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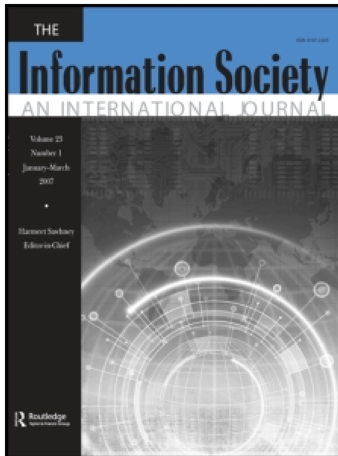

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Subactivism: Lifeworld and Politics in the Age of the Internet

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Subactivism: Lifeworld and Politics in the Age of the Internet

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The potential of the Internet to enhance civic participation has been examined in numerous theoretical and empirical studies. This article concentrates specifically on the role the medium plays in affording and supporting new forms of making sense of public issues and getting involved in civic activities that evolve at the level of everyday life. Characteristically, these forms do not square neatly with elevated notions of political and civic participation. Their significance easily escapes recognition. Building on existing conceptualizations such as those of "life politics" (Giddens, 1991),"sub-politics" (Beck, 1997) and "the political" Mouffe (2005), and "democratic rationalization" (Feenberg, 1999), the concept of subactivism is proposed with the objective to expand received notions of what does and should count as civic engagement.

Keywords activism, citizenship, civic participation, democratic rationalization, everyday life, Internet use, subpolitics, the political

Since the early years of its emergence the Internet has sparked curiosity, debates, and dreams revolving around its likely role in the reinvigoration of democracy. An area of lively scholarly debate on this topic has taken shape following the early speculations by pundits and futurists (see overviews by Feenberg, 2008; Friedland, 1996). Distinct schools of political theory have envisioned the democratizing potential of the Internet differently depending on the model of democracy informing their projections (Street, 1997; Dahlberg, 2001; Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; Agre, 2002).

Cast in the categories of liberal individualism, both theorists and practitioners have anticipated and spearheaded projects that aim to realize direct democracy via electronic means. The emphasis in these visions has been on the capacity of the Internet to inform individuals' political choices by giving citizens ready access to a free marketplace of ideas as well as to transmit the vote of the individual citizen to centers of power through opinion polls and online referenda (Adonis & Mulgan, 1994; Dutton, 1999). Communitarian versions of democracy, for their part, have been excited by the community-building and -maintaining possibilities the Internet has opened up for local communities (Brants et al., 1996; Etzioni, 2003, Schuler, 1996). Active participation in community life online, this reasoning goes, will strengthen individuals' identification with common values and care for the common good. Besides the enhancement of local connectivity provided by community nets, or freenets, the Internet allows for networking between and among communities globally, introducing new opportunities for sharing and solidarity building.

The deliberative model of democracy that has at its core Habermas's notion of the public sphere—a social space where individuals come together as a public to engage in a rational-critical debate on issues of common concern—sees the Internet as offering new and more inclusive fora for public deliberation (Ess, 1996, Coleman & Gøtze, 2001). Recently, Dahlberg (2007) has given this perspective a radical-democratic slant by emphasizing the ways in which the Internet facilitates the emergence and growing visibility of "counter publics" composed of groups and interests that are not represented in the mainstream public discourses. What is characteristic of this "agonistic" public sphere is that it is driven by discursive struggle as opposed to a search for consensus. Examples of such counter publics are the Zapatistas movement, the antiglobalization movement, and other radical initiatives that cannot be inscribed in the mainstream public sphere.

Many of these visions have been informed by real-life developments. My goal here is not to question their validity or foresight, but to push at their limits. In this article, I would like to propose a perspective on the democratic potential of the Internet that casts light on facets of democracy located outside of the visible arena of politics,

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typically occupied by campaigning, voting, assemblies, and organized action in the street or the media. I would like to divert attention from the structural, institutional, and procedural effects of the Internet on democracy and direct it toward changes unfolding at the level of meaning and individual agency. My main preoccupation will be to inquire into the capacity of the Internet to enhance democracy through the multiplication and enrichment of the everyday practices of citizenship.

By definition, the citizen is the main agent of the democratic system. That is why a thorough elaboration of the different modes of becoming, being, and acting as a citizen is imperative for a valid model of democracy (Dahlgren, 2003). Voting, polling, deliberating, and joining in activist movements certainly represent key acts of citizenship, but they may not make up an exhaustive list. I share this hunch with a number of scholars who, in recent publications, have sought to expand the understanding of citizenship by introducing notions such as "civic culture" (Dahlgren, 2003, 2006), "cultural citizenship" (Hermes, 2006; Hermes & Dahlgren, 2006), and "public connection" (Couldry, 2006; Couldry et al., 2007). These are all attempts to grasp the political significance of those "fuzzy or ambiguous phenomena, grounded in civil society and the lifeworld, that fascinate empirical researchers," as Livingstone (2005, p. 32) has put it. A common feature of these works is the insistence that we should look for germs and projections of the political and public world in the private quarters and daily dealings of individual persons. Everyday thoughts, conversations, and activities have a bearing on democratic politics (see Couldry et al., 2007). Some of the necessary conditions for a functioning democracy exist at the level of lived experience, resources, and subjective dispositions (Dahlgren, 2003). Put together, these arguments mark a "cultural turn" (Dahlgren, 2003) in the study of democracy and political communication.

In order to define and distinguish the practices of *citizenship* from the numerous diverse practices comprising everyday life, I undertake a brief excursion into the theory of citizenship. What is citizenship and what are its practical manifestations? Where can they be found, observed, and understood? Due to the inextricable link between citizenship and politics, this involves an exploration of "the political." Is it a specific sphere of social life, a type of activity, or a relationship of a certain character and intensity? My next bout of definitional work deals with the everyday as a specific plane at which humans engage with the world. What is there to be gained from choosing to look for citizenship exactly on that plane? Can such an exploration help solve some of the intractable problems that have been plaguing attempts to trace citizenship across the public–private divide? I attempt to connect the problematic of citizenship with that of everyday life through the concept of *subactivism*. Subactivism in my definition is a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life. It is constituted by small-scale, often individual, decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and are difficult to capture using the traditional tools with which political participation is measured. Subactivism is a refraction of the public political arena in the private and personal world. I then employ the concepts evolved in this theoretical investigation in the analysis of the data from an empirical study of Internet use.

MODELS OF CITIZENSHIP

Debates surrounding the notion of citizenship can be mapped out along several axes usefully outlined by Isin and Turner (2002). The long-standing liberal tradition has defined citizenship as a complex of unalienable rights and freedoms that individuals posses in equal measure in their capacity as members of a liberal-democratic state. Rooted in a set of formal rules, liberal citizenship has become a matter of status endowed on individuals automatically by birth or after a strictly regulated process of naturalization. The relationship between the social totality (the state) and the individual thus becomes an administrative relationship cast in the form of instrumental rationality: The state exists in order to secure favorable conditions for the individual's pursuit of his or her private interests and vice versa. The individual's main contribution to the state is in providing the means (through taxes) and performing the activities (observing the law, voting) that ensure the reproduction of the state. The citizen thus emerges as a client of the state and consumer of the protective and enabling services that it has to offer.

The communitarian view of citizenship, in contrast, endeavors to rescue a cultural dimension of citizenship that reaches more deeply into individual and group identity than the acceptance and abidance by a formally specified set of universal rights and obligations. In this view, community holds ontological primacy over the individual. Partaking in a moral and cultural agreement over shared values and meanings defines an individual's membership in a community. Instead of an emphasis on each individual's freedom to pursue his or her own good, communitarian thinkers insist on the centrality of the common good and ground citizenship in the act of its embracement and prioritization. The communitarian model overcomes liberal universalism through its attention to the social and cultural contexts of citizenship. At the same time, it idealizes the social uniformity and moral accord within communities.

A third model, the republican view of citizenship, is based on citizens' active participation in the republic, or the political community. The agency of citizens is one of the main tenets of this conception. In a republic, the

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governing of the state and society is a matter in which all citizens have to be involved. Republicanism has an expressed ethical dimension. It promotes "civic virtue," the ability of the individual to set aside his or her personal interests in the name of the public good. Republicanism does not discount individual interests and group or community belonging, but places the public as a political community at a higher level of significance. Citizenship thus acquires an integrative dimension: It is a "more general point of view" (Dagger, 2002, p. 150) from which the individual surveys his or her numerous interests, roles, and loyalties.

Critics of the republican model have focused their discontent on two main shortcomings. The first has to do with the fact that a public good is impossible to arrive at equitably in a complex society where numerous groups make conflicting demands reflecting their particular and often irreconcilable interests (Young, 1990; Mouffe, 1993). The concrete content of the public good is therefore an upshot of a hegemonic process in which dominant groups impose their meanings and will over subordinate groups. Another assumption of republicanism, that all individuals in a complex society are bound to acquire public virtue and skills for participation in self-governance, is an idealization that does not account for differences in access to resources, as well as economic and cultural inequalities. A third challenge that republicanism has had difficulty dealing with is the elusive boundary between the private and the public, the particular and the political, which incidentally represents a constitutive element of many of its central categories such as participation and civic virtue. Classical republicanism has extolled the public and put down the private, as in the sharp contrast the Greeks drew between the *polités*, the citizen playing an active part in public affairs, and the *idiótés*, the private person who minded his own business and shunned the polis (see Dagger, 2002, p. 149). With a boundary so pointed and morally charged, the definition of the public as opposed to the private becomes a highly contested ground. Feminists, for one, have decried the low status ascribed to women under such a conception of citizenship and in some cases have advocated the recognition of the virtues of the private world and the extension of the notion of citizenship to include these virtues typically sustained by women. A much more interesting move, however, undertaken by feminist activists and scholars has been the one that calls for rethinking the very contrast or boundary between the public and the private as suggested by the formula "the personal is political" (see Hanisch, 1970, 2006). I will have more to say about this argument in the context of my examination of Internet use for civic purposes.

The theory of radical democracy engages the problems of republicanism head on. While retaining the ideal of active and equitable civic participation at its core, this theory subjects issues such as difference, inequality, domination, hegemony, and others to an incisive critical examination (Dahlgren, 2006). Its point of departure is an explicit attempt to draw on both liberalism and republicanism with a view to combining their insights in a new conception of citizenship (Mouffe, 1993, p. 62). Mouffe argues that "the recovery of a strong participatory idea of citizenship should not be made at the cost of sacrificing individual liberty" (p. 62). The challenge to civic republicanism, according to her, is to envision political community in a way that is compatible with modern democracy and liberal pluralism.

The theory of radical-democratic citizenship is suggestive for my investigation with its expressed effort to propose a reconstitution of the relationship between the public and the private, the political and the particular in a way that acknowledges the dynamics and complexity of both identity and politics in a late-modern society. Citizenship in this model is neither a paper certificate of entitlement, nor faithful abidance by community norms and values, nor selfless ascendance above private interests and concerns in the name of the common good. It is a special aspect of identity that meshes and interacts with all other facets making up who one is as a person. It is constantly in flux, open and susceptible to the social discourses in which the individual is immersed. Thus the main concepts on which this model of citizenship is based are those of *identity* and "*the political*." I examine them next in more detail, as they prove to be useful analytical tools in my further discussion.

IDENTITY AND SUBJECT POSITIONS

For Mouffe (1993), radical-democratic citizenship is a "form of political identity that consists of an identification with the political principles of modern pluralist democracy" (p. 83). She theorizes the individual "as a site constituted by an *ensemble of 'subject positions*,' inscribed in a multiplicity of social relations, the member of many communities and participant in a plurality of collective forms of identification" (p. 97). The subject positions, which the individual assumes, are themselves "constructed by a diversity of discourses among which there is no necessary relation, but rather a constant movement of overdetermination and displacement" (p. 77).

Subject positions emerge out of diverse social discourses and recognized social relationships. Identity is the upshot of the process of identification by the individual with a set of subject positions, a process that is ongoing and never completed. Identification, Stuart Hall (1996) maintains, is not lodged in stable commonalities and solidarities shared by members of "natural" groups. It is a "signifying practice" marked by contingency, involving "discursive work," operating through the "binding and marking of symbolic boundaries and the production of

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'frontier effects"' (p. 3). It requires its "constitutive outside," difference, the other.

Hall offers several compelling observations regarding the workings of the process of identification. Identities, he believes, are "points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us" (p. 6). Identities are produced by using the resources of history, language and culture in the "narrativization of the self" (p. 4). Although they include a strong fictional component, they possess high material and political effectiveness. Identification, Hall insists, is a two-way process. It involves the "hailing" or "interpellation" (a term introduced by Althusser) of the subject in a position crafted by ideology or hegemonic social discourses. It also requires an investment in the position on the part of the subject.

Positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990) represents a school of thought that has endeavored to examine the formative dynamics of subject positions at the level of interpersonal discursive practice. People construct their selfhood, these authors argue, by continuously positioning themselves in various points of the discursive repertoires provided by their culture and by speaking from those positions in the course of their daily life. However, "in speaking and acting from a position, people are bringing to the particular situation their history as a subjective being, that is the history of one who has been in multiple positions and engaged in different forms of discourse. . . . Such a being is not inevitably caught in the subject position that the particular narrative and the related discursive practices might seem to dictate." In this way, the notions of positioning and subject position improve on that of "role" employed in dramaturgical and functionalist sociological theory. A role presupposes lines already written for actors and a script determined by the particular play in which actors find themselves. Positioning and subject position, on the other hand, emphasize the improvisations and transformations actors introduce in the culturally established scripts by drawing on their own subjective lived histories with their attendant emotions and beliefs. Thus, it can be concluded, the "narrativization of the self" has two moving forces: the macro-discourses of power and the micro-discourses produced by subjects themselves amid the particular circumstances of their life situations and intersubjective experiences.

To fill a serious gap in the identity theories recounted so far, it is important to recognize that modern subject positions emerge not exclusively in the crucible of diverse social discourses, but also in the various points of complex institutional and technological networks (see Feenberg, 2009). These networks play a powerful role in the identification process because they influence to a large extent the access subjects have to social discourses of all kinds as both audiences and participants, as well as their direct experiences of the social world. A technological network based on the pulpit, the printed bible, and village word of mouth offers a substantively different set and scope of subject positions compared to a network based on the national newspaper or modern broadcasting technologies. The Internet transforms the process of identification by exploding the number of discourses and subject positions to which the individual becomes exposed, as well as by multiplying the participation forms available at that individual's fingertips. Moreover, by reaching deeply into users' everyday lives, Internet technology allows for active appropriation of discourses and constitution of new discursive repertoires by individuals and groups, thus bringing discursive agency closer to subjects' everyday experience.

Borrowing something from all these distinct takes on subject positions and individual identification with them, we can settle on a definition that recognizes the nonessentiality of identity and its constitution in social discourses involving power and authority (macro-discourses). At the same time, sufficient acknowledgment should be given to the constitutive role of the interpersonal and group micro-discursive practices in which an individual engages and chooses positions, as well as to the technological networks conditioning the access to and performance of these positions. In order to plug this concept into an elucidation of the nature of citizenship, however, it will be necessary to elaborate a criterion for identifying those subject positions that are more likely to make her/ him into an agent of the democratic polis. Subject positions are not political by default; however, positions that are considered apolitical at a certain point in time can turn into loci of conflict and antagonism and lead to political mobilization and new forms of struggle under different conditions and changed discursive dynamics.

THE POLITICAL: AN EXPANDING TERRAIN

Beck (1997) distinguishes three ways in which political science has operationalized its concept of politics: (1) the institutional constitution of the political community into which society organizes itself (polity); (2) the substance of political programs that shape social conditions (policy); and (3) the political conflict over power sharing and power positioning (politics). All these dimensions concern collective agents and their activities and interactions. Individuals are absent from this landscape of the political (p. 103). To this traditional view of the political, Beck juxtaposes a new one rooted in the processes of "individualization" characterizing "reflexive modernity." This view is captured in his concept of "subpolitics." Subpolitics represents a new mode of operation of the political, in which agents coming from outside the officially recognized political and corporate system appear on the stage of social design, including different professional groups and organizations, citizens' issue-centered initiatives and

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social movements, and finally, individuals (see p. 103). This vision introduces not only political actors organized around institutional and essential identities, but also collective agents of less comprehensive and permanent common characteristics and concerns. Isolated individuals are also mentioned as legitimate participants in this new game of politics. The world of politics, for Beck, is no longer that of "symbolically rich political institutions, but the world of often concealed everyday political practice" (p. 98). Individuals abandon the roles and allegiances handed down to them by custom and venture into constructing political causes and commitments of their own. They immigrate to "new niches of activity and identity."

Identity happens to be the central category around which Giddens's (1991) notion of the political in high-modern society revolves. The process in which Beck's individualized individuals "produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves" (p. 95) becomes the central playing field of politics in Giddens's view. Life politics has a generative, or substantive nature. It is a "politics of choice" as opposed to a struggle for the freedom to make choices. It is "politics of lifestyle," "politics of life decisions." It concerns "political issues which flow from the process of self-actualization in post-traditional contexts, where globalizing influences intrude deeply into the reflexive project of the self, and conversely where processes of self-realization influence global strategies" (p. 214). This politics tackles the question, "Who do I want to be?"

In his discussion, Giddens gives due credit to the feminist formula "the personal is the political," with which he connects the emergence of life politics as a dimension of the political in high modernity. The equation of the personal with the political, or more precisely the acknowledgment that issues considered to be strictly personal in fact have their roots and projections in the political sphere, has been one of the insights stemming form the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s. Carol Hanisch's essay "The Personal is Political" (1970) spelled out the dilemma that plagued women's discussions at that time regarding how to distinguish "therapy" from "political action." What were the issues that had to be confined to the personal sphere of women's lives and tackled within a narrow circle of friends and counselors, and what were the issues that the women's movement could confront in public as properly political? Hanisch is adamant that the discussions women had in small groups focusing on questions of their personal lives and beliefs were a form of political action. These discussions allowed the participating women to understand that they had to stop blaming themselves for the problems in their lives and to try to change the objective conditions in which their existence as women was framed.

The understanding of the personal as political has its heritage also in the work of social feminists like Elshtain (1998) who have been challenging the idea that the public, with its aura of nobleness, is the exclusive sphere of politics and citizenship. In the "small world," the world of private life identities are formed, moral qualities are nurtured, and resistance is put up to the oppressive forces and humiliating conditions experienced by some categories of individuals in the public realm. That is where the humanity of persons is reaffirmed and their dignity restored to them (see also hooks, 1992). Beyond questions of identity, matters of common, strictly political nature are also engaged and tackled with utmost seriousness within the small world. In her effort to find everyday-life contexts where public-spirited political conversations take place, Eliasoph (1998) comes to the conclusion that such conversations can more often be heard at the backstage, in private settings, than at public events or group meetings. While this finding comes as a disappointment in the ability of the different associations that Eliasoph studies to encourage public-spirited discussion among members, it reaffirms the importance of the small world, as a site where individuals make sense of politics. Needless to say, the small world is also the place where media representations and discourses concerning issues of the political community are received, interpreted, and negotiated (Cruz & Lewis, 1994, Silverstone, 1994, Livingstone, 2005, Couldry et al., 2006).

This kind of redefining of the sphere and nature of the political carries some risks, as Mouffe (2005) has forcefully argued. It hides the danger of reverting the understanding of the political back to the narrowly individual choices and decisions where liberal notions of democracy and citizenship started out. The place and importance of collective entities in the constitution and operation of the political should not be overlooked, Mouffe insists. She criticizes the individualization theory put forward by Beck and Giddens inasmuch as it downplays and almost cancels the significance of collective identities for citizenship and political life in general. Beck and Giddens's version of politics, in Mouffe's view, turns a blind eye on power relations, hegemony, and the centrality of conflict and struggle to the political process. In her own way, Mouffe places identity and subject positions at the heart of the political, but for her not just any subject position or identity carries the marks of the political. Following political theorist Carl Schmitt, she asserts that the criterion of the political is the "friend–enemy" discrimination. "It deals with the formation of a 'we' as opposed to a 'they' and is always concerned with collective forms of identification" (p. 11). The political, then, is not a sphere of activity or a set of issues, but an ineradicable property of human social organization. Every religious, moral, economic, ethical, or technological controversy can transform itself into a political one "if it is sufficiently strong to group human beings according to friend and enemy" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 12). Feenberg

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(1995, 1999), for example, has shown how the interests of disenfranchised participants in technological systems such as medicine, telecommunication, and industrial society at large have gradually become articulated and have led to the emergence of politicized we-formations challenging the existing hierarchical order. With their collective as well as individual decisions and actions, patients with AIDS, Internet users, and environmentalists have clearly demonstrated that the technological can be political.

Building on the arguments recounted so far, I would like to distinguish three levels at which citizenship can be perceived albeit in quite distinct forms. The first two include the level of formal institutional politics and that of subpolitics as defined by Beck (1997). Note that as much as Beck emphasizes forms and manifestations of politics located underneath the surface of formal institutions, his construct retains a strong public and activist element. What seem to count as subpolitics are the organized and/or publicly traceable initiatives of social movements and individuals finding themselves in strategic points of the social system. The third level which I believe should be added to a comprehensive model of citizenship lies deeper under the surface than that. It could be referred to as the level of "subactivism." Subactivism is categorically submerged and subjective. It can be described as small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and remain submerged in everyday life.

Characteristic of subactivism is that its locus is the private sphere or the small social world. It blends ethics and politics, or oscillates around that fuzzy boundary where one merges into the other. It is rooted in the subject but necessarily involves collective identities often in an imagined form—recall Anderson's (1984) imagined communities. It is constituted by numerous acts of positioning—often in the imaginary vis-à-vis large-scale political, moral, and cultural confrontations, but also with respect to ongoing micro interactions and conversations. It is not about political power in the strict sense, but about personal empowerment seen as the power of the subject to be the person that they want to be in accordance with his or her reflexively chosen moral and political standards. Its frames of reference are fluid and constantly shifting, responding to the ongoing dialogue between the subject and the cultural discourses permeating his or her social environment. The decisions and actions that constitute it have no permanent place in a person's agenda. They arise spontaneously, often as new dimensions of work, homemaking, parenting, entertainment. Subactivism may or may not leak out of the small social world and become publicly visible, meaning that its acts and products, although multiple, can remain insulated in the private sphere. This, however, does not condemn subactivism to inconsequentiality. The potential for it to be mobilized by trigger events and transformed into overt public activism is always in place. It is that essential bedrock against which individual citizens' capacity for participation in subpolitics or in the formal political institutions of the public world is shaped and nurtured.

Subactivism is best understood if the analysis starts from the point where the thinking and acting subject immediately experiences her physical and social world. The most productive route for performing such an analysis is charted by theories of everyday life and the lifeworld.[1] Lefebvre, for example, (1991) started his inquiry into the quotidian (everyday life) by distinguishing his approach from the preoccupation of philosophers and thinking people of his time with the political dramas acted out in "higher spheres" (p. 6), such as the state, parliament, or party policies. Lefebvre's interest focused on the "humble everyday base" (p. 6) of politics: in matters related to food, housing, rationing, wages, the organization and reorganization of labor. For him, everyday life was "what is left over after all distinct, superior, specialized, structured activities have been singled out by the analysis" (p. 97). It is the meeting place and common ground of all activities where the sum total of all relations that make the human being a whole takes shape (p. 97).

Among the numerous alienations plaguing everyday life, Lefebvre distinguished the alienation in political life, where the state takes on a power superior to the life of society. Traces of this kind of alienation can be sensed in the "I don't care about politics" retort by disenchanted citizens who have lost faith that anything they say or do can bring about any changes in the specialized and "superior" sphere of state politics. Indeed, modern society has circumscribed political activities in a specialized compartment, to which the ordinary person living his or her everyday life hardly has any access. The daily routines of work, housekeeping, childrearing, etc. erect an effective time–space barrier between the actual here and now of the ordinary person and the structured and highly professionalized realm of political action. Nonspecialized political initiatives involving ordinary citizens require a rupture in the flow of daily activities and thus take a high investment of energy and mobilization work. The concept of subactivism is, I believe, useful in helping us conceive of a level of the political deeply embedded in everyday life. The very self-identification of the individual as an actor taking sides and choosing positions and courses of action vis-à-vis debates and clashes of values and interests in a larger social world represents an elementary instance of subactivism. This self-identification could occur in the silent act of reading and interpreting political news as in the famous example of reading the newspaper in Anderson's (1984) treatise on nationalism. Or it could play out in the conversations around the dining table overheard by Eliasoph (1998). Or it can be taken out of the kitchen and put to work in the numerous frontier situations spanning the

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private and the semi-public such as neighborhood initiatives, school boards, etc.

Starting from a set of very different philosophical premises, Schutz sees the everyday lifeworld as "the region of reality in which man [*sic*] can engage himself and which he can change while he operates in it by means of his animate organism" (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 3). In this region man encounters other people (his "fellow men") with whom he communicatively constructs a shared world. These two features taken together make the everyday lifeworld "man's fundamental and paramount reality" (p. 3). A detailed exploration of the social structures of this experienced reality leads Schutz to map out an interlocking range of "zones of anonymity": "The breadth of variations in my experience of the social world extends from the encounter with another man to vague attitudes, institutions, cultural structures and humanity in general (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973, p. 61). Between the immediately present "fellow man" and the abstract images of highly anonymous social collectivities and institutions stretches a continuous scale of "social typifications"[2] characterized by different "gradations of immediacy" (p. 69): of people the individual has met, but later lost from sight; of people or groups about which she has heard first-person accounts from her friends; of people and groups that she knows through myths and media; of social collectivities that she has been led to imagine indirectly and such that she finds even hard to envisage. The more remote and harder to reach and bring into immediate contact a social body is, the greater is its degree of anonymity.

Schutz's notions of actual, potential, restorable, and attainable reach hold particular importance in defining the capacity of the individual to come to know and get involved with the different personal and collective entities populating her social universe. These entities include friends, relatives, and family members, as they do cultural and professional groups, politicians, parties, civic organizations, governments, and nations. As I have argued elsewhere (Bakardjieva, 2005), this view of the experienced social world dissolves the dilemma of the public–private boundary. Instead of a duality of two distinct realms divided by a firm line, a multitude of intermediary states between the intimate and the highly abstract and anonymous emerges. Communication media with different affordances and the use genres they engender help individuals traverse this continuum and establish social engagements infinitely variable in closeness, content and intensity. The Internet has proven to be a particularly versatile vehicle for navigating the structures of the social world. My next goal will be to demonstrate the implications this has for citizenship. Thus, in what follows, I interpret the data from a qualitative study of home-based Internet use along the lines of the theoretical discussions and categories introduced so far.

THE INTERNET AND SUBACTIVISM

Methodology

The study was conducted in Calgary, Canada, one of the most Internet-saturated cities in a highly connected country. In-depth interviews were conducted with the members of 74 households between 2002 and 2004. Participants in the study were recruited by a variety of means, including advertisements in the local media and popular local web sites, interviewers' own social networks, and with the help of different local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The goal was to ensure that a wide variety of social categories of Internet users was included in the study. Diversity along socioeconomic and demographic lines was explicitly sought, but so was the presence in the sample of a set of specific life experiences such as immigration, disability, single parenthood, unemployment, and others, which were expected to shape Internet use in distinct ways. Although the prevalence of middle-class and upper-middle-class professional households in the sample could not be avoided, our explicit efforts led to the inclusion of a set of low-income families and individuals, as well as an assortment of respondents falling into the life-experience categories just detailed. In sum, the approach taken provided for a multiple and varied, albeit non-probability, sample of respondents and for rich data concerning numerous aspects of Internet use in everyday life

Altogether 192 individuals were interviewed about the purposes and patterns of their daily Internet use, 105 women and 87 men of various ages. The procedure took place in respondents' homes and consisted of a group interview with all members of the household, followed by individual sessions with each member who had agreed to participate, in front of the computer that he or she used to connect to the Internet. The declared focus of the study was Internet use at home. The inquiry followed several different themes, such as the history of the home Internet connection; Internet-related roles and rules; children and the Internet; Internet-supported activities; preferred information sources on the Internet; social networking and online group participation; and finally, reflections on the overall role and significance of the Internet in respondents' lives. Each theme was broken down into a series of probing questions in order to ensure consistency across the relatively large respondent group. At the same time, significant leverage was given to interviewers to allow respondents to recount their own "stories" related to each of the areas of interest in their own words and in a fairly open format. Questions concerning the political and civic uses of the medium were included in the package, but pursued only to the extent to which respondents felt comfortable answering them. One question asked respondents directly whether they had used the Internet for civic participation;

other questions probed more generally into interviewees' perceptions of whether the Internet extended their "possibilities for action in the world" and whether it made them feel "empowered." In a significant number of cases the interviewers had to decipher the notion of "civic participation" for respondents, which they did in ways and terms they thought appropriate to the particular individual and the context of the conversation thus far. Rather than being discouraged by this fact, I treat it as a finding and seek to understand what it tells us about participants' own understanding of the concept.

The quotes presented in this section have been selected from the data set due to their particular suggestiveness with respect to citizenship practices. Most of the authors of the statements quoted were people with higher education, while their occupations and current employment status varied. No quantification of the frequency of civic uses reported in the data has been made. Rather, the goal of the analysis has been to identify and categorize the various empirical manifestations of subactivism involving the Internet as they presented themselves in respondents' accounts.

What Is Civic Participation?

The direct question concerning civic participation produced three distinct types of responses: (1) an unconcealed puzzlement as to what this phrase meant, (2) some wild guesswork grappling at the meaning of the phrase, or (3) pointed and concrete accounts of forms of participation that entailed a "civic" quality in the view of the interviewed. Examples of engagement that could be qualified as civic propped up also under the rubrics of "action in the world" and community involvement, although they were not seen as belonging to the elevated and somewhat pretentious category of citizenship by respondents themselves.

> Civic? Um, [long pause] I guess I'm not sure what the question means. I guess you know from the point of view of looking things up locally that might be going on or something, yes I would do that. Um, like looking up whether there is a play in town or something like that?
>
> Yeah. I was just checking out the [town's name] web site on Canada Day to find out what time the fireworks. And we didn't end up going down there, we sat right out here.
>
> School team registration.
>
> Oh, hang on, there is one advocacy thing I've done just fairly recently, I haven't completed it. I'm filing a complaint with the Alberta College of Physicians and Surgeons.
>
> Oh okay, I'm not into politics. I'm not a political person. I was married to one [laughs]. Didn't like it. You know. . . Actually I do do my taxes online.

As hesitant and off the point as these answers may sound to someone arriving from a serious theoretical journey into the concepts of the "civic" and the "political," they still betray an underlying liberal take on citizenship: The civic is related to services typically provided by institutional entities, be it the municipality, the school, the health care system, or the taxation office. Participation in this scheme of things is equivalent to consumption, compliance, or, at best, defending one's entitlement when it is somehow compromised. The Internet simply furnishes a smooth connection and extended reach to anonymous offices and administrative representatives or automated interfaces, whose anonymity is not reduced despite the engagement. It is a technical instrument in a formal process where roles and rules of interaction are inherited elements of the social structure. Citizens' positions in this relationship are given by default; they are enacted almost unreflexively, although it should be recognized that these positions require some enculturation and may not be automatically presumed by new immigrants, for example. There is hardly any aspect of these relations that can be defined as political. The waters have settled over imaginable debates and confrontations regarding the responsibility of the city to organize public celebrations, of the school to run sport teams, and of the public health care system to provide each citizen with an access to a personal physician. The "we" and "they" of this relationship is non-adversary as long as the "they" carries out its expected duties and provides the "we" with the services we believe we rightfully deserve.

Personal, Political, or In-Between: Spotting Subactivism in the Quotidian

Another type of answers to the "civic participation" question brings the action one step closer to the notions of conflict and active involvement. Notably, in the responses in this group, the civic retains expressed local and personal dimensions. It stems from projects and pragmatic interests originating in the immediately experienced social world.

> Last year I was really involved in what we called the LEET process, which was the CBE's [Calgary School Board] ideas on how to decide which schools would be closed down. So each school had a parent volunteer. So you're very politically active. There's a lot of messages going back and forth between you and the Board, and the trustees, and the government of Alberta.. . . So yeah, I think it makes it easier because you have access to people that maybe you wouldn't have otherwise. (Lisa, 38, MSc. in genetics, stay-home mom)
>
> It was actually my sister and I and a couple of other women had instituted this sort of fund raising group for Discovery House which is second stage housing here in Calgary for abused families, especially women and children but they have a program for abusive males as well. And so, we started up their main gala fundraiser and so we did that for three years and that was a way of communicating. And [then] I didn't have the e-mail or our computer for a lot

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> of it, so I had to do it through my sister's office. But we still keep in touch, like, the group does, even though we haven't done it now for a year and like Discovery House will send us their stuff and what not. (Elizabeth, 43, social worker on disability)

There are several interesting things going on in these accounts: First, they are very close to home: The object of the activity is of personal significance to the women involved. Lisa has children attending a school that is among those under consideration for closing, while Elizabeth used to be a social worker with firsthand knowledge of the consequences of spousal abuse. Second, there is a directly accessible local organization that becomes the center of the activity. Third, a remote and anonymous dimension is also part of the package, as in the first case a set of municipal and governmental actors is the target of some of the action, while in the second, a dispersed population of potential donors has to be reached and convinced to contribute. Finally, a strong interpersonal component can be also detected. In the second case the respondent's sister and a group of women who had known each other before were part of the project. In the case of the school volunteering as well, Lisa had most likely known the school staff and other parent volunteers before she ventured into the process. The Internet comes in to facilitate both the interpersonal exchanges among "fellow women," and the reach into the previously unknown and faceless bureaucracy or circle of donors. It makes these activities more efficient and more feasible to the participants. More precisely speaking, the Internet helps furnish the critical leap between the closely personal and the anonymous and abstract, or, one may say, between the private concerns shared with friends and acquaintances and the public bodies necessary for any significant change to be affected. The intersubjective engagement with issues that already relate to or can eventually be bumped up into the public arena seems to be a crucial component of these respondents' civic involvement. Another woman described a similar chain of connections thus: "Some of my friends are involved in advocating for specialized things and looking at health care reforms and things like that, so I get a little bit involved in their exchanges" (Sonia, 52, physician).

In another example recounted by Elizabeth (see earlier discussion), the interweaving of the "private" and the "public" along with some halfway gradients of immediacy stands out even more clearly:

> Like even with my mom who has Alzheimer's, she's in a long-term care facility. And my family's been really active in trying to have the government look at lack of funding and so, as I say, I e-mail my government about that, but there's also other sites I've gone into to look up information on long-term care facilities, like I'll go into specific care centers. I've looked up some of the qualifications they have for staff, the staff ratios. There's a couple of other organizations that you can get into, that are into these kinds of things, so in most of those things that I do, I do use it for those things. (Elizabeth, 43, social worker on disability)

In this case, an acute personal problem breaks out of the bubble of the private and particular small world and mutates into an issue demanding the attention and action of public agencies. With the help of the Internet, family conversations, web sites, advocacy organizations, and direct links to government representatives are entwined together and the personal is transformed into political in a very practical sense. This example demonstrates also how the formation of a collective "we" around the issue of care for Alzheimer's disease patients gradually progresses through interpersonal contacts, affiliations with organized groups, and finally confronting the government as the "they" that should recognize the deficiency and institute a change. It is indeed hard to qualify this particular instance of activism as political, as it does not contain the intensity of the we–they agonistic relation that Mouffe postulates. However, inasmuch as it refers to and targets established administrative and political institutions (the health care system, the government), it spills out of the social into the political, or at least has a strong potential to do so.

Submerged Activism: Engaging the Political Interpersonally

Answering the question "Has the Internet changed the way you see yourself in the world?" another woman engaged an issue of personal significance with expressed implications for minority groups in Canada and Canadian politics in general:

> *Fiona (56, lawyer):* Oh for sure. There is no question. You know before—I mean. . . , now I am part of this. Before I knew something was going on out there. Now I am looking at those bills that they are, that [former Canadian Prime Minister] is trying to force through before he gets out. I am e-mailing people before he gets out. I am e-mailing people. . . I am lobbying the Alberta Government not to put a cap on pain and suffering at twenty-five hundred dollars which is absolutely ridiculous. I understand what they are trying to do. There are other ways of doing it. But to put a cap on it? But I am still lobbying. Which before I probably would have heard and said "oh, okay."
>
> *Interviewer:* So the Internet has given you the potential to, I suppose, protest in a sense? Or is that the right word?
>
> *Fiona:* Disseminate information. None of the people know until I tell them [about this].

Fiona is a lawyer of Aboriginal background. She consults different Aboriginal organizations on new legislation concerning Aboriginal rights. She does her own exploration of Government of Canada legal sites and takes a stance on the decisions and changes the Parliament plans to introduce.

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From there on, she uses the Internet to spread the word, or as she puts it to "disseminate information" to the appropriate stakeholders, people like herself, who would be affected by the new legislation. By doing this, she actively constitutes a collective "we" capable of taking a position with respect to the changes: "I'm Aboriginal," Fiona says, "I want to know what *they*'re doing. . . . Now *they* want me to give up my privacy as far as my medical care goes in order to get medical care. And it's, if you don't do it, you don't get anything."

This type of activity is structured into Fiona's Internet browser and daily practice. She regularly reads and contributes to several online lists and groups that deal with Aboriginal legal issues and legal education. She has been the secretary of one of them and a representative on a few others. Her activism blends with her professional research and communication, but it is clearly distinguishable from a purely professional responsibility. Her self-positioning as a public Aboriginal intellectual is enacted through the micro-discourses and practices that the Internet supports and enhances.

Another professional with a civic mission, a graduate student in engineering originally from India, was intensely involved in collective we-formations that were totally virtual—his online groups. These groups had different but necessary input in his self-identity project.

> The most useful thing on the web is having e-mail groups . . . I'm a member of more than seven-eight groups, on social perspectives and academics, social thinking, civic sense. . . They are Indian groups and they want to know my opinions, they read my letters. . . . Once, I did not write for a while, and I got a message from one of the group members asking how I was doing and worried that he hasn't seen my e-mails lately. . . . Whatever I'm writing about is in India . . . we have two thousand to three thousand contributors to these lists. I moderate a group called GIA, an e-group interested in geomatics. We don't have a very strong force back in India on geomatics. There are not too many students, but this allows us to chat, organize conferences, and exchange opinions and experience. We now have members from geomatics programs from all over the world. What we do is just align people on the same frequency, so to speak, bring them together, and focus on the same things. (Sami, 23, graduate student in engineering)

As this young man pursues his professional training, he is aligning himself with other professionals from his native country, thus building a stronger Indian geomatics "force." A distinct sense of belonging to a "we," both professional and civic, emanates from Sami's account. His own position and hence identity as a part of that collective "we" is reinforced through the recognition that the group gives to his presence and opinions. The "constitutive outside" of this Indian geomatics force seems to be the geomatics force of other countries in the world, against which the Indian network of scholars measures itself. There is no expressed agonism in this relationship, so it could hardly be construed as political, and yet a clear national and cultural frame of reference can be recognized. Needless to say, the Internet supplies the indispensable communication infrastructure through which this collective "we" becomes possible by connecting the actions performed in the everyday lifeworlds of numerous dispersed people.

A plethora of mundane collective we-formations lacking self-awareness as a civic force proliferate on the Internet, born in the group discourses of people sharing common interests, problems, and experiences. Cathy, a 51-year-old unemployed teacher, told the interviewer about the various newsgroups and lists she belonged to, especially stressing her "secular sobriety" forum:

> *Cathy:* Every kind of human condition, there's a group for it on Yahoo. So, you form your own little community regardless of where you live and exchange information that is supportive and it's monitored by the moderator and there was no messing around. It was a serious and very supportive bunch of people.
>
> *Interviewer:* What does the membership in these groups mean to you?
>
> *Cathy:* It was recovery, relationships, information, and strategy for growth.
>
> *Interviewer:* What do you mean by growth?
>
> *Cathy*: Growth just means I was in one place and now I am in another and the only difference is that group.

Another middle-aged woman, Esther, a 47-year-old farm wife, also spoke about personal growth in the context of her chronic illness, sometimes difficult life circumstances, enthusiasm for organic farming, and the online community she had created herself.

> So, I think the Internet has [pause] gosh [pause] I think I'd, in terms of personal growth I'd still be at the Neanderthal stage if it hadn't been for the contacts and the education and the opportunity that I've encountered online.. . . . The time that I spend, I guess, some of us are able to donate money to charities, some of us are able to donate food to the food bank or clothing to the Sally-Ann or whatever. For me this is my 10%, this is, you know, this is how I give back to society even though it's an Internet community.

It would be a stretch to try to imbue such communities with any political implications. After all, they are just gatherings of private people willing to share their problems and lessons learned in specific situations of their lives. These are not the rational-critical deliberators of the Habermasian public sphere. The topics and issues they discuss are typically very personal, emotion-laden, sometimes social, but hardly ever are they perceived as political. At the same time, there is something paradoxical in displaying and trying to tackle such deeply personal problems in such public forums. There is a strange sense of empowerment in learning and being convinced over and

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over again that you are not alone in any, even the most peculiar, aspects of your personal life story and experience. For Esther, it felt like fulfilling a human duty (not civic, however, as she blanked out on the "civic participation" question) to extend her consolation and advice to people in trouble, to be, as she put it, "therapeutically productive" through her writing posted on her web site and in her online community. Forming such a bond, a small "we" preoccupied with a strictly personal, even if shared, agenda, certainly does not count much toward the global, structural, and/or institutional processes of government and decision making. I would nevertheless see it as a fragile form of subactivism, as it often involves taking a stance with respect to questions related to debates and clashes of a larger scale. Esther's abstractly humanitarian endeavor was tentatively framed by references to non-consumerism, sustainable agriculture, and alternative medicine, all denoting counter-mainstream values and action choices. She mentioned participating in a government agriculture-related web site where she would engage in exchanges with Canadian beef producers, telling them: "Well, if you're having to cut back on your beef production and sell your cattle, you know, maybe it's time to consider something different, something that isn't so hard on the planet, you know." Overall, the connections and interactions that the Internet supported for her made Esther feel better about herself, better than ever before, and that, she thought, was "very empowering."

In the examples of Cathy and Esther it appeared that a rather mundane and individualized form of life politics focused on the question "Who do I want to be?" was being actualized in the process of Internet use. Yet, recalling Mouffe's distinction between the social and the political, it isn't hard to imagine how such personal and, at best, social issues and preferences can be politicized in the larger public discourses and power struggles. Micro we-formations like the one created by Esther can become a resource to be mobilized and drawn upon. A joggers' group may turn out to be responsive to environmental issues, a pet-lover forum to calls for defense of animal rights, a parenting group to debates around day-care policies and funding (and ultimately, gender equity), the patient advocates to health care reform initiaitves,[3] etc. While not directly political, the groups in which these users negotiated and articulated their life challenges and choices constituted a subactive stratum of the polis, firmly embedded in the lifeworld, and yet quietly echoing categories of a broader political scope.

A Matter of Reach: Political Participation From the Living Room

In Miriam's experience the link between her personal moral and political choices and the institutional sphere of politics was much more direct but, interestingly, not mediated by a "we" collectivity. Miriam, a middle-aged woman disabled after a stroke, had used the Internet to run for an alderman position. This had been a life-political gesture in an important sense, as Miriam told us that despite her failure, she could now cross off this "thing" from the list of things she had wanted to do in her life. She saw city politics in very critical light, as "pompous pageantry" that hardly allowed for anything of value to be accomplished. She had decided to run for alderman led by her desire to change how things were done and possibly also to prove to herself that she was up to the task. The Internet had been her thoroughfare from her living room into the intricacies of city administration. She had used it to patiently educate herself about all this "crap" that she might have studied something about in school, but had completely forgotten:

> I got lots of demographics and information statistics from the different, . . . our city web site and then Alberta Government, you know, to just check statutes and all of that bylaw information and zoning and what's new, what studies have been done recently and all that. So it was very helpful for somebody that had never been involved in any political, you know . . . I had to start somewhere; it was a good place to start. Then I also got how to write a campaign plan. I got the whole, mostly United States [material]. That, I tell you, they have got some excellent ideas. So that helped me formulate my campaign, so I became my own campaign manager and then there's a whole bunch of steps to follow in between. I can tell you why I didn't succeed—I didn't have any money. So, you know, I did learn a lot and it was a very valuable exercise for me. . . . I might be able to offer assistance to somebody else because I have stored all of those web sites and information and everything I did in my campaign.

A 37-year-old medical scientist, Gregory, had used the direct thoroughfare into the institutional sphere of politics in a different, not quite so engaged and yet personally meaningful fashion. He was a man of a more cosmopolitan orientation and cared passionately about political events happening around the world. The Internet was his source of quality information about world politics, as he did not think he could rely on traditional media for that. He had fastidiously selected the sources that he drew on to keep abreast of developments: Listening to BBC radio on his computer at breakfast was part of his morning routine; he regularly researched the "superb" archives of the NPR, a public radio station in the United States, that he said he was "very fond of"; his highly customized Yahoo! page supplied him with the daily news from Reuters:

> It's just the thing, being able to listen to the BBC news. I really enjoy that news. CNN . . . we never would think about going that route. It's a sexy kind of over-dramatized and totally one-sided . . . , in so many instances it kills me. And the BBC just seems so fair in comparison.

Naturally, Gregory held opinions based on this information that he considered solid and well thought out. So, in a complementary move, he would occasionally write to the Prime Minister of Canada when a Canadian position with respect to international developments had to be worked out. Gregory talked about this as a kind of civic involvement, albeit with a trace of disenchantment in his voice: “Well, I write a letter to our Prime Minister—probably three times a year [chuckles]. I haven’t got a meaningful response yet. But I keep on writing. This is particularly surrounding my own feelings, surrounding the war in Iraq and the way I see our place in the world and just wanting him to know one Albertan’s opinion.” Gregory was grateful to e-mail for allowing him to do something like that fast, without much complication, and saw it as an enlargement of his possibilities for action in the world:

> Writing a letter to the Prime Minister of Canada would be something that I would never do. Firing off an e-mail, which takes me 30 minutes to write, a really nice e-mail—it’s a relaxing thing to do and I know it gets there right away—boom, I can forget about it.

Besides this direct personal expression of opinion, he had been part of the mailing list of a local anti-Iraqi-sanctions group, hoping “to make my point known in Ottawa . . . I was asking for the sanctions to be broken because of humanitarian reasons, not military.” The invasion of Iraq, however, had dampened Gregory’s enthusiasm for participating because, he said, “things are out of my hands now.”

Gregory’s case to me is an excellent illustration of what it looks like to take a subject position vis-à-vis discourses circulating in the public world. Gregory invested a substantial amount of work in selecting and formulating his position and subsequently took that position very seriously. Undertaking steps to make his point known in Ottawa, individually and through the mediation of a micro we-formation, was an action following from his chosen subject position of a sanctions opponent and war - opponent. His determination in performing this action was frail for sure, as his rather disheartened response and recoil following the invasion of Iraq demonstrate. Nevertheless, short of marching down the street, his civic engagement is very obvious in his daily activities and choices. These activities and choices are certainly molded by the sources of information and discussion to which he has access, but Gregory navigates these sources in a very mindful and selective manner. These activities and choices are also circumscribed by the cultural resources and the time that the individual can commit to them. Note Gregory’s insistence on the importance of speed and ease as factors facilitating his actions. His remarks resonate with participants’ accounts quoted earlier that also hinged on ease, speed, and scope of e-mail communication with virtual and actual group members and institutions. As much as these may appear obvious and banal details, they do matter a lot in the materialization of the tiny gestures that subactivism consists of. By affording ease, speed, and scope, the Internet brings the otherwise remote and anonymous political bodies within attainable reach. It makes civic participation, not as a specialized activity in a superior (public) sphere, but as a concrete action amid everyday life, more practically feasible.

Here is probably the right place to make it clear that I do not think of the Internet as producing or setting off subactivism. I agree with Agre (2002) that the Internet rather amplifies existing impulses and forces. Yet I consider it important to change the grammatical subject in statements like that. It is users who appropriate the technical functionalities of the Internet to position themselves with respect to discourses of different scale and character and to take action concordant with their emerging and changing subject positions. In the process, they weave together discourses and actions unfolding at the levels of the personal, interpersonal, small group, quasi-formal organization, public body, and institution in new ways. Thus, numerous new forms of subactivism evolve around the Internet with added capacity to traverse effectively the private–public continuum and make civic engagement more deeply embedded in everyday life. Internet-aided subactivism can be seen as a prime example of the “democratic rationalization” of the Internet itself (Feenberg, 1999, 2009). It is an ensemble of diverse sociotechnical practices generated by ordinary users that blend new technology and citizenship in unexpected ways. These are not the forms of civic and political use of the technology envisaged within the rationality of political and technological elites. These are rational choices emerging out of lifeworlds whose structures have been poorly understood or ignored.

CONCLUSION

Going back to the various readings of the incipient relationship between the Internet and democracy, I would like to throw subactivism into the mix. We may not be seeing an automatic rise in informed decision making by rational-born citizens knowing their best interests, as the liberal view would have it. We do not observe massive growth of solidarity and consensus over the nature of the public good as communitarians may have hoped. Disappointingly, the spread of forums and competencies for rational-critical debate on issues of common interest has not been as wide as the deliberative model advocates would have liked.

A recapitulation made from a different angle, that of the loci of politics, shows that public institutions have poured ample resources and scored positive results in harnessing the Internet in the service of state administrations and political bodies. Even though these advancements have contributed to more fluid institution–citizen

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transactions, the majority of them have been organized around the provider–client paradigm, ensuring better service, but extraneous to political democracy. Subpolitical players (as defined by Beck, 1997), for their part, have thrived on the possibilities introduced by the Internet to create counter-publics, to focus the attention and coordinate the actions of dispersed and transient collectives. It is a pity that their spirited and deserving causes have often remained unheeded and unsupported by the apathetic masses of the general population. Finally, turning to these ill-reputed apathetic masses, all one can find, and it takes very dedicated looking, is subactivism—feeble motions immersed in the everyday many times removed from the hot arena of politics. For these motions of personal positioning and weaving of connections across erstwhile zones of anonymity the Internet has proven a real blessing, but their consequences have been neither revolutionary, nor even conspicuous.

So then, has the Internet contributed in any way to the growth of democracy and does it hold any promise for such a contribution? The answer, and the potential of the medium, I believe, does not lie at any of these levels taken separately, but in the possibility for their interweaving. My insistence in this article has been that first of all subactivism has to be recognized as an important dimension of democracy grounded in individuals' paramount reality, the point where they are capable of gearing into the world through talk, deed and interaction. This province of democracy will remain closed off and largely inconsequential to the affairs of the polis, if no proper bridges are built between it and the subpolitical and strictly political strata populated by collectives, organizations and institutions. So, I suppose, the central question to ask becomes: What are these proper bridges? What do they look like? Who are their prospective engineers and builders? Attempts have been made to construe such bridges as a form of marketing and public relations (see Bennett, 1998). I am wary of this approach, as it has proven to lead no further than the provider-client model. New formats of *interactive civic relations* are necessary designed to capture and channel the powers of the Internet to the benefit of a thoroughgoing democracy. The first and critical step down that road is the acknowledgment and orientation to subactivism as a major reservoir of civic energy. Perhaps movement activists and issue activists should start by recalling the wisdom of the brilliant short essay that put the phrase "the personal is political" on the conceptual map—just replace "women" by "citizens" in this quote:

> I think "apolitical" women are not in the movement for very good reasons, and as long as we say "you have to think like us and live like us to join the charmed circle," we will fail. What I am trying to say is that there are things in the consciousness of "apolitical" women (I find them very political) that are as valid as any political consciousness we think we have. (Hanisch, 1970, p. 5)

There are also, I argue, things in the Internet-use practices of "apolitical" citizens that are a valid indication of how the construction of a democratic Internet and of a thoroughgoing democracy can enhance one another.

NOTES

1. For a more detailed discussion of theories of everyday life and their relevance to Internet studies, see Bakardjieva (2005).
2. Typifications, in Schutz's language, are aggregate and abstract perceptions of objects and social entities in the lifeworld that lie outside of an individual's immediate here and now, i.e., out of her zone of "actual reach."
3. Mentions of participation in all these kinds of online groups appeared in the data set from the 74 households studied.

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