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Our new public life, 2.0

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Web2.0 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, 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 web2.0 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, seemingly³ 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 lifes 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

1 O'Reilly, Tim (2005). *What is Web2.0?* (30.09.2005)

<http://www.oreillynet.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html>

2 Web 2.0: Meet Venture Capital. *Technology Review* (19.10.2005)

<http://www.technologyreview.com/Infotech/14879/>

3 Numerous cases have shown how easy it is to dress up corporate and strategic communication as personal and authentic in the context of web2.0.

4 By vetted I mean having passed through organizational filters such as editorial boards or peer-review processes.

5 For an early analysis of this historical transformation, see Sennett, Richard (1974). *The Fall of Public Man: On the Social Psychology of Capitalism*. New York, Vintage Books

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 are necessary to mention. First, I will only speak about the West, not only because technologies of web2.0 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, web2.0 technologies and their social uses interact with 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 web2.0, the gender imbalance is relatively strong (70% men).⁸

On the level of the individual, the boom of web2.0 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

6 See, for example, Hughes, Thomas P. (1983). *Networks of Power: Electrification in Western Society 1880-1930*. Baltimore, London, John Hopkins University Press

7 Smith, Merrit Roe; Marx, Leo (1994). *Does Technology Drive History? The Dilemma of Technological Determinism*. Cambridge, MA; London, MIT Press

8 Pew Internet and American Life Project: *A Typology of Information and Communication Technology Users*. May, 06, 2007 http://www.pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP_ICT_Typology.pdf

9 Giddens, Anthony (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford, CA, Stanford University Press

10 Whyte, William H. (2002 [1956]). *The Organization Man*. University of Pennsylvania, University of Pennsylvania Press

11 Marcuse, Herbert (1964). *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*. Boston, Beacon Press

12 *Be Creative! Der Kreative Imperativ*. Exhibition at Museum für Gestaltung Zürich (30.11. 2002- 02.03 2003) , <http://www.k3000.ch/becreative/>

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 prosumerism, 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, however they see it, be it comings and goings of their cat, Scandinavian 'necro metal', or global warming. Web2.0 transforms people who used to be spectators into participants. Sometimes, the difference between these roles is so small that it might feel 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 into the world, not the 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 is contributing to a psychological (self)experience very different from model still dominant, where the world inside of us, our self, is far removed from the world outside of us. The Cartesian a priori "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

13 Castells, Manuel (2001). *Internet Galaxy*. Oxford, Oxford University Press

by web2.0, 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 not '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 web2.0, 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 web2.0 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 web2.0 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 web2.0 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, 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 ties¹⁶. From that, some very few people might get interested in the project as a whole, and

14 Baudrillard, Jean (1988). *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Brooklyn, NY, Semiotext(e)

15 Aguiton, Christophe; Cardon, Dominique (2007). The Strength of Weak Cooperation: An Attempt to Understand the Meaning of Web 2.0. *Communications & Strategies*. No. 65

16 The concept of “weak social ties” was developed by Mark Granovetter, who recognized that people received essential information (while looking for jobs) often from casual acquaintances (with whom they are connected by weak ties), rather than from close friends (with whom they share strong ties). Granovetter, Mark (1973). The Strength of Weak Ties. *American Journal of Sociology* (May). Vol. 78 No. 6 pp. 1360-80

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 team, where weak cooperation slowly gives way to more conventional strong, that is planned, cooperation. Thus, in web2.0 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 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 set of rules, pragmatically assembled by the people who make up these publics as

¹⁷ It is, perhaps, this need to expose one self, and the greater risk this still entails to women, that explains the gender imbalance in this area.

¹⁸ Auiton, Christophe; Cardon, Dominique (2007)

¹⁹ Castells, Manuel (2004). *The Power of Identity, The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture, Vol. II (second edition)*. Cambridge, MA; Oxford, UK, Blackwell

the go along. Since people are inhabiting 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 around politics, seems increasingly artificial and insincere. Not the 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. There seems to exist, more generally, an inverse relationship 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

20 Beck, Ulrich; Beck-Gernsheim, Elisabeth (Hrsgs.) (1994). *Riskante Freiheiten. Individualisierung in modernen Gesellschaften*. Frankfurt a/M: Suhrkamp

21 Lyon, David (ed.) (2002). *Surveillance as Social Sorting: Privacy, Risk and Automated Discrimination*. London, New York, Routledge

22 Sassen, Saskia (2006). *Territory, Authority, Rights. From Medieval to Global Assemblages*. Princeton and Oxford,

executive's an 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 web2.0 technologies, but I think that these technologies are accelerating and shaping these developments in their own ways, as I have outlined them. 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 sharply 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 out of the old public sphere. Thus, we might end up with the flowering of free cooperation within an authoritarian political framework.²⁶

Princeton University Press, pp 179-84

23 Kluitenberg, Eric (2007). *The Society of the Unspectacular*. Presentation at INFOWARROOM, De Balie Centre for Culture and Politics in Amsterdam, June 8 & 9. Available at <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0706/msg00010.html>

24 For a related analysis, but on the level of consumption patterns of the “bourgeois bohemian” (bobo), see, Brooks, David (2000). *Bobos In Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There*. Simon & Schuster, New York.

25 Benkler, Yochai (2006). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and Freedom*. Yale University Press, pp. 212-272

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