From Public Space to Public Sphere: Discerning the Public Value of the Internet

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Abstract

Can the internet be a public space, and eventually a public sphere? The main aim of this paper is to explore the answer to this question. First, I distinguish a public space from a public sphere. Then, I elucidate what Jean Baudrillard meant by murder of reality, specifically in the context of digital media. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality has captured the difficulties of the internet as a communication tool, but as he is bleak on his assessments, his view also suggests a picture of what it should take for the internet to become an effective public space. In that regard, I propose the idea of enlightened political discourse inspired by Jurgen Habermas as a way to bring about the potential of the internet as a public space. Finally, I identify two challenges to the internet becoming a public space, namely the problem of social media bias, and the problem of excessive government intervention. I argue that these two problems undermine any possibility of the internet being a public space, and if they are not overcome, the picture of the internet as a public sphere will always remain a farfetched possibility.

Keywords: Baudrillard, Habermas, Papacharissi, Public Space, Public Sphere, Internet, Hyperreality

Surveying the Landscape

Zizi Papacharissi is one of the foremost scholars who analyzed the role of the Internet as a public sphere. Although she admitted the present inadequacy of the internet in transforming political and social structures, she does not preclude its possibility.[1] As a very powerful

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[1] Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere" in *New Media Society* 4:9 (2002), 9-10.

new medium that easily caters to the masses, the Internet can likely be heralded as the most democratic platform to have risen in human history through which every political voice has the potential of being heard.

However, postmodernist thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard thought that such a thought is too optimistic. Baudrillard claimed that the advent of new technologies has shown more vividly what he calls the murder of the real. This murder involves the disappearance of the social and the self. The internet has made it difficult to distinguish what is real from what Baudrillard calls the hyperreal. Virtual reality such as what the Internet provides is one dominant form of hyperreality. As one consequence of this, the distinction between true and false has become blurrier than ever before. But if Baudrillard is correct about all these, how can the internet still be a public sphere?

Before I lay out my plan in answering the above question, some distinctions should be made between a public space and a public sphere. The public space, as commonly understood, refers to any platform, digital or otherwise, where the public can express opinions, discuss state policies, and debate matters of public interest and importance. The public sphere, while requiring a public space, has an additional function: it must qualify as a mechanism through which public communication has the force of being directly communicated to public officials and of necessitating a response from the officials concerned. As Mark D. West explained, the ideal public sphere has a deliberative component, to which all have equal access and all voices are heard.[2] As should be clear, this particular component encapsulates what an ideal public square simply means. But there remains an additional component for something to be considered a public sphere, which is "some sort of plebiscatory regime under which the determinations made in the deliberative regime are implemented by public servants."[3] The main point is: the public sphere is not possible without there being a public space, but the public space is moot if it contains little potential to being a public sphere. As such, this paper will narrow down on two major questions: Is it possible for the internet to be a public space? And assuming that it is, does it have the potential to become a public sphere?

Before we proceed on answering the above questions, it is at least essential to look closely at the positive benefits brought about by any public space, especially as it is a prerogative for the creation of any

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[2] Mark D. West, "Is the Internet an Emergent Public Sphere?" in *Journal of Mass Media Ethics: Exploring Questions of Media Morality* 28:3 (2013), 158.

[3] *Ibid.*

public sphere. In other words, why is it important to have any public space at all?[4]

One major factor for the necessity of a public space is how intimately connected it is to the nature of democracy. Any democratic state must have a system in place in which the public can express their political opinions without fear of a government backlash. Secondly, public space should be seen primarily as an essential ingredient to the bringing about of a public sphere. While the mere expression of opinions is in many ways worthwhile, it is not as worthwhile as having the power to influence the shaping of public policies, which in the end is something that only a public sphere can achieve. A democratic state where the public is ultimately powerless in shaping the structures and contents of their society is democratically inadequate insofar as it leaves lawmakers the complete power to decide what laws to pass, even if they may be laws to which the majority of public does not agree.

I first explore what Baudrillard meant by his so-called murder of reality, specifically in the context of digital media. In this world where reality is becoming more indistinguishable from hyperreality, there is a danger for the internet to fail its potential as a new public space. Moreover, the democratic component of the internet in which anyone can speak one's mind and even conceal real identities leads among others to the seeming denigration of the internet to nothing but a sounding board for political frustrations, political tribalism, and a deep-seated division of political sentiments. Given this predicament, I suggest a proposal that is a plausible response: an enlightened political discourse.[5] Drawing inspiration from the work of Jurgen Habermas, whose theory of communicative action is geared towards "the experience of achieving mutual understanding in communication that is free from coercion",[6] I attempt to show how an enlightened political discourse can pave the way for the internet to be a kind of public space that has the greatest potential of becoming a public sphere. This kind of discourse saves the all-too-common political discourse in the

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[4] I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that I expound on this theme.

[5] I have already introduced this idea in a previous article but solely in the context of voting. See my "Democracy's Discontent: The Problem of Knowledge and a Solution" in *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* 4:1 (April 2018), 88.

[6] Thomas McCarthy, "Translator's Introduction" in *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* by Jurgen Habermas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), x.

country, pervaded by vitriol and unsubstantiated personal attacks, from a total breakdown. Then, drawing inspiration from Baudrillard, I further identify two challenges to the internet becoming a public space, namely the problem of social media bias and the problem of excessive government intervention. I maintain that these two problems undermine any possibility of the internet being a public space, and if they are not overcome, the picture of the internet as a public sphere will always remain a farfetched possibility.

Baudrillard and the Internet

Baudrillard defines reality as something that "implies an origin, an end, a past and a future, a chain of causes and effects, a continuity and a rationality."[7] However, virtual reality in the form of the Internet has striking differences with this characterization. While the internet has an origin that can be traced in human history, it does not seem to paint a picture of its coming demise. In fact, the more technologically advanced we become, the more that virtual reality becomes ever more present in our lives, without any signs of abating. Participation in this virtual reality have led to a lost sense of time wherein past and future are no longer distant realities but are now subsumed under the all-encompassing power of real time. Information in the internet has become ubiquitous and even dismissed largely because of the constant and ever changing stimuli that virtual reality offers. As Marc Oliver Pasco describes it, "Everything is now seen, heard, absorbed, processed, edited and translated in real-time, nullifying the once sacred character of knowledge as it relates to the temporal and historical nature of the unknown; relegating it to the status of commodity—current, banal and unexciting."[8] Information has not only become omnipresent; it has also become random. The internet is a new medium that caters to all kinds of information which makes it likely for people to become addicted to the next shiny thing amid the seeming randomness. For Baudrillard, reality has disappeared, "not because of a lack of it—on the contrary, there is too much of it."[9]

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[7] Jean Baudrillard, "The Murder of the Real" in *The Vital Illusion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 63.

[8] Marc Oliver Pasco, "From Objects to Being and Beyond: Situating the Crisis of Reason Within the Bounds of a Hyperreal Situation in Contemporary Media Society" in *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies.* Last Accessed July 9, 2018: https://www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-13_1/v13-1-pasco.html.

[9] Baudrillard, "Murder of the Real", 65-66.

Digital media is able to replicate reality in various forms and textures, framing everything in images and moving pictures, like a colorful circus show that never ends.

Papacharissi identified two major problems with the internet in terms of providing information access. First is that the internet "excludes those with no access to this space. Moreover, connectivity does not ensure a more representative and robust public sphere."[10] These are, indeed, problems that need to be addressed if the aim is for the internet to become an effective public sphere. In fact, Papacharissi admitted that while the internet provides public space, it still does not constitute a public sphere. The internet as a public space provides a platform for political discussion while, in the context of a public sphere, it has virtually little to zero influence in public policy formation. But Baudrillard goes even further. For him, the nature of virtual reality entails that the idea of the internet becoming a possible public space is itself questionable.

A political discussion presupposes a common ground based on facts if it is to be meaningful. But for Baudrillard, this reliance on facts is the very thing in question. While we call these new technologies as information highways, Baudrillard suggests "disinformation highways" as an equally valid characterization.[11] This is to bring out the fact that the Internet opens up avenues to all kinds of communications but it is neutral as to whether what is communicated therein corresponds to something true. Information has become excessive that distinctions between a fact and an unsubstantiated opinion masquerading as fact become difficult to ascertain. Moreover, the shortening of attention span of the present generation as brought about by the digital media is increasingly exploited for whatever purposes it may serve.

In the political arena, all it sometimes takes is a constant barrage of images with funny or provocative captions to discredit an opponent's character. These images are known as internet memes or simply memes. They are defined as "images captioned and re-captioned for humorous, political, and satirical purposes, sometimes made for the clearly aesthetic goals of exhibiting beauty, wit, and pathos."[12] Because of the light-heartedness by which most memes are presented, many find it amusing, fascinating and powerful in changing people's minds. As such, it is not surprising if even a critical thinker who relies on facts and scientific studies can be misled by this new

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[10] Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere", 13.

[11] Baudrillard, "Murder of the Real", 65.

[12] Simon J. Evnine, "The Anonymity of a Murmur: Internet (and Other) Memes" in *British Journal of Aesthetics* (forthcoming), 1.

medium since anyone with access to internet can fabricate lies appearing as facts to suit their own agenda. As there is no easy way to trace the ultimate origin of internet posts such as what is usually found on social media, anonymity is easy and free. Given that anyone can choose their own identity or non-identity, the internet has become a platform for anyone who wants to fabricate falsehood appearing as truth, and get away with it. Baudrillard, in fact, opined that "the attraction of all these virtual machines no doubt derives not so much from the thirst for information and knowledge as from the desire to disappear, and the possibility of dissolving oneself into a phantom conviviality."[13] With the free opportunity to be invisible, humanity need not be constrained by social demands that are usually imposed on him outside of digital media. It is not surprising then if the present time is characterized as an age of "fake news"[14] or, as some would call it, an "era of post-truth."[15]

What is surprising with Papacharissi's assessment of the internet and its possibility as a public sphere is that she has not mentioned any issue of misinformation, only the issues associated with access to information.[16] For Baudrillard, misinformation is in fact not a problem to grapple with, but a reality to be accepted. As the internet makes reality more real than it really is, it can also introduce a lie that is paraded as truth and make it seem real than what it otherwise is. In this scenario, the clear, dividing line between what is true and false is inevitably erased. This predicament is why the internet encapsulates

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[13] Jean Baudrillard, *The Intelligence of Evil or The Lucidity Pact*, trans. C. Turner. London: Berg, 2004.

[14] This is evident in the recent spate of academic articles devoted to the phenomenon of so-called fake news, such as the following: M. R. X. Dentith, "The Problem of Fake News" in *Public Reason* 8:1-2 (2017), 65-79; Axel Gelfert, "Fake News: A Definition" in *Informal Logic* 38:1 (2018), 84-117. A recent contributor to this journal even has his own take on fake news, situating it within the context of current Philippine media, some prominent examples of which are found in the internet. See Regletto Aldrich D. Imbong, "Living (with an Idea) in the time of Social Media and Fake News: Emancipatory Politics and Critical Media" in *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* 4:1 (April 2018), 102-106.

[15] Regletto Aldrich D. Imbong, "Living (with an Idea) in the time of Social Media and Fake News", 102.

[16] Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere, and Beyond" in *Routledge Handbook of Internet Politics,* Andrew Chadwick & Philip N. Howard, eds. (London: Routledge, 2009), 234-235; Zizi Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere" in *New Media Society* 4:9 (2002), 12-15.

the nature of hyperreality: it makes things more real than they really are. The obsession with digital images and virtual reality in general says something about the predicament of this era: we desire something, and it does not matter whether it has something to do with the truth. For Baudrillard, this obsession has not gone unnoticed. He says that "we oscillate between an illusion and a truth which are equally unbearable. But perhaps truth is even more unbearable, and we ultimately desire the illusion of the world, even if we take up all the arms of truth, science and metaphysics against it."[17] We prefer the virtual illusion "where, at the cost of total disenchantment, we would enjoy a total immunity."[18]

This tendency to evade truth lies at the heart of what makes any political discussion problematic. Papacharissi surveyed studies that document incidents of flaming and conflict beyond reasonable boundaries in the internet. Cases of miscommunication and discrimination are frequent. When the focus of the discussion is political, online communication is, to a great extent, "about venting emotion and expressing hasty opinions, rather than rational and focused discourse."[19] This phenomenon reveals a deep discord in political communication online: people only want to speak their minds and communicate rather than engage in discourse aimed at reaching a reasonably defensible political conclusion.

While the problem of misinformation cannot be underestimated, Baudrillard speaks an even greater problem. Even if misinformation is eradicated in every online communication – something which seems impossible at the moment – the excess of information undermines the very possibility of a meaningful communication. Our attention has been held captive by the array of information that flies by our vision glued to the digital screen. Such an excessive and aggressive display of information may make people be fascinated for some time, but it is only a matter of time for disillusionment and apathy to set in. Rather than making us reflect on the current status of our lives, the addictive nature of virtual reality, with all the information it contains, make us passive and indifferent observers of information.

Unaware of the hidden forces of digital media, we have become mere transmitters of information rather than the ultimate originators of it. Too much information can make human beings no better than a lifeless computer: "The excess of positivity, and of operational

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[17] Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1996), 9.

[18] *Ibid.*, 41.

[19] Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere", 16.

stimulation of current systems, plunges us everywhere into this kind of impossible situation where we are no longer in a position of action but of pure reaction, reflex operation and automatic response."[20] As we don't characterize computers as communicating to one another when they are merely programmed to transmit information among each other, so there is absence of meaningful communication when humans are understood in the same context. As the size of information expands, so is the pressure to keep up with all the information and transmit them.

It should be borne in mind that nowhere in the above scenario is much critical thought even needed. Given the power of digital media, we can now instantly pass information without even having to understand whatever it is we are passing. This led Baudrillard to observe that, in this digital age, thought is becoming more considered as "a fossilized object, an archaeological relic, itself also to be visited as a special attraction, with some `think-operator' as guide: `Thought in real time! Experience the historical thrill of thought!"[21] However far-fetched this may appear as an absolute description of reality, we cannot deny the fact that there is a sense in which this description is on point in a great number of online political discussions. Some netizens are better understood as mere medium for information transference than ones who practice a critical and disinterested eye towards information. But without an adequate understanding of the relevant issues and the information that surrounds them, political discussion denigrates into futility.

Another fascinating component of the internet is that for every evaluative claim, there appears to be an available online information to back it up. In fact, as internet and social media made possible the meeting of similar minds that transcends geographical and cultural categories, it is highly likely that for any political position, there is an online group that defends it. The digital availability of information may have given political groups a solid evidential grounding for their stand but this does not guarantee a civil dialogue with groups that are opposed to them. Even if the same facts are laid out in the table, groups are likely to interpret them according to the background assumptions that define their group. But if these assumptions are in opposition to one another, no amount of information would settle the case. Such a blurring of value distinctions is, according to Baudrillard,

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[20] Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 35-36.
[21] *Ibid.*, 43.

"a result of the upsurge of a reality which is absorbing all differences and conflating opposing terms by promoting them all unreservedly."[22]

This blurring of such distinctions is a consequence of the hyperreal nature of the internet. Baudrillard defines hyperreality as that which is "more real than real"[23], "a real without origin or reality".[24] In a world of hyperreality, it is no longer a question of what is real from what is not real; such distinctions are already indistinguishable. As Baudrillard memorably described it, "In the shroud of the virtual, the corpse of the real is forever unfindable."[25] Moreover, nowhere in this scenario is reality given a chance to defend itself. The encroachment of the hyperreal in the fabric of reality is almost effortless and precise that humanity is left unaware of what has happened. We are witnesses to "a crime without a criminal, without a victim and without a motive."[26] We are unwitting witnesses to the murder of the real. The epoch of hyperreality is an age that does not hide the truth, but rather the absence of truth. Everything can now be reproduced, replicated and made more fascinating than the referent it is supposed to imitate. It now seems that anything is more captivating, more surprising, more worthy of public attention when it is put on a screen, edited and digitized, in other words hyperrealized, than when it is simply existing out there, jumbled and chaotic. We have become a generation who sees everything through the eyes of Hollywood, dismissing anything that does not resemble it.

If the internet is to even play a role of a public space in which democratic ideals are exercised and different voices are heard, then it must come to terms with how its hyperrealized nature is infringing people's capacity to make up their minds on civic matters. If the public's supposedly autonomous political commitments are deep down nothing but an echo chamber of ideological narratives whose power resides in their disguise to blur the real from the hyperreal, then as a public space, the internet is ultimately a failure. This is what makes the internet multifarious in its power: while it gives the public the power to communicate and express their political opinions like never before, it equally gives power to those who have the resources to penetrate the public consciousness and shape public opinion in subliminal ways. Papacharissi saw this problem, but in the context of

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[22] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

[23] Jean Baudrillard, *Fatal Strategies*, (New York: Semiotext(e), 1990), 11.

[24] Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation,* trans. Shiela Faria Glacer (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 1.

[25] Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 46.

[26] *Ibid.,* 1.

how commercialization on the internet is undermining democratic practices by encouraging commercial values more than civic and cultural ones.[27] However, even if the problem of commercialization is resolved, political machineries utilized in the context of digital media remains an equally – if not an even more – perplexing concern.

The hyperreal may also likely lead people to see government leaders for more than what they really are. Such a hyperrealized view of politicians and government leaders may be a great impediment for a critical analysis of public policies and political moves. For instance, the public's choice to put someone in any government position, such as the case with the present Philippine president, does not necessarily preclude the public who voted for him from criticizing his policies and political maneuvers. But it seems to be the case that President Duterte became widely known with a hyperrealized image of himself: a hero, a savior, a benevolent father. Such idealized version makes it difficult for his avid supporters to understand, much less accept, criticisms against him that may, in fact, be justified. On the other hand, there is also the opposite hyperrealized image of President Duterte being a vindictive, evil dictator who cares nothing about justice and the rule of law. Similar with the avid supporters, his staunch critics who see him in this light are likely to be dismissive of whatever positive merits particular policies and projects may have that are implemented under his administration. These two hyperrealized images of the current Philippine president are made more manifest and ubiquitous in the internet, especially in social media. Cartoons, memes, catchphrases, and short video clips are created and shared to perpetuate these opposing hyperrealized images.

Towards an Enlightened Political Discourse

Baudrillard states that the hyperreal gave way for the non-distinction of true and false[28], but I don't think that this picture is totally accurate. Hyperreality has indeed made it almost impossible to distinguish between truth and falsity, especially on the internet. Conflicting political views seem to be as good as any other, appearing to be both armed with facts and evidence, but even Baudrillard admits that "the crime is never perfect."[29] Reality still has its traces and the

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[27] Papacharissi, "The Virtual Sphere", 18-20; Papacharissi, "The Virtual 2.0", 235-236.

[28] Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, 17.

[29] *Ibid.*, 1.

key is to finding where they are. Truth, even in political matters, still exists, even in a chaotic environment as the internet.

In the hyperrealized nature of the internet, is there a way for truth to come out, or should we consider it a relic? Given all the perplexities discussed, is it still possible for the internet to be a public space where democratic ideals can be realized? Regarding the second question, I propose what I think to be a valid response: an enlightened political discourse. For democracy to be fully realized on the internet, an enlightened political discourse should be possible and its realization must be encouraged.

So what is an enlightened political discourse? It is *a discourse about civic and political matters in which participants uphold themselves to the basic standards of rationality and open themselves up to the possibility of a rational discussion and/or debate*. This definition implies that there is a universal standard of rationality to which all human beings are subject to. So what are the ways in which the standards of rationality can be met? This is where the philosophy of Jurgen Habermas, specifically his theory of communicative rationality, becomes invaluable. Let us hear what Habermas has to say about the matter:

> An expression satisfies the precondition for rationality if and insofar as it embodies fallible knowledge and therewith has a relation to the objective world (that is, a relation to the facts) and is open to objective judgment. A judgment can be objective if it is undertaken on the basis of a *transsubjective* validity claim that has the same meaning for observers and on participants as it has for the acting subject himself.[30]

There is much to be unpacked about this passage. First of all, a claim is rational if it is capable of being proven wrong, that is, it is inherently fallible. Any claim whose nature is such that it can never be shown to be false does not have any meaningful relation to the objective world since any claim that has to do with the objective world, including the messy world of human politics, must be open to objective judgment. But then, why assume that the objective world is open for judgment? This is where what Habermas calls the phenomenological position becomes relevant, a position which "reflects on the fact that those who behave rationally must themselves presuppose an objective

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[30] Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1981), 9.

world."[31] However the phenomenologist, i.e., the one who subscribes to the phenomenological position, does not simply presuppose the existence of an objective world; rather, he even problematizes it "by inquiring into the conditions under which the unity of an objective world is constituted for the members of a community."[32] The world – our human world – is objective because, according to Habermas, it exists "as one and the same world for a community of speaking and acting subjects."[33] He continues:

> The abstract concept of the world is a necessary condition if communicatively acting subjects are to reach understanding among themselves about what takes place in the world or is to be effected in it. Through this communicative practice they assure themselves at the same time of their common life-relations, of an intersubjectively shared lifeworld. This lifeworld is bounded by the totality of interpretations presupposed by the members as background knowledge.[34]

Thus, what makes a claim rational is not only its commitment to an objective world but, more so, a commitment to a communicative understanding that makes the commitment to an objective world possible. In the context of an enlightened political discourse, a claim is rational if, aside from being inherently fallible, it possesses a validity claim whose meaning is understandable by others who also share the same lifeworld. More so, a validity claim is criticizable. For this reason, those who engage in political discourse then must have a willingness to expose themselves to criticism and, if necessary, to participate properly in argumentation. This is for Habermas one way for people to behave rationally.[35] Consequently, any claim that becomes subject to criticism must be able to withstand those criticisms in order to vindicate itself. In order to do that, any validity claim must be grounded on intersubjectively acceptable reasons. As Habermas states, "valid norms must be capable in principle of meeting with the rationally motivated approval of everyone affected under conditions that neutralize all motives except that of cooperatively seeking the truth."[36]

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[31] *Ibid.*, 11.
[32] *Ibid.*
[33] *Ibid.*
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] *Ibid.*, 18.
[36] *Ibid.*, 19.

At this point, it is not difficult to infer that the components of rationality as expounded by Habermas that are needed for an enlightened political discourse seem too demanding for participants to consistently achieve. To recap, a claim is rational if it is fallible, understandable, criticizable, and grounded on intersubjectively acceptable reasons. On the contrary, we are already aware of the many ways in which political discourses in the internet can turn into a chaotic environment ruled by name-calling, black propaganda, catchy snippets, and other less-than-rational manifestations. So given the messy reality of political talks on the internet, is there a way for an enlightened political discourse to take place? The answer is yes. However, the road to such a discourse is not easy, as I shall shortly explain.

The internet has already provided a wide-range medium for people of many different backgrounds to engage in dialogue about anything. This shows that it can also be an avenue for an enlightened political discourse to actually take place. Also, some social media forums, such as Facebook pages and Twitter threads, can be designed in such a way that they act as platforms where differing political ideas can be expressed, discussed and criticized, all the while maintaining the basic standards of rational discussion and civil debate. For instance, some of those who own these pages inform their members of the standards and rules that they need to follow in order to be able to continually participate in the discussions. Some of these rules include not resorting to name-calling and insults and not deliberately spreading lies and fake news with the corollary rule that debates must always be done in a civic and respectful manner.

At this point, the possibility for an enlightened political discourse is introduced only at the grassroots level, at the level of individuals, which in the sphere of the internet, are called netizens. But it need not be confined only at that level. Initiatives from non-governmental and non-partisan organizations can bring about a platform in which individuals can engage in fruitful political discourse that may take different forms: debates about particular public policies, discussions on urgent social and political problems and the participants' suggested solutions, and evidence-based examinations of public officials, to cite a few. What is important to bear in mind with these potential initiatives is the strict implementation of rules by the governing organization in such a way that an enlightened political discourse is faithfully achieved. In order that such discourse be inviting, the first norm that must be implemented is the strict prohibition of expletives, name-calling and ad hominem arguments. Speech on this level does nothing to advance a discussion; it only discourages individuals from speaking

their minds, especially if their views happen to be unpopular. The organization or personality in charge should make this rule explicit to anyone who wants to participate, including the corresponding consequences to be faced once this rule is broken. However, care must be present in the implementation of such rules. For instance, while expletives are generally well-known, the case is not so clear with name calling and ad hominem; the latter cases are generally determined by context and the speaker's intention. The flexibility of a word's use and meaning must be taken into account upon deciding whether or not to prohibit the use of such words or phrases in social media. Upon deeper reflection, the flexibility of language turns into a double-edged sword: a funny use of a word for one person may be deeply offensive to another.

One may hope that social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, promulgate an official policy in which expletives and name calling are automatically banned from being posted so that fruitful dialogues, such as in politics, can develop. This policy seems conducive to the emergence of an enlightened political discourse. The suggestion to ban expletives, name-calling and ad hominem is attractive on one level since, if properly executed, it will surely reduce the instances of cyberbullying and improve the level of general discourse from being pervaded with insults and personal attacks to creating conversations of deep and lasting substance, even if there may be fundamental differences. It seems that hate speech, in which curses and name calling are expressions, have no rightful place in social media. But even the hypothetical policy just mentioned is more difficult to implement in practice than it initially appears in theory.

For instance, it appears that prominent social media platforms are moving towards such idea in their regulation against so-called hate speech. However, there is a growing concern that many of these social networking sites are using the idea of hate speech to censor mostly conservative voices. This concern is why Mark Zuckerberg, the founder and present CEO of Facebook, is asked by US Senator Ted Cruz, among many others, in a widely publicized hearing, why well-known conservative voices in Facebook are being censored or shut down.[37] This kind of viewpoint discrimination makes it alarming to know that Facebook has already blocked allegedly fake news sites in

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[37] For a written account of the incident, see Nash Jenkins, "The Mark Zuckerberg vs. Ted Cruz Showdown Was the Most Explosive Part of Today's Facebook Testimony" in *Time Magazine*, July 9, 2018, http://time.com/5235461/mark-zuckerberg-facebook-ted-cruz/.

the Philippines.[38] This trend of censorship is not even unique to Facebook. Many Youtube pages and personalities, known for their conservative viewpoints, are either being censored (such as the Prager University Youtube channel founded by Dennis Prager)[39], or demonetized (such as many Youtube videos of well-known conservative personalities like Steven Crowder, Mark Dice and Paul Joseph Watson, to name just a few)[40], or both. Meanwhile Twitter, another well-known social media platform, prohibits ads that are pro-life because they are deemed inflammatory and offensive, while America's largest organization that carries out state-sanctioned abortions, Planned Parenthood, is allowed to advertise their pro-abortion messages.[41] It is not surprising that all these censorships of conservatives have necessitated the emergence of new social media platforms, such as Gab, whose main value proposition is their commitment to free speech.

The systematic viewpoint discrimination against conservatives in such social media giants as Facebook, Twitter and Youtube should be seen as one difficult obstacle to achieving the objective of the internet being a public space. This is what I call *the problem of social media bias*. All that has been said so far presupposes that social media platforms are committed to allowing different political viewpoints to be expressed, discussed and even criticized. Once these platforms turn their heads and start favoring one viewpoint at the expense of another, they no longer become a democratic avenue where the digital public, whatever their political orientations, have the potential to express themselves, communicate with concerned officials and agencies, and eventually shape public policies. They are reduced to propaganda machines whose primary task is to be an echo chamber of a homogenous viewpoint that increasingly denies space to any kind of opposition, even if they may be saying otherwise. If this systematic

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[38]Janvic Mateo, "Facebook cracks down on Philippines fake news sites" in *The Philippine Star*, July 9, 2018, https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2018/04/16/1806377/facebook-cracks-down-philippines-fake-news-sites.

[39] Tyler O'Niel, "Google Reveals Its Leftist Bias: Youtube Still Censors PragerU Videos" in *PJ Media*, July 9, 2018, https://pjmedia.com/trending/google-reveals-its-leftist-bias-youtube-still-censors-prageru-videos/.

[40] James Murphy, "Youtube's Soft Censorship" in *The New American,* July 9, 2018, https://www.thenewamerican.com/usnews/item/26724-youtube-s-soft-censorship.

[41] Lisa Bourne, "Twitter censors pro-life ads" in *LifeSite News,* July 9, 2018, https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/twitter-censors-pro-life-ads.

discrimination and censorship continue unabated, this is surely to become one of the greatest threats to the internet being a public sphere, or even simply a public space. One need only to realize the enormous power and influence of these platforms to be alarmed that their censorship of a particular, i.e., conservative, viewpoint would spell the death of a genuine public space, which is a necessary condition to the building of a public sphere. Of course, these platforms do not comprise the whole of the internet, but their almost synonymous concomitance with the internet, which bespeaks of their universal appeal, shows that their digital presence cannot be underestimated. Whether one likes it or not, these platforms will remain influential, perhaps even more influential than ever before.

Suppose that the social media bias that is intimated before has been proven to be without substance, or at least more realistically, has been adequately overcome (something which I think to be highly unlikely). Does this mean that social media already qualifies as a public space? At least in the Philippine context, we have reasons to doubt. When a particular government tries to regulate the bringing about of a public space, such as in digital media, this move should be monitored closely by the public since this government initiative may result to a tendency where ideas that criticize or oppose a government regulation or simply ideas that are unpopular or politically incorrect, are censored. There is no current initiative from the Philippine government towards this objective, but there are now regulations and pending bills that may in the future curtail the public's freedom to fully express their opinions in social media. This is what I call *the problem of excessive government intervention*. Some examples are already apparent. There is the Fake News Bill filed by senator Joel Villanueva which seeks to penalize anyone who spreads malicious distribution of so-called false news. False news is defined by the bill as information which intends to cause panic, division, chaos, violence, and hate, or those which exhibit a propaganda to blacken or discredit one's reputation. The penalty for the bill is a staggering five million pesos and imprisonment of up to five years.[42] It is not difficult to realize the problematic nature of this bill. For one, it is antithetical to our Constitutional right to freedom of expression. Moreover, the qualifications used to define the key terms in the bill are too ambiguous as to fit the predispositions of anyone powerful enough to

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[42] For a short account of this bill, see Eimor P. Santos, "Bill filed vs. fake news: Up to ₱10M fine, 10-year jail time for erring public officials" in *CNN Philippines*, http://cnnphilippines.com/news/2017/06/22/senate-bill-fake-news-fines-government-officials.html.

use it in censoring opinions and views that do not agree with their own. If this bill is passed into a law, this would expectedly weaken people's resolve to express their opinions in social media, thereby undermining the very possibility of a public space. Another bill that is antithetical to the making of a public space is the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression Bill, or commonly known as the SOGIE Bill.[43] While the bill focuses mainly on the concerns of the LGBT community, some of its provisions have the potential to stifle the public from expressing their opinions on such matters as gender, family and transgenderism. If the bill becomes a law, the Filipino public may no longer be able to express once commonsensical ideas such as 'There are only two genders" for fear of being labeled as discriminatory. What constitutes a public space is a platform where free expression is encouraged and views from all political spectrums are debated and discussed, rather than stifled and censored. Once the government intervenes in the making of a public space and tries to define what views and opinions are only allowed in such a space, this becomes the death of free speech. Once free speech is abolished, the dream of a public space even on the internet becomes the dream of a disillusioned madman.

Conclusion

The presence of a medium, the internet, where dialogue can take place, and the capacity of this medium to give power to its users to set their own standards for dialogue make it clear that the internet, by allowing the possibility of an enlightened political discourse, can really play the role of a public space. Given that the standards for the dialogues are individually decided, it may be the case that no standards are actually set, resulting into a chaotic environment where no consensus or rational understanding is reached. But this need not preclude others from setting rational standards that would make civil political discussions and debates possible. This is an ideal that is possible in the internet even if we do not commonly see an enlightened political discourse taking place. As such, while Baudrillard captures the difficulties of the internet being a possible public space, it does not entail total resignation to the hyperreality of this new medium. Indeed, the internet has the power to promote a vibrant civil society. As James Bohman expressed,

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43   Here is a downloadable copy of the bill: http://www.congress.gov.ph/legisdocs/first_17/CR00101.pdf.

"The point is not simply to create a Website or to convey information. The Internet becomes something more only when sites are made to be public spaces in which free, open and responsive dialogical interaction takes place."[44]

A political discourse is enlightened if and only if both parties are willing to listen to the merits of each other's arguments, and if possible, reach a defensible conclusion based on every available fact that is deemed relevant to the issue. Willingness to listen precludes name-calling and pre-empting a meaningful dialogue by ridiculing opposing ideas without even understanding them. In order to squeeze substance out of political discourse, we need to heed the suggestion of Harvard philosopher Michael Sandel: "To reinvigorate democratic politics, we need to find our way to a morally more robust public discourse, one that honors pluralism by *engaging* with our moral disagreements, rather than *avoiding* them."[45]

However, the problem of social media bias and excessive government intervention are difficulties that need to be addressed before any talk of public sphere is possible. The proposal of an enlightened political discourse heavily relies on the assumption that the internet is a platform where all ideas can be expressed. Once the giant social media platforms manipulate their systems so as only one cluster of viewpoint is shown to be correct, then this would obviously impose undue influence on the public on what opinions would appear viable or attractive. It is like a parent giving their child a range of options but all the options are rigged so as to eventually favor the parent. In our case, the parent is the social media platforms, while we, the netizens, are their children. Meanwhile, the excessive intervention of the government with regards to the public's expression of opinions is dangerous to anyone's right to free speech, and without that basic right to free expression, any platform, digital or otherwise, can never be a genuine public space, much less a public sphere. Thus, any account of a public space, and eventually a public sphere, must

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[44] James Bohman, "The Transformation of the Public Sphere: Political Authority, Communicative Freedom, and Internet Publics" in *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy*, Jeroen van den Hoven & John Weckert, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 82.

[45] Michael J. Sandel, "Populism, Liberalism, and Democracy" in *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 20:10 (2018), 7. DOI: 10.1177/0191453718757888. Emphasis in the original.

effectively deal with these concerns before it can even get off the ground.[46]

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