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# Conceptualizing forums and blogs as public sphere

Thomas Poell

On the morning of 2 November 2004, immediately after the assassination of the controversial Dutch film director Theo van Gogh by the young Dutch Moroccan Mohammed B., large numbers of people rushed to the Internet to share their grief, anger, insights, and opinions. On FOK!forum!, one of the largest web forums in the Netherlands, every minute several posts appeared. Most of them said little more than: 'Goddammit!!!', 'jesus!!!!!!!!!!!!!!', 'No! Fucking hell!', and 'let's hope he's still alive'. Later during the day, when the news spread that the assassin was Moroccan, the posts became more reflexive, but also more aggressive. For example, at a quarter past six in the evening, one message on FOK!forum! read: 'however you look at it, it remains a POLITICAL MISTAKE. Repeatedly, it has been indicated that there are a lot of problems in this MULTICULTURAL society. But has anything ever been done? NO!!'. A few minutes later, someone responded by claiming: 'Bull-shit, this involves one moron, who decided to kill someone because of his ideas. There will always be such types.'<sup>1</sup>

How should this kind of online interaction be understood? Can it be interpreted as fruitful public debate? Particularly two concepts, which are both normative and descriptive, play an important role in the discussion on the influence of online communication on public debate. Firstly, inspired by Jürgen Habermas's *Structural transformation of the public sphere* (1989; orig. 1962), various new media scholars argue that the Internet can revive or extend the public sphere, as it is, contrary to the traditional mass media, in essence an interactive medium. Following Habermas, most of these authors refer to the concept of the public sphere as a realm separate from political, religious, or economic interests, in which citizens articulate shared opinions through public debate (Benkler 2006, 176-178; Dahlberg 2001; 2005; Knapp 1997; McNair 2006, 152-154; Rheingold 1993, 274-280). Secondly, in critical dialogue with the original Habermasian concept of the public sphere, other theorists maintain that the Internet is especially important because it facilitates the construction of multiple alternative or counter-public spheres. With this concept they allude to online communicative spaces in which social groups, which have no access to the mass media platform, can construct shared identities

and interests and coordinate public actions (Bennett 2004; Dahlgren 2001, 52-53; Downey and Fenton 2003, 198-199; Hacker and Van Dijk 2000; Poster 1995).

So far, these concepts have primarily been used for general reflections on the relationship between online communication and public debate. This raises the question of whether they can also help us to understand the influence of particular forms of online communication, that is, as medium-specific materializations. This chapter tries to answer this question by examining the role of Internet forums and blogs in the intense public discussions following the assassination of Theo van Gogh. It focuses on an actual social conflict because the medium-specific characteristics of forums and blogs can be most clearly observed when the public and the various media are in a state of alert, and all focused on the same issue.

The assassination of Theo van Gogh is particularly interesting from an analytical point of view as it received an enormous amount of media attention and put the Netherlands, at least for a few days, in a state of shock. As the assassin was a young Dutch Moroccan, who claimed to have murdered Van Gogh for religious reasons, the discussions inevitably revolved around central democratic issues such as citizenship, freedom of speech, and the place of religion in a liberal democratic society (see also Boomgaarden and De Vreese 2007; Hajer and Uitermark 2008; Pantti and Van Zoonen 2006). In previous years, Van Gogh himself had become an important figure in the debate over these issues, as he had fiercely criticized Muslim practices and beliefs as well as the multicultural politics of the central government, which promoted cultural diversity (Hajer and Uitermark 2008).

For the evaluation of the two concepts, 51 blogs were investigated in the first three days after the assassination. A blog (short for web log) is a website, usually maintained by an individual, which has separately locatable entries, displayed in reverse chronological order. Most blogs offer the reader the opportunity to leave comments, which may be moderated or deleted by the blog owner. The 51 investigated blogs effectively constitute all of the retrievable Dutch language blogs commenting on the assassination. Of these 51 blogs, 46 were found through Google Blog Search, which allows one to search specifically for blog posts written on a particular date. Yet, Google Blog Search is by no means perfect; a manual search revealed that a significant part of the most well-known Dutch blogs commenting on the assassination was not available through Google Blog Search. Consequently, five extra blogs, among others the right-wing shocklog *GeenStijl*, were added to the selection.

In addition, four Internet forums, covering the same time span, were examined. An Internet forum is a dedicated web application facilitating asynchronous discussions, usually organized by user-created topics, and threads. All four investigated forums were monitored by forum administrators, who have the authority to moderate and delete any thread and post on the forum. The four forums, Pim

*Fortuyn Forum*, *Indymedia*, *FOK!forum!*, and *Marokko Community*, were chosen because they each cover a specific region of the political and cultural landscape. The *Pim Fortuyn Forum* is one of the main populist right-wing forums. *Indymedia* is an international left-wing network of participatory journalists and activists, which offers activist news but also functions as a discussion platform. *FOK!forum!* is part of *FOK!*, which was originally focused on youngsters, but can now be considered as a general forum for everyone. Finally, the *Marokko Community*, which is part of the community site *Marokko.nl*, is the largest discussion platform for young Dutch Moroccans. The parent company, *Marokko Media*, maintains on its website that *Marokko.nl* has 45,000 unique visitors per day, which together post 50,000 messages a day. It has been claimed that *Marokko Community* was frequented by Mohammed B. in the months before the assassination (Benschop 2005). In the days after the assassination, an unusual number of autochthon Dutch members were active on this forum.

To assess how the relationship between the forums, blogs, and the traditional mass media can be interpreted, research was also done on the reporting of five major Dutch newspapers: *De Telegraaf*, *Trouw*, *de Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*, and *Het Parool*. These newspapers cover the entire spectrum of the mass press in terms of elitist versus populist, and right wing versus left wing. A selection of articles was made using a LexisNexis search for ‘Theo van Gogh’ for the first three days after the assassination. This search generated a total of 251 articles.

Although this is by no means an exhaustive study of the mediated public discussions following the assassination, it is sufficient for our meta-theoretical objectives. It allows us to reflect on the way in which the concepts of public sphere and multiple public spheres can be used to understand the medium-specific contribution of forums and blogs to public debate. The first two sections of this chapter evaluate the notion of the public sphere, while the third part examines the concept of multiple public spheres.

## **Public sphere as critical rational debate**

Can the notion of the public sphere, as originally conceptualized by Habermas, be used to understand the specific contribution of Internet forums and blogs to public communication? Let us start with the forums. In principle, forums seem to be particularly equipped to facilitate inclusive, critical rational public debate, which, according to Habermas, forms the basis of a real public sphere (Habermas 1989). Forums enable everyone with an Internet connection to initiate and participate in public debate on a national or even international level. Moreover, as most forums allow the participants to make contributions under a nickname, they obscure many of the social markers which in offline discussions may unjustly benefit or discredit the opinions of speakers.

Yet, if we examine the forum discussions in the aftermath of the assassination, most of them appear to be neither inclusive nor critical rational. The messages on FOK!forum! discussed in the introduction section are in this sense typical. The majority of the posts simply expressed anger or sadness without much further reflection. Politicians as well as other participants in the online debates were frequently called 'idiots', 'suckers', and 'hypocrites', while Muslims, or more specifically Muslim fundamentalists, were labeled 'fascists', 'losers', 'murderers', and 'criminals'. It is important to note that most forum threads were dominated by small groups of five to ten participants.

These observations are largely confirmed by various empirical studies on forum discussions, which consistently find that only a small proportion of forum participants engage in public debate. It has been argued that most people use forums for entertainment or personal expression, rather than debate. Furthermore, research points out that when public discussion does evolve, it is far from rational and should rather be characterized as emotional and irreverent (Barber 1998; Davis 1999; Delli Carpini and Keeter 2003; Hurwitz 2004; Margolis and Resnick 2000).

Particularly problematic from a Habermasian public-sphere perspective is that the public on the forums investigated here can be characterized as rather homogeneous regarding ideology. The discussions on the FOK!forum!, and especially on the *Pim Fortuyn Forum*, were predominantly marked by the opinion that the assassination demonstrated that the multicultural politics of the government had failed, and that radical Muslims entail a grave danger to Dutch society. Most contributors on *Indymedia*, by contrast, asserted that the assassination was a symbol of the polarisation of societal relations to which Van Gogh had contributed heavily. Finally, on the *Marokko Community* relatively many participants argued that the assassination was the work of an individual madman and had little to do with religion. Hence, the respective forums were far from inclusive. This becomes particularly evident when considering the reporting in the five national newspapers, which each provided a platform for a larger variety of opinions than could be heard on any of the forums.

Taken together, the forum discussions clearly fall short of the criteria of the public sphere, as originally conceptualized by Habermas. There were, however, a few signs which showed that some of the forums were more favourable to critical rational public debate than others. In particular, *Indymedia* turned out to be a platform for more critical rational arguments. One of the participants on this forum, for example, extensively analyzed the role of the media in the aftermath of the assassination, which, according to her, should have been more critical of the role played by Van Gogh in the negative publicity on Islam and Dutch Moroccans in the previous years.<sup>2</sup> Although these kinds of arguments subsequently evoked several emotional and aggressive reactions, even on *Indymedia*, they do indicate that at least some forums incidentally meet the norm of critical rationality.

Also noteworthy were the discussions on *Marokko Community*, which were more inclusive than the ones on the other fora, as both critics and supporters of the multicultural society expressed their opinions here. For example, in a typical discussion on *Marokko Community*, one member with the nickname *aliyaah* claimed: ‘When Theo van Gogh started to criticize the Jews, all doors were closed to him??? He was not allowed to practice anti-Semitism? And now that Muslims are put in the wrong by him, now there is ... freedom of speech??’ Quickly someone else with the handle *Peej* responded by arguing: ‘Theo has criticized and ridiculed all religions (especially their orthodox parts). This happens to be allowed in the Netherlands, where the constitution and the penal code count as the legal framework, and not a few old religious books.’<sup>3</sup>

Even though the discussions on *Indymedia* and *Marokko Community* still do not meet the ideal of inclusive, critical rational debate, they do suggest that Internet forums can, under specific conditions, facilitate this ideal. The discussions on *Marokko Community* were more inclusive precisely because the enraged critics of the multicultural society sought the confrontation with Dutch Muslims, whom they held responsible for the assassination. The critical rational character of some of the posts on *Indymedia* is no coincidence either, as this forum has a rather strict editorial policy. The administrators of this forum remove ‘racist, fascist, sexist, and homophobic posts’ as well as ‘conspiracy theory nonsense, provocations, and other disinformation’.<sup>4</sup>

The observation that Internet forums can, under particular conditions, approximate the public sphere ideal has also been made by Lincoln Dahlberg in his examination of *E-Democracy.org*. *E-Democracy* is a volunteer-based project, which tries to make ‘use of the Internet to improve citizen participation and real world governance through online discussions and information and knowledge exchange’.<sup>5</sup> Since its conception in Minnesota in 1994, several local discussion forums have been created in the US, UK, and New Zealand. To accomplish fruitful public political debate and a genuine exchange of information and knowledge, the *E-Democracy* project has employed a combination of rules and guidelines, as well as ‘forum management to structure deliberations towards the ends intended’. These efforts seem to have paid off as this project, according to Dahlberg, in many ways approximates the public sphere conception: it has ‘stimulated reflexivity, fostered respectful listening and participant commitment to the ongoing dialogue, achieved open and honest exchange, and provided equal opportunity for all voices to be heard’ (Dahlberg 2001).

Despite such examples, the overall majority of the discussions investigated here, even on *Indymedia* and *Marokko Community*, did not come near these normative ideals of the public sphere. Consequently, we must conclude that in general the deliberations on Internet forums cannot be considered a digital extension of the Habermasian public sphere.

## Blogosphere as public sphere

What about the blogs? In contrast to the forums, blogs are first and foremost a platform for individual authors. While many blogs offer their readers the opportunity to comment on a blog post, they do not allow them to start main blog posts on their own. Consequently, blog discussions are usually dominated by the point of view of the blogger, supported by most of the commentators. As Geert Lovink has made clear, the homogeneous character of blog discussions is the result of the implicit rules of conduct to which bloggers adhere. He argues: 'Adversaries will not post on each other's blogs. At best, they quote and link' (Lovink 2008, 21). In this sense, blogs seem to be even less of an egalitarian platform of public debate than web forums, which would lead us to the conclusion that they are even less well equipped to facilitate the public sphere.

However, this assessment should be reconsidered when we look at blogs as a collective of cross-linked blog entries. As various new media theorists maintain, together blogs can generate a lively public debate by commenting on, and linking to, newspaper articles and other blogs. On the basis of this claim, these theorists subsequently contend that blogs constitute a blogosphere, which serves an important function in public debate by being able to hold the traditional mass media accountable for its mistakes and inaccuracies (Gillmor 2004, 237; Lovink 2008, 7; Tremayne 2007, 263-265). Henry Jenkins even maintains that 'bloggers will be jousting with mainstream journalists story by story, sometimes getting it right, sometimes getting it wrong, but always forcing a segment of the public to question dominant representations' (Jenkins 2006, 216-217).

Yet, if we examine the blogs in the hours and days after the Van Gogh assassination, a somewhat different picture emerges. First, it must be noted that the number of blogs commenting on the assassination is relatively small. Even if we take into account that part of the blogs have disappeared since or could not be retrieved through Google Blog Search, 51 blogs is not that many, set against the estimated 30 million blogs which existed worldwide by the end of 2004. Moreover, there seems to have been little debate between blogs; none of the examined blogs actually discussed claims made by other blogs, even though some provided links in the so-called blog roll. Neither did the blogs comment much on the mass media reporting. A few blogs did provide links to newspaper articles but gave no further comments.

The only exception in this regard was *GeenStijl*, which strongly criticized various prominent columnists and newspapers for cooperating with the political establishment. Particularly remarkable was that this right-wing shocklog, usually critical of any multiculturalism, took the producers of two television programs to task for the way they had selected young Dutch Moroccans to appear on their respective programs. The blog accused the producers of adopting a stereotypical approach and of being only interested in radical Moroccans, who concurred with

the assassination.<sup>6</sup> However, *GeenStijl*, which has been partly owned by the right-wing newspaper *De Telegraaf* since 2006, is not a regular blog. It is effectively a mass medium in its own right, run by a professional staff of at least a dozen editors. The rest of the examined blogs did not criticize other media, but simply gave personal expressions of anger, frustration, and despair. In form and content, these blog posts were not very different from what could be found on the forums. They certainly did not collectively function as a critical check on the mass media reporting.

The discrepancy between the observations in the literature and our analysis seems for a large part due to a difference in focus. New media theorists have primarily examined a small number of American high-traffic blogs, which are devoted to political issues and frequently challenge mainstream media (Lovink 2008, 260). Time and again the same examples are discussed in which bloggers have succeeded in correcting a national newspaper or a high profile television show. The vast majority of personal blogs is excluded in this type of research, since only a few blogs actively monitor other media.

In sum, theoretically, forums as well as blogs can, in different ways, contribute to the public sphere, as originally conceptualized by Habermas. In principle, forums are highly egalitarian platforms for diverse opinions, since they are open for everyone to participate in a public discussion or start a new one. While blogs are in theory more homogeneous, they may also function as a collective linking and monitoring platform, enacting critical checks on the reporting of mass media and other blogs. Yet, in practice, neither the blogs nor the forums seem to fulfil their public sphere potential. There are certainly examples of blogs and forums which come near the public sphere ideal, but the overall majority does not.

Of course, we could abandon the Habermasian normative criteria of inclusiveness and rationality and adopt a more lenient definition of the public sphere. Recent examples of such an approach can be found in Brian McNair's *Cultural chaos* (2006, 136-143), and Yochai Benkler's *The wealth of networks* (2006, 11, 177-178). Although this strategy allows them to arrive at a more optimistic assessment of the influence of online communication on public debate, the concept of the public sphere also loses its critical and normative force as a consequence; it practically becomes a synonym for any form of public communication.

We may conclude that the concept of the public sphere, both as a normative and a descriptive concept, does not really help us to assess the contribution of forums and blogs to public debate. If we hold on to a strict normative definition of the public sphere based on the criteria of inclusiveness and rationality, we inevitably have to dismiss the mass of blogs and forums for failing to live up to this ideal. But if we choose to abandon these criteria, and opt to employ the public sphere primarily as a descriptive concept, we can no longer use it to evaluate online communication in terms of its contribution to democracy and diversity.



## Multiple public spheres

Is the concept of a multiplicity of alternative public spheres more helpful? On the basis of this notion, it has been argued that the Internet is particularly important as an instrument for the emancipation of subordinated social groups. The Internet permits, according to John Downey and Natalie Fenton, 'radical groups from both Left and Right to construct inexpensive virtual counter-public spheres' (Downey and Fenton 2003, 198). This argument has especially been based on the use of networked ICT by social activists. Research shows that the Internet facilitates the internal communication of social movements, as well as the organization of protest campaigns (Arquilla and Ronfeld 2001; Bennett 2004, 130-131; Castells 2004, 83, 154-158; Van de Donk et al. 2004, 4-6; Keck and Sicking 1999, 96). The question is whether a similar claim can be made concerning the forum and blog discussions in the aftermath of the assassination, which primarily involved individuals who were not part of a social movement.

At first sight, blogs especially seem fit as platforms for the development of a multiplicity of alternative public spheres. As we have noticed in the previous section, blog discussions are often characterized by participants who strongly concur with the blog owner's opinions. In this sense, blogs can be interpreted as alternative platforms on which specific groups debate public issues in their own circle. However, precisely the hierarchical character of blog discussions is problematic from an alternative public spheres perspective. As we have already noticed, it seems to make blogs primarily a platform for individual expression, rather than for the development of a collective point of view. This obviously undermines the potential of blogs as instruments for the emancipation of subordinated social groups. In addition, it must be noted that most blogs, except for *GeenStijl*, only had a few commentators. Thus, in a quantitative and qualitative sense, it is questionable whether blogs can facilitate the development of multiple public spheres.

As it turns out, the forums correspond better with the notion of multiple alternative public spheres. In contrast to the blogs, the forums, with their egalitarian architecture and thousands of visitors daily, can potentially serve as platforms for the expression of group interests and opinions. As already became clear in the previous section, the forums did indeed seem to function as such, since they primarily drew participants who interpreted the assassination likewise. Finally, important to note is that most forum discussions were characterized by emotional and heated discourse. While this type of discourse is problematic from the original Habermasian perspective, scholars working from the perspective of multiple public spheres have pointed out that such discourse can fulfil an important emancipatory role. It allows for the participation of groups who do not master the critical rational discourse used by politicians, intellectuals, and journalists who dominate mass media discussions (Dahlgren 2001, 39; Fraser 1992, 120-122; Papacharissi 2004, 266).

In the investigated forum discussions, emotional and heated discourse was specifically important because it allowed a variety of groups to articulate their specific identities and discuss the social tensions resulting from the assassination in their own terms. Particularly *Marokko Community* provided fertile ground for such discussions. For example, a day after the assassination, one member with the handle *ffeiza* claimed that ‘Now, you really hear what the Dutch think about the Moroccans. Today at work we had a vicious discussion: All Moroccans should piss off. Your religion is nonsense. This is what my boss told me.’ Quickly, however, another member pointed out that *ffeiza* made the same mistake as people who blamed the entire Moroccan community for the murder of Van Gogh: ‘if a few “Dutch people” say something, it is not immediately representative for the whole country.’ Someone else added: ‘I don’t know whether these statements are representative of how the Dutch think about the Moroccans. I rather think that these are just emotions that are released after such an event.’ Yet, another argued: ‘This is not that bad. At least he is still discussing with you. It is always better than 7 bullets and a knife in your body.’ To which *ffeiza*, in turn, responded, ‘I’m not talking about what is better: bullets or discussing. I’m purely talking about the fact that a person can smile at you for two years and then, after something happens, say these kinds of things’.<sup>7</sup>

While these kinds of exchanges correspond with the notion of alternative public spheres, this is certainly not to say that all of the statements on the forums constituted a positive contribution to public debate. While some of the discussions, such as the above example from *Marokko Community*, challenged cultural stereotypes, a large part of the investigated forum exchanges consisted of hateful messages. Particularly on the *Pim Fortuyn Forum*, many xenophobic statements could be read.<sup>8</sup> One message on this forum, for example, claimed: ‘Islam is the plague for a free society; consequently, Islam does not belong here. This madness is a disease, which must be totally eradicated.’<sup>9</sup> Although less frequently, and somewhat less extreme, intolerant messages could also be found on the *FOK!forum!* and *Marokko Community*. The only exception was *Indymedia*, which has an explicit editorial policy against ‘racist’ and ‘fascist’ texts.

Similar observations have been made by Albert Benschop in his research on the online communication leading up to the assassination of Van Gogh. Benschop, who largely focused on forums, concluded: ‘We have seen how radicalised Islamic youngsters used the Internet to hatch their networks of hatred and disseminate their hostile message. This gave rise to a climate for violent jihad, in which the murderer of Theo van Gogh could be recruited.’ On the opposite end of the political spectrum, Benschop observed the online activities of ‘right-wing extremist, neo-nationalist and neo-nazi groupings’: ‘With their xenophobic, islamophobic and racist statements they created a climate of hatred of foreigners, long before the murder of Van Gogh’ (Benschop 2005). These concerns resonate with Cass Sunstein’s argument that ‘the Internet creates a large risk of group polariza-

tion, simply because it makes it so easy for like-minded people to speak with one another – and ultimately to move toward extreme and sometimes even violent positions’ (Sunstein 2001, 199).

The concern over extremism hints at another analytical problem, which challenges the concept of multiple public spheres as a tool to understand the contribution of Internet forums to public debate. The concept is based on the assumption that the various social groups first develop their opinions, interests, identities, and organizational links within their own circle, and subsequently influence the larger public debate as played out in the mass media. Yet, if we examine the debate on the assassination, it becomes clear that none of the forums had much of a direct impact on the debate in the mass media. Although some of the newspapers did give short impressions of the more radical statements on forums such as *Marokko Community* and the *Pim Fortuyn Forum*, they did not discuss these statements any further.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, none of the forum discussions produced any agreement between the participants about a shared interest or a particular course of actions which should be followed. This was certainly not due to a lack of initiative. Various contributors to the *Pim Fortuyn Forum* and *Indymedia*, which on other occasions served as a platform for organizing protests, made appeals for cooperation. For example, some of the participants on the *Pim Fortuyn Forum* called upon fellow members to join a protest of several right-wing organizations against the murder. This protest was supposed to serve as an alternative to the official manifestation organized by the Amsterdam municipality, which had drawn over 20,000 people. Even though a few of the forum members showed some interest, the majority did not even bother to respond. The following day, *de Volkskrant* reported that the alternative protest had not been a success as the police had far outnumbered the protesters.<sup>11</sup> Other calls for joint action did not produce any major results either.

## Conclusion

This article has shown that the concepts of the public sphere and alternative public spheres, frequently used to understand the influence of the Internet on public debate, only have limited value when we examine particular forms of online communication in the context of actual societal conflict. More specifically, the investigation demonstrated that these concepts could only capture part of the different roles played by forums and blogs in the debate following the assassination of Theo van Gogh.

Some of the forum discussions certainly approached the public-sphere ideals of inclusiveness and critical rationality, whereas *GeenStijl* appeared to fulfil the promise that blogs enhance the rationality of public debate by providing a critical check on the reporting of the mass media. However, the majority of the forum and blog

discussions did not in any way match the normative criteria of the Habermasian public sphere.

More or less similar conclusions can be drawn concerning the notion of multiple public spheres. At first sight, blogs seem to correspond with this concept, but on closer inspection it becomes highly questionable whether they facilitate the expression of group interests and opinions. Forums were even more ambiguous. Clearly, they provided a platform for the articulation of specific cultural identities. Yet, at the same time, forums facilitated the dissemination of hateful messages. Moreover, it became clear that they largely function in isolation from the discussion in the mass media, which does not conform to the idea that alternative public spheres enable subordinated groups to participate in the general public debate.

As most of the forum and blog discussions fall short of the criteria of either the public sphere or of multiple alternative public spheres, holding on to these concepts effectively leads us to dismiss and ignore the vast majority of online communication. Yet, as the concerns of Benschop and Sunstein about online extremism already indicate, the more or less isolated discussions and statements on the forums and blogs do seem to have a significant social and political impact, albeit much less direct and more diffuse than has so far been theorized. The challenge is to find out how this diffused influence exactly works. To meet this challenge and develop new conceptual tools, we need to do further research on the different forms of online communication in the context of social conflict.

A number of questions ought to be addressed. Firstly, our examination showed that many forum discussions revolved around cultural identity struggles. Can this also be observed in other cases? And under which circumstances can this facilitate the transcending of social stereotypes? According to Mark Poster, electronic communication in general, and online communication specifically, displaces the modern 'rational, autonomous individual' with 'one that is multiplied, disseminated and decentered, continuously interpellated as an unstable identity' (Poster 1995, 57). This suggests that online communication does not fixate identities but constantly transforms them. Is this also true for forum and blog discussions in situations of social crisis? And is there a difference between forums and blogs regarding identity interpellation?

Secondly, what is especially missing so far is information about the offline activities of the debate participants. To what extent do contributors maintain offline connections? Contrary to Benschop's analysis of the terrorist network in which Mohammed B. had been active, our investigation showed few indications that people developed offline relationships. Does this imply that most online exchanges are rather isolated from the traditional forms of social and political association, such as clubs, social movements and political parties? And, if this is indeed the case, how does this affect the public debate?

## Notes

1. 'Theo v. Gogh doodgeschoten', FOK!forum!, 2-11-2004, <http://forum.fok.nl/topic/622123/2/25>; 'Theo van Gogh vermoord (deel 14)', FOK!forum! 2-11-2004, <http://forum.fok.nl/topic/622354>.
2. 'Commentaar op moord Van Gogh', *Indymedia*, 3-11-2004, <http://indymedia.nl/nl/2004/11/22761.shtml>.
3. 'Vertel mij eens....', *Marokko Community*, 3-11-2004, <http://forums.marokko.nl/archive/index.php/t-403666.html>.
4. 'Spelregels van Indymedia NL', *Indymedia*, <http://indymedia.nl/nl/static/help.policy.shtml>.
5. 'About', *e-democracy*, 3-4-2004, <http://www.e-democracy.org/about.html>.
6. 'Bedankt Van Jole cs.', *GeenStijl*, 2-11-2004, <http://www.geenstijl.nl/mt/archieven/002829.html>; 'Omroepen op zoek naar kutmarokkanen', *GeenStijl*, 2-11-2004, <http://www.geenstijl.nl/mt/archieven/002832.html>.
7. 'Frustaties tussen Marokkanen en Nederlanders', *Marokko Community*, 3-11-2004, <http://forums.marokko.nl/archive/index.php/t-404038.html>.
8. The Pim Fortuyn Forum was created in the honour of the openly gay, populist right-wing Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn, who was murdered in 2002 by an animal rights activist. Fortuyn was highly critical of Islam, which he called a 'backward culture'.
9. 'Theo van Gogh vermoord', *Pim Fortuyn Forum*, 3-11-2004, [http://www.pim-fortuyn.nl/pfforum/topic.asp?ARCHIVE=true&TOPIC\\_ID=30391&whichpage=3](http://www.pim-fortuyn.nl/pfforum/topic.asp?ARCHIVE=true&TOPIC_ID=30391&whichpage=3).
10. 'Uitingen van woede op websites', *NRC Handelsblad*, 2-11-2004; 'Ook op internet zorgen na moord op Van Gogh', *Het Parool*, 3-11-2004; 'Uitingen van woede heersen op websites', *Trouw*, 3-11-2004; 'Wanhoop en woede op webforum', *NRC Handelsblad*, 3-11-2004; 'Condoleance.nl stroomt vol met racisme', *de Volkskrant*, 3-11-2004.
11. John Schoorl, 'Voor de kaalkoppen is de maat al heel lang vol', *de Volkskrant*, 4-11-2004.

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