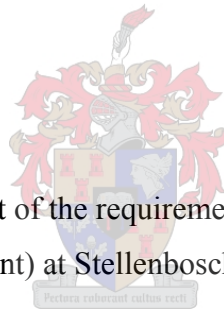


**Social Networking Sites as a New Public Sphere: Facebook and its
Potential to Facilitate Public Opinion as the Function of Public Discourse –
A Case Study of the 2008 Obama Campaign**

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Management) at Stellenbosch University

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Declaration

By submitting this thesis electronically, I declare that the entirety of the work contained therein is my own, original work, that I am the owner of the copyright thereof (unless to the extent explicitly otherwise stated) and that I have not previously in its entirety or in part submitted it for obtaining any qualification.

March 2010

Abstract

In the 17th and 18th centuries the bourgeois public sphere emerged as the conceptual space between the public, with its enclosed institutions and organisations, and the circle of the private life. It is within this more or less autonomous space that public discourse took place and public opinion, as a function of public discourse, was produced. The public sphere was realised as a necessary precondition of deliberative democracy where it needed to manifest commitments to freedom and equality in the communicative interaction between those partaking in the deliberative process. Since the 17th and 18th centuries, the public sphere has undergone various transformations and, even though it is largely argued that the utopian public sphere as conceptualised by Habermas does not yet exist, it is regarded as a necessary precondition that all democracies should strive towards.

Since the 19th century, media has been one of the main intermediary institutions of the public sphere. Initially, the earlier mass media of press and broadcasting were regarded as adequate and beneficial for the conduct of democratic politics and the facilitation of public opinion in the public sphere. Information flow was, however, vertical and the heightened commercialisation experienced within the media market led to the neglect of democratic communication roles between the public itself and the leaders, institutions and organisations. These forms of mass communication thus limited access and discouraged active political participation and deliberative dialogue within the public sphere.

In the 20th and 21st centuries, new media, especially the internet, have been hailed as a potential way to break away from the vertical information flow and to create new arenas for public discourse. One emerging contending form of new media is social networking sites (SNSs). Even though SNSs were not initially developed for political reasons, they have been utilised by political figures in an attempt to broaden voter reach and to enhance their campaigns. Amongst the SNSs available on the internet, Facebook has emerged as the largest, fastest growing and most popular SNS amongst internet users between the ages of 18 and 24 in the world. In the past, this age demographic has shown a disinterest in politics and has thus been recognised as the previously politically disengaged age demographic. American president Barack Obama realised the potential of Facebook and incorporated it in his new

media campaign during the presidential election of 2008. Facebook enabled Obama to expand his voter reach and communicate with the previously politically unengaged age demographic. It also enabled him to create an arena where political information regarding the candidate, campaign and relevant political issues can be provided. This opened a communication flow between Facebook members and the president. Arenas for public discourse were also established and the potential of Facebook to facilitate public opinion was realised.

In this study, the question is asked whether Facebook, as a SNS, can be seen as an adequate forum where public discourse takes place and public opinion, as the function of public discourse, is facilitated. This study will therefore aim to explore whether a Facebook, as SNS, can be seen as a public sphere. With the help of a case study of the 2008 Obama campaign, Facebook has shown the potential to allow for public discourse to take place. Thus the notion of Facebook as facilitator of public opinion is supported by this study.

Keywords:

Public Sphere; Public Discourse; Public Opinion; Social Networking Sites (SNSs); Facebook; 2008 Obama Presidential Campaign.

Opsomming

Die burgerlike openbare sfeer, as die konseptuele area tussen die publiek, met sy ingeslote instellings en organisasies, en die private lewe, het sy ontstaan vanuit die 17de en 18de eeu. Dit is binne hierdie min of meer outonome area waar openbare diskoers plaasvind en waar openbare mening, as 'n funksie van die openbare diskoers, geproduseer word. Die openbare sfeer is 'n noodwendige voorvereiste van 'n beraadslagende demokrasie waar dit nodig is om verbintnisse tot vryheid en gelykheid in die kommunikasie interaksie tussen die wat aan die beraadslagingsproses deelneem, te manifesteer. Die openbare sfeer het verkeie omvormings ondergaan en, al word daar geargumenteer dat die utopiese openbare sfeer soos deur Habermas gekonseptualiseer nog nie bereik is nie, word dit as 'n noodsaaklike vereiste waarna enige demokrasie moet streef, gesien.

Sedert die 19de eeu word media as een van die hoof intermediêre instellings van die openbare sfeer beskou. Die drukpers en uitsaaipers was aanvanklik voldoende en voordelig vir die bedryf van demokratiese politiek en die fasilitering van openbare mening in die openbare sfeer. Die vloei van inligting was egter vertikaal en die verhoogde kommersialisering van die mediamarkte het tot die afskeep van demokratiese kommunikasierolle tussen die publiek self en die leiers, instellings en organisasies gelei. Hierdie vorms van massakommunikasie het dus toegang tot, en die aktiewe deelname in die politieke en beraadslagende dialoog binne die openbare sfeer beperk en ontmoedig.

Gedurende die 20^{ste} en 21^{ste} eeue is nuwe media, veral die internet, as 'n potensiële manier om van die eenrigting kommunikasievloei weg te breek en nuwe arenas vir openbare diskoers te skep, erken. Sosiale Netwerkingswebtuistes (SNWs) is een van die opkomende kompeterende vorms van nuwe media. Selfs al was SNWs aanvanklik nie vir politieke doeleindes ontwikkel nie, was dit wel deur die politieke figure, in 'n poging om kiesersomvang te verbreed en om hul veldtogte uit te brei, gebruik. Onder die SNWs wat op die internet beskikbaar is, het Facebook as die grootste, vinnigste groeiende en gewildste onder die internetgebruikers tussen die ouderdom van 18 en 24 jaar in die wêreld ontstaan. In die verlede het hierdie jaargroep belangeloos teenoor politiek opgetree en was hulle sodoende as die voorheen polities onbetrokke jaargroep erken. Die Amerikaanse president, Barack Obama, het die

potensiaal van Facebook besef en dit in sy nuwe-media veldtog gedurende die 2008 verkiesing ingesluit. Facebook het Obama in staat gestel om se kiesersomvang te verbreed en om veral met die voorheen polities onbetrokke jaargroep te kommunikeer. Dit het hom ook in staat gestel om 'n arena te skep waar politieke inligting oor die kandidaat, veldtog en ter saaklike inligting aan Facebook-lede beskikbaar gestel is. Dit het 'n vloed van kommunikasie tussen Facebook-lede en die president geskep. Arenas waar openbare diskoers kon plaasvind, is ook skep en die potensiaal van Facebook om openbare mening te fasiliteer, is besef.

In hierdie studie word die vraag gestel of Facebook, as 'n SNW, as 'n genoegsame forum waar openbare diskoers plaasvind en openbare mening as 'n funksie van openbare diskoers gefasiliteer word, dien. Hierdie studie poog derhalwe om ondersoek in te stel of Facebook, as SNW, as 'n openbare sfeer erken kan word. Met behulp van die gevallestudie aangaande die 2008 Obama veldtog, blyk dit dat Facebook die potensiaal het om openbare diskoers te fasiliteer. Die idee dat Facebook 'n fasiliteerder van openbare mening is, word derhalwe deur hierdie studie ondersteun.

Sleutelwoorde:

Openbare Sfeer; Openbare Diskoers; Openbare Mening; Sosiale Netwerkingswebtuistes (SNWs); Facebook; 2008 Obama Presidensiële Verkiesing.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

The bourgeois public sphere developed during the 17th and 18th centuries. This public sphere occupied the area between the public, with its enclosed institutions and organisations, and the private life of the family. The term was coined in 1962 by Jürgen Habermas when he developed the concept in his book entitled *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. He realised that it is within the area between the public and the private where public discourse takes place and public opinion, as the function of public discourse is formed (McQuail, 2005:180-181; Habermas, 1989:1-3).

The public sphere has been realised as a necessary condition for a deliberative democracy. Here the public sphere needs to manifest commitments to freedom and equality in the communicative interaction between those taking part in the deliberative process (Bohman, 1998:73). Cohen (in Gaus, 1997) states that “the notion of a deliberative democracy is rooted in the intuitive ideal of democratic association in which justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens” which further emphasises the importance of deliberation in a democracy. Within this context of the deliberative democracy, Habermas realised that decisions regarding public affairs are made at the political centre. The political centre refers to the government agencies, parliaments, courts as well as political parties. Routine decisions are largely made without the input from the broader public. When important normative questions are at stake, however, it is necessary that extensive public discussion is incorporated and that the deliberation is not limited to the actors that occupy the centre of the political system. In cases such as these, it is important that actors from the periphery (civil society actors as well as grassroots organisations) are included in the decision making process (Marx Ferree *et al*, 2002: 230).

The public sphere developed against the backdrop of the social conditions witnessed in the democracies of Germany, Britain and France. These conditions provoked and facilitated the situation where the bourgeois men, as private citizens, united to engage in reasoning over issues that were of mutual concern and interest. The private citizens were willing to let argumentation, rather than status and authority, guide the debate and decision-making

process. They united as agents yearning accountability for the societal disparities with the purpose to impose some form of control over the state (Crossley & Roberts, 2004:3; Dahlgren, 1991:3).

Initially the private citizens of the bourgeois society met to deliberate on issues regarding literature, philosophy and art. These meetings and the areas they occupied became the arenas of deliberation and debate. The infrastructure referred to as the political publics were established where deliberation on literature, philosophy and art gave way to discussions regarding politics and economics. Other factors that also contributed to the development of the bourgeois public sphere include development and improvements in printing technology and the emergence of popular newsletters and journals. Thus media soon became the source of information and later the arenas of deliberation (Crossley & Roberts, 2004:3-4; Dahlgren, 2005b:34).

The above mentioned factors contributed to the public sphere during the 19th century. Its climax was short lived, however and the demise of the bourgeois public sphere soon followed. Consequently, contradictions and conflicting ideas have tainted the notion of the public sphere in the 20th and 21st centuries and although the original ideas of the public sphere were set in stone, it failed to develop as an authentic representation in the contemporary reality and was acknowledged as a poor imitation of Habermas' ideals (Dahlgren, 2005b:34).

The Media has thus been one of the main intermediary institutions in the public sphere. Since the 19th century, the media have, however, changed in terms of space, time and physical barriers. In the contemporary world, media have saturated lives on a daily basis in such a way that everyday life has been inconceivable without modern means of communication (Real, 1989:13). Media act firstly as a supplier of information where they inexorably influence, educate, entertain and introduce individuals with values, beliefs and behavioural codes. These factors contribute to the integration of people into the society (Real 1989:14; McQuail, 2005: 457). It also seeks to represent a particular reality through the production and the representation of an image of society. In this way media provide the “guiding myths which shape our perception of the world and serve as important instruments of social control” (Hall in Davis, 2004:42).

Yet, within the public sphere, media have been greatly criticised and many believe that the public is more likely to be manipulated by the media than helped to form public opinion in a rational way. Despite this criticism, many scholars (e.g. Curran, 1991) have found that the media in the public sphere have value. Most of these positive expectations concerning the role of media in the public sphere have been expressed in relation to the emergence and existence of new media. New media refer to digital, computerised or network information and communication technologies which emerged during the 20th century (McQuail, 2005:182).

One emerging contending form of new media is that of social networking sites (SNSs). Today, SNSs are embraced by political leaders and parties to conduct public discourse and produce public opinion. It is especially around election times that these sites are embraced. The most important SNSs include Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube. Of these three, Facebook is ranked as the largest SNS worldwide after overtaking MySpace during April of 2008. It is also seen as the fastest growing SNS and the most popular amongst internet users between the ages of 18 and 24 (Smith, 2008c). Because Facebook has been playing such an important role in the development of SNS, this thesis will look at its potential to act as a forum where public discourse can take place and where public opinion can be facilitated. The potential of Facebook as facilitator of public opinion will be explored. In the following section the background and rationale of the study will be indicated which will lead to the formulation of the problem statement and the research question of this study.

1.2. Background and Rationale

According to the *Generations Online in 2009* study (Jones & Fox, 2009) adult American internet users can be categorised according to their age. The individuals born in 1977-1990 (referred to as the Millennials or Generation Y) constitute the largest percentage of internet users at 26%; followed by the individuals born in 1968-1976 (Generation X) at 20%. Individuals born in 1955-1964 (Younger Boomers) constitute 20%; individuals born in 1946-1954 (Older Boomers) 13%; individuals born in 1937-1945 (Silent Generation) and finally those born before 1963 (G.I. Generation) both at 9% each. Thus it is clear that the largest proportion of internet users in the United States of America (USA) is those between the ages of 18 and 32 (Millennials or Generation Y) (Jones & Fox, 2009:1).

Amongst these demographic age groups it has been found that teenagers and Generation Y are the people most likely to use the internet as a tool of communication. Individuals between the ages of 12 and 32 are more likely to use SNSs and to create profiles and to partake in the virtual spheres (Jones & Fox, 2009:3). This group is further narrowed by a study conducted by Lenhart (2009) which states that Generation Y can be reduced to a smaller group – 18-24 years. What is significant about this group is that those between the ages of 18 and 24 have been recognised as the previously politically disengaged age demographic. This is the age demographic that will be used for the purpose of this study. The sample will however be explained later on. Amongst the internet users of these demographic age groups in the USA, 75% have a profile on a SNS (Lenhart, 2009:1).

During the 2008 presidential election, Facebook was deliberately used as a tool of political communication. The campaigns initially followed traditional communication strategies which included television advertisements, campaign rallies, direct mail as well as press coverage. The Democratic as well as the Republican parties extended their campaigns to include various websites on the internet. It started with personal homepages (e.g. www.johnmccain.com and www.my.Barackobama.com) and later social network websites were included. Campaigners saw the potential of social networks; not only as a forum of debate, but also as a means to communicate to the younger generation (often those who were previously politically disengaged) in the USA (Westling, 2007:6).

Why was Facebook embraced as a facilitator of public opinion? Facebook has abilities that could facilitate political communication. It combines the features of local bulletin boards, newspapers and organisation and places them in one location that is available any time any place. Facebook allows members of a geographic centre of the population to voice their opinions on various topics whilst giving them the choice of the intensity of contribution. Also, political leaders can use Facebook as a medium to communicate with members of the public who are willing to listen without actively imposing their messages on these members. It thus provides political leaders with an effective way in which they can reach the public. At the same time members of the public can use this as an opportunity where their own opinions can be directed towards leaders and where they can organise themselves towards a certain cause (Westling, 2007:5).

Thus, during the election, Facebook has shown the potential of being a forum where political leaders can communicate with the public in a way that opinion polls cannot. Facebook provides campaigns with the ability to organise support and communicate with members of the public in a very efficient way. It also provides members of the public with the ability and the chance to communicate back to these leaders and voice their own opinions and organise themselves around their causes. Facebook doesn't merely serve as a forum where this communication takes place; it also has the potential to expand Jürgen Habermas' idea of the public sphere. It allows the public to engage in political action both in conjunction with and independently of political campaigns (Westling, 2007:2).

1.3. Problem Statement

Before the advent of new media, the earlier mass media of press and broadcasting were seen as adequate and beneficial for the conduct of democratic politics and the sustainment of public opinion in the public sphere. These forms of media enabled the information about public events to be passed to all citizens and politicians and governments were able to be criticised by the society. However, information flow was predominantly vertical or one-directional and the heightened commercialisation of the media market led to the neglect of democratic communication roles between the public itself and the leaders, institutions and organisations within mass media. Thus, earlier forms of mass communication limited access and discouraged active political participation and deliberative dialogue within the public sphere (McQuail, 2005: 150).

The new media have been hailed as a potential way to break away from the vertical information flow and 'top down' politics where most political decisions are made without negotiation or input from grassroots support. Instead, new media provide means for the provision of political information and in this way almost unlimited access to different voices and feedback between leaders and followers are established. New media promise new forums for the development of interest groups as well as the formation of public opinion. New media also allow dialogue between politicians and active citizens and thus it provides an arena where public discourse can take place and public opinion, as its function, can be formed (McQuail, 2005:150-151).

In 2004, during the Howard Dean campaign, the potential of the internet as an arena for political communication and public deliberation was realised. One of the major problems was that there was a continuing disinterest among young American adults to participate in public discourse and other political activities. In 2006, SNSs, including Facebook, were used as a tool for public discourse during the U.S. Congressional elections and during the 2008 Presidential election, specific SNSs were embraced and prepared as arenas for public discourse where public opinion could be facilitated. SNSs, as arenas of public discourse, thus showed the potential to overcome the problem of the vertical information communication flow as witnessed with traditional communication strategies. In this way, SNSs provide political information and almost unlimited access to different voices and feedback from the public to the political leaders. Within these SNSs, the possibility of the formation and development of interest groups as well as the formulation of public opinion is realised. This also enables a dialogue between the public and political leaders, creates the possibility of organisation amongst members and provides the chance for members to affiliate on a more personal level with their political leaders (Westling, 2007:4).

Facebook, as the fastest growing SNS and the SNS with the highest number of young members aged 18 to 24 years, is at the centre of this study. Specifically the potential of Facebook as a facilitator of public opinion will be explored. The focus will be on young American adults (18-24year) and Facebook's features which enable political communication and public opinion especially during election times. The question that will be addressed is: Can Facebook, as a SNS, be seen as an adequate forum where public discourse takes place and public opinion, as function of the public discourse, is facilitated?

1.4. Research Aims

- To establish SNSs as arenas for political communication within the public sphere
- To establish SNSs, specifically Facebook, as a new public sphere
- To explore public discourse on Facebook
- To explore the notion of the facilitation of public opinion on Facebook.

1.5. Research Methodology and Research Design

This is an empirical and qualitative study. The researcher has, however, made use of various qualitative as well as quantitative secondary sources which were used as points of departure for analysis during this study. The studies that have been used and employed for the purpose of this study include studies conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. Various studies in the field have been conducted, especially in the wake of the presidential election of 2008. For the purpose of this study, however, the following six studies were used: *Generations Online in 2009* study (Jones & Fox, 2009); *Internet and Civic Engagement* (Smith et al, 2008); *Adults and Social Network Websites* (Lenhart, 2008); *The Internet Gains in Politics* (Kohut, 2008); *The Internet and the 2008 Election* (Rainie & Smith, 2008); *Post-Election Voter Engagement* (Smith, 2008).

Furthermore, the researcher spent numerous hours researching Facebook, especially with regards to the Obama campaign still present on Facebook. In addition to this, the researcher also created profiles on various SNSs which included, Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Friendster, Xanga, Flickr, Twitter, Tribe.net and LastFM.

As the purpose of this study is to explore SNSs as new public spheres and the potential of Facebook, as one of these SNSs, as facilitator of public opinion, the researcher made use of a case study in the attempt to support the notion of Facebook as facilitator of public opinion. For the purpose of the case study, the conversations between Facebook members were used in the journey of proving support for the notion of Facebook as facilitator of public opinion. The Facebook members were contacted via the messaging service available on Facebook and consent was given to the researcher to use the information they posted as part of the discussion.

1.5.1. Unit of Analysis

For the purpose of the thesis, the unit of analysis is the young adult American internet population (18-24) who have profiles on Facebook. The unit of analysis is derived from four studies conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The studies used are *Internet and Civic Engagement* (Smith et al, 2008); *Adults and Social Network Websites*

(Lenhart, 2008); *The Internet Gains in Politics* (Kohut, 2008); *The Internet and the 2008 Election* (Rainie & Smith, 2008); and the *Post-Election Voter Engagement* (Smith, 2008).

The first study used is the *Internet and Civic Engagement* as conducted by Smith et al (2008). This survey reports on the daily use of internet by Americans. The results are obtained from telephone interviews which were conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International and occurred during the time period of August 12 to August 31 2008. The sample included 2 251 adults who were 18 years and older.

The study on *Adults and Social Network Websites* as conducted by Lenhart (2009) on behalf of the Pew Internet and American Life project was also used to substantiate arguments. This report is based on the findings of two daily tracking surveys on American internet use. The majority of the results obtained are based on data from telephone interviews also conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International between April 8 and May 11 2008. The sample consist of 2 251 – all 18 years and older (Lenhart, 2008:17)

The Internet gains in Politics (Kohut, 2008) was published in January 2008. The results of the study are also based on telephone interviews which were conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International. A sample of 1 430 adults (18 years and older) was used. The interview process stretched from 19-30 December 2007.

The Internet and the 2008 Election (Rainie & Smith, 2008) is based on the findings of a tracking survey on Americans' use of the internet. The results of this report were also based on data from telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Association International conducted from the 8th of April to the 11th of May 2008. The sample was 2 251 adults (18 years and older).

The *Post-Election Voter Engagement* Survey (Smith, 2008) is also a daily tracking survey on Americans' use of the internet. The results are also based on telephone interviews conducted by Princeton Survey Research Association International. The interviews occurred between 20 November and 4 December 2008 among a sample of 2 254 adults (18 years and older).

The samples of the four surveys each make use of a random digit sample of telephone and cell phone numbers which was selected from telephone exchanges in the continental U.S.

With the random digit sampling method, bias is avoided and both listed and unlisted numbers are used. The design of the sample achieves this representation by random generation of the last two digits of telephone numbers. In addition to sampling error, some other challenges such as question wording and practical difficulties in conducting telephone surveys, which had the potential to introduce some error and/or bias into the findings of opinion polls, were met (Smith et al, 2008; Kohut, 2008:21; Rainie & Smith, 2008:31; Smith, 2008:14-15).

1.6. Case Study

In this thesis, a case study on the Obama campaign, as visible on Facebook, during the presidential elections of 2008 was conducted. During the 2008 elections, the internet played a prominent role in the campaigning process and it was Obama that recognised the potential of Facebook – especially to reach out to the previously politically disengaged youth in the USA.

1.6.1. Rationale

Since 2006, Facebook has been utilised as an instrument for political communication and public discourse. As explained in Chapter four, Facebook initially gave all candidates profiles on Facebook which they could personalise. This was first seen during the USA Congressional elections of 2006. In preparation for the 2008 election, Facebook gave all candidates Pages which expanded the communication abilities and their voter reach. Obama's campaign was only one of the campaigns that utilised this SNS and a level playing field for candidates was established. This meant that Obama was contending with established players in the field. Even though Obama and the other candidates had (and still have) pages on other SNSs, this study will focus on Facebook members, owing to the great numbers and growing popularity amongst the 18-24 year olds. It is also this demographic age group that has been historically politically disengaged. Therefore, the possibility to gain support from previous disengaged supporters, by means of communicating with tools they prefer, was realised.

Traditional media have played the most prominent role in election campaigns. However due to its dynamism and modernity, the utilisation of new interactive media has become an integral part of campaign communication. The reason for this is greatly owing to traditional media being substituted with their electronic counterparts. Furthermore, the usage of SNSs

such as Facebook has made new and exciting ways of communication possible. It also offered leaders the opportunity to connect with their supporters on new and more personal levels (Eldon, 2009).

Throughout the campaigns, traditional communication forms were not ignored. Obama did however embrace and rely on new technological communication media which made it possible for him and his message to circumvent traditional filters of producers and editors and created a direct communication flow to his supporters (Barron, 2008:10).

Thus, for the purpose of this study, a case study is conducted of Obama's 2008 presidential campaign as he was an aspirant candidate in the internet election and the forerunner of the Facebook election.

1.6.2. Research Questions of the Case Study

- How did Obama use Facebook as an instrument to communicate, recruit and mobilise supporters?
- Did Facebook provide an arena for public deliberation? If yes, was public opinion, as function of public deliberation merely reflected, or was it facilitated, by this SNS?

1.6.3. Criteria of Interpretation

It is important to note that the SNSs, although utilised for political purposes, were not designed to undermine the specific purpose of supporting offline political organisation and activities. The usage of SNSs, specifically Facebook, is in its early stages of development and politicians are still experimenting with this phenomenon. This is largely occurring through a trial and error basis and improvements still need to be made constantly. Major changes have been visible between the 2006 Congressional elections and the 2008 presidential elections and thus it can be expected that more changes and enhancements are still to follow (Williams & Gulati, 2008:2).

Moreover, even though all presidential candidates had Facebook Pages and all had the ability and capacity to personalise their pages, not all candidates are on par with Obama's Facebook campaign. It seems necessary for all candidates to embrace Facebook to the same extent in

order for the playing field to be levelled. This will enable all candidates to have access to the same opportunities and same basic database and to create the same arenas where communication, public discourse and healthy competition can take place (Williams & Gullati, 2008:2).

1.7. Limitations and Delimitations

Owing to limited time and resources, the researcher depended a lot on secondary sources for relevant quantitative data. Even though the data was derived from a credible source – Pew Internet and American Life Project – primary research focussing on the question at hand would have been much more beneficial. Even though research have been done on SNSs, Facebook, the modern public sphere as well as public opinion, it was difficult to merge other information from the different studies seeing that they have not been used in accord to obtain the same results. Studies regarding SNSs and/or Facebook and the role of public opinion have not yet been conducted and the researcher had to use data from other studies to substantiate the findings of this study.

Further limitations were realised in conducting the case study. Limits regarding generalisability of the USA case study were noticed. Only one discussion was used for the case study and even though adequate and sufficient results were found, the problem of generalisability was realised. Even though the notion of Facebook as facilitator of public opinion is supported and even though it became clear that Facebook members deliberated and took part in the deliberation process, this unit is not a representative of the American population. If future research on Facebook and public opinion is to occur, it is necessary that a larger sample should be drawn in order for a representative aggregate to be formulated. The study does, however, show a lot of potential, given that it is the first of its sort. Even though the dynamism of SNSs and specifically Facebook have made research headline in the past few years, the relationship between SNSs, specifically Facebook and public opinion are yet to be researched.

The researcher also had trouble finding relevant information and debating forums on the 2008 election. Obama's Page is still utilised to such an extent that any information older than a few months cannot be accessed anymore.

1.8. Chapter Outline

Chapter two will provide all necessary theoretical background surrounding the notion of the public sphere as developed by Habermas. The rise and fall of the bourgeois public sphere will be discussed whereafter the criteria and assumptions of the public sphere will be showed. The criticism of the public sphere will receive attention and a revised conceptualisation and the modern public sphere will be discussed.

Chapter three will provide a conceptual framework of cyberspace, the internet and the World Wide Web (WWW). Thereafter the notion of the internet as public sphere will be explained. Public discourse on the internet will also receive attention. This will be followed by the discussion on SNSs and SNSs as a new public sphere. The different features of SNS, a brief history outline as well as contemporary SNSs and their potential to facilitate public opinion will conclude the chapter.

Chapter four will explore the idea of Facebook as a public sphere and facilitator of public opinion. This will be done by putting Facebook in the context of the American community. Means of communication will be elaborated upon; its applications which can be used for political communication and public discourse, politics on Facebook as well as public discourse on Facebook will be explained.

In order to further substantiate Facebook as a facilitator of public opinion, a case study of the 2008 Obama presidential campaign is conducted. This constitutes chapter five of the study. After an overview of the campaign, specific focus will be placed on Obama's campaign on Facebook. The utilisation of the applications for public discourse as discussed in chapter four will be elaborated upon. An analysis will follow.

In chapter six the criteria and assumptions of the bourgeois public sphere as discussed in chapter two will be compared to Facebook. This will be followed by the conclusion where the hypotheses will be supported or rejected.

Chapter 2: The Development of the Public Sphere

2.1. Public Sphere – A Conceptual Framework

In the late 17th and 18th centuries, a phenomenon namely the bourgeois public sphere became apparent. The public sphere emerged owing to various societal changes that were evident in the bourgeois society after the Enlightenment period. The bourgeois society was industrially advanced and represented the welfare state. Jürgen Habermas developed this concept in his book the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* where he embarked on the journey of a historical and sociological analysis of that period. He described the public sphere as the conceptual space between the public, with its enclosed institutions and organisations, and the circle of the private life. In this space, private citizens came together to deliberate issues in an environment that was absent from influence of government, the economy and other relevant institutions and organisations. This was the area where political deliberation took place and where public discourse, association and debate lead to the formation of public opinion as well as political movements and parties. With this theory, he presupposed reason which included critical and discussion debate and he claimed that this type of communication would weaken prejudices, increase the extent and power of the public sphere and ultimately strengthen the democracy. Habermas realised that the quality of a democratic society was dependent on private citizens' capacity to communicate and deliberate. The development from opinion to public opinion and its necessity in the democratic society was explored by Habermas (Habermas, 1989:1-3; Dahlberg, 2005:111; Boeder, 2005:2-3).

Erikson and Tedin (2007:8) define public opinion as “the preferences of the adult population on matters of relevance to government”. It is thus the collective view of a significant part of any public. The members of a genuine public in a democracy are free to associate, converse, organise and express themselves on all subjects. Government is fully accountable to the will of the public as a whole (Erikson & Tedin, 2007:7; McQuail, 2005:565). Public opinion is a key term applied to theories in democracy because it denominates the relationship between the government and the people. Public opinion also represents the will of the public with regards to political decision making by the government. Thus, public opinion is seen as a

normative concept that describes the ideal process through which informed citizens achieve rational judgements well grounded in goodwill and for the greater good of society (Marx Ferree, 2002:230).

The *Structural Transformation* offers a historical and sociological account of the emergence, transformation and the decline of the bourgeois public sphere. Habermas identified social conditions that allowed for reasoned discussion regarding political issues to take place. The discussion was undertaken by the private citizens of the bourgeois society who were willing and eager to let argumentation, and not status and authority, guide the debate and the decision-making process within the governmental structures (Johnston, 2001:218). It was with this logical and informed discussion that agreement and decision-making would take place which ultimately represented a democracy at its best (Papacharissi, 2002: 11).

The concept of the public sphere was translated from the German term *Öffentlichkeit*. This is an artificial translation because there is no adequate translation of the German term. *Öffentlichkeit* is derived from the French adjective *publicité* meaning *public*. This term was only developed in the 17th century because the phenomenon did not exist prior to this period. The public sphere emerged in Germany as part of the civil society, the realm of commodity exchange and labour governed by law (Habermas, 1989:2-3, 25; Kleinsteuber, 2004:73).

In order to further discuss the concept of the public sphere, it is necessary to firstly clarify the notion of the *public*. The public can be seen as a group that enjoys commonalities. According to McQuail (2005:565) the general meaning of public refers to the collection of all free citizens of a specific society or equal space. Here he calls upon freedom and equality which are distinct characteristics of a liberal democracy. Thus for the citizens of a functional public in a democracy, freedom of association and converse as well as the freedom to organise and express themselves freely is “accountable to the will of the public as a whole according to agreed procedures” (McQuail, 2005:565). Dewey (1927:15) narrows the definition and states that the public not only refers to the collective body of citizens, but rather includes “all those affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (Dewey, 1927:15). The public is therefore seen as the dialogical representation of these consequences and the political dimensions within a civil society (Johnson, 2006:5). This notion of the public is also

supported by Calhoun (2009) who recognised four senses of public. The first sense of public is created when citizens feel that they share something in common. The second is more familiar in modern societies: public arises from the idea that some goods, such as clean water and clean air, are inherently public. The cost and use are shared. The third sense of public is when politics connects strangers. Different bonds than those that exist in family and community life thus come into existence. With the final sense of public, all public goods do not exist independent of deliberation. Even though the relevant debates are often formed and initiated by experts, the fact that citizens can debate the public goods makes it public (Calhoun, 2009).

The public stands in contrast to the circle of the private life. The public sphere is seen as the social space between the state, as public institution, and the private sphere of family life and economic relations where open and rational debate takes place to form public opinion. The state as public institution should pursue the interest of the public whereas the other pursues the interests of private citizens, families as well as businesses. It is also very important to note the distinction between *publicity* and *privacy*. Publicity involves conveying private relationships into the public domain via exposure in various forms of media. These media include, amid other forms, television, radio, newspapers and the internet. Privacy calls upon the private citizen's right to non-exposure. Thus the relationship between the public and the private sphere is dynamic and complex and with the modern society, the boundaries between the two are often blurred (Habermas, 1989:1-2; Sheller & Urry, 2003: 109-113). Finally, Habermas (in Calhoun, 1993:272) recognises the private realm as the area that provides the individual citizens with the identity and support to represent the actors who are active in the public sphere.

In his initial conceptualisation, Habermas identified the public sphere in two dimensions: empirical and normative. In the empirical sense, the public sphere was a distinct, institutionalised system of verbal and written interaction. The normative definition refers to the public sphere as a forum in which people with no official power came together and “readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion” (Habermas, 1989:25-26) (Hirschkopf, 2004:50). This empirical definition has however received a lot of criticism and thus the normative definition received more credence. With the

analytical difference, academics do not always agree on whether a public sphere has ever existed or even currently exists. Many argue that the public sphere has not yet been achieved, but that the concept of the public sphere – when taken in its normative dimension – is a very helpful and useful term at present as the term often connotes the realm of the media, politics and opinion processes in a general descriptive way (Dahlgren, 2005b:34-35).

2.2. The Rise and Fall of the Bourgeois Public Sphere

The emergence of the bourgeois public sphere occurred subsequently to what Habermas refers to as ‘representative publicness’ of the medieval era where decisions were made by the ruling nobility and merely presented before the populace. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, an increasing differentiation of society took place. This was particularly evident in Germany, Britain and France. The increasing differentiation was seen in the separation of political authority from domestic life which was constituted through the centralisation of political power in the national state; by the separation of the church and state; and by the differentiation of public norms. Finance and capitalism systems also emerged and the tax burden imposed upon individuals by the state was enhanced by military activities. These factors lead to an increasing demand from the citizens for accountability. The social conditions provoked and facilitated conditions where middle class men, the private citizens, united to engage in reasoning over various issues that were of mutual concern and interest. The pressure asserted came from publics which were formed by private citizens who acted as agents yearning accountability with the purpose to impose some form of control on the state and governmental structures (Crossley & Roberts, 2004:3; Dahlgren, 1991:3).

The formation of publics realised against the background of a new form of privatisation within the society where the self and subjectivity were central. The formation was a process of collectivisation where the public spheres emerged and mediated between the state and the individual agent. The private sphere thus functioned as an area where privatised citizens and subjectivities could take shape and where attention was focussed on the process of self cultivation. The public sphere offered the private citizens the possibility to organise themselves collectively and engage in discussion where they used critical reason to debate upon issues at hand (Dahlgren, 1991:3; Crossley & Roberts, 2004:4; Calhoun, 1993:272-273).

It is very important to note that the self cultivation of the private citizens was initially pursued through literature, philosophy and art. During the 18th century there was an increase in the private consumption of these works. This occurrence supports Habermas' idea of privatisation and subjectivity. People came together to deliberate literature, philosophy and art in places such as coffee houses and salons which materialised in the major urban centres all through the 18th century. These places acted as areas of debate and established the infrastructure that Habermas referred to as the political publics where a shift away from literature, philosophy and art as popular topics of debate gave way to discussions over politics and economics. It can thus be said that the literary debate contributed to the public sphere as it contributed to the cultural resources which was necessary for critical and rational political debate. Thus the accessibility of information needed for debate on these issues became a wanted 'goods' itself. There were, however, other factors that also contributed to the emergence of the public sphere. These included improvements in printing technologies and the surfacing of popular newsletters and journals. Media also acted as sources of information and were used as the point of departure for public debate. Thus enlightenment ideas were manifested by the private citizens seeking knowledge and freedom in the abundant and different media and milieu. These factors played a significant role in the mid-19th century and lead to the climax of the public sphere (Price, 2008: 12; Crossley & Roberts, 2004:3-4; Dahlgren, 1991:3; Dahlgren, 2005b:34).

After its climax in the mid-19th century, the demise of the public sphere soon followed. Habermas (1989) stated that the public sphere was effectively undermined by the social conditions, as mentioned before, that lead to its emergence. Accordingly the public sphere in the 20th and 21st centuries has been tainted with contradictions and conflicting ideas. Even though the initial idea of the public sphere stayed intact, its representation in reality was a poor imitation of the Habermasian ideals (Crossley & Roberts, 2004:1-2). Journalism lost claim and importance and public discourse was victim to public relations. Another intervening factor was that of the ever increasing impact of capitalism and commercialism. This shaped the operations of media where the public voice became inferior to the compulsion of profit and personal gain and accordingly the domain of rationality diminished. In the 20th century, Habermas (Dahlgren, 2005b:34) emphasised the trivialisation of politics which could be seen in the emergence and impact of electronic media, the industrialisation of

public opinion and the transformation of the public from a discursive to a consuming culture (Dahlgren, 2005b:34).

2.3. Criteria and Assumptions according to Habermas

2.3.1. Institutional Criteria for Emergence of a Public Sphere

Habermas recognised three institutional criteria which act as the preconditions for a public sphere to exist. The first precondition refers to the *disregard of status*. If status is disregarded, the influence of rank is absent and thus the better argument will uphold against the hierarchy imposed by the society. In this way, the uniformity of “common humanity” is asserted. The idea of the public sphere became established as an objective forum independent from the authority of rank and status (Habermas, 1989:36).

The second precondition for a public sphere to emerge is that it needs to be a domain of *common concern*. Before the development of the public sphere, authority of interpretation lay in the hands of the state and the church. These two institutions had a monopoly of interpretation in the fields of literature, philosophy and art. The monopoly persisted even at the time that specific spheres adhered to the rational thinking which flowed from the development of capitalism where more information was required. During this time philosophy and literature works as well as works of art became commercialised and were accessible to private citizens. These items no longer remained components of the churches’ and courts’ publicity of representation. Thus the private individuals, for whom these cultural products became available, determined meaning to it by the use of rational communication with others, verbalised it and stated the implicitness for so long they could assert its authority. Cultural products and information thus became the common concern of private citizens and this paved the way for other issues of common concern to be introduced as topics of deliberation (Habermas, 1989:36).

The final precondition is the idea of *inclusivity*. The process that commercialised cultural products and information, made it inclusive. Even at times when the public strengthened its boundaries to exclude people, it was never able to fully close itself to disallow participation. The public sphere has always been immersed within a more inclusive public of private

individuals. These private individuals could gain from this process. Issues discussed, which were previously confined to the debates amongst secluded groups now became general in their significance and accessibility. Thus everybody had to be and was able to participate. The public sphere was not necessarily founded on an institution which constituted a stable group of discussants. It did however equate itself with being the mouth piece and to form the bourgeoisie representation. Even when the first public spheres developed as specific groups of people, it was ever conscious of being part of a larger part and acting as a representative group of that larger public. The potential of it being a publicist body was evident as its discussions did not merely remain internal but could be directed to the outside world (Habermas, 1989:37).

2.3.2. Assumptions for the Existence of a Public Sphere in a Political Democracy

Habermas (in Fraser, 1990:62-63) also identified four assumptions which are central to the concept of the public sphere. These assumptions reinforce his composition of the institutional criteria as discussed in the previous section. The first assumption is that the possibility exists for private citizens, engaged in deliberation, to bracket status disparities and to deliberate with the supposition that all involved are equals. This assumption supports the institutional criteria of disregard of status as well as that of inclusivity. Thus it is assumed that societal equality is a necessary condition for a political democracy. The second assumption is that a single and comprehensive public sphere is preferable to a multiple publics. Thus the proliferation of competing publics will be detrimental to the sufficient functioning of a political democracy. Discourse in public spheres should be restricted to deliberation over issues that are of common concern. Thus the third assumption of the public sphere is that the appearance of private issues and concerns in deliberation is undesirable. This also supported the institutional criterion of common concern. The final assumption of the public sphere states that a sufficient public sphere within a political democracy requires a definite separation between civil society and the state (Fraser, 1990: 62-63).

2.4. Criticism of the Public Sphere as Conceptualised by Habermas

Even though the public sphere, as conceptualised by Habermas (1989), is a very influential concept, it has been criticised on various occasions. The criticism will be discussed in terms

of contesting ideological viewpoints whereafter Habermas' institutional criteria and assumptions for the public sphere will be criticised.

2.4.1. Ideological Contestation

The public sphere has been analysed and criticised by various ideological frameworks. According to the classical liberal approach the public sphere is the space between the government and the society. The private individual has the ability to exercise formal and informal control over governmental decisions. Formal power is exercised through elections and informal power through the pressure of public opinion. These theorists recognise the media as the central aspect to the process. The media distribute necessary information to individuals for them to make informed choices; by providing an independent area for debate it facilitates the formation of public opinion; and it enables people to shape the conduct of the government through formal and informal control. The media are therefore responsible for acting as policing mechanism in the society and are often referred to as the fourth estate of the realm (Curran, 1991:29).

The first problem with this idea of the public sphere is that it does not take adequate account of the way power is exercised by the various institutional structures. It fails to demonstrate how media relate to the wider social disparities. It also disregards the way that interests become organised and collectivised. It fails to provide a platform of representation to all people and consequently does not touch upon the ways in which media can revitalise the structures of a liberal democracy (Curran, 1991:29-30).

In an attempt to provide some answers to the cleavages of the classical liberal approach, the radical democratic dimension was approximated. According to this approach, the media act as the battleground between competing forces. Therefore, all significant interests in a society should be represented by the media. Media should facilitate participation in the public domain; enable citizens to participate in public debate; and assist in framing public policies. Another role of the media is that it should facilitate the performance of representative organisations and expose internal processes to public scrutiny and the play of public opinion. A problem of ambiguity does however arise: the less radical component argues that the media should act as a representative system within existing societal structures. The other component

argues that the media should be a countervailing agency while representation of all groups in the society is still central. The media should therefore expose offences, remedy injustice and subject criminal behaviour to public scrutiny. Furthermore, the media should seek to restore power imbalances in society. Since power cannot be evenly diffused in all major structures of a society, it is seen as legitimate for the media to function as a balancing force (Curran, 1991:30-31).

These two above mentioned approaches also differ in the conceptualisation of the media in a modern democracy. The classical liberal theory sees the media as vertical channels of communication between private citizens and the government. In contrast, the radical democratic approach recognises the media as a complex articulation of vertical, horizontal and diagonal channels of communication which occurs between individuals, groups as well as power structures. The role of the media is thus extended so that it includes the facilitation of the systems of representation and democratises it by exposing the decisions made by the organisations to public disclosure and debate (Curran, 1991: 32-35).

Where the radical democratic approach sees the public sphere as an arena where private citizens and their collectivised decisions aim to influence the allocation of resources and regulate social relations, the communist and Marxist approaches differ. These groups recognise the bourgeois public sphere as a chimera – a mask for the domination of the bourgeois in society. The media, which are mostly owned by the bourgeois, is seen as agencies of this ideological hegemony. Thus the media act as an ideological instrument of the state (Curran, 1991:35-38).

2.4.2. Against the Institutional Criteria and Assumptions of the Public Sphere

The following criticism launched against the bourgeois public sphere relates to the institutional criteria and the four assumptions of the public sphere as discussed earlier in the chapter. In *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy*, Fraser (1990) reviews Habermas' historical description of the public sphere. She recalls Habermas' definition of the public sphere as a "body of private persons assembled to discuss matters of public interest and common interest". Via publicity the state is held accountable by the society. She emphasises that the public sphere indicated an institutional

mechanism for rationalising political domination by holding states accountable to the citizens. The public sphere indicated a specific kind of discursive interaction where public opinion is produced (Fraser, 1990:58-59).

This utopian conceptualisation of the bourgeois public sphere has not been practically realised. Fraser states that Habermas' account of the public sphere merely portrays the liberal public sphere. She accentuates significant exclusions that occur. This is in conflict with *inclusivity* as one of the institutional criteria as previously discussed. In contrast to Habermas' assertions on these criteria, the bourgeois public sphere had boundaries that could not be crossed. The bourgeois public sphere discriminated against women and the lower social strata of the society (Sitton, 2003:108-119).

In this way, masculine gender constructs were created as part of the conception of the bourgeois public sphere. This led to the formal exclusion of women in the public sphere. Eley (2002) states that gender exclusions were also linked to other exclusions entrenched in class formation. In the 18th and 19th centuries the bourgeois men came to see themselves as a "universal class" who aspired to govern. Thus a hegemonic tendency of the male bourgeois public sphere existed which overshadowed alternative publics. These subordinate groups therefore could not express particular concerns (Fraser, 1990:59; Eley, 2002:306; Landes, 1988:4).

Another point of criticism is against Habermas' idea of the public sphere which requires a *disregard of status*. The relationship between publicity and status is more complex than Habermas asserts. The problem is not necessarily only that the liberal public sphere is idealised by Habermas, but rather that it falls short of examining other non liberal and non bourgeois competing public spheres. The bourgeois public sphere was seen as *the* public and the opinions and voices of those that constituted the other public spheres were disregarded and simply ignored. Various other counter publics emerged as the bourgeois public sphere intensified. These counter publics often contested exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public sphere, whereas the bourgeois public sphere criticised these specific contestations to block broader participation (Fraser, 1990:59-61).

Revisionist historiography present a more obscure argument: it sees the bourgeois public sphere not only as an utopian ideal, but rather as a masculinist ideological notion legitimising the development from class rule. They recognise the bourgeois public sphere as an “institutional vehicle for major historical transformation in the nature of political domination” (Fraser, 1990:62). Thus a mere shift from oppressive power-based dominant rule to a hegemonic, bourgeois-lead rule occurred. Thus the new rule enforces one stratum of the society, much like that of the dominant rule of the previous centuries (Fraser, 1990:60-63).

With reference to the assumptions of the public sphere, the following arguments have been made. The first assumption – that the possibility exists for private citizens, engaged in deliberation, to bracket status disparities and to deliberate with the supposition that all involved are equals – is contested. Habermas stresses the importance of the public sphere as being open and accessible to all. Fraser, however, states that this has not yet been realised. As mentioned before, women were not allowed to partake in the deliberative processes of the public sphere owing to their gendered status. Discrimination also occurred on the basis of class and racial differences. She recalls the assumption that the bourgeois public sphere requires bracketing. The bourgeois public sphere was supposed to be an arena where people deliberated as social and economic peers. Inequalities were however never eliminated and only bracketed. The bracketing was governed by protocols of style and decorum which was established by the government. These protocols functioned formally and excluded many groups such as women. Accordingly, feminist political theory accused the deliberation in the bourgeois public sphere as being a mask of dominance and control (Fraser, 1990:63-64).

Language that private citizens used to reason was also considered as a means of exclusion. Language often favoured dominant groups and discouraged subordinate groups. The subordinate groups often did not have the ability to express themselves sufficiently. Thus bracketing in this sense benefitted the dominant groups. The question that is posed is whether private citizens can truly deliberate as social and economic spheres when these arenas of deliberation form part of the larger societal context which is pervaded by structural relations of dominant and subordinate groups. Thus the bourgeois public sphere is inadequate insofar as it supposed that societal equality is not a necessary condition for participatory equality in a public sphere (Fraser, 1990: 64-65).

The second assumption – that a single and comprehensive public sphere is preferable to a multiple publics – is also challenged by critics. Habermas stresses the singular identity of the bourgeois public sphere and sees this as the desirable state of affairs. Yet, in a stratified society, where the basic institutional framework generated social inequalities, full parity of participation in public debate cannot be achieved. Fraser (1990: 66) states that the inequalities will be exacerbated when there is only a singular public sphere. This would mean that subordinate groups will have no areas of deliberation and thus their voices will not be heard and they will not be able to articulate and defend their own interests (Fraser, 1990:66-67). Further on, Eley (1992:306) suggests that the public sphere is a stratified society where contestation rather than deliberation takes place. Thus if multiple public spheres exist, healthy deliberation will follow whereas biased deliberation may emanate from a singular public sphere.

The third assumption states that discourse in public spheres should be restricted to deliberation over issues that are of common concern. The problem with this assumption is with the conceptualisation of public issues. This is an ambiguous term because a matter of common concern for some can be realised as private interests for others. The responsibility to decide whether issues are public or not, lies with the private citizens. No guarantee exists however that these private citizens will concur on these issues. It is clear that there are no *a priori* boundaries for issues of common concern and it would be decided upon through the means of deliberation. Thus no topics of discussion can be counted out as matters in the public sphere (Fraser, 1990:70-73).

The final assumption – a sufficient public sphere within a political democracy requires a definite separation between civil society and the state – is susceptible to two interpretations. The first interpretation states that the private sphere, driven by capitalism, does not foster socio-economic equalities. State activity is thus needed to assist in reduction of these inequalities. Thus the sharp separation between civil society and the state cannot be seen as a necessary precondition for a public sphere to exist. The other interpretation states that the civil society refers not only to citizens but the nexus of secondary or non-governmental associations. Thus the public sphere is the informally mobilised body of non-governmental discursive opinion that can contest the state. However, a problem can emerge from this. Often

these organisations only promote opinion-formation and not decision-making. This leads to the formation of weak and strong publics. Strong publics emerge when the power of public opinion is strengthened when the body that represents it has the ability to interpret the public opinion in the process of decision-making. Weak publics merely produce public opinion. With strong publics, however, the line between the public and the state is blurred because the state mostly acts as the enforcer of decisions made (Fraser, 1990:74-77).

2.5. Revised Conceptualisation of the Public Sphere

By taking the criticism into account, it is necessary that a working definition for the public sphere should be decided upon. It is important to note that, for Habermas, it was not only the institutional basis of the public sphere that was so important, but also the manner in which communication occurred in the bourgeois public sphere. For him it was the interaction in the social space which embodied the ideas of reason. And it was these ideas of reason that were recognised as the rational thinking, argumentation and discussion pursuit of the Enlightenment period. Accordingly, the public sphere was seen as a rational dialogical process (Dahlgren, 2005b:34).

In this light, Dahlgren (2005a:148-150) recognises the public sphere as a phenomenon constitutive of three dimensions: structural, representative and interaction. He recognises media as the communicative link between civil society and the power holders of society. He also calls upon the empirical and normative definition of the public sphere and states that even Habermas has to revise the concept owing to its dynamism and ability to change through time.

Firstly Dahlgren (2005a:148-129) conceptualises the public sphere in the structural dimension. This dimension refers to the institutional features of the public sphere which includes the media organisations, their political economy, financial issues, regulation, ownership, control as well as the legal frameworks. Classical democratic issues are very relevant here – freedom of speech, access to information and the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. The structural dimension also refers to the political institutions as the environment where the media act as regulator of information flow and forms of expression. Strong

democratic tendencies are needed in a society for it to have healthy institutional structures for a public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005a:149).

The second dimension is the dimension of representation. This refers to the production of media as well as media's scope of influence. An important aspect here is the criteria about media production for political communication which includes, amongst others, accuracy, fairness, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda setting and ideological tendencies (Dahlgren, 2005a:149).

The third dimension, that of interaction, evokes the concept of the public where publics are seen as groups other than mere media audiences, but rather as discursive interactional individuals who contribute in a collective process of argumentation. The importance of public opinion is realised especially in this dimension. Interaction consists of two aspects. The first is citizens' encounters with the media. This is seen as communicative processes of sense-making, interpretation and utilisation of media production. The second aspect of interaction is the interaction between citizens themselves where these encounters vary from two person conversations to large gatherings. Interaction specifically has its sites, its discursive practices and other transcended cultural aspects (Dahlgren, 2005a: 149).

Thus the structural, representative and interaction dimensions provide an analytical starting point to explore the extent of the public sphere. This will be applied to the idea of the modern public sphere.

2.6. The Modern Public Sphere

Since Habermas, there have been many societal changes that influenced the notion of the public sphere. Amongst the advances, the most prominent and dynamic were in the media. This is characterised by the 'new media age' where the political economy in the western media has especially evolved with specific reference to the areas of ownership, control and political use. Even though the modern public sphere evokes the publicness of the public sphere from the middle ages, it focuses on the relationship between public resources where the goal is to establish structures of broadcasting so that communication can take place that is in the interest of the public and free of state intervention. This in return optimises diverse

information for arguments and viewpoints which cultivates active and adequate citizenship in a democratic society (Dahlgren, 1991:10-11)

2.6.1. Political Discourse in the Modern Public Sphere

In today's context, the modern public sphere and the accompanying political discourse cannot be separated from the mass media. Mass media helps individuals to learn about the world, deliberate in response to issues and to reach an informed decision about the issues. Political discourse as a means to produce public opinion has passed through three successive periods since the end of World War II. During the first two decades following the war, political systems were regarded as the main source of debate and initiatives surrounding social reform and other political issues. This was termed the 'golden age' of parties. Here party systems closely expressed disparities of social structure and voters were mainly related to parties due to long lasting and existing party identifications (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999:211-212).

The second period dawned in the 1960s when television viewing, although limited, penetrated homes and became the dominant medium of political communication and discourse. This led to four transformations: People were less exposed to party propaganda since audiences were exposed to different parties and arguments regarding political issues. The second transformation was that political communication was broadcast in nonpartisan norms of fairness, impartiality, neutrality and measured choice. The third transformation was seen in the range of audience reach: television also enlarged their audience for political communication and discourse by penetrating a sector of the electorate that was previously difficult to reach. The final transformation was the impact of television news. Television news had a short-term and far reaching influence on audiences. This was seen in the scheduling of political events, the language of politics and the personalisation of its representation. Owing to the extensive influence of the second period, parties had to find new ways to influence party members and shape media agendas. It was from this development that the core features of the professional model of formal campaigning emerged. Thus political communication evolved into a highly positivistic, scientific and unsentimental approach where persuasion was based more on the established authenticates of opinion conditions (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; 212-213).

The third phase, which is still in its emerging stage, is marked by the proliferation of the main means of communication, media abundance, ubiquity, reach and speed. Here the public has greater autonomy with regard to the media. The multiplication of the means of communication; the affluence of communication channels; the increase in commercialisation; the omnipresence of the media; and the acceleration of the speed with which political information becomes accessible for the public are all characteristics of the third phase. (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999: 213).

2.6.2. The Emergence of the Internet as a Public Sphere

As part of the third phase, many call upon the emergence of the internet as medium for political discourse and as a new public sphere. In its initial stages of development, the internet was thought to herald new possibilities of political participation. The internet is however seen by many critics as something that will undermine the public sphere and political interaction that is necessary for genuine democratic public deliberation (Crossley & Roberts, 2004:133).

Yet, other academics such as Crossley and Roberts (2004:133-134) argue that the internet offers other ways of dialogical exchange through new mediated forms of communication. Although these ways of communication are indirect and mediated, they still preserve and rearticulate the connection to democratic self rule. Crossley and Roberts evoke the institutional criteria of a public sphere which could be applied to the internet as a public sphere. The first condition for a public sphere to have democratic significance is that it is a forum. In other words it must be social spaces where individuals may express their views to others; and who in turn respond to others and accordingly raise own opinions and concerns.

The second condition is for the public sphere to manifest commitments to freedom and equality in the communicative interaction which takes place within the forum. This interaction is manifested in the forms of dialogue and deliberation where all individuals – speakers and listeners – treat each other with mutual respect. The mutual respect not only means that individuals listen to each other but also that within the communicative exchange, individuals will take turns and are also guided by the mutual expectation of response . In other words people voice their opinions with the expectation that those who listen will take

into consideration what they have heard and use the information to assist in the development and course of their own arguments. In this way, the ongoing course of interaction is kept alive without anyone exerting control over another (Crossley & Roberts, 2004:133-134).

The third condition is that the communication must address an indefinite audience. If this condition is followed, any social exclusion undermines the existence of a public sphere. Thus a conversation is seen as public not only because it is heard by the members of the public, but also because it excludes no one. This feature is referred to as publicness or the publicity of communication. Communication can thus be seen as public when it is directed towards an indefinite audience and when responses are expected. The public sphere depends on this type of interaction and for this to realise social spaces must exist. It therefore requires technologies such as the internet and institutions to secure its continued existence and in order to regularise opportunities to access it. Today, the internet has been hailed as a potential way to break away from the vertical information flow seen in the media. Instead, it provides means for the provision of political information and the possibility for two way communication are established (Crossley & Roberts, 2004:133-134).

2.7. Conclusion

In this chapter the public sphere has been conceptualised. The public sphere emerged as the conceptual space between the public, with its enclosed institutions and organisations, and the circle of the private life where private citizens unite to deliberate issues of common concern that are free from influence of the state's governmental structures. The bourgeois public sphere, as developed by Habermas, has experienced a rise, climax and demise and the notion of the public sphere in the contemporary world is recognised as a poor representation of Habermas' ideals. Even though the concept of the public sphere did gain prominence, even Habermas later realised that problems exist with the concept. This statement is supported by Habermas (1989:170) himself who states that "the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only". Despite various forms of criticism, the notion of the public sphere is seen as a necessary ideal that democratic societies need to strive towards.

In the contemporary context, the modern public sphere and public discourse cannot be separated from the mass media. Public opinion has been facilitated by various forms of media

– including newspapers, magazines, television talk programs as well as the internet. The internet has been heralded as a new potential public sphere as it opened new channels for political communication and public discourse. Within the internet, SNSs are seen as a potential development which could act as a new narrower form of this public sphere. In the following chapter the notion of the internet as a public sphere as well as the emergence, influence, and potential of SNSs as a new public sphere will be explored. Throughout the chapter, public opinion as a function of public deliberation in the public sphere will be examined.

Chapter 3: Social Networking Sites as a Public Sphere

3.1. Introduction

As stated in the previous chapter, the bourgeois public sphere experienced demise during the 19th and 20th centuries. During the 20th century, media processes and channels evolved which led to changes in the areas of the informal public life. New domains, as areas of informal public life, emerged where the internet was amongst them. With the further commercialisation of the internet in the 1990s, the potential of this phenomenon as a major communication medium and possible public sphere realised as it became the fastest diffusing communications technology in history (Castells, 2009:62).

The internet was initially used as communication medium between scientists and computer experts. With the advent of the World Wide Web (WWW) in the early 1990s the internet became a commercial medium. Other factors also contributed to the commercialisation of the internet: the decrease in prices of technology; the emergence of user friendly software; low production costs; as well as low publication barriers. This resulted in the internet becoming commercialised and thus the once complex medium was changed into a forerunner of mass communication (Debatim, 2008:64).

With the development of the internet as mass communication medium, many researchers (Debatim, 2008 and Dahlberg & Siapera, 2001) have identified the internet as a public sphere. In the following chapter the potential of the internet as a public sphere will be discussed. A clear distinction between cyberspace, internet and WWW will be made in order to clarify the idea of the internet as a public sphere. Within the internet, SNSs have emerged as new possibilities of areas to express public opinion. Thus, the potential of these SNSs to exist as a public sphere will be explored. Specific reference will also be made to the most prominent SNSs. It will be argued that SNSs can function as a public sphere for the creation, structuring and influencing of political discourse and ultimately public opinion.

3.2. Cyberspace, Internet and the World Wide Web

When literally translated the term cyberspace means *navigable space* as derived from the Greek term *kyber* which means *to navigate*. Cyberspace is a navigable, digital space of networked computers. It refers to computer-mediated communication and virtual reality technologies where individuals interact with and trade in information. Gibson (in Dodge & Kitchin, 2001:1) consigns the cyberspace to the conceptual space within information and communication technologies. It consists of multiple expanding cyberspaces – each supplying a different form of digital interaction and communication. Furthermore, Jones (1995:19) states that the common ritual of informational accessibility and the need for information is what holds the cyberspace together.

Multiple cyberspaces exist: Electronic Banking (via ATMs) and cell phone conversations are two examples. For the purpose of this study however the realm of the internet as a cyberspace will be explored. The internet, as a cyberspace, is an amalgamation of conventional communication technologies (i.e. written letters, telephone and fax) and virtual reality. People, or *users*, enter this cyberspace through various media in order to connect to the internet. Thus people are united in a virtual space as users of the internet. Here the notion of *virtuality* comes to mind: physical reality is subject to the virtual reality as the physical realises in cyberspace by being reinvented to become part of the virtual reality (Dodge & Kitchin, 2001:1-2; Conradie, 2000: 16-17).

The internet is a matrix of communication networks within cyberspace. (Dodge & Kitchin, 2001:1; Conradie, 2000:16-18). As a global network of computers, the internet transcends physical barriers as it commences at the local area and works its way through the service provider, to regional, national and international telecommunications networks. With the advent of the WWW during the early 1990s, the internet became instrumental in the communication networks as it enabled people to transcend time and space and to communicate and share information. The establishment of the WWW lead to easier navigation on the internet as well as greater accessibility and thus paved the way for the internet to become a commercial medium (Dodge & Kitchin, 2001:2-3).

The WWW is constituted of multimedia data which is stored as hypermedia documents. Hypermedia documents are documents with links to other pages of information. Through using internet browsers such as Internet Explorer and Firefox, users can connect to a remote computer host and explore and interact with information stored on that page and navigate to another page through the use of the links available on the hypermedia document. In addition to displaying hypermedia documents, programs can be run and downloaded with the help of plug-in programs such as Java. Furthermore, the internet is used as broadcast medium where radio and television messages are transmitted via the internet. Electronic mail (email) can also be exchanged, databases searched, and users can partake in activities such as conferences and games via the internet. The internet has become a powerful interface and interaction paradigm in mass communication. It has also allowed for spaces of interaction where the phenomena of SNSs have developed as areas where personal communication in virtual reality takes place (Dodge & Kitchin, 2001:2)

3.3. The Potential of the Internet as a Public Sphere

“[The internet is] a new communication realm, and ultimately a new medium, whose backbone is made of computer networks, whose language is digital, and whose senders are globally distributed and globally interactive” (Castells, 2009:70).

As mentioned in chapter two, the bourgeois public sphere experienced demise during the 19th and 20th centuries. As media processes evolved, the areas of informal public life changed too. Various new domains as areas of informal public life emerged. The internet was one of these domains. Thus with the advent of the internet and especially the WWW, the possibility for a re-emerging public sphere became clear. With its privatisation and increasing popularity, the internet was heralded as a means to change communication with regards to democratic governance. The internet penetrated all the realms of the social life and where private citizens were initially mere recipients of information, they evolved into participants active in processes such as gate keeping, agenda setting as well as the production and dissemination of news and other information. Thus the internet was believed to present private citizens with the ability to address political elites and communicate with peers as well as the elites where status was disregarded with regards to access of information and the opportunity to voice opinions. Private citizens could explore social interests, conflicts and other relevant issues

free of censorship and undemocratic tendencies. The possibility to enhance trust, create community amongst private individuals, to advance political participation and to foster and facilitate public opinion was also expected as it formed part of the internet ascendance (Smith *et al*, 2009:13; Castells, 2009:65)

In spite of this, many were cautious of the internet and warned that it could become just another medium used and possibly manipulated by elites to voice their opinions and enhance their own ideas and beliefs which may lead to undemocratic tendencies such as greater political fragmentation and incivility. Also, the bourgeois public sphere was criticised as something that aspired to the utopian image as set forth by Habermas (1989). As the internet and the WWW became commercialised, it was clear that problems embedded in society would not necessarily be solved by the emergence of the internet (Smith *et al*, 2009:13).

Nonetheless, in the contemporary world it is inevitable that the interactive capacity of the internet allows for certain forms of political participation to be conducted more easily. The vast amounts of information available on the internet leads to a decrease in the costs of the acquisition of information; and a possible increase in political knowledge and political interest. It is seen as a valuable tool not only for the acquisition of information, but also for political action. The participatory character of the internet has the potential to revitalise public discourse and provides a new arena for public opinion (Debatim, 2008:64; Smith *et al*, 2009:14).

It is however very important to note that internet access is by no means universal. Even though a sum total of 24% of the world population are internet users (Internet World Stats, 2009), major cleavages surfaced across the globe as the internet developed into a mass communication medium. The *digital divide* is a prominent obstacle on the route to global penetration. In 2008, only a fifth of the world population had access to the internet. In various societies, poor, disadvantaged and minority groups are excluded from using the internet owing to their lower socio-economic status. Thus the internet community is a gated community where only those whose socio-economic status allows it; who has the acquisition of skills needed to use the internet; and those who have access to the network infrastructure, are included. The digital divide in developed countries is shrinking, yet the gap between the developed and developing countries is still vast. Except for non-western countries not having

adequate capital and infrastructure to facilitate a mass communication medium such as the internet, many of these countries have shown resistance against the western values and ideas and are yet to embrace this mass communication medium. An immediate solution is unlikely because underlying structural issues are evident. This problem opposes the idea of inclusiveness and disregards of status. If, however, this problem is bridged, and people are not excluded with regards to their socio-economic status, the notion of the internet as a public sphere is strengthened (Debatim, 2008:65; Castells, 2009:62; Smith *et al*, 2009:14).

Another obstacle is that access to internet does also not necessarily mean that internet users use the internet specifically for political activity (Smith *et al*, 2009:14). The internet is used for various other purposes which should not be overlooked.

3.3.1. The Internet as Public Sphere

To explain the internet as public sphere, the institutional criteria as set forth by Habermas (1989:36-37) is recalled: disregard of status, common concern and inclusivity. Within the internet, these three criteria are, at least, to some extent adhered to. People access the internet via virtual identities similar to their own. If individuals' socio-economic status allows it, he or she has the skills needed to access and use the internet and when individuals have access to the necessary network infrastructure, all people can use the internet. The internet does not only allow for private individuals to access it. The mass communication medium is used by online journalists, web-based interest groups and other organisations to explore and use the information available on the internet. These groups are often ignored by mainstream media and the internet thus reinforces the idea that new media can open up new channels of communication and instigate new forms of public discourse and ultimately public opinion (Debatim, 2008:65-66).

Even though there are barriers with regards to information available on the internet as well as with regards to the digital divide, individuals and groups have free access to the same information and are free to make the information available. Thus the internet adheres to Habermas' idea that issues of common concern should be addressed in a public sphere. Habermas also realises the idea of inclusivity. When thinking about the internet as a public sphere, it is very important to note that a singular unitary public sphere is rejected on the

grounds of plural identities and differences. The internet as public sphere must accommodate individuals belonging to different cultures, from different languages and from different socio-economic strata and thus the internet needs to be technically, economically, culturally and linguistically accessible to all members of society. Any a priori exclusion in terms of access goes against the institutional criteria of the public sphere as mentioned before. Yet, when the internet is considered as a new public sphere, some level of exclusivity will always be present. This, however, is not different to the bourgeois public sphere where certain groups – such as women and the lower social strata – also were excluded.

For further comparison, the three dimensional conceptualisation of the public sphere as described by Dahlgren (2005a:148-150), which was discussed in chapter two, is recalled. The three dimensions of the public sphere are the structural-, representational- and interpretation dimensions. When cyberspace and the internet are taken into account, the layout is organised and presented in terms of social, economical, cultural, technological, legal as well as web-based features. This is in accordance with the structural dimension of the communicative spaces of democratic societies as discussed in the previous chapter. The representational dimension is also evident when referring to the internet. With the omnipresent and increasing penetrating character of the internet, representation becomes very relevant for online contexts of the public sphere. Individuals, interest groups and organisations are represented as information receivers as well as information producers. Finally, the dimension of interaction is also evident. Encounters with the internet are a communicative process of sense-making, interpretation and utilisation of media production. The interaction is also evident between citizens themselves where communication varies from two person conversations to gatherings amongst more individuals. These three dimensions provide not only an analytical starting point for the scope of the public sphere but also for analysing the impact and scope of the internet as a newer public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005:149-150; Papacharissi, 2002:21).

Owing to the transformation seen in the mass communication systems – which specifically includes the commercialisation, government regulations and the diffusion of the internet, Debatim (2008:65) argues that the internet may experience a structural transformation of its own. The accessibility and availability of the WWW which made the internet a medium of mass communication also appear to have initiated a decline in its trajectory. This is similar to

the bourgeois public sphere where the effects of capitalism weakened the public sphere. This is however not enough to reject the idea of the internet as a public sphere. Whereas traditional media provided horizontal information flow, this medium of mass communication provides the possibility of multidirectional communication flow and thus users advance from mere recipients of information to participants in a dynamic process of computer mediated communication.

Parracharissi (in Debatim, 2008:66) states that the revitalisation of the public sphere as the internet is not only practically, but also empirically, visible. The internet has created new channels of information – be it SNSs, chat rooms and other loose virtual communities. Here identities are protected by anonymity and public assembly occurs through discussion forums, mailing lists or newsgroups, or news media-based public communication where nearly all print and broadcast media is transforming in the new digital environment. This has opened new opportunities for communication and democratic participation (Debatim, 2008:65-66).

3.3.2. Public Discourse on the Internet

Table 1: Similarities between Offline and Online Public Discourse Activities (Smith *et al*, 2009:33)

Offline Activities	Online Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact government official in person - by phone or by letter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send an email to government official
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign a paper petition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign a petition online
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send a letter to the editor through U.S. postal service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email letter to the editor
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a political contribution in person - by phone or through mail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make political contribution online
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate with civic/political group - by face-face meetings, print letter or newsletter, or telephone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate with civic/political group by messaging - using group's website; sending the group and email; communicating via SNS

Traditional manners of public discourse and political participation included activities such as communication with a government official – whether by telephone or by letter sent via the postal service; the signing of a petition; the sending of a letter to the editor of relevant media through the postal service; making a donation to a person of party either by telephone or

through the mail; and communication with an active civic or political group by means of face-to-face meetings, print- or newsletter or telephone. The emergence and utilisation of the internet as medium to enhance political participation has however opened up new channels and possibilities for communication. These online activities include the sending of email to a government official; the signing of petitions online rather than on paper; communication to the editor via email rather than using the postal service; donations made via the internet; a communication with active civic and political groups by messaging, instant messaging or accessing communication channels available on social networking sites (Smith *et al*, 2009:33).

In addition to this, Dahlgren (2005:152) states that the internet facilitates an 'impressive community heterogeneity'. He recognises various different internet-based public spheres which accommodate this heterogeneity. These include versions of *e-government* which refers to forums where government representatives interact with private citizens. Within this forum, information regarding governmental administration and performance is made available. Participatory communication is however restricted in these forums. *E-governance* exists parallel to the former where interaction from private citizens is encouraged and regarded in relation to input and criticism of the government.

The *advocacy/activist* domain is a forum where organisations sharing the same perceptions, values and goals are united to discuss issues of common concern. These organisations are usually geared for forms of political intervention. Social movements and other activist groups are amongst these groups (Dahlgren, 2005:153).

Civic forums are also seen as important public spheres where interaction between individual citizens is facilitated and where deliberation can take place. In general, this form of public sphere is regarded as the pragmatic version of the public sphere on the internet, but not the only one (Dahlgren, 2005:153).

Dahlgren (2005:153) also refers to the *parapolitical domain* which proclaims social and cultural topics which is of common concern and affects collective identities. Even though politics is not explicitly addressed in these domains, it persists to be an underlying issue.

Finally Dahlgren (2005:153) refers to *journalism domain*. This domain includes major news corporation that have penetrated the internet – such as CNN; net-based news organisation – such as Yahoo!News; alternative media news organisation – such as Mediachannel; as well as single member blog sites.

These are all examples of internet-based public spheres. In the following section, it will become clear that these internet-based public spheres are reflected in the dynamic of SNSs. Accordingly, SNSs and their potential to function as public spheres will further be explored.

3.4. SNSs and SNSs as a New Public Sphere

3.4.1. SNSs and their Features

Boyd & Ellison (2007) conceptualises SNSs as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or a semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and navigate their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. Users of SNSs use the tools available on the site to communicate and build relationships with other users (Lenhart & Madden, 2007:i).

Some of these sites are specialised and attract people who share identities and other similarities where others cater to diverse audiences. But in all instances, SNSs make use of pre-existing social networks. These sites enable social networks to be upheld and assist in the formation of new relationships amongst strangers and acquaintances who share similar views, interests and activities. The forte of SNSs is not that they merely allow strangers to meet and build communicative relationships, but rather that it enables users to articulate and to make their pre-existing social networks visible. A possibility of relationships formed between individuals who would possibly not have met, are thus realised (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

As mentioned, SNSs allow their users to create a profile: individuals are asked to provide certain information in order to establish their profile on the site. The required information usually includes age, location and interests. On most of the sites, users are encouraged to post a profile picture. Pages are further made personal by the tools available on the sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Privacy regulations vary between the SNSs. Some of these sites are public for all users to view, others offer the possibility for the user to limit access to their profile by only allowing users from the same network or those the user befriended to access their profile. Often profile owners also have the capacity to choose who can have access to their profile (Friendster, 2009a; Tribe.net, 2009b; LinkedIn, 2009a; MySpace, 2009a; Facebook, 2009l).

When users join a SNS, they are asked to identify other users with whom they want to build relationships with. These relationships are often pre-existing and the SNSs merely act as a means to facilitate communication between users and to reinforce the relationships they already have. These co-users are referred to as “Friends”, “Contacts”, “Fans”. Most of the SNSs require the recipient of the friendship request to confirm the contact between the two users – this is however not the case with all SNSs. Users’ connections with other users are publicly displayed. The list of friends, fans and contacts contain links to direct a user to their profiles. This enables users to navigate to their friends’ profiles (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Friendster, 2009b; Tribe.net, 2009a; LinkedIn, 2009b; MySpace, 2009b; Facebook, 2009g).

Except for users being able to access the profiles and personal information of co-users, the SNSs also have a tool for users to either leave a message on other users’ profiles and a private messaging service similar to that of email. Many of these sites also have features that enable blogging and instant messaging technology. Through these mentioned features, conversation and contact are enabled by SNSs. Some versions of these features are available on most of the SNSs, it is however not a prerequisite (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Other than the above mentioned features, there are various other features available on the different SNSs. These are generally referred to as applications which include, amongst others, support groups and photo and video-sharing capabilities. All of these features have aided in the development of SNSs as a phenomenon now witnessed worldwide (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In the following section a brief history outline of the development of these SNSs will be given to give a better understanding of how it has grown into a worldwide phenomenon.

3.4.2. SNSs: A Brief Historical Outline

In 1997, the first SNS, namely SixDegrees, was launched. It allowed users to create their own profiles and list their friends. Even though these features existed prior to the development of SixDegrees, this SNS was the first of its sort to combine the features. SixDegrees laid claim on their identity as a site that could help people connect with other users and send messages to them. Despite initial popularity, this endeavour did not succeed and the service was shut down after three years. The main reason for the lack of interest was that even though users across the world embraced the internet, most of the SixDegrees users did not have extended networks of friends who were online. Activities on the SNS were also limited and people soon became jaded towards it (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Between 1997 and 2001 SNSs developed and allowed for personal, professional as well as dating profiles to be constructed. In 2001, Ryze.com was developed in order to assist users to exercise some form of control within their business networks. Examples of other SNSs which followed Ryze.com included Tribe.net, LinkedIn and Friendster. All of these SNSs had personal and professional interests at heart. Ryze.com did however not acquire mass popularity as was expected. The other three SNSs showed initial potential as they started on their slow ascent (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Friendster, particularly, was developed as a social complement to Ryze.com. Whereas previous SNSs focussed on introducing strangers (with possible shared interests) to one another, Friendster was created to form bonds between the friends-of-friends. Friendster gained popularity and grew to 300 000 users through word of mouth. It was only in May 2003 that Friendster received traditional press coverage. As the site grew however, it experienced difficulties: Servers and databases were not capable of dealing with the rapid growth of the site and thus malfunctions were experienced. Users were also negative towards the site – especially those who replaced e-mail with Friendster. Due to the combination of technical problems and social conflicts also experienced, trust faltered between users and the site (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

2003 witnessed the launch of various other SNSs. Most of these sites were profile-centric and socially organised sites as explained above. In addition to these, professional sites like

LinkedIn and Xing emerged which targeted business people. Other media-sharing websites also started implementing features of SNSs and some even became SNSs themselves. Examples include Flickr – for the sharing of photos, LastFM – for the sharing of music listening habits and, one of the most prominent of its sort, YouTube – for the sharing of videos (LinkedIn, 2009b; Xing, 2009; Flickr, 2009; LastFM, 2009; YouTube, 2009; Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Another SNS launched in 2003 was MySpace. This site's emergence was overlooked by many when it started to compete with other SNSs such as Friendster and Xanga!. MySpace attracted the alienated users from Friendster and contacted bands for local support. MySpace did have an upper hand. The site implemented features based on user demand and allowed for their users to personalise their profiles. A year after its launch, teenagers started to join MySpace. Teenagers, unlike the older users of MySpace, were never members of previous SNSs such as Friendster. As teens began to join, their existing social networks of friends were encouraged to join too. MySpace initially had a policy against underage users, but these regulations were relaxed and minors were allowed to join. Here, as seen in the instance of Friendster, initial press coverage was absent and therefore few realised the SNS's growing popularity. In 2005 the SNS was bought by NewsCorp, the world's second largest media conglomerate – the deal finally attracted masses of media attention (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; NewsCorp, 2007:68).

Even though MySpace received most of the mainstream media attention, various SNS penetrated the rest of the world. In addition to the growing popularity of the SNSs, more services began implementing SNS features. Blogs – websites maintained by an individual or a group that allows for regular entries and commentary – also implemented SNS features. This phenomenon attracted diverse audiences (Boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Amongst these sites, some SNSs were developed for niche demographics before it expanded to the worldwide community. Facebook was one of these SNSs when it was launched in 2004 as a Harvard-only SNS. Users had to have a harvard.edu email addresses to join Facebook. Owing to its membership being limited initially, Facebook was perceived an intimate private community. Shortly afterward it was expanded to support college students from elsewhere (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; TechTerms, 2009).

During September 2005, Facebook expanded to include the high school community, professionals as part of corporate networks and finally everyone else above the age of thirteen. Facebook has several features that differentiates it from other SNSs: unlike the other SNS, Facebook users are not able to make their whole profile public for all users to see, and outside developers have the capability to build applications which allow users to personalise their profiles even more and perform additional tasks, for example to join support groups and join in discussion forums (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Facebook, 2009g). These features will be explored in chapter four.

3.4.3. SNSs Today and their Potential to exist as a Public Sphere

In 2009, SNSs have become a fundamental dimension of the daily lives of individuals across the globe. Not only are they popular amongst individuals, but more and more corporations and businesses invest time and money in the creation, purchasing, promoting and advertising of SNSs (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Mainstream media have made use of interactive networks, such as SNSs, and blogs to distribute their content and interact with the audience by combining vertical and horizontal communication methods. Thus a growing interaction between vertical and horizontal communication is witnessed. This does not, however, mean that mainstream media is declining, but rather that it is transforming – much like that of Habermas' bourgeois public sphere. The new networks of communication are a complement to the traditional ones and give birth to a new media reality and a new form of the public sphere as witnessed in the realm of the internet (Castells, 2009:68-70).

A clear increase in the joining of SNSs has been witnessed amongst teenager and adult internet users. For the purpose of this study, only the American adult internet users will be taken into account. From 2005 to 2008 the amount of users who had a profile on an online SNS increased from 8% to 35% (Lenhart, 2009:1). Lenhart (2009) found in the study on *Adults and Social Network Websites* that young adult internet users (18 to 24 years) are much more likely than their older counterparts to use, and be part of, an online social network. Seventy five percent of this age group has a profile on a SNS. Amongst these, a great portion of the respondents claims to have engaged in politically driven activities.

Most of the SNSs do not assert a distinct political agenda or affiliation, yet the sites do have tools to exchange relevant information and perspectives which could affect and/or facilitate public opinion. In a study on *The Internet and Civic Engagement* conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Smith *et al*, 2009:5) it was found that younger American adults, rather than elders, are more likely to be and become internet users. This study also found that the gap which exists between the relatively unengaged younger population and the more engaged middle aged population is less pronounced in online activities than offline activities. Yet even though this distinction is reduced online, there still exists a strong correlation between socio-economic status online and active civic and political engagement. However, SNSs and blogs demonstrate potential to alter these embedded socio-economic patterns.

According to Smith *et al* (2009:49-50) the development of new forms of communication on the internet such as the emergence of SNSs, exert the potential to expand the opportunities for civic and political engagement. They offer two explanations for this trend. Firstly, the new forms of interaction via SNSs may engage new kinds of people whose views and opinions are not normally taken into account. This may encourage those who were inactive to take on active rolls in political participation. The second explanation refers to the large amount of internet users and their possibility to mobilise and be mobilised to partake in certain activities. These activities can occur offline and/or online as long as they have the intent to affect or influence governmental decisions and/or actions. This can be done by either directly influencing the formation of the policies or indirectly influencing those behind the decisions. Furthermore Smith *et al* (2009:49-50) explains that internet-based political participation can either refer to political engagement or political expression on SNSs. Political engagement includes information obtained about a candidate or campaign; the joining of a political group or cause; and the signing up as an acquaintance (fan, friend or supporter) of a candidate or campaign. Political expression includes comments about political or social issues posted on a website or blog; pictures or videos about political or social issues posted online; pieces written about political or social issues on personal blogs; or political content posted on the SNS for others to read (Smith *et al*, 2009:49-50).

Amongst the SNSs discussed, the most popular are Facebook and MySpace. According to Castells (2009: 68) MySpace – with 114 million users – and Facebook – with 123,9 million users – stand out as the most prominent and popular websites for interaction and communication amongst users across different age and social demographics. As of May 2008 MySpace and Facebook were regarded as the world's most successful websites for social interaction for users across different age and social demographics as they emerged as links between private citizens, media networks, companies, political elites and other relevant groups (Castells, 2009:67).

3.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, Cyberspace, the internet and the WWW were explored. The notion of the internet as public sphere was explored and explained. As the internet developed, especially since the advent of the WWW, new features such as SNSs – as web-based services where users can create a profile and communicate with acquaintances on a mass level - gained prominence as a possible new public sphere. SNSs and their features which exert the potential to allow for public discourse to take place received attention. A brief historical outline was given in order to realise the position of SNSs in the contemporary world.

In the following chapter the potential of Facebook – the most prominent SNS – will be further explored by referring to its features which enables it to act as a possible public sphere.

Chapter 4: Facebook – Potential Facilitator of Public Opinion

4.1. Introduction

In the following chapter the potential of SNSs as public spheres will be further explored. This will be done with specific reference to Facebook. Facebook will be fully conceptualised whereafter Facebook and the American community will be discussed. There are various features available on Facebook that exert the potential to enable public discourse and facilitate public opinion. In the following chapter these features, referred to as *applications*, will be discussed. The applications include *Pages*, *Groups* and *Events*. It will be argued that these applications have the potential to enable public discourse and thus facilitate public opinion. The public discourse takes place between the users or members of Facebook as well as between member and the organiser, referred to as the administrator, of the application. The relationship between members as well as between members and administrators will be explored in an attempt to explain how public discourse is enabled on this SNS and how public opinion is facilitated.

As discussed in chapter three, most of the SNSs do not assert a distinct political agenda or affiliation. These sites do, however, possess the tools which can be utilised to exchange relevant information and perspectives which, in turn, could affect and/or facilitate public opinion. The development of the new forms of communication on the internet – for example via SNSs – exerts the potential to expand the opportunities for civic and political engagement. This is greeted with enthusiasm especially owing to the gap between the relatively politically unengaged younger population and more politically engaged middle aged population which is less pronounced in online activities than offline activities (Smith *et al*, 2009:5; 50)

The potential for SNSs to act as public sphere became feasible during the 2004 Howard Dean campaign. It was only with the U.S. Congressional Election during 2006 that Facebook was used for the first time and in 2008 during the U.S. Presidential Campaign, Facebook as well as other SNSs like YouTube were embraced and prepared as arenas of public discourse in order for public opinion to be facilitated. These SNSs provide areas where deliberation and debate can take place and where political information is provided and shared. This leads to a

greater number of voices and the possibility of feedback is realised. In addition to this, the possibility for the formation of interest groups is created and members can organise themselves around a political goal and get the chance to affiliate with political parties and/or leaders on a more personal level. Thus Facebook, together with other SNSs, emerged as an online tool that offer candidates and politically affiliated groups to communicate with supporters and mobilise voters (Williams & Gulati, 2009)

4.2. Facebook

As mentioned in chapter three, Facebook is a social utility that connects people and allows them to share information, opinions and media. Facebook was founded by Mark Zuckerberg in 2004 with help from Dustin Moskovitz and Chris Hughes. As mentioned before, membership to this website was initially limited to students from Harvard University, but in 2006 it expanded to include the whole internet community. Facebook launched the *Facebook Platform* which provides the possibility for any developers to create applications which are available to the members of Facebook. It allows its members to share personal information and to connect and interact with other members. For a person to join Facebook, he or she firstly needs to create a Facebook account. For the account to be created a person's first name, surname, email address, password, gender and birthday details should be added. Thereafter the person has the option to load a profile photo and to add acquaintances, referred to as *friends* on Facebook. When the information is added and the steps are completed, the person becomes a Facebook member and receives a homepage from where his/her *Profile* can be accessed (Fabernovel, 2007; Facebook, 2009i).

When the member has a profile, additional information and applications can be added to personalise his/her profile. Furthermore, members can affiliate themselves with pre-existing social networks which range from academic institutions to employment and residential areas (Fabernovel, 2007; Facebook, 2009i).

4.2.1. Facebook and the American Community

According to the study done on *Adults and Social Network Websites* (Lenhart, 2009), it was found that 35% of American adult internet users have a profile on a SNS. Despite the lower

levels in comparison to teenagers with profiles on SNSs, the usage of SNSs amongst adults has grown from 7% in 2005 to 35% in 2009. See Figure 1.

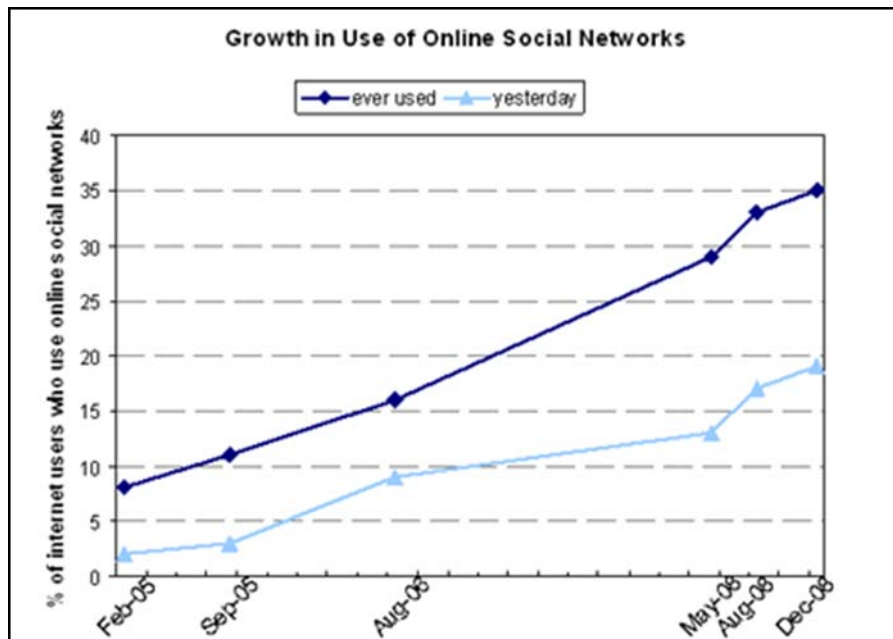


Figure 1: Growth in the Use of SNSs (Lenhart, 2009:4)

Furthermore, it was found that amongst the adults who have profiles on SNSs, 75% of those between the ages of 18-24 years have a profile on a SNS (Lenhart, 2009:3-4).

Smith *et al* (2009:24) found that nearly half of the American adult internet users have expressed opinions in a public forum on topics that are important to them. These forums are mostly found on blogs and SNSs. With the development of these media, individuals are presented with various channels which can be followed in order for civic engagement to occur. In this study it also became apparent that 15% of the internet users – which constitutes 11% of the American adult population – have gone online to add to online political discussion.

In addition to the blogs, SNSs have become fertile ground for engagement with the political process. Amongst the American adult internet users who have profiles on a SNS, 31% have engaged in activities centred on a political cause – whether it is to join a cause or to obtain information about a candidate and/or campaign (Smith *et al*, 2009:26).

When the above mentioned activities are taken together, Smith *et al* (2009:26) found that a full 19% of all American internet users can be considered members of the online “participatory class”. This is elaborated upon in table 2.

Table 2: The Online Participatory Class (Smith et al, 2009:49)

The proportion of Internet users who have posted political or social content using digital tools	
Post comments about a political or social issue	12%
Obtain political info from a SNS	8%
Write about political or social issues in your own blog	4%
Start/Join a political group or cause on a SNS	4%
Befriend a candidate on a SNS	4%
Post political news on a SNS	4%
Post pictures online about a political or social issue	3%
Post video online about a political or social issue	2%
Did any of these	19%

Amongst the SNSs MySpace has been the largest and most popular since 2006. During 2008 however, Facebook surpassed MySpace in popularity amongst SNSs. Not only is Facebook the most popular SNS, but is it rated as the second most popular website available on the internet – only preceded by Google (Small, 2009: 85; Alexa, 2009; ComScore, 2009).

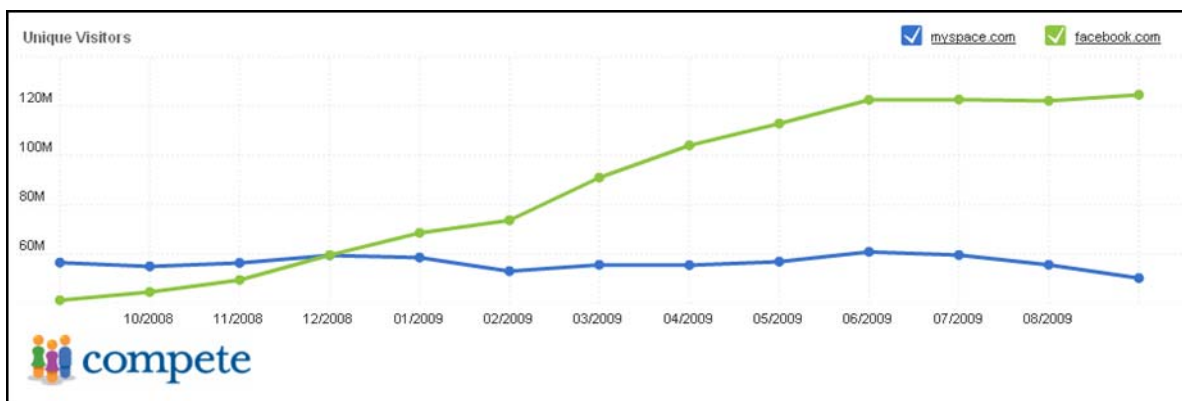


Figure 2: Facebook Growth Rate; September 2008 – September 2009 (Compete, 2009)

Since June 2007 and June of 2008, Facebook has grown with 153% in comparison to MySpace which had a mere 3% growth rate. A great increase in Facebook users has been witnessed in 2009. In September 2009 Facebook had 124,579,479 different members whereas

MySpace had 50,229,156 members. Within the one year mark – September 2008 to September 2009, the growth rate of Facebook has increased even further by 202.06%. These figures are explained in figure 2 (Techtree, 2009; Compete, 2009).

It is also very important to note that, amongst the Facebook members, the age group of 18-24 constitutes the largest proportion which is 52% (Smith, 2008c). Thus, with its membership surpassing the 124 million mark, Facebook is currently the most popular and fastest growing SNS available on the internet. Its potential as a tool for public discourse as well as a means of recruiting the politically unengaged demographic of 18-24 year olds have been realised and will therefore be further explored.

4.2.2. Means of Communication on Facebook

There are various areas on Facebook that allows for communication to take place. For the purpose of this study the focus will only be on written communication. The first area of written communication is the *News Feed* which appears on the Facebook member's homepage as he/she logs into his/her account. The News Feed highlights information regarding any changes made on members' profiles. Even though this communication tool does not allow for direct communication, members are able to *comment* on each news feed. This is a semi-public context owing to the fact that all the friends of a member can see the information on the feed. The information does however not appear on the members' profiles whom he/she did not befriend. The News Feed was initially greeted with criticism: Members were not fond of the idea that everything they did was posted for all to see. Security measures were soon implemented and Facebook users were able to organise and filter information according to personal preference. Since 2008 the News Feed has become an integral part of Facebook (Facebook, 2009g; Smith, 2008a).

Facebook also allots an area of communication on the profile of each member. This is referred to as the member's *Wall*. Similar to the News Feed, this means of communication functions in a semi-public context where asynchronous communication takes place. With this function, members are able to post messages, directed to a specific Facebook member, on their profiles. The possibility to share media – be it photos, videos or other media – also exists on the Wall. *Status updates* also form part of the Facebook member's Wall. This

function allows for Facebook members to update their daily actions which are posted on their Wall as well as on the News feed of their own and their friends' homepages. Comments are also allowed on all the information made available on the member's profile (Facebook, 2009m; Smith, 2008a).

The third means of communication is via the *Messaging* service which is similar to email correspondence between internet users. The messaging service is however not as advanced as its email counterparts, yet it acts as an adequate means of communication between the Facebook members. Communication via the messaging service is instantaneous and private – messages can only be read by the sender and receiver. The option does exist to send the message to various recipients (Facebook, 2009h; Smith, 2008a).

The final tool used for communication that will be discussed, is the instant messaging or *Chat* service. This service is similar to desktop-based instant messengers. This is also a means of instantaneous communication. There are three tools which constitute this means of communication. These include the online friends tool – which shows the Facebook member how many of his/her friends are online; the notifications tool – which alerts the Facebook member of any new Facebook notifications; and the actual chat tool – which allows the member to partake in the instant messaging service. The means of communication is the newest amongst addition to Facebook (Facebook, 2009h).

Furthermore, members can communicate by commenting on all media posted; and by various virtual actions performed on Facebook. These actions are however not of relevance to this study (Facebook, 2009g).

4.2.3. Facebook Applications used for Communication and Public Discourse

As mentioned previously, Facebook allows for applications to be part of the SNS and thus Facebook members can personalise their profiles by adding these applications to their home pages. Thousands of applications developed as more and more people and institutions wanted to be stakeholders within the Facebook community. For the purpose of this study, however, only the applications that can enhance public discourse and possibly facilitate public opinion will be discussed.

The relevant applications that are referred to are *Pages*, *Groups* and *Events*. These features each included a home page which displays information and a Wall (message board) which was explained in the previous section. The applications allow Facebook members who share the same interests or views to assemble, communicate and possibly organise themselves around the relevant subject (Facebook, 2009g).

Pages are a personalised and customised virtual presence for public personalities, organisations, products or areas. For a Facebook member to create a page, it needs to be certified that the member is an official representative of the relevant public personality, organisation, product or area. The administrator thus needs permission to create the page on Facebook. Facebook members who add the specific page to their profiles are seen as *supporters* or *fans* of the relevant subject. By joining the page, supporters/fans become brand advocates as they become representatives of the public personality, organisation, product or area themselves. Facebook allows for information about the public personality, organisation, product or area to be made available. It also allows for the administrators and supporters/fans to post different media on the Wall. The Wall thus acts as central area where the latest news and information is made available to all the fans. Supporters/fans can also contribute by posting media or partaking in discussions (Facebook, 2009c)

With the *Groups* application, Facebook members are able create and join a maximum of 200 groups. Facebook Groups can be centred on any interest or activity. Facebook allows for the administrator(s) of the group to provide a required group name; categorise it according to its network; provide a required description of the group; categorises it according to a preselected category (i.e. Student groups) and type (i.e. Political Groups). Furthermore Facebook provides spaces for recent news, information about the office, email address, street address and town/city to be added. This application has a Wall and a News Feed which enables members to post messages and where notifications are posted. A group email can also be sent to all the members – this is however limited to the administrators of the relevant group (Facebook, 2009d).

With Facebook *Events* events can be organised and advertised via the application. The member(s) who act as the administrator(s) should provide the required title of the event. Furthermore the location, start time and end time should be stated by the administrator(s).

With regards to privacy, Facebook provides a choice between open, closed or secretive. An open event is accessible and available to all Facebook members. When an event is closed, members are only allowed to join when their membership is requested by the administrator, on other words, only guests who are invited are allowed may attend the event. Unlike the Group application the Events application only has a wall where members can post messages. A group email can also be sent, this again is limited to the administrators of the group (Facebook, 2009b). More people are invited to events via the events application than through any of the leading focussed invitation websites (i.e. Evite.com) (Fabernovel, 2007).

With these three applications, Facebook allows for its members to communicate and to organise. It allows for members to from different communities to assemble for a common cause, interest, belief or gathering. With this study it is argued that Facebook exerts the potential to facilitate public opinion. Facebook allows for its members to cross physical borders and to assemble to voice opinions and give them the flexibility to decide how and when they want to contribute to the relevant conversations.

4.2.4. Politics on Facebook

As was mentioned previously, the internet was first utilised for political purposes in 2004 with the Howard Dean Campaign. It was however only in 2006, during the American Congressional and gubernatorial elections, that amateur bloggers, media bloggers and party bloggers covered and discussed the election. Politicians also acquired advertisement space in 2006. With the presidential election of 2008, candidates established Facebook pages to interact with the million of Facebook members in an attempt to widen their reach and to attract new voters from the previously political unengaged groups. The profiles of politicians are similar to the profiles of other Facebook members – politicians were now allowed to create a profile and personalise it by providing personal information; posting various media including photographs, videos and notes; and thus interact with their supporters (or friends) via the tools made available on Facebook. Except for the profiles, various pages, groups and events dedicated to political issues have also been formed (Smith, 2008:86).

In 2006, Facebook created a general profile for all candidates of the U.S. Senate. This general template presented only the candidate's name, his/her office being sought and basic contact

information. Passwords for the profiles were forwarded to the candidates' offices. By the end of the campaign, a third of the candidates personalised their profiles by adding additional information, initiating discussion topics, posting comments on their Walls and sharing different media via the available Facebook tools. Facebook members who befriended the candidates were thus able to access all the information on the candidates' profiles and were allowed to react by means of comments, partaking in the discussions or sharing media content (Facebook, 2009a; Williams & Gulati, 2009:2).

Some changes were brought about for the 2008 presidential elections. Instead of creating profiles for the candidate, Facebook rather allowed for each candidate to create a page. Even though the pages were similar to the profiles, the pages allowed candidates to enhance their campaigns by posting various kinds of campaign materials which included public announcements, links to other pages, links to other SNSs like YouTube, photo albums and event information. During the 2008 campaigns, this application was also opened to the rest of the world which allowed for elected officials and candidates in any country to be eligible for pages as long as a representative of the politician created the page (Williams & Gulati, 2009:3).

There are various benefits for extending political campaigns to the internet and more specifically to Facebook. Owing to its growing popularity, extended membership and accessibility, campaigning on Facebook can increase exposure at low and even no cost. Secondly, the information made available and communicated on Facebook is unmediated by the traditional press. Also, Facebook paves a way to and for the millennial generation who are the most active users of the internet. SNSs are seen as an ideal way to communicate with this previously politically unengaged age group. Fourth, an organised database is created which allows for greater reach amongst supporters. This occurs because Facebook requires members to request their friendship in order to be recognised as a supporter of the politician, politically affiliated group or campaign. Finally, the interactive character of Facebook is also seen as beneficial when it comes to campaigning on the internet. This allows for communication amongst supporters and between supporters and the campaign (Small, 2008:86).

4.2.5. Public Discourse on Facebook

When people utilise Facebook for public discourse, communication can either occur between the different members of Facebook or between the members and the facilitators responsible for the administration and upkeep of the relevant page, group or event. Facebook acts as an organised structure where communication takes place within a structured environment and where members can be organised not only for communicative purposes, but also mobilised for possible political participation.

The application most often used for political reasons is the Groups application. Most of the groups that are established on Facebook are partisan which means that Facebook act as arena where likeminded people come together to obtain information; share information; and communicate with other members. These types of groups do however run the risk of ignoring opposing viewpoints and are at times criticised as being biased. Examples of partisan groups – with regards to American politics – available on Facebook are *Barack Obama (One Million Strong for Barack)* and *1 000 000 Strong for McCain/Palin '08 (Official Group)*. There are, however, groups that invite open debate for contentious issues. These groups vary from election issues – *Election 2008* and *McCain v. Obama* to specific issues – *Turning the Page: Perspectives on Obama Foreign Policy* (Westling, 2007:5; Facebook, 2009f; Facebook, 2009e).

Furthermore, public discourse on Facebook can occur between Facebook members and representatives of the relevant politician, campaign or politically affiliated groups. The tools made available by Facebook have the potential to expand campaigns and build on in the relationship between voters and candidates. Online media such as SNSs and Facebook can accelerate the diffusion of information. The information is also available to a large proportion of the voting community. It is thus an attractive and cost effective means of conducting voter outreach. Given the growing popularity of online communication via SNSs amongst the younger generation, it acts as an effective way to target that specific demographic age group (Williams & Gulati, 2009:1).

Pages and groups of candidates are usually mostly utilised during the campaigning period. Even though the administrators are able to edit the pages and groups, editing activities

usually decrease after the election period. Most politicians prefer to use their own websites as a means of communication between them and their supporters, yet Facebook provides more options than that available on websites and the option of two-way communication is realised (Westling, 2007:6-8).

4.3. Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of Facebook and the American community; its features which can be utilised as means of communication; as well as the applications available that have the potential to be utilised for political communication and public discourse. The role that politics have played on Facebook since 2006 received attention and it was found that Facebook offers the possibility for public discourse to realise. Yet, for Facebook to realise as a public sphere and for public opinion as a function of public discourse to be facilitated by Facebook, further investigation needs to take place. In order to explore whether Facebook has the potential to facilitate public opinion, a case study of the 2008 Obama campaign is conducted in the following chapter. Obama arose as the first presidential candidate to run an internet campaign. As part of his campaign, Obama utilised SNSs – especially Facebook – to expand voter outreach, reach the politically unengaged demographic and to gain grassroots support. With the information obtained from the information already discussed and that of the case study, an attempt will be made to prove the potential of Facebook as a facilitator of public opinion.

Chapter 5: Case Study – Facebook and the 2008 Obama Campaign

5.1. The Case Study

In an attempt to further verify Facebook as a facilitator of public opinion, a case study on Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, as visible on Facebook, is conducted. During election campaigns, candidates build brand recognition, assemble their campaign organisations, raise funds and conduct market research – all in an effort to promote themselves and to mobilise their supporters (Williams & Gulati, 2008:3). In 2008, the internet and SNSs played a prominent role during the election. As discussed in Chapter three, SNSs provide the possibility of a dynamic communication flow and expose new forms of communication which have showed the potential to engage new kinds of people whose views and opinions are not necessarily regarded and to mobilise supporters (Smith *et al* 2009:49-50). The new trend of utilising the internet and SNSs signified a new development in the representation of voters.

The internet started to play an interactive, socialising and educational role in the modern society. When Obama's campaign was developed, his administrators soon recognised the potential of the internet and SNSs. It was within this context that they realised their supporters, especially younger supporters (between the ages of 18 and 24) could not be seen as mere consumers of information, but rather as conduits of the information.

As mentioned before, Obama contacted Chris Hughes (one of the co-founders of Facebook) to run his new media campaign which formed part of his aggressive election campaign. Hughes, as one of Obama's key strategists, also became his official Facebook advocate. The usage of Facebook as a campaign instrument allow candidates not only to achieve electoral goals, like contacting volunteers and donors and organising and promoting events, but allow them to achieve these goals at a much faster pace, lower costs, and by treading in new electoral pastures. With this, the scope of campaigning broadened. The advent of online social interactive media, the growing significance of SNSs and the growing popularity of Facebook allowed for campaigners to take on new challenges in the virtual sphere. Thus this election became the first internet election. It was, however, Obama's campaign which differentiated it from the rest of the candidates as he combined desktop, mobile, video and

email platforms to form a perpetual seamless swell of communication. It is interesting to note that this election was soon hailed as the *Facebook election* owing to Obama’s innovative campaign (Barron, 2008:10; Johnson & Perlmutter, 2006:375-376).

5.2. Overview of the Campaign

According to Rainie and Smith (2008:3) 40% of all Americans obtained information regarding the 2008 electoral campaigns via the internet. Three online activities gained prominence which lead to the internet being a source of political information. The first activity was the viewing of online videos posted on SNSs such as YouTube. Thirty five percent of Americans reported to have watched online political videos. The second activity, and the one of most importance to this study, is the utilisation of SNSs to gain, promote and facilitate information regarding the campaigns. Ten percent of Americans reported to have used SNSs such as Facebook to take part in some form of political activity. That adds up to 14% of all internet users and 40% of the internet users who have created profiles on SNSs such as Facebook. Among young voters, the use of SNSs has become pervasive as it plays an increasing role in their political experience. The study found that 66% of the younger voters have a profile on a SNS and half of these young profile owners used the SNSs to obtain or share information regarding the campaign or candidates (Rainie & Smith, 2008:5; Williams & Gulati, 2008:2).

Rainie and Smith (2008:5) further found that the younger voters were more comfortable to engage with the political world online than their elder counterparts. It was also found that 39% of the internet users accessed the internet to read or view unfiltered campaign material which included candidate debates, speeches and announcements, position papers as well as speech transcripts (Rainie & Smith, 2008:7).

Table 3: SNS and Politics (Rainie & Smith,2008:7)

SNS and Politics: % of SNS members who have:	
Discovered Friends' political Interests or affiliations	29%
Obtained campaign and/or candidate information	22%
Signed up as a friend of a candidate	10%
Started or joined political group	9%

Amongst the members of SNSs who have engaged in political activities on the SNS, 29% of the respondents of this study claimed to have discovered their friends' political interests and affiliations via the SNS; 22% obtained campaign or candidate information via the SNS 10% signed up as a friend of a candidate; and 9% started or joined a political group (see table 3).

5.3. The Obama Campaign and Facebook

As discussed in chapter four, Facebook is currently the largest and fastest growing SNS available on the internet. With this age demographic 18-24 (52% of internet users) being the most politically disengaged group, Obama saw the opening that needed be bridged. He realised that, with Facebook's communication capabilities and aggressive database as well as the need to gain support from grassroots organisations, his online campaign should be fully developed and utilised. In February 2007, Obama met with Hughes to discuss the potential of Facebook and other internet tools as instruments for his campaign. With the help of Hughes and an innovative strategic team, Obama made it possible for American citizens to "participate where they wanted, how they wanted, using the tools and friendships they wanted" (Smith, 2008c; Carr, 2008). Thus the campaign typified a new relationship model between leaders and supporters. And owing to the rise and growing popularity of Facebook, an unprecedented number of individuals, especially young supporters, were able to play an active and direct role in the campaign.

Hughes left Facebook to work on Obama's new media campaign. The strategy was inspired by SNSs such as Facebook and MySpace and it has revolutionised the use of the WWW as a political instrument. The centrepiece of the new media campaign was the official site www.myBarackObama.com where supporters had the chance to join groups, create events, sign up for updates on issues surrounding the election and establish personal fund raising pages – very similar to the applications found on Facebook. While Hughes was responsible for the fluent functioning of the official website, other staff members maintained Obama's presence on Facebook (Stelter, 2008).

Hughes wanted Obama's online network to mirror his off-line activities. The reason for this was that Obama's supporters would foster more meaningful connections by attending

neighbourhood meetings and calling on people who were part of their daily lives. The internet and specifically Facebook served as the connective tissue (Stelter, 2008).

Amongst the Facebook members, Obama acquired the most supporters with Senator Clinton trailing behind in second place. Amongst the Republicans, Senator McCain took the lead, followed by Congressman Paul (Williams & Gulati, 2008:1).

Even though various aspects of Obama's campaign, such as his caucus strategy, his charisma and his speeches, added to the value of his campaign, his utilisation of the internet as campaigning instrument was what differentiated him from the other candidates. It is clear that the success of his campaign was greatly owing to the money he raised; media he posted and shared; and his connections with millions of his supporters which all occurred online (Williams & Gulati, 2008:1)

As mentioned before, Obama realised the potential of social networking and SNSs and, with its communication abilities and aggressive database development, the potential to expand voter reach was realised (Barron, 2008:16).

In the following section the Obama campaign on Facebook will be discussed. This will be done by referring to the Facebook applications identified to have the potential to enable public discourse and possibly facilitate public opinion (from chapter four). The applications referred to are the Pages, Groups and Events. Other possible means of public discourse are also looked at whereafter an analysis will follow.

5.3.1. Pages

As discussed in chapter four, Pages are personalised and customised virtual presences for public personalities, organisations, products or areas. When *Barack Obama* is entered into the search function, 93 hits of pages dedicated to him are listed. Other related Pages include: *Students for Barack Obama* (266 089 supporters), *Women for Obama* (109 133 supporters) and *Obama Action Wire* (55 590 supporters). Among the many pages, his official Page is run by staff members of his new media campaign. They are responsible for daily posts and all necessary changes on this page (Facebook, 2009k).



Figure 3: Example of Barack Obama Facebook Pages (Facebook, 2009k)

Obama’s official page (see figure 3 – *Barack Obama*) shows that he has almost seven million supporters. These figures are increasing daily¹. The *supporters* refer to the Facebook members who added this page as an application on their own profiles. It is important to note that it is not necessary for Facebook members to support this page for them to access the information or the discussions posted. Thus anyone, who wishes to take part in the deliberation – no matter their political orientations, can join in the conversations posted. Similar to profiles of Facebook members, Obama’s page reserves an area where his personal information is made available. The information is divided into the following sections: current office; detailed information which includes information such as his relationship status, birthday, religious views, interests and favourite books; work information which includes his current position, the length of employment and his employer; educational information – university and study field; as well as contact details. This makes it possible for supporters to familiarise themselves with Obama. This feature was especially beneficial during the 2008 campaign: it personified the iconic American president and created the opportunities for Americans to get to know the person they were voting for; familiarise themselves with him and his interests; and find what they had in common with him. This aided in the relationship between leader and supporter as Obama was revealed not only as a president, but rather as an American, a Facebook friend, running for the position of president.

¹ From 5 to 15 November 2009 the supporters rose from 6 912 316 to 6 920 233 (Facebook, 2009l)

Communication and public discourse can take place on the Wall and the discussion forum of the Page. On the Obama Page Wall, information regarding current political issues is posted by the administrators. This is a direct reflection of what is currently happening in the government because the posts correlate with the real life events within the U.S. governmental structure. All the posts on the Wall provide a space where supporters can comment; state their own opinions and respond to the postings and/or comments of other supporters (Facebook, 2009k).

Obama's Page also provides a discussion forum. Here any supporter can start a new topic for discussion or take part in already established debates. In most of the instances, postings exceed the number of participants, thus it can be accepted that the communication is not merely vertical, but that a communication flow where some form of reaction is anticipated is established (Facebook, 2009k).

5.3.2. Groups

As explained in chapter four, Facebook Groups can be centred on any interest or activity. When *Barack Obama* is typed into the search function, more than 21 000 results are shown. This number increases as other searches (such as *Obama 2008 Election*) are conducted. According to Westling (2007), it is this application which is the mostly used form communication on Facebook. Owing to the wide variety of groups, people are able to unite to deliberate on an endless number of issues. Similar to the Facebook Pages, Groups also have a Wall and a discussion forum where communication and public discourse can take place.



Figure 4: Example of Barack Obama Facebook Group (Facebook, 2009k)

The largest Obama Group is the *Barack Obama (One Million Strong for Barack)* group with over one million supporters (see figure 4). Amongst the thousands of groups that solicit specifically public discourse and public opinion during the 2008 election were *Rock the Vote* with 3 555 supporters and *Obama vs. McCain 2008 Election* with 6 546 supporters (Facebook, 2009k).

The *Barack Obama (One million strong for Barack)* was the main source of public discourse regarding electoral issues during the campaign period of 2008. After the election, this page has remained one of the main communication applications on Facebook and discussions, news and information is posted on a daily basis. Owing to this group being updated on a regular basis, information from the electoral period was not available during the period of this study. Information from the electoral period was however available on the Group *Obama vs. McCain 2008 Election*. This is a much smaller group and was created as a group specifically for election purposes and not with the idea that this would stay an open forum and a source of information like the former. Deliberation occurred between the 20th of June and the 4th of November 2008. For the purpose of this study, an analysis is made by using the public discourse as posted by Facebook members from the *Obama vs. McCain 2008 Election* group (Facebook, 2009j). This will follow the section on Events. Today, various discussions are posted daily. Topics of interest include issues regarding the elections, economics, the war on Iraq, religion, health, defence spending, media and many more. Unlike the Pages application, groups are not necessarily run by a representative of the public personality, area or organisation. Any Facebook member is allowed to create and/or join maximum of 200 groups (Facebook, 2009k).

5.3.3. Events

Events can be organised by Pages, Groups or individual Facebook members. Similar to that of Pages and Groups, the Events function also has a Wall which allows for communication to take place. The Wall function is, however, more often used for conveying logistical information, still the possibility to deliberate does exist. The Events application does not have a discussion forum.

Similar to the Pages and Groups application, information regarding the 2008 election was not available at the time this study was conducted. Smith (2008c) did however state that over 2.4 million Facebook members joined Facebook's Election Day Event.



Figure 5: Example of Obama Event: Obama Rally (Facebook, 2009n)

Figure 5 is an example of an event surrounding the election. With the Event application, Facebook members are able to indicate whether they are planning to attend the event, possibly attend the event, or not attend the event. This particular event is a rally which occurred on the 5th of June 2008 in Bristow, Virginia. As mentioned, the Events application does have a Wall feature, yet it is seldom used for deliberation purposes. Therefore further investigation of the role of the Events application in public opinion is not conducted for the purpose of this study (Facebook, 2009n).

5.4. Public Opinion on Facebook



Figure 6: Example of Discussion on Facebook Group (Obama vs. McCain 2008 Election) - Topic: Why do you support who you support? (Facebook, 2009o)

In order to explore whether Facebook has the potential to facilitate public opinion, the following discussion found on the Facebook Group *Obama vs. McCain* will be analysed (see figure 6). The topic of discussion is *Why do you support who you support?* It was launched in the months preceding the election in 2008 and discussions on this particular topic took place

during the 6th of June and the 6th of August 2008. Here, members of the group were able to communicate with each other and deliberate on issues surrounding support for and information on Obama and McCain, their ideologies, viewpoints and policies. It is interesting to note that while 83 discussions were posted, a mere eleven Facebook members took part in the discussion. The eleven Facebook members who took part in the election posted information in reaction to others' comments and opinions and it can be concluded that the Facebook members deliberated in order to form and post their own opinions. A communication flow was established where members' opinion on the issues at hand was dependent on the postings of the other Facebook members. In order to substantiate this, the discussion is evaluated and analysed.

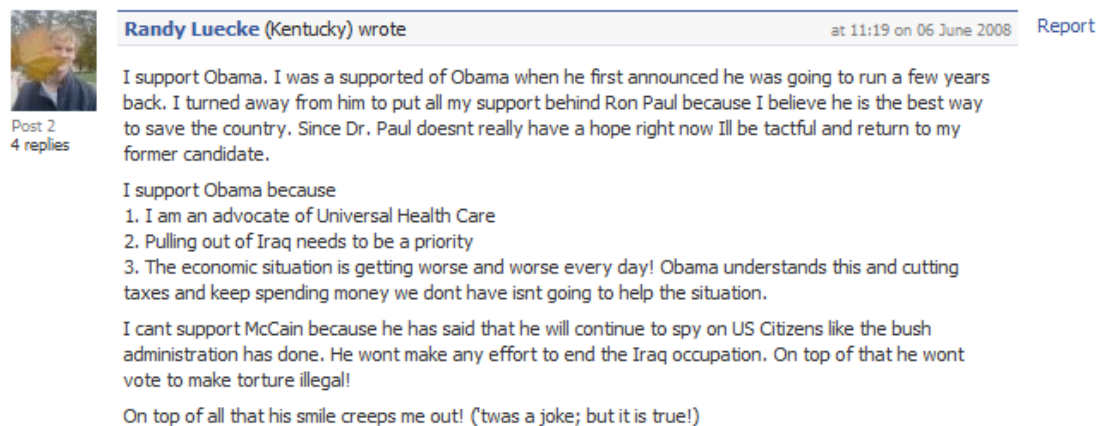


Figure 7: Why do you support who you support? Second posting: Luecke (Facebook, 2009o)

The topic *Why do you support who you support* was launched by Facebook member, Randy Luecke (see figure 7). He gave three reasons why he supported Obama in the 2008 election. He claimed that he is firstly an advocate of universal health; that he is against the U.S.' military involvement in Iraq; and that he supports Obama's opinion towards tax reduction and government expenditure. He also proclaimed why he did not support McCain (Facebook, 2009o).



Ethan Farley (Kentucky) replied to Randy's post

at 15:02 on 06 June 2008

Report

Post 3
1 reply

1. Talk to Canada about Universal Health Care. There are reasons why we do not have it. Since health care is provided for by the government, waiting lines are very long. There are many people that have actually died before they could be attended to, or their illness worsened because of the long wait.
2. WHY does pulling out of Iraq need to be a priority? Everyone says that but NO one has a legit reason. Support our troops, they're doing it for us.
3. You think McCain is not aware of the economic situation?

You have no idea what the whole "spying" situation was and is. The Bush administration wasn't "spying" on U.S. citizens like you and me. The only citizens being "spied on" were ones who were wrapped up in controversial international affairs, and were highly suspected to be linked with Al-Qaeda. This was a minute percent of the population.

That is all I am saying.

Figure 8: Why do you support who you support? Third posting: Farley's reply on Luecke's post (Facebook, 2009o)

In reaction to this, Facebook member, Ethan Farley commented on the posting of Luecke (see figure 7). He addressed the topic by referring to the three points Luecke raised. Firstly he proclaimed reasons why universal health care is not the optimal situation for America. He also referred to lessons that can be learned from Canada. He also wants to know why the U.S. involvement in Iraq should be curtailed. He claims that even though people are expressing their opinions against the military involvement in Iraq, adequate reasons for doing so is absent. On the economic situation, he claims that McCain will also address this issue because it is an inevitable point of common concern (Facebook, 2009o).

By evaluating these two postings, it is only clear that Facebook acted as the arena where public opinion was merely reflected. Facebook provided an area where Luecke and Farley could voice their opinions, yet deliberation and the facilitation of public opinion is at this point still absent. The conversation however continues, and it is upon further investigation that the facilitation of public opinion becomes a reality.



Post 4

Randy Luecke (Kentucky) replied to Ethan's post

at 16:46 on 06 June 2008

Report

again this wasn't supposed to be a debate thread, but I guess it has turned into one.

1. Right, and the same can be said for your police force in the US, the Fire Department, etc. The Canadians have a longer average life expectancy and a lower infant mortality rate! The wait for most things isn't that long. You can go see a doctor whenever you want for free, you might wait 30 minutes to an hour at most! That is just like the US. The rest of the modern world has universal healthcare as well. The US healthcare system is sad! We are ranked 37 in the world!
<http://www.photius.com/rankings/healthranks.html>

2. Don't even try to say I don't support the troops! I have the utmost respect for a person willing to put their life on the line for their country! It is a priority because we are occupying a nation, they have asked us to leave and we haven't. It is illegal! This is why people in the middle east hate us!

3. Again lowering taxes and continuing to spend the same amount of money isn't going to fix anything! McCain has admitted he is clueless when it comes to economics.

Spying: Spying violated my 4th amendment rights the whole idea that they don't even have to go to a court is absurd! The fact remains that if they want to spy on me they can, and as of right now there is nothing I can do about it. The founding fathers believed in certain human rights. The first 10 amendments to the constitution outline these rights!

Please feel free to create new topics to debate each of these issues, I don't really want to debate in this one though.

Figure 9: Why do you support who you support? Fourth posting: Luecke's reply on Farley's post (Facebook, 2009o)

As seen in figure 8, Luecke replied to Farley's post. Here he takes what Farley said into consideration and replies in the form of another posting on the discussion. He continues to deliberate his view points, but in contrast to his earlier posting, he now needs to defend his own point of view and try to persuade the other Facebook member(s) to understand and possibly accept his point of view (Facebook, 2009o).

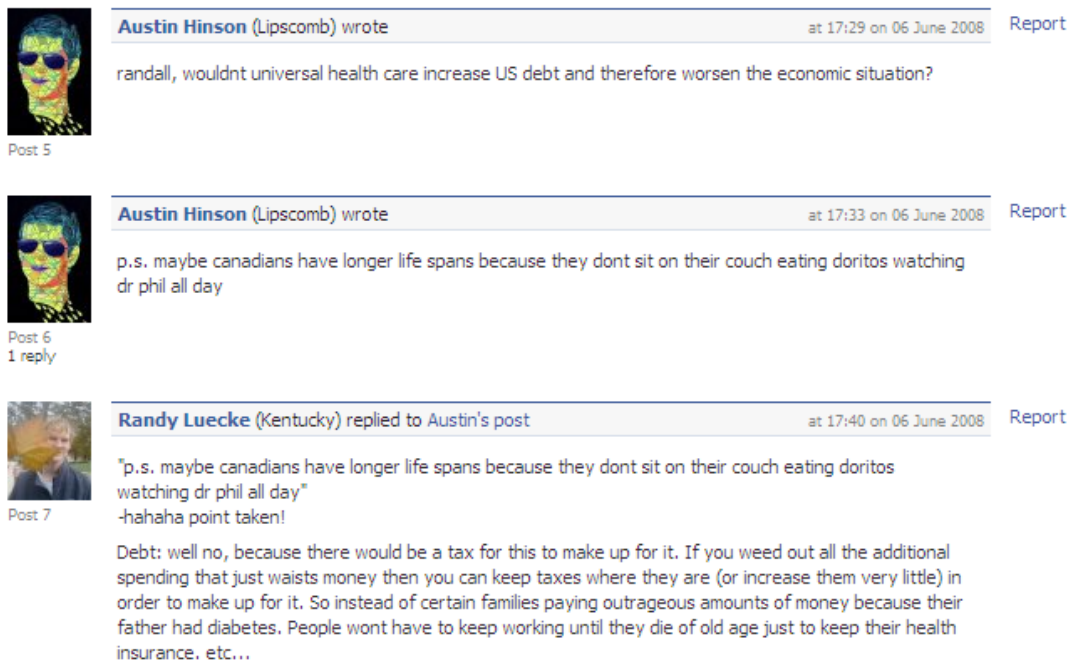


Figure 10: Why do you support who you support? Fifth, sixth & seventh postings: Hinson and Luecke (Facebook, 2009o)

In the fifth posting (see figure 9) Hinson joins the deliberation and raises the point that universal health care could possibly lead to an increase of U.S. debt, which could lead to a further worsening of the current economic situation. Luecke replies in the seventh posting, explaining why this would not be the situation. Deliberation continues for the sum total of the 83 postings. Throughout the postings various issues and the candidates' viewpoints and approaches to them materialised. These issues include racism, oil prices as well as the issue of global warming. Even though there are irrelevant postings and not all postings can be considered as contributing factors to the public deliberation, various viewpoints are discussed, exchanged and defended. These viewpoints reflect the opinions and preferences of a significant part of the public.

5.5. Similarities between Traditional Instruments for Political Communication and Facebook

Table 4: Similarities between Offline, Online and Facebook Public Discourse Activities

Offline Activities	Online Activities	Facebook Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact government official in person - by phone or by letter 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send an email to government official 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • send a message via Facebook Messaging service • Start new discussion on Page • React to discussions on Page/Group/Event
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign a paper petition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign a petition online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sign a petition via the Cause (petition) application
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send a letter to the editor through U.S. postal service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Email letter to the editor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contact editor via Facebook (or by using contact information made available on Facebook)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make a political contribution in person - by phone or through mail 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make political contribution online 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • make political contribution by following link place on Facebook
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate with civic/political group - by face-face meetings, print letter or newsletter, or telephone 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate with civic/political group by messaging - using group's website • sending the group and email • communicating via SNS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with Facebook members as part of a group or supporters of government official

Except for the possibility for public opinion to materialise as mentioned in the previous section, Facebook also bears similarities to offline as well as other online political activities where public opinion is portrayed and/or facilitated. This notion is explained in table 4. With an offline activity, people can contact a government official via telephone or letter. This has long been the accepted manner in communicating with government officials. With the advent of the internet, the possibility to contact government officials via e-mails realised. Even though it not replace the traditional method of communication, it created other channels of communication between the private citizens and the government. Facebook also portrays the notion, as discussed in chapter four, that it has various communication features. If government officials have a Facebook page, as is the case with all the U.S. candidates running for congressional and presidential elections, messages can be remitted via the Wall and discussion function. Because the pages are run by representatives of the government and because these pages want to imitate the offline activities, it is likely that the message will reach the relevant person.

The second offline activity is the signing of a petition in order to represent the collective voice of individuals in order to have a collective impact. This has been imitated online where online petitions have been distributed especially via email. Facebook has also reproduced the online petition through its application namely *Causes*. When an event is organised, information regarding the type of event is requested. The options that the Facebook member can choose from are *rally*, *petition*, *fundraiser* or *protest*. A space is reserved for Facebook members to indicate whether they support or reject the petition.

The third offline activity refers to contacting the letter of the editor. This activity has realised online where people are able to send a letter to the editor via email. This activity has not yet realised on Facebook. Some editors (or their magazines, newspapers) do have presences on Facebook, yet this feature has not yet been developed for this reason. Contact details are often available on their pages.

The fourth activity refers to financial contributions made to candidates and/or parties. For years this only occurred though contributions made by telephone or though the post. Contribution is however made online through the use of electronic banking. Facebook does not have an application developed specifically for this cause, yet it has various links on its Pages which navigate Facebook members who want to make an online contribution.

The final offline activity is the communication with a civic group and/ or other individuals regarding relevant and issues of common concern. This has materialised online and is seen especially in SNSs. It is the activity that was depicted by the previous section.

5.6. Analysis

5.6.1. Overview of the 2008 Presidential Election and the Role Facebook played in Obama's Campaign

Obama and McCain developed customisation and socialisation tools to encourage networking in online and offline activities. McCain did, however, lag behind Obama and even after improvements in his online campaign; Obama had more online support than McCain. As mentioned, his support was especially explicit on Facebook, MySpace and YouTube. Even though McCain was represented on different SNSs – Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Flickr

and LinkedIn –his official website did not allow for his supporters to access SNSs via a hyperlink. This limited social networking on the internet amongst his supporters (Barron, 2008:15). By the end of the election, the country witnessed a surge in political participation. People across the country participated with great political enthusiasm. Yet, even though this increase was witnessed across Democrats, Republicans and Independents, democratic voters mobilised at a stronger pace than their counterparts (Castells, 2009:364).

As shown, there are clear similarities between offline, online and Facebook activities that can be utilised for public discourse and public opinion. Obama did however utilise Facebook in such a manner that it contributed to his campaign on various levels. Thus the campaign materialised as an online movement that begot offline behaviour. This trend was particularly noticed amongst young American adults who have been known as the group who was previously politically unengaged. A higher voter turnout amongst the youth was observed – this group might just as well have supplied the margin for Obama’s victory. Moreover he gained financial support by bringing donation tools to areas where his supporters already hung out. During the election period, a link was available next to all profiles which navigated the member straight to a donation site (Barron, 2008:16-17).

A significant advantage that Facebook provides is that a direct line of communication is created between the politician and supporters as well as between the different supporters. This communication flow is upheld on the candidates’ Facebook Pages, Groups as well as Events (on Walls or discussion forums) where supporters are able to post comments, partake in conversations and deliberate on issues. The information exchanged between the administrator and supporters or between the supporters themselves transpires in the form approvals, requests, queries and criticism. This is shown in the deliberation discussed in this chapter where Luecke, Farley and Hinson deliberated on issues, raised their viewpoints and defended their opinions (Westling, 2007:8).

5.6.2. Obstacles

Firstly, it is important to remember that Facebook was not created as political tool. Even though it has been utilised by the Obama campaign, it is first and foremost a social networking tool. Another point of concern is that even though a candidate receives a Page,

does not mean that he is directly involved in the virtual community. Obama, for example, relies on his administrator(s) to provide the correct information and perform as representative of Obama and the U.S. government. Thus a third party is involved in the communication process and the risk of misinterpretation and wrong transmittance is run.

After the election period, candidates' Pages remain on Facebook and the administrators retain the ability to edit the pages and groups. Most public officials do not however uphold contact with their constituents through Facebook. After election results are obtained, candidates do not deem it necessary to constantly update their pages. Most of the candidates also prefer to use their personal WebPages to communicate with their supporters (Westling, 2007: 7).

5.7. Conclusion

According to Rollyson (2008) the election and campaign was only the beginning of utilising media such as the internet, and specifically Facebook. Owing to Facebook's growth in popularity, the potential of Facebook as arena for public discourse is realised. Within the internet various sources of political information is available. SNSs, and specifically Facebook, however offer a package deal. It is a provider of information; offers an area for public discourse; and act as a direct link between leader and supporter as well as between supporters. Even though other SNSs have been utilised for political purposes, it does not seem that any of these have the potential that Facebook has.

Overall, campaigns still focus on traditional media. Yet third party campaigns are more likely to make use of and take advantage of Facebook. Facebook is still mostly used as additional means of communication than a forum where political debate can take place. The potential do however exist – and this was realised by Obama. In 2009, news issues regarding Obama, policy issues and governmental concerned are updated daily. Supporters are actively posting information on the Obama Facebook Pages and so the Pages are continuously used as communication tools to provide supporters with information, trigger reaction and possibly facilitate public opinion (Barron, 2008:18). Furthermore, Facebook can be utilised to keep a dynamic communication flow between leaders and supporters as well as between the different supporters. Candidates can send, via the administrators, information regarding

legislation and policy issues. In this way, supporters will be kept up to date with important decisions and changes made in government.

If politicians are able to uphold a communication flow with their supporters during non-election times, the politicians themselves will be liberalised from highlighting their accomplishments, informing their supporters and soliciting support while having to adhere to finance regulations and the expenditure of government resources for the duration of their campaigns (Westling, 2007:8). As a result, when Obama decided to incorporate Facebook into his aggressive campaign, he created the opportunity for greater communication. He also did not merely build a political base, but rather a database consisting of millions of supporters' names who can be engaged and contacted immediately (Carr, 2008).

John F Kennedy was the first president to understand and realise the potential of television in election campaigns. Howard Dean saw the potential of the internet to raise money for his campaign. Obama understood that the internet can be utilised to lower the cost of branding, create a sense of connection and engagement, and dispense with the command and control method of governing to allow people to self organise to do the work. With the utilisation of Facebook, members traded their personal information with a Facebook alert at almost no cost. On the day of the election 5.4 million Facebook members shared that they voted during the 2008 elections with their Facebook friends; 2.4 million joined Facebook's Election Day event; and 1.5 million Facebook members mentioned Obama, McCain, Palin, Biden or Election on their Facebook profile Wall (Smith, 2008b). This was the Facebook election.

Chapter 6: Analysis – Facebook as Public Sphere and Facilitator of Public Opinion

6.1. Introduction

Thus far, the information gathered in his study was to explore the notion of Facebook as a public sphere and potential facilitator of public opinion. In the following chapter, information regarding the public sphere, Facebook and the 2008 Obama Campaign will be analysed in order to investigate the notion that Facebook is a facilitator of public opinion. Facebook's potential to function as facilitator of public opinion will be analysed according to the criteria as discussed in chapter two.

6.2. Facebook and Habermas' Institutional Criteria for the Emergence of a Public Sphere

Habermas (1989:25-26) defined the public sphere in empirical and normative terms. He saw the public sphere as a distinct, institutionalised system of verbal and written interaction. Furthermore he saw it as a forum in which people with no official power came together to deliberate and form public opinion. Habermas (1989:36-37) realised three institutional criteria as the preconditions for a public sphere to exist. These are *disregard of status*, *issues of common concern* and *inclusivity*.

He argued that when status and the influence of rank were disregarded, a better argument will be upheld against the hierarchy imposed by society. All those with profiles on the Facebook are members, yet Facebook allows for people to provide their personal information and thus his/her virtual identity is composed according to his/her own identity. The status of a Facebook member is, however, only taken into account when those taking part in the deliberation access the Facebook member's profile. This is not always possible owing to the fact that members set their profile as private which means that only those who are friends with the Facebook member are able to access his/her personal information. The profiles of Luecke, Farley and Hinson (from the discussion *Why do you support who you support* as used in the case study in chapter five) are all set as private. Therefore their statuses do not act as intervening factors.

Status can however play a role when the relationship between the administrator of the Page, Group or Event and the Facebook member(s) is taken into account. Often, as seen on the official Page of Obama, the administrator is appointed by those who he/she represents. The administrator is held in a superior position because he/she is a representative of the public figure on Facebook and has the authority to post information, initiate conversations and disallow anyone who posts unwanted information. The administrator of Obama's Page was thus given the responsibility to act as a communicative link between Facebook members and Obama; to make necessary and important information available; to instigate conversation; and to see to it that Obama's presence is maintained in a professional manner.

It can thus be argued that Facebook adheres to the criterion of *disregard of status* to the extent that public discourse takes place on areas recognised (Walls and discussion forums) between Facebook members who do not access the personal information of the other Facebook members taking part in the conversation. This criterion is, however, contested when the status of the administrator is taken into account.

The second precondition states that issues at hand should be of *common concern*. It can be argued that issues deliberated on Facebook are of common concern. Access and participation of discussion is free and only those who share the concern with others will share in the conversation. This is reflected in the discussion (as analysed in chapter five) between Luecke, Farley and Hinson where deliberated on an issue of common concern.

The third precondition is that of *inclusivity*. The problem with the bourgeois public sphere was that some groups were always excluded. Exclusion is visible, not necessarily with Facebook, but rather with the internet owing to the digital divide. In many societies poor and disadvantaged groups are excluded from using the internet. These societies do not have the resources, infrastructure and often not the skills necessary to access the internet. As stated before, Facebook is also prohibited in some non-western countries (Debatim, 2008: 65; Castells, 2009:62). China is an example of this (Web2Asia., 2009). This acts as a major obstacle because people from these countries cannot access the SNSs and are therefore automatically excluded from any discussions taking place on Facebook. This factor is, however, not that relevant for the purpose of the study owing to the sample of the study only being Facebook members from the U.S. Yet, as mentioned, the exclusion owing to socio-

economic status is relevant to the internet and not specifically Facebook. Even though socio-economic status acts as an intervening factor, this is not an obstacle for Facebook membership.

It can also be argued that exclusion, in terms of political identity, took place specifically with the presidential campaigns on Facebook. Even though Obama had an aggressive campaign on Facebook, other candidates lagged behind. Thus it can be argued that an equal arena was not created for those who did not support Obama. It is important to note, however, that participation in the discussions was not limited to those who supported Obama and that any Facebook member could join in the discussions as seen on the Page, Group and Events Wall and discussion forums.

6.3. Facebook and the Ideological Contestation of the Bourgeois Public Sphere

The classical liberal approach refers to the public sphere as the space between the government and the society where the private individual has the ability to exercise formal and informal control over governmental decisions. The media is regarded as the central aspect to process as it distributes necessary information to individuals for them to make informed choices. The media provides an independent area for debate and thus facilitates the formation of public opinion. It also enables private individuals to shape the conduct of the government through formal and informal control. The media thus plays the role of a policing mechanism in society and are often referred to as the fourth estate of the realm (Curran, 1991:29).

Taken the ideas of this ideology into account, Facebook has the potential to arise as a public sphere. Facebook, as the medium, provides an independent area for debate, which is found on the Walls and discussion forums of Facebook Pages, Groups and Events. Private citizens, as Facebook members, thus unite to deliberate on issues which may ultimately lead to the formation of public opinion. Although it does not necessarily enable the members to shape the conduct of government, it has, however, shown the possibility to mobilise members who share the same interests and concerns. The notion that Facebook could play an indirect role in the decision-making process of the government is, however, possible because arenas of

debate are open to discussion and criticism, and owing to the low entrance barriers and lack of gatekeepers.

Yet, similar to the liberal approach of the public sphere, Facebook fails to provide a platform of representation to all private individuals and thus the way in which the media can revitalise the structures of a liberal democracy are ignored. This is similar to the criterion of inclusivity.

The radical democratic approach recognises the media as the battleground between competing forces. In the light of the 2008 election, Facebook, as the media was used as the battleground between the different candidates. Facebook was however not embraced by the different candidates to the same extent. This point was also discussed with reference to the institutional criterion of inclusivity. Obama utilised SNSs (especially Facebook) better than Clinton, McCain or Paul. Even though all running candidates received a pro forma personalised Page on Facebook, it was Obama who appointed Hughes to develop his campaign into a “virtual mechanism for scaling and supporting community action” (Stanton, 2009). Thus, for Facebook to be realised as a public sphere, all parties involved should embrace it equally for a level playing field to be established. Furthermore, this ideology recognises the media as a complex articulation of vertical, horizontal and diagonal channels of communication which occurs between individuals, groups and organisation. Thus, within the radical democratic approach, Facebook can be seen as a public sphere (Curran, 1991: 32-35; Castells, 2009:68-70).

The communist and Marxist view of a public sphere differs to the prior two ideologies. These groups see the bourgeois public sphere as a chimera and recognise this to be another initiative by the capitalists to dominate subordinate groups. They recognise the media as an instrument of the state that could be used for the purpose of domination and manipulation rather than providing an arena for healthy debate. Here, as well, the issue of inclusivity comes to mind again. Owing to the digital divide and the limits socio-economic status places on people, all are not able to have access to Facebook. Thus, until all people – despite their historical backgrounds and/or socio-economic statuses – have access to Facebook, Facebook fails to be seen as an inclusive public sphere. Facebook does, however, have an advantage over traditional media forms: unlike various television networks and printing press, Facebook is not state-owned and therefore is not accountable to the state. The shares of Facebook are

privately owned and thus the potential for the state to use Facebook as a tool of manipulation is not possible.

6.4. Facebook and the Assumptions for the Existence of a Public Sphere in Political Democracy

The following section is done in reference to the four assumptions and relevant criticism as discussed in chapter two. The first assumption states that the possibility exists for private citizens, engaged in deliberation, to bracket status disparities and to deliberate with the supposition that all involved are equals. This is in relation to the institutional criteria of disregard of status as well as that of inclusivity. As already discussed, it has not been realised that a public sphere is open and accessible to all. Whereas discrimination took place against women and those of the lower socio-economic strata of the bourgeois society, the accessibility and capacity for private citizens to obtain and utilise Facebook act as the obstacles here.

The second assumption states that a single and comprehensive public sphere is preferable to multiple publics. Where Habermas stressed the singular identity of the public sphere, the inevitable stratified characteristics of societies cannot be ignored. Fraser (1190:66) explained that inequalities would further be exacerbated when there was only a singular public sphere. This would mean that subordinate groups would have no areas for deliberation. Facebook overcomes this by not having limits to its membership and people unite to deliberate on issues in spite of their status in society.

The third assumption states that discourse in public spheres should be restricted to deliberation over issues of common concern. As discussed earlier, owing to free access and participation in deliberation on Facebook, only those who share the concern with the others form the relevant Page, Group or Event will partake in the conversations.

The fourth assumption refers to a sufficient public sphere within a political democracy that requires a definite separation between civil society and the state. As discussed in chapter two, the civil society does not only refer to private citizens. The nexus of secondary non-governmental associations are also included in the concept. Thus the public sphere can be

seen as an informally mobilised body of discursive opinion, constituted by non-governmental organisations and private citizens that often oppose the state. Facebook offers the opportunity for private citizens as well as organisations to have presences on the SNS. It also allows for weak and strong publics to emerge. Weak publics – as those publics who merely produce public opinion – are seen on Facebook. An example is the publics which forms via the Groups applications. There is no certainty that the deliberation on the Walls and discussion forums of Groups and Events have a way to reach those responsible for the decision-making process within the governmental structure. Pages, on the other hand, are run by administrators as representatives of the government official or party. These people were specifically employed to run the Pages; convey the correct information; keep the site updated with the latest information; administrate discussion and often introduce new topics of discussion. Thus, owing to the administrator being a representative of the relevant government official, a direct link between the Facebook Page and the governmental structures is established. The discussions on Facebook have the ability to reach those responsible for the decision-making process. This type of public is seen as a strong public where the public opinion facilitated are strengthened because the body that represents it has the ability to interpret the public opinion in the process of decision-making (Fraser. 1990:74-77).

6.5. The Three Dimensional Conceptualisation of the Public Sphere

Dahlgren (2005a:148-150) explained the public sphere as consisting of three dimensions: structural, representative and interaction. Firstly, he conceptualises the public sphere in the structural dimension. This dimension refers to the institutional features of the public sphere which includes the media organisations, their political economy, financial issues, regulation, ownership, control as well as the legal frameworks. Classical democratic issues are very relevant here – freedom of speech, access to information and the dynamic of inclusion and exclusion. The structural dimension also refers to the political institutions which are the environment where the media act as regulator of information flow and forms of expression. Strong democratic tendencies are needed in a society for it to have healthy institutional structures for a public sphere. The internet was also discussed in terms of the structural dimension where the internet, cyberspace and WWW are presented in terms of social,

economical, cultural, technological, legal and web-based features. Facebook, as part of the complexity of the internet can also be seen in these terms (Dahlgren, 2005a:149-150).

The second dimension is the dimension of representation. This refers to the production of media as well as media's scope of influence. An important aspect here is the criteria about media production for political communication which includes, amongst others, accuracy, fairness, completeness, pluralism of views, agenda setting and ideological tendencies. As mentioned, with the omnipresent and increasingly penetrating character of the internet, representation is enhanced. Also, on Facebook, individuals and organisations are represented as information receivers as well as information producers (Dahlgren, 2005a:149-150).

The third dimension, that of interaction, evokes the concept of the public where publics are seen as groups other than mere media audiences, but rather as discursive interactional individuals who contribute in a collective process of argumentation. The importance of public opinion is realised especially in this dimension. Interaction consists of two aspects. The first is citizens' encounters with the media. This is seen as communicative processes of sense-making, interpretation and utilisation of media production. The second aspect of interaction is the interaction between citizens themselves where these encounters varies from two person conversations to large gatherings. Interaction specifically has its sites, its discursive practices and other transcended cultural aspects. This is evident in Facebook where interaction occurs as a communicative process on the Pages, Groups and Events as recognised in the earlier chapters. Interaction occurs between small as well as large groups (Dahlgren, 2005a: 149).

6.5. Conclusion

In this chapter the notion of Facebook as facilitator of public opinion has been explored by analysing it in terms of Habermas' institutional criteria; the ideological contestation between the liberal, radical democratic, communist and Marxist approaches; the four assumptions necessary for the existence of the public sphere; as well as the three dimensional conceptualisation of the public sphere. According to these criteria, the notion of Facebook as a facilitator of public opinion is supported. The public discourse on Facebook firstly occurs amongst issues of common concern where status and other disparities are mostly bridged. The digital divide acts as an intervening factor for access to, and the use of, the internet.

Facebook membership is, however, open to all above the age of thirteen, furthermore, Facebook adheres – at least to some extent – to the liberal, radical democratic as well as the communist and Marxist approaches of the public sphere where, once again, the digital divide is the largest obstacle that needs to be overcome for Facebook to act as facilitator of public opinion. Furthermore the idea of Facebook as a political tool used for manipulation is not viable because the SNS is privately owned. Therefore, governments and other authoritative role players do not have such great influence over it (when compared to other state owned media).

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1. Conclusion

This study was pursued in the attempt to discover whether Facebook, as a SNS, can be seen as a possible forum where public discourse takes place and public opinion, as function of the public discourse, is facilitated.

In chapter two, a comprehensive conceptualisation of the public sphere, as developed by Habermas was given. The bourgeois public sphere emerged during the late 17th and 18th centuries as the conceptual space between the public, with its enclosed institutions and organisations, and the circle of the private life where private citizens united to deliberate issues of common concern that were free from the influence of the state's governmental structures. Deliberation was undertaken by the private citizens of the bourgeois society who were willing to let argumentation, and not status and authority, guide the debate en decision-making process. Private citizens initially met to deliberate issues regarding literature, philosophy and art in places such as coffee houses and salons across Germany, Britain and France. These places became areas of debate and established the infrastructure for the public sphere where a shift away from literature, philosophy and art paved the way for discussion regarding politics and economics.

The possibility for a modern public sphere has also been realised. In the contemporary context, the modern public sphere and public discourse cannot be separated from the mass media. Public opinion has been facilitated by various forms of media – including newspapers, magazines, television talk programs and, most recently the internet and the internet has been heralded a new public sphere which opened new channels for political communication and public discourse.

In chapter three the internet and SNS were discussed. The notion of the internet as a public sphere was explained. A clear distinction was made between the cyberspace, internet and the WWW. The internet emerged as a communication medium between scientists and computer experts. In the 1990s, with the advent of the WWW, the internet developed into a commercial mass communication medium.

As already mentioned, new areas of informal life emerged following the demise of the public sphere. The internet was one of these new areas. It penetrated all realms of societal life and a clear shift in the role of the information recipient was witnessed: where private citizens were previously mere recipients of information, they now emerged as active participants in the communication process.

The revitalisation of the internet as a new public sphere was practically and empirically visible. The internet created new channels of information and opened new opportunities for communication and democratic participation. One of these new channels was SNSs. Various SNSs emerged during 1997 to 2003. In 2004 Facebook made its appearance. By 2006 all internet users over the age of thirteen could join Facebook and it soon emerged as the fastest growing SNS in the world.

Chapter four provided a synopsis of Facebook. The first section was an overview of the American community and SNSs and specifically Facebook. Amongst the American adult internet users 35% have profiles on a SNS and 75% of those between the ages of 18 and 24 have profiles on SNSs. It is this age demographic that constitutes the largest proportion of Facebook members at 52%. Furthermore Facebook has been recognised as the largest and fastest growing SNS available on the internet. Facebook was first utilised as a political tool during the 2006 Congressional election. In 2006 all candidates for the Congressional elections received a general profile which he/she could utilise. With the presidential elections of 2008, all candidates received a Facebook Page to establish a presence on this SNS and to interact with the million of Facebook members in an attempt to widen their reach. The Pages allowed for candidates to enhance their campaigns by posting various kinds of campaign materials which included public announcements, links to other pages, photos and all relevant information. It also allowed for discussion to take place between Facebook members and between the administrators of the Facebook Page and Facebook members. Thus, Facebook materialised as an organised structure where communication takes place and where members can be organised not only for communicative purposes, but also mobilised for possible political participation. Obama emerged as the first presidential candidate to run an internet campaign. As part of his campaign, he utilised Facebook to expand voter outreach, reach the politically unengaged demographic and to gain grassroots support.

To further investigate whether Facebook be regarded as public sphere and facilitator of public opinion, a case study of the Obama campaign, as witnessed on Facebook, was conducted. This constituted chapter five of the study. In an attempt to support the notion of Facebook as facilitator of public opinion, the case study focussed on a specific debate conducted in the months preceding the 200 election on the Group called *Obama vs. McCain Election 2008*. The topic of discussion was *Why do you support who you support*. It became apparent that deliberation occurred between various Facebook members. A total of 83 messages were posted, yet only eleven Facebook members contributed to these postings. Even though there were irrelevant postings and not all postings can be considered as contributing factors to the public deliberation, various viewpoints are discussed, exchanged and defended. These viewpoints represent the collective preferences of a significant part of the public. Facebook members exerted their opinion on the issues at hand and Facebook facilitated the conditions necessary for public opinion to be transmitted.

As part of the case study, a comparison between offline, online and Facebook activities regarding public opinion was also conducted. Table 1 was used as the template and an additional column was added where the offline, online and now also activities on Facebook was compared to each other. The fact activities such as contacting a government official, signing a petition and communicating with civic/political groups can occur as a offline, online and Facebook activities, further supports the notion of Facebook as a facilitator of public opinion.

Obama realised the potential of SNSs such as Facebook. He understood that the internet can be utilised to lower the cost of branding, create a sense of connection and engagement, and dispense with the command and control method of governing to allow people to self organise to do the work. With the utilisation of Facebook, members traded their personal information with an alert at almost no cost. On the day of the election 5.4 million Facebook members shared that they voted during the 2008 elections with their Facebook friends; 2.4 million joined Facebook's Election Day event; and 1.5 million Facebook members mentioned Obama, McCain, Palin, Biden or Election on their Facebook profile Wall (Smith, 2008b).

In chapter six, the notion of Facebook as a facilitator of public opinion was analysed in terms of the criteria as discussed in chapter two. The fact that Facebook adheres to most of the

criteria for a public sphere to exist, supports the notion that Facebook is a facilitator of public opinion.

In the following section, the two hypotheses, as identified in chapter one, will be recalled and analysed. The first hypothesis stated that SNSs, like Facebook, can be seen as a forum for public discourse or a public sphere as defined by Habermas and others. This hypothesis was supported by applying the criteria as explained in chapter two. After analysing Facebook in terms of these criteria, it is evident that Facebook adheres to most of the criteria. It firstly adheres to the criterion of disregard of status. Status is disregarded to the extent that public discourse takes place on the arenas recognised in this study (the Walls and discussion forums of Pages, Groups and Events) between Facebook members taking part in deliberation. The criterion is, however, contested when the status of the administrator is taken into account. Furthermore, owing to the amount of discussions found on Facebook and the free access and participation of these discussions, Facebook as public sphere is further supported. Facebook also adheres to inclusivity. Even though the internet acts as intervening factor for access to Facebook, this factor does not directly influence the membership to Facebook or the access to participation on online deliberations. It is important to remember that those who do not have access to the internet are immediately excluded.

Facebook also adheres to the ideological viewpoints. Facebook, as the media, provide an independent arena where deliberation can take place. Furthermore, the public sphere is also recognised as a battle ground between competing forces. This especially became evident during the presidential campaign where Facebook was utilised as political tool. Yet, here again the issue of the digital divide is relevant.

Another issue that needs to be addressed is the fact that the competing forces (for the purpose of this study, the candidates) do not necessarily fight their election battle on the same ground. As discussed, Obama embraced Facebook as a political tool. Even though McCain, Clinton, Paul and all the other candidates had Pages, Groups and Events on Facebook, they all lagged behind Obama's aggressive new media campaign. Thus, for Facebook to grow as facilitator of public opinion, all candidates will have to embrace new media such as SNSs and Facebook for all to compete on the same level. Facebook adheres to the criteria of a public sphere; therefore the first hypothesis is supported.

Hypothesis two stated that Facebook facilitates public opinion as a function of public discourse. The case study played a relevant role in order to support the notion of Facebook as facilitator of public opinion. This hypothesis is supported by the case study where it became evident that Facebook members united to deliberate on an issue of common concern where they debated, exchanged information, defended their viewpoints and tried to persuade others to support their own ideas. Public opinion as a function of public discourse was produced and thus the notion of Facebook as facilitator of public opinion is supported.

7.2. Recommendations

The notion of Facebook as a facilitator of public opinion has been supported by this study. It is however important to note that all politicians involved should embrace this SNS in order to allow for public discourse to take place and for public opinion to be facilitated. If this is achieved, SNSs such as Facebook may play an increasing role in the dynamism of public opinion and the decision-making process of the deliberative democracy. It is also important for politicians to maintain their presence on Facebook, even during the aftermath of the elections. This can aid in a healthy communication flow between the candidates and their supporters.

The SNSs, especially Facebook, also emerged as a means of communication with the previously politically disengaged age demographic. The potential for including new participants in the political process has thus been recognised. By utilising Facebook, and the other SNSs, the possibility for an extended voter reach as well as stronger communication between the candidates and their supporters can become a reality. This will aid in the strengthening of the public sphere in a deliberative democracy.

The development of a new public sphere should be seen as an opportunity to increase engagement in the political sphere – especially with regards to the previously politically disengaged age group (18-24). It should be seen as an opportunity to increase public input and the development of public opinion across various borders. Therefore, it is very important that future research should be done in this direction – especially with regards to the dynamic relationship between SNSs (such as Facebook) and public opinion.

It is important to note that the American example can also be applied to other countries. This has been seen in the 2009 South African elections where political parties such as the Democratic Alliance (DA) developed Pages, Groups and Events for their parties and used Facebook as a means of communication, a means of mobilisation as well as a means to establish a communication flow between leaders and supporters and between the different supporters.

In the modern day and age, new campaigning strategies and strategies to facilitate public opinion are going to emerge. During the 2008 presidential elections, Obama saw the gap and set a trend that might just become the norm in the future. Therefore it is necessary to embrace this new public sphere and its components in order to expand the research of the development of the vibrant field of public opinion.

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