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## NEW TOOLS FOR SOCIAL DIALOGUE ON THE INTERNET. OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS FOR NEW SOCIAL SPHERE

**Abstract:** New media have always changed the face of the public sphere. Social domain has entered the era of interactive tools that have revolutionized the existing functions of the Internet. This article is an analysis of new social and communication situations on the Internet that modify already existing communication processes. It aims to present new forms of public sphere and their possible communication advantages and disadvantages. The main focus of the analysis are social media because they are an important novelty in the new networking tools. Furthermore, it seems that social media can contribute to the increasing of the level of democracy and building civil society in countries where citizens are active and are regular users of such media. It does not exclude, however, many situations in which these new tools distort the public sphere and make manipulation more easy than ever before. First part of my observations is based on twentieth century philosophical conceptions of public sphere. Second, characterizes main tools of the new social dialogue and the consequences of its use. Theses, supported by recent examples, point to opportunities and threats of this new phenomenon.

**Keywords:** social sphere, social media, political marketing, manipulation, social dialogue

Nowadays, more and more elements of civic life move to the Internet. Cyberspace is characterized by sophisticated technology commonly referred to as the Web 2.0., which enables its users a wider participation in the virtual world and increases the importance of the content generated by them. Day by day, the Web becomes a more widespread and more interactive tool which redefines the relation between the user and the medium, revolutionizes interpersonal contacts and increases the exchange of information. We are now dealing with mechanisms and applications which enable us to engage in dialogue, exchange opinion, political views or political advertisements – all this based on mutual relation with others. This fundamentally changes the nature of communication, since, until now, only one-sided messages were possible. The Internet creates a space for collective communication and debate. The debate may take different forms: ephemeral exchange of opinions, heated debates, controlled and artificial discussions or casual comments on

a given subject. Aside from the possibility to communicate, cyberspace also affects other spheres of human life. The Internet becomes the catalyst for transnational social movements, a forum for expressing opposition or disapproval, a place to incite to civil disobedience or to have an informal discussion on social problems. The new, virtual world has become the extension of public sphere to the point that it is sometimes the only place where real public debate and exchange of opinions takes place.

### **1. The XX's century concept of social sphere**

The concept of social sphere is inherently included in contemporary theories and definitions of democracy. A short introduction into the origins of 20<sup>th</sup> century theories of the phenomenon will help us to understand it better. In modern democratic society public sphere is the place for political discourse and exchange of opinions. After the World War II the issue of social dialogue was originally taken up in Western Europe by Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper and in subsequent years by Jurgen Habermas and Ralf Dahrendorf. The philosophy of the two former was influenced by their shocking experiences connected with totalitarian regimes. The evolution of this concept after the Second World War is deeply rooted in the ideas of equality, respect for individual rights and promotion of tolerance. The fearful effects of entrusting small groups or individuals with all power led these thinkers to natural conclusions that authority should be as much dispersed as possible. Public sphere becomes the main tool of control over the authorities and the guarantor of individual freedom. Similar conclusions are reached by twenty years younger Jurgen Habermas and Ralf Dahrendorf, for whom public sphere became the remedy for the experience of war, even though it was not their personal experience. Unique and thorough analysis of public sphere is common for all four authors whose analysis, on the one hand, starts a new trend in social thought, and on the other hand, takes a great deal from the achievements of the past, especially ancient Greece. The new hybrid of ideas puts people on a pedestal, and at the same time places them in a completely new social-political environment. This combination and numerous ideas on how to put it into practice are truly extraordinary.

These concepts are very inspiring even today. They became increasingly popular with the development of the idea of participatory democracy in the West which is based on social dialogue and originated as an answer to many problems and obstacles connected with the functioning of the par-

liamentary democracy. They were also present on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, where the opposition first comprised the sphere in the form of underground movement and then emerged to the surface. Manuel Castells writes that from the standpoint of social theory, *space is the material support for contemporary social practices*.<sup>1</sup>

In my article I aim to prove that many social practices, including social dialogue, changed diametrically as a result of the development of the Internet. It is well-justified to claim that the Internet, at its current stage of development has become a vital element of nowadays social sphere. Hannah Arendt, when defining public sphere, says that everything that appears publicly may be seen or heard by everybody and has the widest possible range of recipients. In this sense, the new media: radio, press, television, all essentially fulfil this condition.<sup>2</sup> The second important element of public sphere is the sense of community. It is a sense which is common to us all; however it differs, depending on our personal position in the community.<sup>3</sup> Public sphere is thus a place of activity which goes beyond personal interests of individuals. In this context, the Internet can be treated as a global public arena. Only this medium makes it possible to create and disseminate information, generate virtual social situations and produce interaction and bonds with others. Another argument for the recognition of the Internet as a segment of public sphere may be the one provided by Habermas which states that public sphere is the area of human social activity where public opinion is formed. It is an area where people can freely discuss important social issues and through this discussion influence the actions of politicians.

It may monitor the authorities and create space where individuals gather to discuss problems which are important to the public.

## **2. Development of Internet**

The evolution of social space on the Internet progressed gradually. At first, it assumed only the form of posting comments to press articles and participating in newsgroups, however, with the development of new techno-

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<sup>1</sup> Castells Manuel. *Spoleczeństwo sieci (The Rise of the Network Society)*. Warszawa 2008: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN. p. 412.

<sup>2</sup> Arendt Hannah. *Kondycja ludzka (Human Condition)*. Warszawa 2010: Wydawnictwo Altheia, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, 23.

logies, such as mobile Web, social networking websites, and other communication tools, the debate became much more widespread. The Internet, at first slow and costly, now fast and relatively inexpensive, is slowly reaching to all people around the world, which is well taken care of by both IT companies and the consumers themselves, as they can appreciate the new technological developments.<sup>4</sup>

There are more and more of those who are willing to inhabit the virtual world, and become more and more active in it. Even though the Internet is yet not as widespread as television, in many regions of the world the number of those who are digitally excluded is diminishing. The study by Eurostat (2010) shows that in 2009 fifty nine percent of households in Poland were connected to the Internet.<sup>5</sup> This trend is still growing. New solutions reach especially young people whose attitude towards the Internet is very open and who treat it as the main source of information. Moreover, the number of Internet users is also growing in other age groups, especially among older people, aged 55–65.<sup>6</sup>

The second very important factor, especially for the theory of argumentation is the flattening of the hierarchy of actors involved in the discussion. Nowadays, the boundary is blurred between the sender and the receiver or between authority and the ordinary user of the Internet. Multiplicity of non-hierarchical relationships makes the discussion more open. Arguments become more equivalent, and less supported by the force of authority or the media. Furthermore, the broadcaster can be anyone connected to the Internet. These new opportunities have not been available in such a wide range up to now and are dramatically changing the face of the Internet. New, more egalitarian tools are a key stimulator of social dialogue in cyberspace.

What is more, the Web has overcome many spatial and geographical barriers. A new identity of *the citizen of the world* who participates in global social movements and seeks for internet-based, transnational communities representing his views is being formed. Global identity is no longer a utopian construct, but becomes more and more real and almost every day shows its new face – the face which is changing so fast that it is hard to predict what it will look like even in the near future.

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<sup>4</sup> Friedman Thomas L. *Świat jest płaski. Krótka historia XXI wieku (The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century)*. Poznań 2006: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis. p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/PUBL\\_nts\\_spolecz\\_inform\\_w\\_polsce\\_2006-2010.pdf](http://www.stat.gov.pl/cps/rde/xbcr/gus/PUBL_nts_spolecz_inform_w_polsce_2006-2010.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Facebook Data Team. 2011.

### **3. Tools of social dialogue**

An important element of the virtual space are social networking sites with their mechanisms and applications. Particularly popular are sites with developed, interactive, and varied applications which combine many different functions. These new mechanisms called social media are focused on social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable communication techniques based on web and mobile technologies. Such websites include, among others, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Hi5, and the Polish Blip. Lifestreaming tools allow for information to get into circulation amazingly fast. The world's largest TV channels and newspapers can be found on Twitter. Also, it is becoming one of the main sources of information for journalists.

The most popular Facebook, although it has been operating only since 2004, has 600 million active users, of which 70% live outside the U.S. (Facebook Statistics: 2011). Each of them has an average of 130 "friends". Additionally, the webpage has 160 million entities with which its users can interact. Founded in 2006, Twitter until now gathered up 175 million Internet users, that is 100 million more than last year (January 2011).

Facebook.com links friends, acquaintances, family members and companies with customers. Users can create profiles with photos, lists of hobbies, contact information, and other personal information. Members of website community can exchange information, pictures, documents and links, build networks of interest, use and create tools for communication, fun and games, including automatic notifications when they update their profile. It is possible thanks to basic applications: Photos, Notes, Groups, Events and Posted items (the comments in the form of text, link, or video). Users can also communicate with friends and other users through private or public messages and a chat feature. They can also create and join interest groups and "like pages". The second very popular side, Twitter, on the basis of the so-called microblogging, enables its users to send and read short text messages called *tweets*. Tweets are text-based posts of up to 140 characters displayed on the user's profile page. Notes written by the user profile by logging on the main site, sending an sms or use of third party applications appears in the pages of all other users connected to it.<sup>7</sup>

Enormous numbers of users quickly found various groups which, in many ways, try to use the websites to disseminate information. Facebook was founded in a dormitory by a student Mark Zuckerberg, who, when he

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<sup>7</sup> Nations Daniel. 2008. *What is a Tweet*: <http://webtrends.about.com/od/glossary/g/what-is-a-tweet.htm>.

started off with his project, did not expect that it would become so popular or that, apart from “regular users,” Facebook would be joined by many institutions being able to take advantage of many useful applications of the website. Originally, it was supposed to serve only social purposes in the academic environment and help with the exchange of information in a faster way. But suddenly, many independent centres gained subjectivity and power to influence others. Besides friends and family, social networking sites gained new type of users: associations, social movements, parties and other political organizations, pressure groups, news programmes, “old media” such as newspapers and television, think-tanks, and even “historical figures”<sup>8</sup> and celebrities. Their impact takes many forms: opinion formation, influencing voters and encouraging to vote, political marketing, encouraging open public debate and contributing to the development of participatory democracy and new political discourse. Mike Westling, University of Washington, writes that there is no other online community that connects members of real-world communities (geographic, ideological, or otherwise) in such an effective way. *Facebook combines the best features of local bulletin-boards, newspapers, and town hall meetings and places them in one location that is available at any time in practically any location.*<sup>9</sup> The great advantage is that, in contrast to the discussions at the Town Hall, Facebook allows all members of the worldwide community to have an input on a topic giving them the flexibility of deciding when and how they contribute to the conversation.

The most common activity on the websites involves creating a network of supporters, e.g.: of a party, movement, reform or idea. Users create thematic groups and introduce topics from many different areas of life. Characteristic of such groups is the fact that every member can invite other users to join the group. In groups, members can participate in discussions, exchange links, and send latest news items. The act of joining a particular group may be a sign of empathy, sympathy, or participation in the group in real life. Moreover, the groups may serve as polling tools, and to some extent replace street surveys. It is more and more common to come across such statements in newspapers: *32 thousand of Facebook users is against... 43 is for...*

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<sup>8</sup> On Facebook one can become a friend of, e.g. Karl Marx and Józef Piłsudski and a fan of Plato, Che Guevara, Kierkegaard or Ludwig Zamenhof.

<sup>9</sup> Westling Mike. *Expanding the Public Sphere: The Impact of Facebook on Political Communication, 2007*, [http://www.thenewvernacular.com/projects/facebook\\_and\\_political\\_communication.pdf](http://www.thenewvernacular.com/projects/facebook_and_political_communication.pdf) 4.01.2011.

#### 4. New Opportunities and Threats

Emerging doubts concern the question whether we are dealing with a real social and political discourse. In addition, one cannot yet provide a clear classification of the new phenomena, because they are very dynamic and varied. It is worth stressing that the websites became a place for open and assertive expression of social and political views by private users, which, however, is not often transferred outside the realm of media. Tomasz Mastyk<sup>10</sup> rightly points out that *the Internet and associated technologies are necessary but not sufficient tools for building a strong democracy based on deliberative principles. It is easy, however, taking into account its possibilities, to believe in its power and motive force to influence the form and content of social activity. Still, it must be remembered that it is the only tool that can significantly enhance and promote active citizenship and encourage participation in the process of deliberative-rational political discourse.* According to Bernard Manin and Azi Lev-On,<sup>11</sup> the Internet as a medium is a *mixed blessing*. On the one hand, these groups are an ideal place for like-minded people in which there is a high risk of reducing the debate and ignoring opposing points of view. On the other hand, we can observe groups that invite to an open debate on controversial topics, while at the same time, very few real-world discussions allow opponents to speak.<sup>12</sup>

A specific style of spreading information on the Internet is worth noting. It is significantly different to other media, i.e. television and newspapers. An Internet user who looks for a piece of information chooses himself or herself where to find it and ceases to be a passive consumer.<sup>13</sup> Having this possibility to choose he or she is more willing to trust the information being provided. A wide variety of sources of information to choose from enables him or her to find the websites which will reflect his/her views. This often

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<sup>10</sup> Mastyk Tomasz. *Demokracje deliberatywna a Internet (Deliberative Democracy and the Internet)* in: Magdalena Szpunar (red.). *Media a polityka (Media and Politics)*. Rzeszów 2007: Wydawnictwo Wyższej Szkoły Informatyki i Zarządzania, p. 265.

<sup>11</sup> Manin Bernard, Lev-On Azi. *Happy accidents: Deliberation and online exposure to opposing views*. in: Todd Davies, Seeta Gangadharan (red.). *Online Deliberation: Design, Research and Practice*. Chicago 2009: Center for the Study of Language and information, p. 113.

<sup>12</sup> Westling Mike. *Expanding the Public Sphere: The Impact of Facebook on Political Communication*. 2007. [http://www.thenewvernacular.com/projects/facebook\\_and\\_political\\_communication.pdf](http://www.thenewvernacular.com/projects/facebook_and_political_communication.pdf) 4.01.2011.

<sup>13</sup> Wit Hubert. *Cyfrowe nierówności w dobie kultury 2.0. Problemy wybrane (Digital Inequalities in the Age of 2.0. Culture. Selected Issues)* in: M. Jeziński (red.). *Nowe media a media tradycyjne (New Media and Traditional Media)*. Toruń 2009: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, p. 21.

leads to the situation in which the Internet user restricts himself or herself to those sources of information which match his or her previous viewpoint. This naturally reduces the chance for a change of views. In effect, it leads to the polarization of his or her earlier assumptions and continuous surfing away from the views different from one's own. Hence, increased focus is put on the processes of consolidation of earlier views and grouping with those who support them, rather than a change in views.

In the 1980s, American psychologists described the so-called "hostile media phenomenon". It consists in the fact that groups firmly in support of given ideas perceive a neutral, balanced messages on television as hostile, because the medium did not provide such description of reality which they know is true.<sup>14</sup> On the Internet this phenomenon is not so visible, but this is at the cost of another distortion. New communication tools on the one hand trigger discussion, but on the other hand lead to strong polarization of views. We are free to choose our information providers in such a way that only the content which agrees with our views and expectations gets through to us. This may have very negative effects, previously not encountered on such a scale. A today's Internet user may feel that he or she participates in a public confrontation of views, whereas the percentage of opposing views with which he is confronted is very small. In addition, there exists significant social consent to various forms of manipulation, covert advertising, creating sham grassroots movements and initiatives. In fact, if a person is conscious of such operations he or she may feel confused, and the more he or she is unaware of them the easier it is to manipulate them.

## 5. Political marketing

At a conference organized in 2010 by the Facebook corporation, its Vice President – Blake Chandlee – encouraging participants to advertise on their website – stressed that the marketing research shows that 78% of people trust their friends' recommendations, and only a small percentage of advertising as such.<sup>15</sup> It seems that this applies not only to consumer choices,

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<sup>14</sup> Aronson Elliot, Wilson Timothy D., Akert Robin M. *Psychologia społeczna. Serce i umysł (Social Psychology. The Heart and The Mind)*. Poznań 1997: Wydawnictwo Zysk i S-ka, p. 138.

<sup>15</sup> Blake Chandlee is the vice president and commercial director of Facebook, responsible in the company for the actions in Europe, the Middle East and Africa who appeared at a conference called Facebook Now, organized by Facebook and a marketing group ARBOinteractive on 12 January 2010 in Warsaw. The Conference was devoted to substantive issues related to advertising on Facebook.

but also to many others, including the socio-political, and one has to remember that high trust usually means a big political impact. Transferring this to socio-political sphere we can easily notice that news on the Internet spreads like gossip, quickly reaching bigger and bigger audience (snowball effect applies here). The mechanisms of information transmission on the web functions similarly as in private life. Each time we reach for a source it is most often because it was recommended to us by our acquaintances.

Advertisers, who in the search for new ways of reaching their customers take advantage of this mechanism and call it *buzz marketing*.<sup>16</sup> It is a powerful tool to pass on information through informal contacts which gives the illusion that we are dealing with a private opinion. The illusive bond which is formed with the recipient makes manipulation easier.

Politicians create their profiles and websites on the Internet, which enables them to bring their supporters together and to remind them for whom they should vote, to reinforce their views and to build social capital. What is more, public figures such as members of parliament, local politicians, publicists, create the so-called press corners where one can find current information, see latest posts, photos, reports from important events or engage in a virtual conversation with them.<sup>17</sup> Undoubtedly, a big advantage of social media is independence in providing information. The content is often not processed by journalists, but formulated directly by the authors and in this direct form reaches Internet users. *Most of these online forms of communication are used to reduce the distance between a voter and a politician, and increase competitiveness in political communication.*<sup>18</sup>

Those who follow posts on particular websites write comments in which they express their political attitudes. Unfortunately, apart from positive effects such innovations might bring, like better access to information, they also change the image of a politician which starts to remind one of a film star created by image experts. Often, thanks to the comments of Internet users a politician has an opportunity to learn what and how to speak in order to gain widest possible support. This way, however, they fall in a trap

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<sup>16</sup> Hughes Mark. *Marketing szeptany. Z ust do ust. Jak robić szum medialny wokół siebie, firmy, produktu (Buzzmarketing. Get People to Talk About Your Stuff)*. Warszawa 2008: Wydawnictwo MT Biznes.

<sup>17</sup> Leszczuk-Fiedziukiewicz Anna. Kampania negatywna i kampania internetowa jako przykład promocji polityków w kampanii wyborczej do Parlamentu Europejskiego w 2009 roku (Negative Campaign and Internet Campaign As an Example of Promotion of Politicians in Campaign to the European Parliament in 2009.) in: E. Kuźelewska, A. R. Bartnicki (red.). *Zachód w globalnej i regionalnej polityce międzynarodowej (The West in Global and Regional International Politics)*. Toruń 2009: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, p. 276.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, 256.

of “temporary moods” and, if their main motivation is to please their potential voters, they change into “political aggregates of dispersed comments of Internet users”. Thus, virtual comments may influence political decisions and attitudes in the real world. It is so much dangerous as the Internet by no means reflects the opinion of the whole of society but only some of its segments or even random, individual users who often rebel against the whole socio-political sphere.

People gathered around an association, a politician, or a social movement generate social capital and possess certain participatory potential and therefore there emerges more and more strategies to realize it and use it. In order to maximize the number of recipients, already persuaded “fans” are asked to invite their friends and share information on private profiles. In view of the fact that an average user has a lot of “friends” the new range of influence can be huge, much bigger than with other channels of communication. In real life we share our political views only with good friends and family, whereas such websites become the place of political exhibitionism. In addition, on-line activity often moves to “off-line” life. In Poland, one of the profiles which encourage active participation is: *Powszechna mobilizacja na wybory prezydenckie* (*General activation for presidential election*) and the so called “event” *Ratujmy program TVP Kultura. Zbieramy głosy pod petycją* (*Save the TVP Kultura channel. We are collecting signatures for a petition*). *General activation for presidential election* is a website which works as a newsletter, sending current information to users with the aim to motivate them to take action. In the case of the event there is only a piece of information about an initiative and about ways of supporting it. If somebody wants to sympathize with a chosen movement, they can join it in the virtual space and through this indirectly manifest their view, since the information on the fact of joining a given group may be seen on the profile page of the user and is also sent to all of his or her friends.

The power of the Internet is especially appreciated in the United States. According to the Pew Institute during last year’s campaign, 46% of Americans used the Internet as a source of information about politics, 30 percent watched election spots in the network, and about 10 percent of citizens have used their social networks account for the purposes of the election campaign. Moreover, thousands bloggers were invited to the meetings with Barack Obama or John McCain.<sup>19</sup> Barack Obama’s political promotion is regarded

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<sup>19</sup> Trzeciak Sergiusz, *Internetowa demokracja (Internet Democracy)*, *Tygodnik Onet* 2009, [http://www.trzeciak.pl/pl/onet\\_pl\\_internetowa\\_demokracja.html](http://www.trzeciak.pl/pl/onet_pl_internetowa_demokracja.html).

to be the best and most effective on the Internet. In addition to political marketing in the Internet, he asked local Internet users for help in organizing the campaign. Building first strong relationship with the users and then making many “activation moves”, he managed to stimulate people’s commitment and real actions which contributed to his victory. For this purpose he used every opportunity to present himself in a positive light. Americans could be on first-name terms with him on many social networking sites. They could watch his pictures, films showing his political and private life or read his political commentaries. Those who wanted to find out more could visit [www.barackobama.com](http://www.barackobama.com), listen to podcasts<sup>20</sup> with interviews, and subscribe to a mailing list. Currently, Obama’s campaign is emulated by many politicians around the world, both in developed democracies and in countries with unstable political mechanisms. Facebook or Twitter host not only politicians from almost every European country, but also candidates in presidential campaign in Sri Lanka or politicians from Rwanda.

## 6. “Social Media Revolution’s”

The Internet and social networking sites have become a place of debate on issues which in many ways are ignored by other media and a place where new areas of open political discourse are born. Interactive communities give birth to different social movements. This is, among other factors, due to low costs incurred by senders and recipients, concurrent existence of horizontal and vertical communication, shared responsibility for the content, promotion of equality, the fact that information can spread so fast, and lack of borders. These are undoubtedly the benefits of the Internet for democratic politics<sup>21</sup> which is now strengthened and developed in a completely different direction than before. Thanks to this, one can see more and more manifestations of deliberation which has been taking place for some time now. Already in the early nineties in Santa Monica, California, a heated Internet discussion about the problem of homelessness took place. What is more, the homeless themselves took part in it. Today, such debates are a common occurrence. Online discussions are taking place among members of political and social movements, citizens gathered around particular institutions and

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<sup>20</sup> Format of Internet audio recording, allowing quick access to various recordings, including many archival radio broadcasts.

<sup>21</sup> McQuail Denis. *Teoria komunikowania masowego (McQuail’s Mass Communication Theory)*. Warszawa 2007: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, p. 165.

groups of friends. A particular advantage of Facebook is bringing all sources of information to one website. A recent improvement of the social networking website allows the user to use some of his or her favourite websites from one main site, as they are linked to Facebook. The user has all news appearing on his wall. This results in the fact that much more information reaches users than in a situation when they would have to visit each website individually.

Also, completely new fields of discussion emerge. On Facebook or Twitter people take up topics which are absent in other media. On the pages of particular Facebook groups one can read about death penalty in Iran (e.g. *I bet I can find 1,000,000 Against Government Violence in Iran* or *In Defence of Freedom of Speech in Iran*), riots in Palestine or controversial, unofficial opinion on the accident in Smolensk. The discussions are not only among supporters of a view, but also among its opponents, particularly in response to posts of journalists and columnists. It often happens that two people of different views confront accidentally, as they happen to have a mutual friend or belong to the same group. New technologies allow for one single post to produce a widespread response among Internet users. A good example here would be a seemingly irrelevant act of a teenage Polish girl who founded a Facebook group called *Mówię stanowcze nie zburzeniu Pałacu Kultury* (*I strongly oppose the demolition of The Palace of Culture and Science in Warsaw*) which, within only two weeks had over 8,500 supporters, and now, after half a year of existence (data from April 2010), over 17,500 thousand. With the fast dissemination of information such groups make a strong activation base and prove that the Internet becomes the main tool of communication.

Even more spectacular and easy-to-notice effects can be observed in such countries as Iran or Moldova. In these two places young people went out into streets encouraged by local activists on western websites. Twitter and Facebook constitute a perfect medium to promote social problems and it was thanks to those websites that in spring 2009 on Teheran's and Chişinău's town squares crowds of young people appeared to protest.<sup>22</sup> In both cases the students used Twitter and Facebook as a forum for fast exchange of messages on computers and mobile phones, which allowed holding demonstrations and informing about their progress. Foreign press described the events, first in

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<sup>22</sup> *Iran. Wojna w Internecie. Facebook i Twitter za Teheranem (Iran. War in the Internet. Facebook and Twitter for Teheran)*. 2009.06.18 <http://www.redakcja.newsweek.pl/Tekst/Polityka-Polska/530070,Iran-wojna-w-internecie-facebook-i-twitter-za-teheranem.html>, 1.12.2010.

Moldova, then in Teheran as *Twitter revolution*.<sup>23</sup> This phenomenon was described in detail by Evgeny Morozov in the *Foreign Policy* magazine. On April 7, 2009 he checked the most popular topic of discussion on Twitter within the past 48 hours. Most people in the global Web observed and wrote posts tagged, rather strangely, as follows: “# *pman* (aside from such tags as *Eminem* or *Easter*.) *Pman* is an acronym of *Piata Marii Adunari Nationale*, the name of the biggest square in Chişinău, the capital city of Moldova, where anti-Russian protests took place [Morozov, 2009]. Even though the political context was different, the events in Iran were similar. After a tragic death of a sixteen-year-old Neda, an Iranian girl shot by the police during an opposition demonstration, thousands of identical posts could be read on Twitter and Facebook: *Rest in peace Neda. The world is crying watching your last breath, but your death shall not be in vain. We will remember you*.<sup>24</sup> This type of publicizing activity by Internet users is not an isolated case, but only one of many more examples of actions carried out on the Internet by young “cyberactivists”.

Similar actions are especially typical for non-democratic countries where the Internet is the only place for expressing views and meeting and debating with others, and serves as a tool for activating people. Those countries show the biggest numbers of people who use online sources and Western social networking sites. In Egypt, already in 2008 Imams in mosques preached that using Facebook is a great sin. The biggest, and so far the only action against the Internet in Egypt was a complete blockage of the Web on January 28, 2011. In the middle of the day, during escalating street riots, five biggest Internet providers in the country blocked access to the Internet for all of their users, as probably ordered by the government. Even China, which carefully monitors Internet traffic, did not ever go that far.<sup>25</sup> Events like the ones described above can be observed in many other places. Numerous Twitter accounts disappeared during the “green revolution” in Iran, and currently thousands of Algerians’ profiles on Facebook were removed. This shows how regime governments fear the power of the new medium, and at the same time proves that it plays an important role in shaping public opinion.

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<sup>23</sup> Morozov Evgeny. *Moldova’s Twitter revolution. Foreignpolicy 2009.04.07* [http://net-effect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/07/moldovas\\_twitter\\_revolution](http://net-effect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/04/07/moldovas_twitter_revolution) 12.12.2010.

<sup>24</sup> *16 letnia Nada. Męczennica irańskiej rewolucji (16-years-old Nada. A Martyr of Iranian Revolution)* 2009. [[http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/Wiadomosci/1,80591,6741791,16\\_letnia\\_Neda\\_meczennica\\_iranskiej\\_rewolucji.html](http://wiadomosci.gazeta.pl/Wiadomosci/1,80591,6741791,16_letnia_Neda_meczennica_iranskiej_rewolucji.html), 28.04.2010.

<sup>25</sup> [http://wyborcza.pl/1,75477,9025243,Jak\\_wylaczono\\_Internet\\_w\\_Egipcie\\_Tego\\_nie\\_bylo\\_nawet.html#ixzz1Cf1i1hvh](http://wyborcza.pl/1,75477,9025243,Jak_wylaczono_Internet_w_Egipcie_Tego_nie_bylo_nawet.html#ixzz1Cf1i1hvh).

## 7. Conclusions

We are dealing with a variety of phenomena belonging to the positive concept of cyberdemocracy. It is a participatory democracy, in which citizens generate content, participate in virtual communities or even help in Internet-based voluntary organizations. On the other hand, we are entering the world of meticulous control and manipulation of citizens, their consumer and political rights, and control of information which they read or make available on the Internet. Both negative and positive results of the development are to a great extent determined by a cultural, financial and social capital of Internet users and authors. *Communication techniques, by themselves, have no direct impact on the habits and cultural practices.*<sup>26</sup> Depending on social, cultural, and economic factors, political activity on the Internet is realized through many ways of building virtual contacts and forms of on-line relationships. Users and Internet environment constitute foundations of quasi-society, or even quasi-state – without a real superstructure with which they generate discourse or which they defy. The answer to the question of how the new, interactive possibilities of Web 2.0. will be utilized depends largely on the potential of Internet users – citizens, their ingenuity, but also their ability to act beyond the realm of technoreality. It is not the Internet, as a medium, that creates a new political arena, but people who make use of this tool.

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<sup>26</sup> Goban-Klas Tomasz. *Media i komunikowanie masowe. Teorie i analizy prasy, radia telewizji i Internetu (Media and mass communication. Theories and analysis of the press, radio, television and the Internet)*. Warszawa 2006: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, p. 143.

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