

# **Internet and the Structural Transformation of Public Debate - A Comparison of the Online and Offline Public Spheres in Croatia**

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Submitted to Central European University

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of  
Arts/Sciences

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Budapest, Hungary

(2011)

# Abstract

This thesis evaluates how the internet fits the concept of the public sphere and how different/similar Croatian online and offline public spheres are. In order to explain the first part of the problem, the thesis investigates how theories of Jurgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser, the major contributors to this field, can be applied to the internet. Hence, literature review reveals that a number of authors successfully apply this concept to the online environment and recognize the internet as the new public sphere. The second part of the analysis answers the question on how different Croatian offline and online public spheres are and how specific Twitter is in this aspect. In order to answer this question, a theoretical and practical analysis of these spheres is performed. First, the spheres are contrasted in accordance to the Habermas' definition of the public sphere. Then, a content analysis of the selected television talk shows and relevant part of Twitter is conducted. The offline public sphere offers a source of topics of common concern and is therefore used as a reference point in the analysis of the discussions on Twitter.

The content analysis of two television talk shows and relevant Twitter timelines produced surprising results. Among other things, discussions among Croatian Twitter users concerning topics of common concern are far less frequent than expected. In fact, majority of tweets actually do not involve interaction with other users. Contrary to expectations, the intensity of debate among Twitter users on given topics is lower than it is on the observed television shows.

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# Introduction

The exchange of opinions through communication with co-citizens is essential for sustaining democracy. In modern Western societies, the public sphere is usually perceived as a place where such interaction takes place and where wider social issues are addressed in order to reach a consensus (McKee 2005, 6). The existence of the public sphere is what differentiates a democratic from feudal or autocratic society. In the latter, it does not matter what ordinary citizens think since the authorities (the king or dictator) make all decisions by themselves (McKee 2005, 16). In democracies, on the other hand, what citizens think and how they collectively influence public opinion should matter. Citizens should have free access to knowledge and information and should be able to act collectively when deciding on who will govern the society. In this process, the aggregated individual worldviews become public opinion which political leaders should consider when making decisions and framing policies (McNair 2003, 25). Public opinion created in this way is what constitutes a public sphere.

The public sphere is crucial for enabling participation of citizens in political decision-making and for securing that politicians are accountable for their actions. It is therefore an essential element of the good governance (The World Bank 2009, 1). Namely, the public sphere consists of the social institutions i.e. mass media that allow for the exchange of opinions. They build a common knowledge that later serves as a starting point of a collective action (McNair 2003, 26). In democratic context, therefore, the public sphere refers to the space where exchange of opinion among citizens takes place and to the practice of dialogue and consensus-making. In case of the former, the public sphere may be represented by a main square, coffee shop or a city hall whereas in case of the latter it refers to the specific infrastructure through which citizens send and receive information (The world bank 2009, 1). In that case, it is a space defined by the media, either print or electronic. The public sphere

can thus equally be newspapers that offer a critical opinion on a given topic and the internet with its so-called web 2.0 social media tools that facilitate discussions and networking among many users at once.

The internet has already been recognized as an important platform that could enhance and promote democracy. While some authors stipulate the internet as a most suitable venue for participation (e.g. Bohman 2004, Moe 2009, De Zuniga et. al 2009, Tolbert and Mcneal, 2010) others claim that because of the network neutrality the internet actually can foster the public sphere better than other media ( e.g. Barron 2008). The growing bulk of literature on this topic as well as increasing number of research centers that emerge within academia, such as the Berkman Center for Internet and Society or the Oxford Internet Institute, signify how important the internet as a research subject is. The internet with its online communication tools, such as blogs<sup>1</sup>, might secure valuable space for deliberation by giving access to a debate to anybody interested. Through its alleged positive impacts on participation and deliberation, the internet is also a prerequisite for e-democracy or digital citizenship (e.g. Coleman and Blumler, 2009 and Mossberger et. al. 2008). Such optimistic understandings of the net and its role in the society usually contain a belief that social networks, particularly Twitter are a important venue for political participation and political engagement. The recent studies in the United States confirm that the proportion of the internet users who view campaign related videos increased by 12 percent from 2006 to 2010 (Smith 2011, 2). In 2010 one in five online adults (22 percent in total) used Twitter or other social networking sites for political purposes

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<sup>1</sup> A name "Blog" derives from the blending of the terms "web" and "log". Although both forms offer individual, private introspections and views on almost any topic, the most important difference between blogs and journals in a classical sense is in the fact that the content of blogs is publicly available and subjected to commenting. All existing blogs make a blogosphere. Micro-blogging sites like Twitter are a sub-type of blogs, which contrary to the latter, have a limited number of characters available per each expression while they still maintain the subjectivity of the journal. This limitation in characters is the reason why they are called micro blogs. In the case of Twitter, users can post messages called "tweets" that are 140 characters long. By choosing other users to follow (so called friends) each user creates his own "timeline", i.e. individualized Twitter home page on which tweets are posted in a chronological order (Riemer et al. 2010, 2). "Following" implies that each user subscribes to other person's tweets. Although two users can follow each other, this is not an automatic possibility.

(Smith 2011, 2). The growing number of users, the increasing quantity of the online content, the mediating function the internet began to play in the modern society and its role as a source of information, all provide reasons for investigating how “classical” theories on the public sphere apply in the new, virtual environment.

Although the idea of citizens participating in their governance originates from ancient Greece and it was later incorporated in the liberal political theory of the 18th century, the person who is usually associated with the concept of the public sphere is Jurgen Habermas. The Habermas’ idea on the public sphere is a historical exploration of a space between the state and the private world and family (Butsch 2007, 4). Nevertheless, his classic work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1993) put this topic back under the headlights and influenced the debate on the importance of public discourse in democracies. If the book had been translated to English some 27 years earlier i.e. immediately after it was published for the first time in German, it is very likely that Habermas’ work would have had a profound impact on the western philosophy and political theory much earlier. Nevertheless, according to Calhoun, this work remains the most influential book on this subject (Calhoun 1992, 5).

*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* represents an overview of the historical development and sociological and political consequences of the public sphere, and explains how this concept changed through time. Among other findings, the book gives a rather pessimistic view on how emancipating the public sphere in the modern society is. This is because modern mass media became too commercialized and consequently unable to perform the role of the neutral and all-inclusive space for deliberation for the public as once coffee shops and saloons did for the bourgeoisie.

Despite Habermas’ skepticism concerning the possibility for the modern media to fulfill the role of the public sphere, the starting assumption of this paper is that both television

and the internet actually can do that. Namely, over the last 20 years, the internet has become an unavoidable communication channel in the Western societies. Among other things, it provides a plausible, cheap and easily accessible platform for deliberation. Since it is still to a large extent unfiltered, since it remains relatively easily accessible, and is not as hierarchical as the traditional media, I assume that the internet could constitute a valid alternative to the “classical” media and secure a structural interface for deliberation. It is true that the environment, technology and functioning of the media changed significantly from the time of the 18<sup>th</sup> century bourgeois public sphere, both online and offline media still perform the mediating role in the society and provide the public space for various voices, regardless of how (normatively) imperfect they might be. Namely, Habermas’ theory contained a strong normative orientation as it explains prerequisites for the rational-critical debate and other circumstances that could stimulate the emergence of the public sphere. In this sense, upholding individual freedoms was one of the essentials. Nowadays, although the media changed significantly, the need for similar normative regulations still exists. This makes his theory as actual and as applicable as before. For these reasons, I believe that existing theories on the public sphere, can be applied to both the real-life face-to-face communication as well as in the virtual environment. The literature overview I include in the thesis shows that I am not the only one holding that opinion.

In light with all stated this thesis seeks to evaluate how the internet fits the theory of the public sphere and how different/similar the online and the offline public spheres are. This assessment is made by using the example of the offline public sphere as a reference point, i.e. by analyzing the topics and the characteristics of political talk shows and discussions that occur on Croatian national television. These elements of discussions in the offline, mainstream media are then contrasted to the discussions that occur among Croatian users on the micro-blogging site Twitter. The main goal of the analysis is to identify specificities of the

online public sphere and to test if and to what extent Twitter may serve as a public sphere.

The research thus seeks to answer the following questions:

*Can “classical” theories of the public sphere be applied to a new media environment such as the internet? If yes, how?*

*How do online and offline discussions differ in structure and characteristics?*

*What are the main features of the public sphere in the new media environment in Croatian case?*

Habermas’ study on communication as an emancipatory opportunity identifies between two types of action: rational-purposive action and communicative action (Grosswiler 2001, 23). The former has been developed under the capitalism and might include manipulation in achieving goals whereas the latter aims at realization of human potential (Grosswiler 2001, 23). In light of such differentiation, the hypothesis is that offline discussions contain more of the rational-purposive action in so much as they aim to form public opinion and set the agenda. Online discussions, on the other hand, are expected to be more consensus-oriented than opinion forming. This is partially because participants in most cases have *a priori* standpoints on the topic they choose to participate in and since by participating in discussions they can only exert limited influence on the real life politics or on general public opinion. Since the purpose of communication is stripped away from potential material interests or consequences, it appears reasonable to assume that individuals in the online sphere communicate for the sake of it. This is the reason why the online public sphere will match more to the communicative action concept. In addition, I expect the offline public sphere to be more homogenized, at least in a sense that it will provide expression predominately to a specific group of people most notably the elite. On the other hand, I assume that the online public sphere will be more diversified as it provides voice to more different users on different topics. For this reason, it may also be more fruitful ground for the



emergence of counterpublics, especially if users discuss topics that otherwise are not represented in the mainstream offline media. I also expect that the intensity and diversity of debate, particularly on political topics, will be much higher in the online public sphere. These hypotheses are tested in the final part of the thesis where the research methodology is also explained.

## ***The Contribution of the Study***

This study will contribute to the general debate on the public sphere and especially to its adaptation to the new media environment and the internet in particular. Namely, due to their inability to promote a fair and equal debate Habermas has been critical towards the “classical” mainstream media (Gerhards and Schafer 2010, 143). The thesis will also contribute to the analysis of the public sphere within the Croatian realm and, hopefully stimulate additional research on this topic in the country. Finally, the study will add to the overall research on the applicability and importance of the so-called web 2.0 technologies i.e. of interactive tools used on the internet in the context of the political science and politics in general. Namely, since the internet and social media nowadays play an important role in informing and engaging citizens for politics, it appears that political science would benefit from additional studies on this topic. This is especially the case of Twitter and its role as it appears that high hopes exist concerning the democratizing potential of that network. Such enthusiasm was particularly evident in reporting on recent anti-government protests in Egypt, when the news often stipulated Twitter’s irreplaceable role in securing the flow of information during the internet blockade and thus helping in bringing down the regime (for example see blog entry on FastCompany by Neal Ungerleider from Jan 25, 2011).

By analyzing the use of Twitter in Croatia and by estimating the political potential of such discussions, this paper will add to the attempts to understand the political role of this

social network in that country and thus help create a broader picture on the topic. Judging on the influence social media has in political campaigns especially in the US, it seems important to assess the potential of the social media in the new democracies like Croatia. This is especially the case since over the last years we observed the decline in the overall level of media freedoms and journalism quality in Croatia. In 2009 Reporters without borders registered Croatia dropping 33 places in one year due to the increased violence against journalist and pressures made against investigative reporting (Dalje, 2009). Such decline in journalism quality may indicate that the mainstream media fails to fulfill its role in raising and discussing issues of common concern to citizens. This might have serious consequences for the state of democracy in the country. In such circumstances, the internet might provide a space for debate and thus compensate for the lack of the public discussion or political participation. The comparison between discussions that occur in the offline and the online sphere might help detect the pitfalls and advantages of these two spheres and foster future research on this topic.

### ***The Structure of the Thesis***

The body of the thesis is divided into two sections; the one encompassing the analysis of relevant theoretical works and the other dealing with the empirical study on the topic. Findings of the case study and discussion of results are presented in the concluding part of the thesis. The theoretical part of the thesis presents in more details the ideas of the two main authors writing in this field: Jurgen Habermas and Nancy Fraser. While the former elaborates the idea of participatory democracy through the concept of the public sphere, the latter perceives the public sphere in terms of the “counterpublics”. According to Fraser, counterpublics are competing publics that emerged in parallel to the bourgeois public sphere (Fraser 1990, 61). These two authors are particularly analyzed due to the importance of their

works in the study of the public sphere. Jurgen Habermas elaborated the concept of the public sphere and thanks to him the deliberation and rational-critical debate got special attention in the framework of the analysis of a democratic society. Nancy Fraser, on the other hand, pointed out to certain problems in the construction of the social discourse that Habermas oversaw. She provided a different view on the public sphere and launched the concept of subaltern counterpublics. After presenting their works, including potential problems and critique, I will present the overview on how these issues have been handled in the literature. These theories, as well as other assessments of the public sphere concept, are used in the analysis of both the online and the offline public spheres.

The study continues by evaluating to what extent these standpoints can be applied in the internet realm. A literature review will illustrate how other authors have treated the public sphere concept and how, according to them, “classical” theories are applicable to the new (internet) environment. In order to facilitate the review and to group the works in some way, they are systematized in accordance to Dahlgren’s stratification of the public sphere concept, which rests on three elements: the structural, the representational, and the interactional. Therefore, works in the literature review are classified along the three characteristics depending on which aspect of the public sphere they stipulate the most.

The empirical part of the thesis is a comparison between the offline and the online spheres in Croatia. As the exemplar of the offline sphere, political talk shows currently showing on Croatian national television are used. On the other hand, the analysis of the online public sphere is performed on discussions and political conversations among Croatian Twitter users. As the basis for the analysis of Twitter the topics that are raised in the offline public sphere are used. The case study is performed in the period of 19 days and consists of the analysis of the two political television shows broadcasted on a weekly basis and on the analysis of the discussions occurring on Twitter during the same period, with the specific

emphasis on the days when selected television shows are broadcasted. The reason why these cases are selected as exemplars and not other forms of media, such as blogs or newspapers, as well as possible implications and problems with chosen analysis are explained in the methodological part of the analysis, which is a part of the same section.

By relying on Habermas' definition of the public sphere, the case study assesses the applicability of approaches and tests whether the theoretical assumptions illustrated in the literature review are applicable in the Croatian case. According to Habermas discussions should be open to all and should occur among private people who act as a public and engage in a debate over a topic of general interest. Applying this definition to chosen media will help identify characteristics, which actually make television and Twitter public spheres.

In the research, two types of methods are used; the critical analysis of the literature and secondary sources and the content analysis of television shows and Twitter discussions on politically relevant topics in Croatia. The case study of the offline sphere is contrasted with discussions happening in the online environment. In this way, the study assesses what is specific about the online public sphere. The content analysis provides a contrast between different forms of communication occurring on blogs and on television and offers the possibility to analyze how different communication forms influence the discussion.

# Chapter 1 - The Public Sphere Concept

## *1.1 Habermas and the Public Sphere*

Habermas is one of the most prominent representatives of the Frankfurt school and his work is the continuation of the critical theory that originated there. Critical theory represents ideas and work of several generations of German philosophers and German theorists in the western European Marxist tradition who gathered around the Frankfurt school. This theory differs from traditional theory inasmuch as it seeks to pursue a specific practical purpose. Therefore, a theory is critical if it seeks human emancipation. Critical theorists seek to explain and transform all circumstances that lead to the enslavement of the human being and because of different types of enslavement many critical theories have been developed. Generally speaking critical theory both normatively and descriptively provides a basis for social inquiry aimed at decrement of domination and increment of any form of freedom (Bohman 2010).

Habermas' lifelong effort was to give a new spirit to the Frankfurt school's project of critical theory. This is especially the case since after the experience with fascism and emergence of cultural industry it became clear that a certain historical subject that would enable transcending capitalism would not emerge. The latter was the underlying idea of the previous work of the Frankfurt school (Calhoun 1992, 6). Habermas moved away from the search for such a subject and developed an account of intersubjective communicative processes and their emancipatory potential (Calhoun 1992, 6). His work on the public sphere was only a step in the development of his overall theory of the communicative action. Communicative action is also the main principle at work in the public sphere. It is a kind of rationality that should be differentiated from the instrumental rationality. While the latter is

goal oriented, the main objective of the communicative action is mutual understanding, trust, and shared knowledge (Dahlgren 2001, 40). Moreover, Habermas' idea of communicative rationality presumes that all problems and conflicts are resolved through open discussion (Edgar 2006, xvi).

When it comes to his work on the public sphere, in "*Structural transformation of the public sphere*" Habermas explains why the public sphere declined and stresses how cultural consumption substituted rational-critical debate in that process (Grosswiler 2011, 24, Habermas 1993, 159-175). According to him, the public sphere consist of private people who come together as a public for the purpose of debating general rules "governing relations in basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor" (Habermas 1993, 27). Put differently, private persons through the public sphere debate and contest the rules existing in political and economic realm of the society. They do this through the public use of their reason. According to Habermas, the use of reason as the medium of discussion in the bourgeois public sphere was peculiar and without a historical precedent (Habermas 1993, 27). The public use of reason has its origins in private experiences as it developed through audience-oriented subjectivity of conjugal family (Habermas 1993, 28). Private realm that is made up of internal space of conjugal family and civic society represent the authentic public sphere. This is because private people constituted it yet it had a public dimension (Habermas 1993, 30).

The public sphere, as a place where citizens critically discuss various topics including the opposition to the state, is a realm separated from the latter. Habermas stipulates that in the bourgeois public sphere citizens debate the general rules governing the society and in that way use it against the authorities (Habermas 1993, 27). In fact, the public sphere is a place where the general will is formed (Edgar 2006, xvi, Dahlgren 2001, 33) or the place where

“private persons” discuss “public matters” (Fraser 1990, 70). Individuals participating in the discussion focus on areas of public concern and neglect their private interests. Another definition describes the public sphere as the way in which citizens exchange ideas and information on equal footing (McKee 2005, 8). The public sphere in its original conception consists of mediated and face-to-face interactions (Dahlgren 2001, 33). Participation in the public sphere plays essential role in the process of self-enlightenment (Gimmler 2001, 25). The public sphere consists of organs of information and of political debate. Within this setup, individuals shape public opinion and in that way influence the political establishment (Kellner, n.d.). It is therefore no surprise the statement that a public sphere depends on the quality of discourse and quantity of participation (Calhoun 1992, 2). When it comes to the question of common concern that is supposed to be the topic of the debates in the public sphere, Habermas actually uses the notion of common good not to describe the orientation of the debate but to define the outcome of the public discourse (Goode 2005, 47). This characteristic becomes evident only in his later work, however.

The public sphere in Habermas view is much more than a mere arena in which the views clash, it rests on the assumption that in the public sphere the possibility of understanding is tested (Goode 2005, 47). Consequently, the test of rational critical debate is not the achievement of the consensus but the extent to which the procedures allow for the possibility of testing of an already achieved, uncovered consensus (Goode 2005, 47). Put differently, the Habermas’ concept on the public sphere does not look for the conditions, which allow the achievement of the consensus. It demands the constant questioning of the achieved positions and of the dominant ideology (Goode 2005. 27). This request for reflexivity rests on the ability of participants in the public sphere to critically evaluate their own attitudes but also ideas on which the society is based on.

The origins of the public sphere can be found in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century when in England, France and Germany first coffee houses, saloons and literary societies (table societies) developed (Habermas 1993, 31-36). By that time, a process of transformation evolved which included the transition from the representative public sphere (aristocratic or monarchical model) into the new type, which consisted of the private persons exercising rational-critical debate (Habermas 1993; 7-11, Warner 2005, 47). Rational-critical debate is a public competition of private arguments which results in a consensus about what is necessary in the interest of all (Barton 2005, 179). A range of cultural and social changes, including the emergence of newspapers, salons, coffeehouses, clubs and other institutions that promoted discussion, stimulated this transformation (Warner 2005, 47, Dahlgren 2001, 34). These intuitions put into practice the Enlightenment ideals regarding human pursuit of knowledge and freedom (Dahlgren 2001, 34). The process of rationalization put in question the ancient regime, particularly the legitimacy of feudal king who did not rely of reasonableness in assessment of their laws. Instead kings drew their legitimacy by a reference to God which could not be questioned (Crossley 2002, 156). The emergence of the public sphere owes a lot to the capitalist setting in which it developed. Namely, mercantile capitalism needed a public space for free exchange of information. The side effect of this need was that in such the bourgeois public sphere not only business information but also culture and politics could also be freely discussed (Habermas 1993, 14-26, Butsch 2007, 4).

Saloons, coffee houses and literary societies served as a new space where nobility mingled with the bourgeoisie in public and on equal footing. Although they differed in the size and composition of their publics and the types of their proceedings, the common characteristic of saloons, coffee houses and table societies was that the climate of their debates and topics were all organized to foster ongoing discussion among private persons



(Habermas 1993, 36). Therefore, all had a set of similar characteristics. First, they nurtured a type of social interaction that disregarded the social status in total. Secondly, the discussion within these publics involved a problematization of topics of common concern. This represented the area of the public discourse that was never before questioned. In fact, previously the church and the state authorities had a monopoly on interpreting topics from both political and cultural realm. Thirdly, the public that gathered in the aforementioned places remained inherently inclusive. Even if in a given moment the public became exclusive it could no longer close itself in its entirety and become consolidated as a clique. This is because the topics of discussion became more general, both in their significance and in accessibility. The public from saloons was actually a part of a more inclusive public of all private people who all could equally participate in the discussion (Habermas 1993, 36-37).

In Habermas' view, the public sphere widened and deepened with the spread of literacy and mass media. However, with commercialization of the press the domain of rationality scaled down (Dahlgren 2001, 34). In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, trivialization of politics and industrialization of public opinion occurred, which influenced the public by turning them from discursive into consuming collectivity (Dahlgren 2001, 34). Modern mass media, according to some critics, neglects the promotion of rational critical debate that was once the underlying principle in the public sphere. Instead, it creates a "sham public interest" that resulted in the creation of the mass and not in creation of the public (Barton 2005, 181). Habermas believed that commercial media eliminated the public sphere and that consumers of the private sphere gained more importance over the citizens of the public sphere (Street 2003, 38). Such system deviates significantly from the purpose the public sphere is supposed to fulfill. Current media setup does not serve the public discourse and stimulate political debate. It only connects the audience/consumers and advertisers (Street 2003, 38).

Habermas was rather skeptical towards the capacity of mass media to fulfill the role of the public sphere. He idealized the bourgeois public sphere from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and particularly stressed the role of the press in the process of overall development of the critical opinion towards the state (Grosswiler 2001, 23). As the main cause of the decline of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas stresses commercialization of the media. He is also rather pessimistic of the role of the mass media could play in enabling the public sphere. Habermas thus states:

*Radio, film and television by degrees reduce to a minimum the distance that a reader is forced to maintain toward the printed letter - a distance that required the privacy of the appropriation as much as it made possible the publicity of a rational-critical exchange about what had been read (Habermas 1993, 170).*

However, Habermas does not fully theorize the functions of contemporary media although he idealizes the earlier print media within the public sphere in comparison to later electronic media (Keller n.d.) He perceives the contemporary media as a channel for transmitting messages and as such, they are not perceived as an essential part of either economy or polity. Since it is by definition manipulative and governed by money and power, the media is completely excluded from the democratic realm and democratic transformation (Keller n.d.).

In the public sphere the process of deliberation takes place. Public sphere as understood from deliberative perspective has a particular meaning (Gimmler 2001, 24). It is an intermediate sphere since it represents an opposition to the public dominated by the state or mass media (Gimmler 2001, 24). According to Gimmler, the theory of deliberative democracy perceives the public sphere as a concept that comprises of “equal access to available

resources; openness in pursuit of particular issues; the disclosure of outer and inner; and a public network of connected participants” (Gimmler 2001, 25). Since it is believed that deliberation has inherently democratizing effect upon the public itself, it represents important element of any democratic society (Coleman and Blumler 2009, 17). Deliberative theorists claim that open discussion on matters of public interest exposes people to other views and teaches them how to evaluate various arguments and diverse preferences that exist in a democratic culture (Coleman and Blumler 2009, 17). Deliberation rests on the idea that a debate happens on fair and equal grounds, and with a good chance of reaching a best decision. In addition, the debate should not be limited only to political elites but it should also involve public both through the media and polling and through direct participation in political organizations. The legitimacy of policies is achieved in the way that public affected by them participates in their creation and in that way obtains some ownership over them (Coleman and Blumler 2009, 17). It also represents one of the elements of the public sphere concept.

In short, as can be red above, in Habermas’ analysis of the structural transformation and development of the public sphere there is an underlying dichotomy between public and private, and the interactions of these shaped the society, political responsibility and actions of the individuals throughout time. Citizens by relying on their reason could engage in the critical debate over the issues of common concern. The inclusive and open nature of the public sphere put in question the traditional authorities and signaled the beginning of the new era of modernity.

## **1.2 Critique**

Despite the great popularity of his theory among social scientists, Habermas has often been criticized for being too unrealistic for relying so much on the participants’ rationality and the power of reason in the public sphere, for the idea that the public sphere is universally

inclusive and for the belief that it nurtures equality. Gimmmler focuses on the most common objections to his work. For instance, Habermas' concept of the public sphere would actually be divorced from reality. Critics along this line argue that spontaneous and self-organizing citizenry that is simultaneously interested in the common good and capable in handling the media with competence does not exist (Gimmmler 2001, 26). Moreover, any communication actually only reveals more intellectual and social inequalities (Gimmmler 2001, 26). Therefore, such critique on empirical grounds advocates rejection of the idea that the public sphere is free of domination and compulsion (Gimmmler 2001, 26). However, according to Gimmmler, the idea of a public sphere in Habermasian terms should not be abandoned because of its normativeness. The value of his theory is not only in its concretization but also in the fact that it sets the normative requirements for the existence of the public sphere, including institutional settings that should secure freedom of expression (Gimmmler 2011, 27). Gimmmler adds that the public sphere can be understood as a „network of public spheres and counter public spheres that compose a whole” (Gimmmler 2001, 27). According to such interpretation, the public sphere is specific realm of freedom that secures free formation of the will of citizens.

Another type of critique usually directed against Habermas' concept focuses on the manipulative characteristics of the public sphere. It is thus stressed that the public sphere manipulates people and hinders their individual development, that it fragments communities and creates consumers of information rather than educated citizens (Gimmmler 2001, 27). However, Gimmmler explains that individuals evolve and develop inter-subjective relations through the interaction with media. In that way they are able to define their interests and position with respect to others (Gimmmler 2001, 27). Capacity for self-reflection is increased with the new media (Gimmmler 2001, 27). Namely, with the utilization of the new media it is expected from users to create their own opinion and make informed judgments independently

from the media source. This is in contrast to the “old” media, as before the level of self-reflection was limited since people allowed newspapers to make judgments for them (Gimmler 2001, 28).

The third set of critique refers to the historical background of the model of the public sphere and to its inherent characteristics. This type of critique focuses on the problems of structural exclusion, which appears to be inherent to the concept. This type of critique is elaborated in more detail in the following section where the work of Nancy Fraser is presented. Unlike the other two critiques, it has to be stated that this critique cannot easily be dismissed as indeed the original definition of the public sphere did leave out a significant portion of citizens, most notably women and social classes other than bourgeoisie. However, again the value of the Habermas’ theory is not only in the empirical manifestations, but on its normative aspects, which highlighted the importance of equality, at least as an ideal.

### ***1.3 Nancy Fraser and Counterpublics***

Habermas was often criticized by feminist scholars because of his reliance on the bourgeoisie, thus only on one specific segment of the society which he perceived as essential for the rational critical debate. He was also criticized because he perceived the rational critical debate as a neutral discourse. Critics claimed that a critical debate that deals with gender issues could not be disembodied or neutral as Habermas perceived it (Warner 2005, 51).

The most prominent critic of Habermas in this sense is Nancy Fraser. Her work should be seen more as an adaptation of the Habermas theory to the post-bourgeois society than a critique. Nevertheless, she pointed out several important fallacies in his work. She stresses that many social groups are left out of this comprehensive and overreaching public discourse and that it has been easier for them to constitute alternative publics (Warner 2005, 118, Papacharissi 11, 2002). Many other authors like Joan Landes, Mary Ryan and Geoff Eley

have also noted the exclusive nature of the public sphere (Fraser 1990, 59). Since exclusions were predominantly gender-based, the entire concept of the public sphere was perceived as a manly political construct. All this implies that the public sphere, as a space for discussion that everyone can join and in which everyone's status is neutralized, is not sustainable (Fraser 1990, 60). Furthermore, Fraser argues that Habermas failed to notice that the bourgeoisie was never the only public out there. In parallel to the bourgeoisie, a number of competing publics emerged (Fraser 1990, 61). These counterpublics were always in conflict with the bourgeois as they were competing for the definition of the alternative lifestyles and norms (Fraser 1990, 61). Fraser names such parallel, non-dominant publics as "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser 1990, 67). Counterpublics emerged in response to the exclusions from dominant publics. Their existence is per se beneficial, as they tend to expand the discursive space (Fraser 1990, 67). Moreover, the existence of counterpublics is in Fraser's view even emancipatory since the presence of alternative space for discourses diminishes the negative effects of the exclusion from the dominant public sphere (Fraser 1990, 68).

It would be useful to summarize what was explained in the previous chapter and to highlight the major characteristics of these approaches. Common to both Habermas and Fraser is the idea that a public discourse is possible and that it relies on equality among its participants. Moreover, both authors seem to imply that cultural diversity or any other form of differentiation among citizens does not hinder the participatory potential. Although both of these concepts are developed for the "real-life" environment, I believe their theories are applicable to the internet. The question is how qualitatively different the online publics are from those existing in the real world. Thus questions of whether and how technological infrastructure influences the discussions, how inclusive these online spheres are, which topics

discussions do they deal with, just to name a few, become relevant. In the next section, I will illustrate how scholars have applied the public sphere concept to the internet.

#### ***1.4 Applicability of the Public Sphere Concept on the Internet***

Attempts to adapt the ideas of the public sphere and counterpublics in the analysis of the internet are not new as there is already a bulk of literature on this topic. In accordance to a broad definition of the public sphere, everyone even slightly familiar with the characteristics of the internet will recognize the potential this media has for the realization of the public sphere concept. The growing influence of the internet on politics and its potential to act as an public sphere can be supported even with numbers. The recent studies in the US recognized the importance the internet and social media play in the political process and elections. Thus, Pew Research Center established that 22 percent of the online American used social networking or Twitter for politics during the 2010 campaign (Smith 2011, 2). In addition, 73 percent of adult internet users which represent 54 percent of all US adults, obtained the news on 2010 midterm elections online or participated in the campaign either through watching political video, sharing election related content, fast checking political claims or used Twitter or other social networking sites for political purposes (Smith 2011, 2). Not only these results indicate that the importance of the internet as a source of political news grows, but also that social networking sites are becoming important for the communication and political engagement.

Blogs are online interactive journals that facilitate information exchange between users or bloggers (De Zuniga et al. 2009, 555). It is widely accepted that blogs play an important role as a forum of public debate and can influence the media and politics (Farell and Drezner 2007, 16). In the light of the online political engagement, the fact that micro blogging sites, particularly Twitter, register rapid increment in number of users provide

reasons for optimism as this indicates that the potential of the online sphere is far from being exhausted. According to RJ Metrics, in 2009 Twitter had a 75 million users worldwide with around 6.2 million new accounts being created every month (i.e. 2-3 new accounts per second). Despite the large number of inactive accounts, Twitter users are becoming more engaged over time when sample age is controlled for (The Metric System 2010). The data from the US, which witnesses how important political communication channel Twitter became as well as the fact that Twitter registers a rapid growth in the popularity worldwide, indicate that this micro-blogging site is definitely worth analyzing<sup>2</sup>.

Internet blogs, forums and other forms of net-based interactive communication can play important role in upholding the public sphere concept in the internet realm. The same applies for the idea of counterpublics. In fact, forming of specialized and interest-based subgroups is even easier on the internet especially since the medium facilitates the communication and provides channels through which users of similar interests and ideas can meet and network. A proper application of the aforementioned concept of the public sphere on the internet should take into the account all possible angles. Although theoretically the internet can secure a space for discussion, act as a forum for the public sphere and allow for the expression of many different views in terms of its public sphere potential it should not be idealized and approached without any criticism. The internet may structurally provide the

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<sup>2</sup> According to official Twitter statistics, in March 2011 the average number of new accounts was 460 000 (TwitterBlog 2011). Moreover in 2010 the number of Twitter users increased by 14 percent in comparison to the previous year (Royal Pingdom 2010). Probably one reason for such increasing popularity of Twitter lies in the fact that it is more interactive and more dynamic than any other blogging type. Twitter provides almost instantaneous interaction between users, which reflects the real life communication better than in the case of classical blogs. In addition, although subjectivity is its immanent characteristics, it proved to be a very efficient and timely source of news information. The possibility to re-tweet other peoples' tweets enables the spread of the news in a matter of seconds. Recent example of the utilization of Twitter as information dissemination tool was during the 2011 Egypt upheaval and protests against the Mubarak government (McCarthy 2011).



platform for communication, but it should not be perceived as a panacea. After all, it is still a medium, thus open to many problems traditional media face especially those that concern the power relations, accessibility and centralization. Concerning the possible access problems, Gimmmler rightly notices that often the accessibility issue of the new media technologies has been overrated. Thus, he states that despite the fact that there were some fears that internet might become a domain of elite users, in Western developed democracies access costs or technical skills did not prevent people from using the new technology at a massive scale (Gimmmler 2001, 31). In addition, despite the fact the original Habermas' theory rested on face-to-face conversation, the internet can facilitate the exchange of services and information (Gimmmler 2001, 32). Because of that, it can secure full access to information to anyone interested and this can only improve the deliberation process and overall functionality of the public sphere.

In assessing the issue on accessibility, there is also a problem concerning the skills and knowledge necessary for the usage of the digital media. In the case of technological structures on which the internet relies, being technologically literate becomes more important than it was the case with traditional media and/or the offline public spheres. This is because the computer-based communication, apart from a computer or other kind of device, demands at least a minimum of computer literacy in order to access the internet and for many users it also demands a knowledge of English as a foreign language. It is also more demanding in terms of the user's engagement while browsing through the content as internet users are expected to actively chose, select, click and navigate through the web pages. Internet is, namely, a reading-intensive medium and limited individual literacy may represent a barrier to a full utilization of this media (Mossberger et al. 2008, 15). In the case of social media, the users are expected to actively contribute in commenting and in content production. On the other hand,

television for example, does not rely on the active engagement of its viewers as the internet does from its users. Watching television does not require technological knowledge or literacy in order to absorb the information.

Although the internet provides a space for communication on diverse and versatile topics, which reflects the freedom of speech and thus intuitively should be seen in line with the concept of the public sphere, sometimes too much fragmentation or too much communicative options might actually hinder any meaningful political debate. An additional question related to this concerns the problem on how much of individuals' online activity is actually politically important. Despite the fact that studies confirm that the internet is commonly used for social interaction and information searching (Boulianne 2008 2, Nie & Erbring 2000, 5) it is still questionable how much of this is politically relevant. Furthermore, even the new media seems to be suffering from commercialization, the same illnesses that affects the "old" mainstream media.

What may be the position of blogs and micro blogging sites in the public sphere? One interpretation of the role which blogosphere might have in the overall Habermas' theory can be derived from his belief that bourgeois diaries were a kind of experiments with subjectivity. Such experiments happened and evolved from close relationship in conjugal family (Habermas 1993, 49). Accordingly, Barton (2005) notices a similarity between such intimate forms of diary and blogs. He believes that primary interest in blogging is to develop subjectivity and that on blogs authors obtain clarity about themselves. Subjectivity is essential prerequisite for the possibility to engage in a rational-critical debate (Barton 2005, 184- 185). Therefore, blogs help their users crystallize their critical opinion and consequently "equip" them with intellectual skills required for participation in debates in the public sphere. Because of this, the role blogs play in stimulating participation and discussions might go beyond the

fact that they give a space to many different and political irrelevant opinions. Blogs might play essential role in educating citizens and upholding their (self)awareness. In fact, according to some authors blogs might have even more important role in the modern society than they are given credit for. Namely, blogs represent a buffer against domination of commercial forces in the public-sphere. In this way, blogs play significant role in the re-opening of the public sphere to more people. Such view is grounded on the belief that blogs actually resemble a lot to a type of journalistic practice from the time when the mass media was less commercialized (Barlow 2008, 3).

### ***1.5 The Literature review***

A good starting point in evaluating potential problems and benefits in implementing the concept of the public sphere on the internet is the analysis of previous research on this topic. The review and systematization of relevant works in the field is based upon Dahlgren's three consisting characteristics of the public sphere: structures, representation and interaction (Dahlgren 2005, 148). Structural elements refer to the formal institutional features and in the case of the internet are defined by its technical, economic or cultural features (Dahlgren 2005, 149). The representational dimension refers to the output of the media and involves the issues of fairness, accuracy, pluralism of views etc (Dahlgren 2005, 149). Interactive dimension rests on idea that publics depend on discursive interactional processes, which may involve "one-to-one", and "one-to-many" forms of communication (Dahlgren 2005, 150). Authors writing in this field usually conceive the online public sphere on the basis of these three elements but they often differ in the aspect they elaborate the most. Such specific points of difference between works will then serve as a plausible indicator in my classification. However, it must be noted that the literature review provided here only covers a part of this rapidly evolving

literature and serves as an attempt to somehow structuralize the outputs in this flourishing field.

The first group consists of published works that predominately highlight the importance and characteristics of the internet as the structure supporting the public sphere. For example, Andrew Baoill presents the structural advantages of the internet with a special emphasis on blogs. The author provides the overview of structural characteristics both related to the content and technology. This characteristic of the new media enables people to produce a content of their interest with a minimum knowledge (Baoill n.d.). The importance of network neutrality for the creation and preservation on the effective online communication is presented in the work of Brent Barron who established that the internet structurally represents an improvement from the traditional media as it secures a communication channel even for marginalized people. Although it should not be idealized, internet's neutrality should be protected for this reason (Barron 2008, 102). Calhoun provides a more transnational account of the public sphere. He analyses the implications ICT might have on the global communications and economy (Calhoun 2002, 18). Taking the example of blogs, wikis and discussion forums, Barton gives a resourceful analysis of the infrastructural advantages of the internet in the creation of a space for rational-critical debate (Barton 2005). By comparing how a specific topic is tackled in the offline and the online media in Germany and the USA, Gerhards and Schafer showed that the offline and the online media do not show significant differences in terms of actors' evaluations and framing (Gerhards and Schafer 2010). In this sense it is questionable to what extent the internet could be perceived as a "better" public sphere as it appears that popular inclusion does not happen (Gerhards and Schafer 2010, 155).

A second group of literature deals extensively with issues of interactivity. In terms of interactivity, scholars usually highlight the potential of the internet to serve as a field for

many different types of communications. For example, Papacharissi offers an overview on how communication happens online, what might be its limits and how much impact the online discussions might have in reality. In this view, the internet provides a venue for expressing opinion loudly yet it still does not mean that somebody will actually listen (Papacharissi 2002, 16). The anonymity and absence of the face-to-face communication, although it might extend our freedom of expression, prevents us to assess the real impact of the online word (Papacharissi 2002, 16). Another important characteristic of the online discussions is its possible fragmentation and specialization. This is especially important for both Fraser's and Habermas' concepts as the creation of special interest group lead to the development of several online publics for which Fraser would argue that they reflect the collective ideologies of their members (Papacharissi 2002, 16). Similarly, when he envisaged the concept of the public sphere Habermas had in mind small-scale discussions between people in coffee bars (Papacharissi 2002, 17).

Downey and Fenton give a particular account of the online public and counterpublics sphere as they focus on left-wing and right-wing counter-public spheres that emerged on the net (Downey and Fenton 2003). Simultaneously they explain the development of the concept of the public sphere and describe the transformations Habermas' work went through in recent decades. In doing so they particularly focus on the benefits internet might have on the functioning and organization of radical groups. They conclude that the internet serves as a communication tool for both leftist and rightist groups in constructing inexpensive virtual counter-publics (Downey and Fenton 2003, 198). Therefore, new media and the internet are seen as a place where new counter-publics emerge which in turn helps destabilize the public sphere and produce new kinds of solidarity and fragmentation between users (Downey and Fenton 2003, 200). Hallvard Moe elaborates the fragmentation of the public sphere on the

internet, with particular focus on blogs and blogosphere. The author stresses the importance of expanding both empirical and theoretical findings in case of the online public spheres (Moe 2009, 20).

Dahlberg provides a thorough overview of the previous literature covering fragmentation of the online public spheres and re-conceptualizes the deliberative public sphere on the basis of post-Marxist discourse theory (Dahlberg 2007). The author investigates if the internet truly leads to fragmentation of communication into “like-minded groups” which is perceived as a threat to democracy since it may lead to radicalization within the public sphere. He concludes that the internet fosters a number of radical counter publics that may question the dominant discourses and bring the marginalized issues into the debate within the mainstream public sphere (Dahlberg 2007, 841). Therefore, the existence of the radical public sphere in his view should signify the need to move away from interpreting the public sphere from the perspective of consensus-model of democracy and to build a radical contestationary understanding of the deliberation in the public sphere (Dahlberg 2007, 842). The discourse on contestationary terms rests on the idea that having more opposing views within the deliberation space actually expands effective participation in politics as it gives voice to many marginalized groups (Dahlberg 2007, 837). In turn, this does not lead to the freezing of the debate within a given discourse but keeps deliberation and ongoing process. Consequently, consensus is simply one point in a dynamic process (Dahlberg 2007, 834). All mentioned is essential for the radical view of democracy Dahlberg seems to advocate.

Frenlon gives a very detailed account of the characteristics and possibilities of the communication going on the internet forums. In addition, he develops a new framework for research of the online political discussion, which is based on the works of Habermas and Dahlgren. Although this work analyses the communication from deliberative perspective

predominantly, it is insightful for discussing the public sphere as well because it provides useful stratification of forums depending on democracy type they promote. Thus, he differentiates between the liberal, the communitarian and the deliberative models of democratic communication and offer a number of their intrinsic characteristic which may serve as a framework for other studies. He also provides a critical overview of the research used in the analysis of the online discussions. (Freelon 2010).

A final group of authors tackles the issues of representativeness and inclusiveness of the Internet as a potential public sphere. Hans-Jörg Trenz promotes the idea that the internet provides new representative order of political communication. This new order of communication is characterized by the diversity of speakers, diversity of publics, fragmentation of the public sphere and cosmopolitan self-description (Trenz 2009, 40-41). He believes that the role of the internet in promoting political communication is limited and that it continues to reproduce the national public sphere. This is because the internet users are confined to markets and entertainment and predominately remain apolitical (Trenz 2009, 42). An empirical study in the online environment on accessibility (whether news and political discussion are accessible to everyone) and traversability (whether people are able to traverse easily for news use to political discussion) showed that although on line news are less accessible than offline news, they might still provide access to certain less politically engaged groups such as youngsters (Brundidge 2010, 77). By comparing the communication patterns between various categories of people in the online and the offline environment, Stromer-Galley reached the conclusion that the internet can provide a voice for some people who otherwise do not engage in face-to face conversations (Stromer-Galley 2002). In this sense the internet should be perceived as a media that increases representation.

It should be noted that works that approach the public sphere and its applicability on the internet from a solely normative account are left outside of this classification. This does not mean such works are unimportant. This is merely the consequence of my desire for parsimony. One of the works that resisted the classification, and deserves to be mentioned is the study performed by Lincoln Dahlberg and investigates the applicability of the normative Habermas' approach to the online environment (Dahlberg 2001). It explains the main postulates and problems in transferring the Habermas' ideas into the online environment. Hence, it provides a solid starting point of any analysis of the online public sphere. In addition, there are many other examples on how the public sphere concept is used in the internet realm. For example, the idea of participation and inclusiveness, which are immanent to the public sphere concept, are applied in the development of the e-government, digital citizenship and in explaining the new role of civil society in the cyberspace (see for example Coleman and Blumler 2009, Schuler and Day 2004, Mossberger et al. 2008). In addition, modern communication channels are also applied in discussing the ideas on transnational democracies and the establishment of a global and the transnational public sphere (see for example Bohman 2007).

This concise presentation of some authors working in the field illustrates well how Habermas' ideas and the concept of the public sphere still maintain its applicability despite the internet as a medium differs significantly from the media that existed when Habermas constructed his theories. Although the differentiation of works along the three lines is not ideal, as many authors could be positioned in a more than one group, it still provides a solid starting point in the attempt to see how authors approach the public sphere concept. Furthermore, works here presented provide an affirmative answer to the research question: *Can "classical" theories of the public sphere be applied to a new media environment such as*



*the internet?* As examples here provided show, different authors approach the internet and the public sphere differently, thus the answer to the second part of the research question on how “classical” theories can be applied in the internet realm will depend upon the author in question.

These part of the thesis showed how flexible in the academic sense the normative ideal of the public sphere is as it can be applied to many various contemporary political realities. If this concept is obviously applicable elsewhere it is no question why it should not apply in a Croatian case as well. In the following chapter, I will thus present how in the case of Croatia the internet differs from traditional media as a public sphere.

# Chapter 2 - The Case Study of Croatia – a Comparison of the Online and Offline Public Spheres

## 2.1 Introduction

The internet and social media play an important role in providing a space for participation and political information in the West, particularly in the US. According to the works presented in the previous chapter, the theories of Habermas and Fraser obviously can and are being applied to the internet as they once were to the mainstream media. The additional interest of this research is to apply these theories in a more specific context i.e. to Croatia, and to establish how in that context the public spheres of the offline mainstream media differ from an online public sphere. The empirical findings based on the samples taken from each of the spheres will help exemplify the assumption that indeed the internet as a public sphere is of particular importance. I used Twitter as a case study representative of the online sphere. In order to contrast my data on the online public sphere, I selected a couple of political shows currently broadcasting on the national television as an example of an offline public sphere.

The goal of the study is to answer two research questions: *How do online and offline discussions differ in structure and characteristics?* and *What are the main features of the public sphere in the new media environment?* By comparing the two spheres, specific characteristics of an online sphere will be easier to notice. It is not assumed here that the offline public sphere is normatively better than the online or vice-versa. The purpose of the research is not to establish any of these spheres as the ideal one. The scope is only to evaluate how different they might be from each other based on the current state of the play of the given sample.

The evaluation of the spheres rested on the Habermas' original definition of the public sphere. As explained before, Habermas assumes that individual social status is disregarded in the public sphere, that discussions that take place in the public sphere deal with issues of common concern and disregard the private interests of participants, and that the public in the sphere remains overly inclusive (Habermas 1993, 36-37). This definition served as the starting point in the analysis. I investigated to what extent these spheres correspond to the definition provided above. In addition, although power relations in the televised debate, issues of framing, selection of topics the role of actors and other matters that may influence the televised debate are important, the scope of this study does not allow for a detailed account of these problems. The research will focus predominantly on the above mentioned structural characteristics immanent to the selected public spheres.

The hypotheses related to the study are based on a rather optimistic perception of the internet concerning its participatory potential and the ability to foster a qualitatively different kind of a debate than the offline media. Thus, I expect that the online public sphere will be more diversified as it will provide a voice to a broader range of different users able to deliberate on different topics. In particular, the intensity of the debate on political topics online is expected to be much higher in comparison to the offline sphere. This is especially true because more users are expected to have access to the online environment, and to have the possibility to join the ongoing discussion. Another thing that could influence the intensity and the scope of the debate is the fact that unlike television shows, Twitter discussions do not have a delimited frame. Even if each statement is limited to 140 characters, participants in Twitter discussion have more time to develop their arguments. Since it can provide a space for topics that otherwise are not represented in the mainstream offline media, the internet and in this case Twitter, may also be a more fruitful ground for the emergence of counterpublics.

## 2.2 The selection of cases

In Croatia, there are currently seven television broadcasters, which are granted a national broadcasting concession. These broadcasters are: Croatian national television (HTV) with two channels HTV1 and HTV2, RTL, NovaTV, Kapital Network, Croatian Music Channel (CMC) and Sportska televizija (Agencija za elektroničke medije 2011). The last three differ significantly from the rest as they offer specialized program and target more specific audience. Because of that, they should not be considered as a proper competition to any of other three national televisions. Observing the remaining broadcasters the most influential among them is still Croatian national television (HTV) with its total audience share of 33.15 percent for the first three months of the 2011 (AGB Nielsen Media Research 2011). Although the competition between broadcasters, most notably between Nova TV and HTV increased in time, especially in the news program, and in last 6 years caused the decline in the audience share of the national television, the latter still remains an unchallenged leader on the market. Therefore in the year 2008 national television still had around 23 percent more viewers than the RTL and around 27 percent more than Nova TV (Peruško 2010, 19).

The selection of the television shows for the analysis had to take into the account the fact that the public sphere rests on the idea of discussion of topics of common concern, and on participation of a larger number of persons in deliberation on a given topic. Therefore, I considered only shows that included more than two disputants and that relied on discussion of politically relevant and overarching topics. Hence, two shows are selected as the basis for the analysis; *Puls Hrvatske*<sup>3</sup>(*The Pulse of Croatia*) and *Peti dan* (*The Fifth Day*). In the study period, from May 2 to May 20 2011, there were six shows broadcasted; three of *Puls Hrvatske* (2, 9 and 16 May) and three of *Peti dan* (6, 13 20 May). However, the topic of the

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<sup>3</sup> All titles of television shows and other Croatian phrases were translated by the author and do not represent the official translation.

talk show *Puls Hrvatske* on May 16 covered the issue of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since it is not a topic of primary concern to Croatian citizens nor it included a majority of Croatian guests, it was not taken into consideration. Namely, this show dealt with the possibilities for the establishment of the new constitutional setting in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although some citizens would find this topic interesting, this is actually an international issue that does not have direct implications on the lives of most Croatian citizens. For this reason, it may not represent an issue of common concern and is excluded from the analysis. Hence, in total there were five television shows used in the comparison. Other issues discussed in shows were used as the reference point in the analysis of the online sphere, as they seemed to come closest to the idea of the topic of common concern. Two different shows were taken into the sample because in that way a more diversified topics could have been detected. This widened the analysis and possibly provided results that are more representative.

There are three groups of television talk shows: those with an issue oriented format, with audience discussion format and celebrity format. In addition, the issues oriented panel discussions are further divided into three subtypes: centered on current affairs, on social issues and personal perspectives (Richardson 2008, 387). The good example of the latter would be the Oprah Winfrey Show. In the shows with the audience discussion format, all “guests” are simultaneously “audience members” and vice-versa (Richardson 2008, 387). In line with this stratification the television talks show *Puls Hrvatske* could be classified as an issue-oriented panel. In this show, guests are not simultaneously the audience, but the audience sometimes participates in discussions by asking questions via the telephone. This show predominantly deals with current affairs and political topics that are deemed important for the wider audience. The show is hosted by Branimir Blić and usually involves a number of guests in a studio and others joining the discussion from other locations. In addition, several

times during the show, the host reads viewer's emails referring to the topic of the debate and couples of viewers offer their comments via telephone.

The other show in the sample, *Peti dan*, is also an issue-oriented panel. In this talk show, both national and international current events are being discussed between the four permanent disputants. These are Zvonko Maković, Velimir Visković, Igor Zidić and Slaven Letica. On the Facebook site of the show they are presented as the "exceptional intellectuals". Because disputants are always the same, it could be stated that this show rests somewhere between those programs centered on current affairs and those offering personal perspectives. Since each *Peti dan* consists of a discussion on three topics that marked a given week, it provides a solid retrospective on the major headlines and possible topics of common concern. While discussions in *Peti dan* often cover the international events, *Puls Hrvatske* is much more oriented towards national issues. It covers the most important political, social, and economic topics on the agenda in the country. These two shows in combination could therefore provide a number of topics that seem the most important in the given moment in the country and as such they might be considered as issues of common concern. Moreover, they serve as a good starting point for the analysis of the online public sphere.

When it comes to the internet usage in Croatia, in the first three months of 2009, 55 percent of households owned a personal computer according to Croatian Bureau of Statistic (2010). Despite the registered increase in personal computer ownership of 5 percent and despite the 7 percent increase in having the internet access in 2011, the Croatian households were still underequipped with the ICT (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2011). The statistic of online habits reveals that users predominantly use the internet for obtaining information on goods and services (80%), sending electronic mail (73%) and reading of daily news and magazines (70%) (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2011). According to the same survey, around

30 percent of the internet users used the net for chat, forums and social networks (Croatian Bureau of Statistics 2011). However, this number does not provide enough insight into the usage of blogs nor it specifies which social networks are encompassed by the research. Because of the lack of systematic research on the topic, it is nowadays impossible to determine the accurate number of bloggers or Twitter users. Even estimations that do emerge in the literature are not a result of a comprehensive study. Instead, they often rely on other subjects' estimations. For instance, by relying on the views of owners of Croatian blogging sites, Vilović and Širinić estimate that the number of bloggers in Croatia is around 500 and 600 thousand (Vilović and Širinić 2009, 66). However, the authors also note that these numbers cannot be fully verified since it is always questionable what actually does this estimation of half a million bloggers include; does it count all existing blogs or it estimates the number of bloggers (Vilović and Širinić 2009, 68). In addition, there are some problems in defining what blog actually means as it may involve more than one creator. Moreover, a blog can be written in variety of ways and posted through many different blogging services. Put differently, unlike in the case of Twitter, there is not only one unifying platform for all the blogs on the internet. Instead, a number of blogging services operate both within and beyond the national borders. Nevertheless, the half a million bloggers in a country where the total number of users of the broadband internet is slightly over one million (Središnji državni ured za E-hrvatsku 2010) seems exaggerated. Even if we observe the total aggregate number of people having the internet access which is according to Croatian Post and Electronic Communications Agency little less than 2,500,000 (HAKOM 2010) and compare it to the aforementioned estimation, it would mean that every fifth person who has the internet connection owns a blog. Regardless of how feasible these estimations may seem, they are still estimations and should not be taken for granted.

Because of the same reasons that prevent establishing accurate number of bloggers, it is equally impossible to determine the number of Twitter users in Croatia with precision. The fact that there is no systematic study dealing with this issue certainly does not help. Even if one counts all Twitter accounts opened by Croatian users, it remains questionable how active they have been after their creation. Moreover, there is also the problem in determining the location of Twitter users as they can register as coming from any location they like or even not write in anything at all. Twitter on the other hand does not automatically allocate the users on the basis of their IP address or geographic location. Although it may not be a perfect method, there might be a way to estimate the number of Twitter users from a specific location. This can be done by using a specific Google search string. Thus by writing in the Google search the following phrase “*location Hrvatska site:twitter.com*” one gets about 29 300 Twitter accounts that have been denominated as originating from Croatia. As mentioned before, since registering location in Twitter account is only optional, this number should not be taken as the precise number. However, it is still the most accurate estimation of users from a certain location one can currently get.

In order to assess to what extent do discussions on issues of common concern that occur in the mainstream media spillover to Twitter, during the research period, I monitored the Twitter discussions under the tag “#politikaHR”<sup>4</sup>. This tag marks tweets that deal with Croatian politics. In order to avoid that the research misses a relevant conversation only because it was not marked with the tag “#politikaHR”, I also investigated Twitter by using the keyword search. The keywords were derived from the topics of the political talk shows. In

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<sup>4</sup> Tags on Twitter are marked with the so called “hash tags” that are constructed by writing the keyboard sign “#” and the word or description of the tweet. This system helps organize tweets and group them together in accordance to their topic. The tagging however should not be the only guidance in the search of a conversation on a specific topic because any discussion that is not marked with the tag will be invisible to the researcher.



both types of the research, the Google Realtime search is applied (<http://www.google.com/realtime>). It searches the content of Twitter and other social media sites and makes Tweets viewable retrospectively. Moreover, Google Realtime allows customizing the search by location. In this way, I hoped to avoid the the problem of including in the analysis irrelevant tweets coming from different locations.

The alternative to the use of a search engine in the analysis of Twitter would be to create a specific timeline with a number of users and then to monitor how the communication evolves. However, a typical problem in the study of the blogs is the non-existence of the central list from which to select a potential sample (Snee, 2008, 11). Similar problem exists in the case of Twitter. There is no universal list of all Twitter users per location nor is there a separate space on Twitter where only Croatian users gather. Therefore, if it is up to the researcher to select a sample from numerous Twitter users he will inevitably base his decisions on the more or less subjective reasons. In doing so, he might bias the sample. In connection to the fact that there is no “Croatian” Twitter timeline, there is also the problem on how to restrict the research to only users from Croatia. Apart from proper selection of the keywords, the very subject of the study also resolves this problem. Although it is impossible to determine the identity and citizenship of the users, it seems reasonable to assume that users who post under the tag “#PolitikaHR” or who are commenting the Croatia-specific topics will be Croatians.

While the analysis of the tweets tagged “#politikaHR” is quite straightforward as most of the tweets that have been marked in that way will be visible, the analysis of unmarked tweets poses a greater challenge. The main problem is how to detect discussions or comments relevant to this research since putting in unsuitable keywords might not show relevant tweets or conversations. This may happen because users can discuss the topic without using the same words or a key phrase that I would use in the search. Unfortunately, there are no cut-and-dried

solutions to this problem other than relying on the common sense and choosing keywords carefully. I thus selected the keywords that seemed to provide the best fit to the given topic. In that way I tried to secure that, I do not miss a potential interest in the topic if there was some. Moreover, in looking for a keyword and in order to see if the topic was discussed in a different moment, I did not limit the search solely on the date of the show. I also analyzed the timeline before and after the given date. In case I obtained a result that was an individual users' comment on a given topic then I checked the timeline of that user (individual's chronology of the tweets) where I looked for any sign of discussion.

The discussion should involve exchange of two or more tweets on a given topic between two or more users. By observing the research results, the possible discussions on Twitter can be easily detectable. Namely, whenever there is a conversation and if a tweet is a reply to somebody else's comment, it contains a mention of that user's nickname. The sign "@" following the nickname(s) of the person(s) to whom the tweet is/are addressed signify mentions on Twitter. By monitoring mentions, I tried to secure that I would not miss a potential discussion even in case my search results did not indicate its existence.

As one of the keywords, I always used the title of the television show. I assumed that even a critical comment towards the shows produced by the mainstream media might be an impetus for a discussion. Moreover, a common practice among the Twitter users is to comment on actual events, news content and on the television shows that are airing at the time a discussion takes place. This is also the reason why the analysis of Twitter focuses predominantly on the days around the day when the given show is broadcasted.

### ***2.3 The Research Rationale, Its Potential Problems and Limitations***

The particular problem regarding the operationalisation of the definition of the public sphere lies in the conceptualization of the issues of the common concern. As Fraser posits the

boundaries of what may be considered in the interest of public or in the interest of private are not very clear, since a common concern for some may be perceived as a private interest for others (Smuts 2008, 24). Namely, only participants in the public sphere can decide what the issue of common concern for them is. It cannot be given endogenously. In addition, matters of public concern should, according to Fraser, be determined through discursive contestation. Hence, Fraser provides the example on how feminists created subaltern counterpublics in order to disseminate the view that domestic violence is an all-present component of male-dominated western societies (Fraser 1990, 71). Since participants can define issues of common concern depending on their perspectives, then almost every topic raised within the public sphere has the potential of being denominated the issue of common concern. Because of that, Fraser stresses that no topic should in advance be excluded from the consideration (Fraser 1990, 71).

Unfortunately, the scope of this thesis does not allow for an in-depth problematisation of this issue. Hence, I assumed that the topics discussed on the public national television concern, at least, the larger part of the population. After all, national television has a double incentive to act in the public's interest. Primarily, it has a legal obligation to provide a program that would reflect all potential social diversities and, secondly, it has to struggle to keep its audience in a competing environment. It will therefore naturally stem to topics that are believed interest a larger number of viewers.

By relying on the television talk shows as the source of the topics of common concern makes the cases much more comparable to each other as it establishes a common basis of the comparison. Moreover, it helps avoiding the potential biases which could emerge had the topics been chosen from Twitter primarily. Namely, on Twitter, there are many conversations going on at any given moment and looking for a topic of political relevance would sometimes be as demanding as looking for a needle in the haystack. Moreover, any such selection would

inevitably involve a potential bias as the researcher could easily import his own assumptions on what the dominant topic is and which one should be perceived as politically relevant. For these reasons an external point of reference is necessary and political talk shows broadcasted on the public television seem a proper choice. This should not be understood as the belief that there are no issues of public concern raised on Twitter. On the contrary, this move is necessary for the sake of comparison and parsimony.

The reason why television and not radio was selected for this analysis is that in the case of Croatia television still plays an important role in shaping public opinion. Hence, public television in Croatia enjoys an influential position among citizens as the main provider of public information and news (European Journalism Centre 2010). Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that it represents a more important element in the public sphere when compared to radio. Namely, radio market is strongly segmented and this implies it has influence on the level of the county rather than on the national level (Peruško and Jurlin 2006, 7). The recent studies confirmed that concentration of the media audience in 2009 at national level was still significantly at the advantage of television before radio, daily newspapers and the internet portals (Peruško 2010, 11). Apart from this, public television has the legal requirement to promote the topics of public interest. Thus, it covers topics that are more general and have a wider reach. As Negt and Kluge stress, “television is in its nature confined to transmission of generalized program material” (Negt and Kluge 1993, 100). By doing so television adopts the norm by which the public sphere is governed and that prevented it from assimilating the immediate life interest of human beings (Negt and Kluge 1993, 100). Because of all these reasons, I assumed that television represented a better case than the radio.

Since newspapers, according to Habermas, played a significant role in the establishment of subjectivity and later in the process of development of rational-critical debate in the public sphere, one could argue that it would be better to include newspapers in

the analysis instead of electronic media. However, although Habermas was pessimistic about the capacity of the mass audiovisual media to uphold the public sphere, we do live in the era of mass media and it continues to play important role in democratic societies and their political communication systems. For example, Blumler and Gurevitch see the mass media as an element in the political communication system and stress its mediating and intervening role in political processes (Blumler and Gurevitch 1995, 13). Other authors stipulate the important roles mass media nowadays play in socializing citizens (Croteau and Hoynes 2003, 14) or as the most important institutional structure of the public sphere (Baker 2007, 7). In addition, the role newspapers might have played in the original Habermas' public sphere seems no longer applicable. Actually, Habermas described how the role of the press and the media transformed significantly particularly because the press became commercialized and open to political pressures at the same time. These trends turned the press from the institution of private people that constituted the public into the institution of certain participants in the public sphere. Put differently the press "(...) became the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere" (Habermas 1993, 185).

Nowadays, the influence the press once exerted is diminishing especially in Western developed nations. As noted by the magazine *The Economist* in an article published on 24 August 2006, in most Western developed nations the sales have been in decline predominantly because the readership more and more switches to alternative sources of information, most notably the internet (The Economist, 2006). Moreover, the press in Western nations is losing its audiences and consequently its purpose in stimulating the private space needed for individual and rational discussion (Grosswiler 2001, 24). In the case of Croatia, over the last years, newspapers suffered a serious decline due to increased commercialization and media concentration. A study performed by the Institute for International relations in

Zagreb (Institut za međunarodne odnose (IMO)) showed that in Croatia the concentration in the market of daily newspapers is rather high: the share of the two leading papers is 66 percent whereas the share of the first three leading papers is 77 percent (Peruško and Jurlin 2006: 7). The more recent study on this topic confirmed the fact that Croatian media landscape remains highly concentrated in spite of the existing anti-concentration and plurality measures in legislation (Peruško 2010, 18). Media concentration hinders the possibility for the development of the public sphere since it limits the opportunities for a diversified discourse. According to Baker in the context of concentrated media environment the democratic distribution principle for communicative power cannot be sustained (Baker 2007, 7). In addition, due to commercialization and decline in the quality of professionalism (European Journalism Centre 2010), the Croatian press seems to have limited influence on submitting issues to critical discussions, which according to Habermas was one of the roles of the press and which got lost during the transformation of the public sphere (Habermas 1993, 169). All this reasons made Croatian newspapers less adequate case for the analysis when compared to television.

Moreover, this study predominantly relies on interactive aspects of the public sphere namely on discussion among people; and this element is not observable by analyzing print media. Namely, one of the purposes of the research is to determine structural and contextual differences between the online and the offline public spheres. Since discussion is one of the constituting elements of the latter, it would be useful to compare similar with the similar i.e. to compare the media that can be classified as interactive. Because of that, television and Twitter, as exemplars of the offline and the online spheres were chosen. Namely, Twitter is a type of micro blogging site that is much more concise in the overall output when compared to typical blogs. The latter are usually perceived as the internet journals. Due to this combination

of a concise form and the degree of subjectivity which is imminent to blogging, communication occurring on Twitter resembles more to the real life conversation which can be picked up on television shows. All this makes television much more comparable to Twitter than to static, diary-like blogs.

## **2.4 Characteristics of the Online and Offline Public Sphere**

In this part of the analysis, I compare the and the offline spheres based on Habermas' description of the public sphere. Following his definition, these spheres should remain all-inclusive, should disregard the status of its participants and discussions taking place within them should focus on the issues of the common concern.

The basic requirement of the public sphere is its idea of the universality i.e. the idea that it must be accessible to all citizens of society in any way: technically, economically, culturally and linguistically (Dahlgren 2005, 35-36). By observing the structural characteristics of the selected television shows, it appears that they cannot entirely secure the requirement for the universal access to the debate. Namely, it is evident that not everybody can join discussions in these talk shows. The issue of inclusivity is less alarming in the *Puls Hrvatske* since viewers can actually e-mail during the discussion or call the show to express their standpoint. However, this does not secure a full limitless access to a debate to everybody as telephone calls and emailing are subjected to potential filtering. Although this might be done unintentionally and is partially caused by the limited time, selection of e-mails or phone calls that will be aired might leave aside many potential participants. Consequently, a number of opposing or radical views might be systematically removed from the discussion and the public eye. Thus although in theory there is a possibility of universal access, one should keep in mind that in practice when mediated discourse is in question the issues of filtering and censoring might occur. This principle of universality is almost entirely neglected when the

second show is in question. As stated before in *Peti dan* a debate occurs among the same people all the time and there is no possibility for the audience to participate.

When it comes to the questions of status, in the case of television talk shows the issue of status is related to the question on who gets to access the debate. In the shows used in the sample, it is usual that only those who are already established in any way will be given access. In other words, after they have already reached a certain status in the society they are given access to the television. Therefore, people who are more engaged in any way in civic life, regardless of their social status, will have more access to the debate. This is confirmed by observing some of the guests that participated in the television shows. They are usually public officials, politicians, NGO representatives or other figures present actively in Croatian political life. Since it relies on the already established persons, particularly those connected to politics, from the aspect of the participation the televised talk shows may be perceived as elitist. This elitism is particularly noticeable in the case of *Peti dan* where participants who are indeed university professors or respectable figures in Croatian cultural and political life, are presented as the opinion makers. It can be thus stated that televised debates do not fully satisfy the criteria for the public sphere since they do not fully disregard the status of the participants.

Another important requirement for any public sphere is that it must deal with a topic of common concern. As explained earlier these television shows satisfy this criteria as topics they cover in most cases surpass the individual and appear politically or socially relevant for the greater part of the community. However, in their overarching tendency they might leave aside a number of minority views or in any other way excluded positions. This seems to be a general characteristic of the mass media, particularly of the television.

The internet in general and Twitter in particular appear to do a far better work in disregarding the individual status in entirety. This is because the internet and Twitter allow for



the easy access to everyone and secure anonymous participation on equal footing in ongoing discussions, regardless of individual's real life circumstances or social role. Moreover, in the conversations on Twitter, nobody is privileged and everyone is free to join or to stop communicating at any point. The only thing needed in order to participate is access. On the internet, therefore, among the users who have accessed it, there is no permanent and self-evident differentiation based on status. The only indicator of the status is between those who have and those who do not have the possibility to access the internet.

Similarly, on Twitter, like in the case of television, the question of inclusivity to the debate depends mostly on the technical characteristics of the media and the possibility to access it. When describing Twitter, the issue of access cannot be observed in separation from the overall accessibility to the internet and from the participants' level of knowledge of the technology. Because it depends on knowledge and technical prerequisites, in case of the internet the boundary between those included and those excluded from the discussion is far sharper than it is the case for television. There is an additional element that might be important in defining the inclusivity on the net; the individual desire/willingness to participate. This element does not exist in the case of television. This is because in the case of the latter individual can passively absorb the content even while doing something else. On the other hand, to consume the internet content by accident is not very likely. Internet users decide to which content they are going to expose themselves and by doing so they have to be fully engaged, actively scroll and click through the web sites.

When it comes to the principle of that in a public sphere, issues of common concern should be discussed. Twitter appears to be much more fruitful ground for a variety of views and issues. Since online debates are far more accessible than the televised ones, and since Twitter disregards the status, secures anonymity and does not have any upfront limitations on which topics are supposed to be discussed, it offers a valuable space even for standpoints that

are elsewhere underrepresented or marginalized. This characteristic enables Twitter, and other social media platforms, at least theoretically, to become a space for emerging counterpublics. The questions to what extent this does happen, whether counterpublics indeed form on Twitter and how are they related to the offline, mainstream public sphere should be a subject of a separate research. For now, it is only important to notice that this possibility exists.

Based on such brief analysis it can be concluded that both television shows and Twitter satisfy the majority of the requirements to be considered a public sphere. Twitter and the internet in general seem to score far better on issues of inclusivity and the possibility for initiating a number of topics that all could, in line with Fraser's perspective, become issues of common concern. The content of television, on the other hand, seems to be accessible easier than the content online that cannot be passively consumed. However, the viewers have more structural limitations in accessing debate and limited influence on the selection of topics of the show. Although the viewers might be given an option to intervene in the talk show via telephone, the editors choose the issues that will be discussed. In this way a kind of filtering might occur, which is completely avoided in the communication on the net and on Twitter. There each participant has equal right to initiate any topic it finds interesting and to join any debate he wishes. Structural characteristics of television, on the other hand, exclude a number of people that might be interested to participate in a given discussion. Unlike the internet, television also does not have a technical possibility to mediate the discourse between many-to-many. In conclusion, I would stress that although television and the internet differ by a degree to which they satisfy the original definition of the public sphere, they still should be considered as such since both secure a valuable deliberative space and thus perform an important role in the society.

## **2.5 The Content Analysis**

After presenting the main differences between the online and the offline sphere, I now turn to more concrete analysis of their content. In the following chapter, I will thus contrast the topics of the offline sphere with those on Twitter. I will use the main topics that dominated the discourse in the offline sphere as a basis of analysis of the Twitter discussions. The idea is to see how the same topics from the offline sphere were present and discussed, if they were at all, in the online sphere.

### **2.5.1 The Topics of the Offline Talk-Shows and Their Reflection to the Online Public Sphere**

May 2 – *Puls Hrvatske*

The topic of the show *Puls Hrvatske* that was aired on May 2 was “Punishing of war criminals and respect of war victims” (“Kažnjavanje zločina i poštivanje žrtava”). The discussion predominantly concerned the Hague tribunal issues as well as the issue on whether Croatia should equally prosecute all types of war crimes including those committed by the Croatians themselves.

The research of the online sphere I begin by analyzing the tweets tagged “#politikaHR”. The results provided by Google Realtime search offered neither one mention of the show or of this topic on a day of broadcasting. Namely, there were only six tweets marked with this tag and three of them had links to other sources. Two were comments on the actual political situation and one was a retweeted message of another user. These results do not indicate that a discussion on any topic under this tag occurred.

In order to assess whether there might be a discussion on the topic of the offline public sphere on the Twitter, the search by keywords was applied. The search for the name of the

show (*“Puls Hrvatske”*) found three tweets. One of them was a retweeted message with a link to the article posted on another web site whereas two other tweets should be seen as an individual statement of the users. Thus, users @frankuseta and @oresk expressed their dissatisfaction with the show and stressed that they would rather do other things than to watch it. Again, there was no indication of discussion occurring among users. Even the search for other potential keywords related to the topic such as the name of the guests, the terms *“zločin”* (crime), *“ratni zločin”* (war crime) did not provide relevant results. Namely, there were tweets that contained some of these words but in the different context, such as the assassination of Osama bin Laden, for example. No relevant results emerged even when the search was extended to the entire study period. Therefore, it appears that at least at the time of the study there was no discussion on the topic on war crimes, even if that issue was discussed in the offline sphere. Since Croatian Twitter users remained completely disinterested for the topic discussed in the mainstream media it appears there might be a discrepancy between the offline and the online sphere.

If they did not cover this topic, is it possible that users on Twitter engaged in alternative discussions? In order to see if additional topics were raised, again the tag *“#politikaHR”* is analyzed. In days from May 2 to May 5 there were in total only 19 tweets. Again, they do not cover the topics presented in the offline sphere although they seem to deal with many other issues ranging from comments on specific political party to those commenting statements of the prime minister. What is particularly interesting is that again the results do not imply vivid discussions as was expected in the beginning of the research. Namely, out of 19 tweets, 15 contained links to other sites, predominantly to the news and 2 tweets should be considered as comments on a certain topic. There is only one tweet on May 5 that indicates that a conversation between users took place. This conversation occurred between @mrak and @kegnatz. They exchanged a couple of tweets and did not engage in a more elaborate

discussion. Moreover, this conversation concerned a topic that was completely different from the offline common concern issues. However, even in this case a lack of extensive debate is present.

6 May - *Peti dan*

There were three topics that were discussed in this talk show: the murder of Osama bin Laden, the case of the corruption among Croatian border patrol officers, and the question on how Croatia changed between the two visits of the Pope. Although the assassination of Bin Laden represented the breaking news of that week and was discussed between Twitter users, this topic is not believed to have immediate repercussions on the lives of Croatian citizens and therefore should not be perceived as an issue of common concern. Other two topics on the other hand concern more directly the Croatian political community and its citizens and the analysis will therefore focus on them.

During that week between 2 and 6 May neither one of the topics of the show have been discussed under the tag “#politikaHR”. In order to determine if there has been discussion that was not marked with that tag, I looked for the following keywords: “papa” (the Pope) and “carinik” (border patrol officer) “korupcija” (corruption). For the keyword “papa” there were no relevant results during that week. Again, it appears that Twitter users completely disregarded this topic and that they obviously did not consider it equally important as the host of the television show did. The search term “korupcija” gives several results between May 4 and May 6 but these are predominantly links to the news sources. There was only couple of tweets in which users expressed their opinion on the action of arresting the corrupt officers. The most interesting among these is posted on May 5 when the user @renatolubina commented on the fact that the Minister of Internal Affairs boasts how they successfully

combat corruption at all levels yet according to the user, the corruption is widespread precisely thanks to ruling establishment. The search for the term “carinik“ provides more results, again predominantly those with links to other news sites. Couple of users commented on May 5 and May 6 on the corrupt border patrol officers. Thus, several users like @tourette and @riapostol notice how profitable their occupation might be. As before, the search results do not indicate there was a discussion on this topic occurring between users.

#### May 9 – *Puls Hrvatske*

The topic of discussion of *Puls Hrvatske* on May 9 was war profiteering and the newly adopted criminal law on this issue. This topic should have been rather interesting for Croatian citizens especially since a number of dubious privatizations from the early years of the country’s independence have never been fully resolved. On May 9 there were in total 11 tweets tagged with “#politikaHR”. Most of them only provided links for other news sources and neither one of them mentioned the issue of privatization. Not even the search for “privatizacija” (privatization) or “ratni profiter” (war profiteer), which included the entire study period, did not provide evidence that this topic was discussed among Twitter users. The search by the keyword “Bilić” (the surname of the host of the show), gave more results with a couple of tweets commenting his performance as a host. Thus, users @MarinaKovac1 and @Perobrk expressed their dissatisfaction with his conducting abilities and the selection of guests. Aside from this, results again do not indicate that a debate developed on this topic. The keyword search with a title of the show revealed more dissatisfied users. Thus, @dbagic believes that the main problem of Croatia is not in its politicians but lies elsewhere and the show “Puls Hrvatske” proves it. The same user had several more comments during the show but results do not indicate that he stirred up any discussion.

May 13 - *Peti dan*

The topics of the show were the return and possible extradition to Croatia of the former Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader, the Bologna process and recently proposed reform of the higher education system, and the issue of a large number of shopping centers that appear to emerge everywhere. As before, I analyzed first the tweets from the day of the show tagged “#politikaHR”. This search revealed a small number of tweets, only 4 on that day. All of them provided links to news sources with only one of them covering one of the topics that were discussed in the show. The latter tweet was posted by @skukolja who provided a link to a blog commentary on a new high education law.

I expanded my search and analyzed the timeline by using the following keywords: “Sanader”, “Fuchs” (The surname of the current Minister of the Science) “Ministarstvo znanosti” (Ministry of science) “Peti dan”, “sveučilište” (university) and the names of each guest in the show. Not many results were obtained. Although on the day of the show there were several tweets mentioning Sanader, they did not deal with his extradition but offered general comments on his account. Other tweets contained the links to the news that mentioned his surname. The results do not indicate that any discussion regarding Sanader’s return developed. Actually, even in cases when there was a conversation between users, they did not discuss the question of Sanader’s extradition. Instead, they were joking on his account. For example, on May 14 the user @igor\_jurilj shared a link to a satiric poem written using the Edgar Allan Poe’s “the Raven” as the basis. The poem was supposed to illustrate how former prime minister wrote letters from the cell in Salzburg to one of his former party colleagues. Even in the next days, a keyword “Sanader” does not produce relevant results.

The search for keywords “Fuchs” “ministarstvo znanosti” “Peti dan” both on the day of the show and afterwards did not produce results that would indicate that a discussion on

topics tackled in the show developed or that these topics raised a particular interest among users. However, the search for a term “sveučiliste” revealed that in the morning of 13 May there was a discussion between two users; @drmalaway and @ipsilongen. The discussion begun on May 12, before the show was broadcasted, and continued the next day in the morning. By observing the timelines of these two users it appears that the stimuli for the discussion was a misunderstanding. Namely, @drmalaway reacted to the news that the Rijeka University allegedly accepted the proposal of the new law on higher education while the tweet by @ipsilongen indicated that this might not have been the case. This example shows that after all there is some discussion on topics of general concern among Croatian Twitter users.

May 20 – *Peti dan*

One of the permanent participants of the show, Slaven Letica was not present, so this time the show hosted only three disputants instead of regular four. The topics it covered were the Croatian accession to the EU, the question on how the world will look like in 25 years and the sexual harassment scandal involving the IMF chief. Among mentioned topics the one which dealt with the EU accession seems to qualify as the issue of common concern and is hence of the particular interest for this research. This is because the EU accession is expected to have an impact on many citizens and consequently discussing it may be in the interest of many.

In order to determine whether this topic has indeed been perceived as an important political issue among Twitter users, first the tag “#politikaHR” is analyzed. On May 20 there were only 12 tweets. Five of them were users’ comments on current events, while all others were links to news sources covering actual topics such as corruption. There was only one tweet involving the EU, but in a different context. Namely, the user “@bruno\_AFK” was making fun of the “end of the world” ideas. Thus, he stated that the world would indeed end



had the prime minister announced that we are not joining the EU. After checking the user's timeline, it is obvious that this comment did not initiate any further conversation.

The search of the timeline by the keyword "EU" reveals, as expected, that this topic indeed inspire users. Thus, every day in our research period there were tweets containing this keyword. However, this does not mean that all the tweets contained relevant results as this abbreviation is used in many contexts and even by users from other countries. The analysis of the timeline reveals that although there were numerous mentions of the EU predominantly in a form of links to other news sources, there were limited indicators of discussion. For example, on May 12 the user @bojanbernik commented the new radio advertisement for the EU accession. He stated that it seems convincing despite the fact it claims that the alternative to the entrance to the EU is the return to the 90s. Namely, the 90s are usually associated with the war and a period of economic backwardness and political isolation.

On May 17 there was an extensive discussion between @scuba\_ri and @HKomljenovic on the topic of the EU and the question on how economically beneficial the accession will be for the country. The user @HKomljenovic took a more skeptical stance toward the EU accession whereas other user was more pro-EU. After exchanging a number of tweets in a rather polite discussion, the communication between these users terminated without any conclusion. On the same day, there were some other discussions on this topic between @HKomljenic and @Vegizinho, for instance.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Discussions such as those about the EU or concerning the reform of the university might provide some optimism for the potential of Twitter to act as a public sphere. Namely, other results produced none indication that a discussion on politically relevant topics, such as those represented in the talk shows, occurs. The results also indicate that in most cases discussions on Twitter do not emerge at the same time when related topics are tackled by the mainstream media. It appears that in this aspect there is none, or limited connection between the online and the offline spheres. This may indicate two things; either that given topics have been discussed on Twitter earlier, or that the common concern issues presented in the offline public sphere somehow do not concern Twitter users. Namely, the study showed that a number of topics that television talk shows tackled remained completely absent from the Twitter, even when a search involved a wider time span.

There might be several reasons for this. Firstly, news reach Twitter fast and then spread in the matter of seconds. Thus, many actual events might have already been the topic of conversations immediately after they happened. This might explain why in the study timeframe there was no discussion of the issue of the prime minister's extradition, for instance. Twitter users might have considered that topic as old news and since no new events in that story happened; it did not raise their interest. Secondly, the broadcasting time of the talk shows might also have influence on the impact the show has on Twitter users. This is especially the case for the show *Peti dan* that broadcasts on Friday evenings when politics for majority of Twitter users is probably not the first thing on the mind. Finally, it is possible that Twitter users actually do not watch selected shows. There is no data on television watching habits of Croatian Twitter users and/or on the impact that television has on the overall online

community. It is therefore yet to be seen whether future studies will confirm or dismiss the last possibility.

The starting assumptions of the study were that the discussions in the offline sphere will be more rational-purposive, i.e. that their intention will be to create public opinion and that discussions in the online sphere will be more consensus-oriented than opinion forming. While indeed discussions in the television talk shows might be considered opinion forming, if nothing else, than because of the overall influence that media has on the public, the results of the Twitter analysis were actually rather pessimistic from the discursive prospective. Online discussions were not as pervasive and as frequent as I initially expected they would be, particularly for the topics of the common concern. Those discussions that were detected appear not to be a consensus based as users solely engage in the exchange of opinion and then at a given point simply stop communicating further. Thus, any issue raised remains unresolved. The purpose of communication in the online sphere is indeed stripped away from potential material interests or consequences, especially since Twitter has less influence on the public than the television does. If they cannot fulfill their material interest, it appears that individuals on Twitter communicate for the sake of it, as was assumed in the beginning.

Furthermore, I expected that the offline public sphere will be more homogenized, at least in a sense that it will provide expression predominately to a specific group of people most notably the elite. This assumption is confirmed. As the discussion on the structural characteristics of the online and the offline public sphere already indicated, the offline public sphere is much more exclusive and status oriented than the online counterpart. This elitism is especially evident in the show *Peti dan* that involves four Croatian intellectuals who are then discussing the given topics without any form of audience intervention.

I also expected the online public sphere to be more diversified as it will provide voice to more different users on different topics. Since after all Twitter does provide access to many users, this assumption is confirmed.

When it comes to the intensity of debate, particularly on political topics, I assumed it would be much higher in the online public sphere. This appears to be incorrect. Despite the more pervasive issues of accessibility and inclusivity that the offline sphere faces when compared to the internet and Twitter, according to this analysis and talk shows used in the sample, the offline public sphere provides for more exchange of ideas and more conversation on political topics than it occurs on Twitter. Therefore, the results of this study did not reflect the great enthusiasm about Twitter and its potential in upholding democracy and stimulating participation. It showed that, at least in the study period, and at least for the political issues that were raised in the offline media, the role of Twitter as a discussion channel was limited. This does not imply that its potential to become a space where various counterpublics emerge disappeared. However, the indicators that such process is happening were not detected during this research. Even by observing the search results of various keywords used in the analysis it can be noted that majority of tweets actually do not involve interaction with other users. Instead, they predominately contain links to other web sites or comments that often do not stimulate any debate. It would not be an exaggeration to state that majority of Twitter users speaks to themselves, and although they do express a pool of different opinions at once, it appears they are all isolated and somehow disconnected from one another. Taking these findings in consideration, the results of another study that showed that 40 percent of tweets are actually a pointless babble do not come as a surprise (PearAnalytics Twitter Study, 2009).

This is not to say that discussions on Twitter do not take place. They do; however, they might not deal predominantly with the topics that have a political relevance and because of that might have been unnoticed during this research. The reason why this may be the case

is because the very characteristic of the Twitter, which is a sub-type of blogs and as such, it inherently, relies on individual expressions and introspections. Hence, Twitter users might be more concerned with their personal issues and may not be predominantly interested in politics.

How do we explain these results particularly the fact that there was a lack of politically relevant discussion on most given topics on Twitter? To an extent, this is connected to the introspective nature of the Twitter as a communication channel. Unlike on television, where discussions are usually limited in time and in number of participants, on Twitter they lack such specific structure as everybody can start, return and leave a discussion at any given moment. Thus in order to avoid conflict it is possible that many users simply stop posting on the topic. This might prevent further development of the debate. Another structural characteristic of Twitter that might hinder the debate is the fact that exchange of information happens there very fast and it is not likely that somebody replies on a tweet older than two days. Consequently, even the life span of a discussion lasts much shorter than it would be on other, more static platforms such as the internet forums or blogs, for example.

These findings indicate that although theoretically Twitter has a capacity to act as a public sphere, according to the results of this study it does so with the limited efficiency. Moreover, its relevance for providing a space for political debate is rather questionable, as discussions on issues of common concern do not happen as intensively as would be expected. Users predominately utilize the tag that deals with Croatian politics “#politikaHR” for sharing links and retweeting and not as a space for contesting the opinions raised by the mainstream media. Because of this, the Twitter’s potential to become a kind of counterpublics to the mainstream media is questionable.

In order to help understand how influential Twitter as a public sphere can be to the politics in general, the further research should cover the questions on how qualitatively discussion differs from the one in the offline sphere, and to what extent discussions on Twitter spill over to the real world to have real effects. In addition, additional research should help us explain how much influence television and other offline media exert on Twitter users, and does the fact that they consume the content of the mainstream media have any influence on the topics they discuss. Finally, all this should clarify the requirements and possibilities for the emergence of the counterpublics on Twitter.

Problems and limitations to the research design I used in this study have already been noted before. Here I would like to stress that this case study has been performed over a rather short period and it is possible that the results would have been different had the sample been taken in a different time. The media, societies and politics are all dynamic processes and hence characteristics of discussions that happen in such environment change as well. Some trends noted in this analysis should be understood as an illustration of the state of the play in a given time. They should also be taken as a stimulus for further research, which would shed more light on all potentials of the internet in general, and Twitter in particular with respect to its role in relatively young democracies such as Croatia.

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