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"Parallel poleis": Towards a theoretical framework of the modern public sphere, civic engagement and the structural advantages of the internet to foster and maintain parallel socio-political institutions

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**'Parallel polis': towards a theoretical framework of
the modern public sphere, civic engagement and the structural advantages of the
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Abstract
The role of the Internet on large-scale demonstrations, as witnessed in the Arab Spring, has been debated and reflects continued interest in the intermingling of social movements and digital technology. Yet behind these large photogenic events stand other less obvious social activity that may be equally profound, particularly in the form of "alternative" institutional frameworks that meet the social needs of individuals than current models. We categorize these "dissident" frameworks as "Parallel polis" as developed by Czech philosopher and activist Vaclav Benda and offer two case studies to support this contention. At the heart of Parallel polis lies the notion that digital technologies are uniquely positioned to reflect and facilitate the political expressions of individuals under low-cost transactions, ease of use and large social network reach possibilities. The sociopolitical ramifications of Parallel polis as conceptualizing the social-technical interaction warrants further discussion.

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Introduction

From a structure and organizational perspective, if not a theoretical one, there is a need to better explicate the relationship between online activity and offline political or civic engagement. By "political or civic engagement" we mean the abilities and means by which human beings express and participate in social institutions that reflect their on-going yearnings for awareness, intentionality, free will, and identity. These yearnings find increasing dissemination in the various digital tools and technologies that now define our lives. Western media, over the course of the *Arab Spring* in 2011, made consistent and persistent mention of the role of Facebook and Twitter in the vast demonstrations that altered the political landscape in the Arab world. Like the *Occupy Wall Street* and the *Indignado* movements in Southern Europe collectively dubbed "Facebook revolutions" (Bennhold, 2012), these extraordinary mass gatherings demonstrate the blending of digital technology and civic participation best captured perhaps by Pickard's "praxis-based democratic theory of technology" (2008:629).

Our goal is not to prove or disprove the connection between technology and these large-scale mass upheavals. Rather, we explore the link between digital technology and political expression insofar as it relates to institutional innovation in the form of *"Parallel polis"* (Benda (1978/1991); initially in the discussion of large social demonstrations and then to more stable alternative digital institutions that our case studies offer. Whatever utilitarian possibilities Parallel polis offers, this is not a discussion on social emancipation, escape or the benefits of being "cured of civilization" (Barzun 2000: 10).

From the standpoint of computer mediated communication (CMC), Dourish (2006) sees in the meeting point between technology and civic expression, or what he calls "space" and "place," as the emergence of "new cultural practices" that "open up new forms of practice within the everyday world, reflecting and conditioning the emergence of new forms of environmental knowing" (NP). Dourish establishes a mechanism for how human beings utilize technology for their own specific social ends. Staying within the same realm of CMC and computer-human interaction, there is in "distributed cognition" the same will towards further (re)defining this intersectional space. In the work of Hollan, Hutchins and Kirsh (2000), as well as Clark 1997 and Hutchins 1999, distributed cognition (or in the case of Clark, "embodied cognition") comes to mean not just to thinking in our brains but also in the interaction with the (in this case, digital) tools that make up our daily environment. Bardone's (2011) "chance seekers" takes the same cognitive approach in which human beings, interacting with their environment, improve their chance of social advancement through the "affordances" this interaction provides (Gibson 1979, cited in Bardone 2011:63). Parallel polis may in fact be another manifestation of chance seeking behavior. If we follow Bardone's "moral mediators" to its logical conclusion, digital technologies through Parallel polis offer "alternative perspectives… that otherwise would remain unknown" (2011: 129). Likewise, the "Internet can be considered as a community builder," precisely what Parallel polis may do indirectly (Bardone 2011: 141).

Similarly, using the Internet as a "cognitive mediators" (Bertolotti et al., 2011) provide individuals the means to use their environment for problem solving as well as for finding alternative means of expression. If, as these theorists posit, cognition is not

simply in our heads but involved interaction with our environment, then the creation or adoption of new institutional frameworks, or Parallel polis, is simply another way of human beings interacting with their social environment to provide solutions to their perceived needs not being met by existing social forces.

In this fashion, Parallel polis borrows conceptually and substantially from Magnani's "moral mediators," or the capacity of our technologies to serve as guides for our deepest yearnings (2007). "Technologies do not merely add something new to an environment," but contribute something new to it (Magnani 2007: 49). In particular, these technologies add principles of "consciousness, intentionality and free will" (Ibid) that correlate to our definition of civic engagement noted above.

This conceptualization does not imply, as Giere (2004) notes, that individuals give up their agency in the process of distributed cognition, nor that the outcomes are always beneficial or even desired (see "macht activism" in Bertolotti et al. 2011), but it does suggest that the relationship between humans and technology is a spatially and operationally rich (and complex) one. This follows a similar path blazed by adaptive structuration theory (see, for example, DeSanctis and Poole, 1994; Donner, 2007), which regards the complex human appropriation of technology for specific adaptive uses. It also suggests, after Starbird (2011) that the Internet in general and social media in particular offer self-organizing and collective action (see also Palen et al., 2010) through emergent organizations (Starbird's term) that make Parallel polis possible.

This invocation towards operational nuance is not lost on scholars whose work often bridges the gap between technology and society, but who also tend to regard the socio-technical realm in more sanguine terms. Whether CMC enhances or detracts from

digital social bonding (e.g., Gattiker, 2001; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Kraut et al., 1998; Nie and Erbring, 2006), few lay claim that the Internet does not in some fashion encourage civic participation (however fleeting). Both in the guise of informational richness (e.g., Davis, Elin & Reeher, 2004; Moy and Scheufele, 2000), or directly feeding into civic engagement via reduced transactional costs and heightened connections (e.g., Shah, Schmierbach, Hawkins, Espino, and Donavan, 2001; Shah et al., 2002; Zhang and Chia, 2006), digital environments offer a measureable impact on our ability to coalesce around political activity. As Zang and Chia (2006) observe, "[t]he Internet sometimes serves as… a networking tool for civic participation. In essence, the effect of the Internet on civic participation is contingent upon how individuals use the Internet" (284). Or as MacKinnon reminds us, the Internet "is a tool, not a cause of political change" (2008:31). It was never meant to be otherwise.

We should not be surprised, therefore, that specific reform movements (Hankiss 1998) coalesce around the Internet. These movements may represent specific social grievances (Smithey and Kurtz 1999, Zunes, Kurtz & Asher 1999 and Goldstone 2011 for the significance of the Arab Spring), or 'alternative' communities that may signal organizational changes in political activity (Allaste and Lagerspetz, 2011; Hankiss 1988; Lagerspetz 2001).

The riots of December 2008 in Greece, for example, were initially organized by cell phone and emails (personal interviews, August, 2009; key work on the riots is Economides and Monastiriotis 2009). In personal interviews with three organizers of the Indignado movement in Greece in 2011 (May and June, 2011), it is revealed that the protest started because of a Facebook message placed by an 18 year-old. Ditto the OWS

movement, which started by self-organizing groups on the Internet (personal interview, October 15, 2011). OWS, inspired by the Arab Spring protests and instigated by the iconoclastic Adbusters collective in Canada, can be viewed through the lens of Parallel Polis conceptually and in the use of technology. Fundamentally, OWS was a visceral reaction to broad systemic failures in the private and public sector. The collusion of large financial institutions and national governments in the economic collapse and aftermath demonstrated to participants and sympathizers that the "99%" were disenfranchised and faced "paying for a party they were not invited to in the first place." The stated goal was to lay the foundation for a socio-political and economic alternative that promoted the potential of equality. The General Assemblies where group consensus was enacted pointed to the shortcomings of political systems dominated by moneyed interests. The DIY esthetic that dominates Global Justice Movement projects such as Indymedia was prevalent as evidenced by some of the usual suspects and tactics in terms of logistics and the use of new media for coordination and dissemination outside of mainstream media channels. This included ad hoc live video feed streams coordinated by activists spread across the country as well as use of existing systems such as Facebook and Twitter (Gursteen, 2011; Hardt and Negri, 2011). Similar grievances and tactics were evident in the Indignado protests that wracked the European Union during the same time period.

It is here that Vaclav Benda and his conceptualization of Parallel polism is warranted. A member of the dissident underground movement in then Czechslovakia, Benda introduced his short essay in May 1978 in "samizdat" (illicit) form. A year later an English translation was published by Palach Press (see Skilling and Wilson 1991 for a fuller discussion about Parallel polis, including original translated text and commentary;

for Benda, see Cermanova, ND). In it, Benda advised his fellow dissidents rather than overthrowing the oppressive Communist regime at the time, he suggests individual create new social institutions. While he specified the suppressive communist state, any system that is unable or unwilling to meet the sociopolitical needs of a vast number of the public can be avoided in favor of alternative institutions. He referred to these alternative "second cultures" collectively as Parallel polis. When the oppressive regime ended, Parallel polis institutions would replace the existing ones. While he did not live to see his concept realized, in many respects the Internet has captured the essence of Parallel polis. We now focus on two case studies, one loosely associated with a social movement, the other not, to explicate this concept further.

Opting Out: Dissent, Consent, and Alternative Infrastructure

Social movements share characteristics with emergent parallel systems. Historically, social movements were described as a refuge for deviant and disaffected populations unable or unwilling to access the "legitimate" political sphere (Kornhauser, 1959). Tilly (1978; Tilly and Wood, 2009) provides a model perspective to identify social movements as a distinct phenomenon. McAdam's (1982) in his study of the black insurgency proposed a theory of "cognitive liberation" as a key activation formula for the formation of a social movement.

The cooperation or at least the acquiescence of elites within a broadly democratic framework is what allows social movements to function as distinct political forces (Tilly and Wood, 2009). This is similar to role elites played in the parallel or second societies in the former Warsaw Pact nations beginning in the 1970s. Although in this case many of these "second societies" have more to do with marshalling resources to enhance

survival than expressing political claims (Lagerspetz, 2001). This does not quite reach the level of classic social movement resource mobilization (MacCarthy and Zald, 1973) since the efforts are highly localized instead of demands on the existing system.

Conflicts that drive social movements increasingly involve the use and distribution of *internal* resources, as opposed to more traditional labor or class issues that battled over the wider distribution of resources. In information-based societies, collective action increasingly becomes a product of the beliefs and aspirations of the actors involved. Movements signal a deep transformation of complex societies and have the capacity to modernize institutions or create social reform. Everyday life and the individual become intertwined with collective action, which increasingly avoids or ignores political frameworks (Bleiker, 2000). This perspective cleaves much closer to the characteristics of Benda's parallel systems, as the focus is on building community and meeting participant aspirations as opposed to making explicit claims on authorities.

Recently, Coopman (2011) has proposed the idea of *infrastructural movements* whose primary purpose is building alternative systems to meet community needs, such as the Micro Radio Movement and Indymedia (see below). These networks of dissent or "dissentworks" are action-oriented, relational, heterogeneous networks comprised of homogeneous networks/nodes (individuals, groups, or organizations). These emerge via an unofficial consensus on the failure of existing institutions (state or private) or regimes of control to meet community needs enabled and magnified by digital technology.

The question is the relationship between social movement activity (as defined) and development of parallel systems. As Tilly and Wood (2009) caution, social movement organizations should not be confused with the social movements themselves.

Movements are comprised of organizations and individuals linked together in complex

networks (Melucci, 1989; Melucci, 1996). Moreover, the concept of a second society did

not emerge from a political milieu conducive to social movements (Tilly and Wood,

2009) but instead an authoritarian society where traditional social movement activities

were impossible. In fact, the parallel society was a result of the constraints of the system

from which it emerged. Therefore, while it may be productive to examine parallel

systems within the context of social movements (such as Indymedia's relationship to the

Global Justice Movement discussed below) they are no more likely, as a characteristic, be

tied to social movement activity than any other organization or network.

Case Sketch #1: Indymedia

Indymedia, or the Independent Media Center (IMC), is a global network of autonomous

media centers. Indymedia is based around the premise that anyone should have access to

all aspects of the media. Media production and consumption should be a many-to-many

process, presenting the possibility that a much wider variety of people from all cultures

and walks of life could have meaningful participation. This is in contrast to the

traditional one-to-many media approach where control of production and distribution is

left to professionals and managers often employed by non-democratic, profit driven

transnational corporations (Bruns, 2005; Pickerill, 2003).

The IMC was established as a media hub and support center for the 1999 WTO

protests in Seattle. The popularity of the concept quickly spread. In the first two years

two-dozen IMC's appeared around the globe and by January 2006 there are 150 IMCs in

50 countries on six continents (Pickard, 2006a). Operating on open source software, run

by volunteers, and emanating from donated servers, the IMC network is easily the largest alternative media project ever undertaken.

Indymedia operates on an open publishing format. Anyone can upload text or multimedia to any IMC and each story has a space for others to rate, comment, or amend the story over time. Editorial polices vary, with some centers letting anything go while other aggressively hiding postings that violate the collectives sensibilities concerning racism, sexism, inciting of violence, and commercial messages among others. The tensions between a free and open forum, local libel and free speech restrictions, and the pragmatism of operating a functional website are some of the most pressing issues. This system is unique as the collectives that keep them functioning are not the source of most of the news and postings. Rather, the websites from an infrastructure for independent citizen journalists and activists.

A preliminary application of the Parallel Polis framework is illustrative of the potential application to existing social movement phenomena. The Indymedia network is by design and function an open system. The software utilized is open source. The system can be accessed at virtually all levels. Collectives that manage the day-to-day operation of the network and individual nodes agree as network members to be open to the public and their communities. Finally, these sites can be viewed by anyone with Internet access. There is broad identification with Indymedia as a social concept and movement within the broader media democracy and global justice meta-movements. As with most activist organizations and groups, personal relationships are central to creating trust and fostering reciprocity. As Pickard notes (2006b) dedication to radical participatory democratic process is a normative hallmark of the system. Finally, the vary nature of the network is

predicated on the creation of public goods as the movement itself is designed to facilitate actions to sympathetic activists and to provide an alternative source of news and analysis to the public at large. A parallel media system, if you will.

The examination of the network clearly indicates it immense and complex infrastructural properties and its rapid expansion its ability to scale and adapt. Moreover, the lack of substantial outside support, especially at the local level and the lack of paid staff or content indicates its self-sustaining nature. While a virtual tautology for any web-based organization, it also has expropriated a governmental and corporate communication system for its own ends.

This expropriation of existing systems leads us to the discussion of impact on existing systems of control. Impact is difficult to gage (Opel and Templin, 2005). Indymedia has had documented impacts on the large scale protests some of the IMCs were constructed to support, such as the Seattle WTO Protests that degenerated into police riots (Armond, 2001). Police and state security services perceive the system as a threat and have aggressively moved to shut down or disrupt the physical IMC "convergence" centers in both Washington D.C. and brutally in Genoa, Italy. The mainstream press has also showed interest in Indymedia, as a curiosity and an information source. There have been numerous cases of the appropriation of content from Indymedia sites by mainstream media or in clearly challenging the mainstream media parroting of authorities portrayal of events. In the 2001 San Francisco protests against the National Association of Broadcasters Radio convention, local news outlets ran footage shot by IMC journalists. Most famously, the police's contention that they were not using rubber and capsicum bullets on protesters in Seattle were clearly shown to be

lies by evidence documented on the Seattle IMC website. Finally, although less overt, the trend toward the popularity of blogs and other forms of "gatewatching" media (Bruns, 2005) in the years following the launch of the Indymedia network are clearly part of a broader socio-cultural trend. The most obvious examples are Facebook and Twitter (although critically stand alone and for profit entities) and their impacts on media use and information consumption and distribution. Despite the prominence of specific blogs, social networking services, or other open journalism projects, the Indymedia network is the largest and most complex manifestation of this phenomenon.

Employing the Master's Tools: An Expression of the Second Culture

The history of the American Indian is a history of living underneath colonial rule. It is a history where American Indians were transformed from independent nations to that of domestic dependent nations. It is a history where American Indians were often forced to relocate from traditional land bases to alien ones that often accelerated cultural fragmentation and loss. It is a history in which a democratic system that often proclaims the virtue of inclusiveness, while at the same time has enacted laws that create exceptions to inclusion. Finally, it is a history where American Indian imagery, media, and ideology have created and maintained racial formations where American Indians exist in a sub-altern relationship to create and maintain a cultural mythology for the United States, in order to develop a national identity and separate the United States from its own colonial past.

Berkhofer (1979) asserts that the Indigenous Peoples living in what is now known as the Americas did not see themselves as being collectively "Indian" and because of this, Berkhofer contends, that the notion of the Indian, must be a European-American

construction not structured or referring to any notion of an Indigenous reality but is instead based off of "Indian of the White Imagination" which imposed the noble/ignoble savage dialectic upon American Indians. Furthermore, Omi and Winant (1994) examined how race, and racism are processes that reinvent itself continually in order to maintain the illusion of 19th century liberalism and the notion of equality for all peoples while in reality it maintains hegemony and its inherit exclusionary praxis. Bird (1996) posits that this imagining serves to justify European-American cultural dominance.

Deloria (1998) argues that perceptions of the noble/ignoble savage aspects of the American Indian served to create a mythology for the colonizer. The noble savage myth not only expressed the virtues that the inhabitants of the Americas were imagined to possess such as rugged individualism, a pioneer spirit, and a sense of liberty but also became an imagined cultural model of the United States that switched to ignoble savage when resistance to colonization occurred and then was used to justify policy and was perpetuated and performed through various media outlets. In addition, Saxton's (2003) examination of 19th century democracy in the United States that while rooted in liberal ideology that was based off of the enlightenment, operated and promoted inequality based off of exclusionist notions of race, class, and gender while extolling the virtues of being an inclusive democratic society, and perpetuated these notions through print media and the theater that continues to inform us in the present day.

Bernardi (1996) states that American Indian along with other racialized groups, as a character and the genre of the Western has been mainstay for the entertainment industry since the birth of commercial cinema because of its marketability by often presenting the European-American as the hero and turning the American Indian into the villain. Many

of the most important and influential films in Hollywood's history such as D.W.

Griffith's *Ramona* (1910), Delmer Daves's *Broken Arrow* (1950), and John Ford's *The*

Searchers (1956) exploited an imagined threat to white dominance while at the same time

bolstering the greatness of European-American dominance by first showing the depth and

complexities of the European-American hero/heroine while framing most of the

American Indian characters either the archetype known as the noble savage, such as

Tonto who served as a loyal sidekick to the white protagonist or the other archetype

known as the ignoble savage.

Yet with all of this progress of using American Indian actors in mainstream

entertainment projects there still remains very little, if any a program or film being

produced within traditional media outlets that are either made by, or focus in on

contemporary American Indian issues. Part of the problem lies in simple numbers.

According to the 2010 United States Census, approximately 1.7% of the total population

reported to be American Indian, Alaskan Native, or mixed decent. Because of such low

Census numbers access to the current hierarchical structure is limited at best and

insurmountable at worst I contend that the development of potential parallel structures

online is currently the only avenue that American Indians have affordable access to create

space where content culturally relevant to fellow American Indians can be developed and

shared. However, the creation of such a space can be problematic often due to limited

resources and it is with this in mind that I now turn to a brief case study of *1491s*, which I

contend has the potential of becoming a parallel polis.

Case Sketch #2: The *1491s*

In Wiping the War Paint off the Lens (2001) Singer argued that with the rise of both an American Indian Films, such as Peter Bratt's *Follow Me Home* (1996) and Chris Eyre and Sherman Alexie's *Smoke Signals* (1998) that there would be a Renaissance of Native production that has yet to be realized. This lack in realization has to do in part with what Hollywood sees as not only culturally acceptable, but also financially viable (personal communication). This is also not limited to feature films. For example, Kent McKenzie's *The Exiles* (1961) follows a night in the life of a dozen relocated American Indians in Los Angeles that while critically received, could not find distribution due to the American Indian characters countered the dominant belief that American Indians only exist in the past by proving on film that American Indians exist in modernity (personal communication). In addition, Aufderheide (2008) points out that *The Video In the Villages Project,* which began in 1987 and continues to this day**,** Indigenous produced videos were initially rejected by the global north because the content created did not fit the audience's expectation of what anthropological and ethnographic video were supposed to be.

There has been prior effort to develop an economically viable American Indian online network in the United States and that effort was *Rednation.com*. In 2006 *Rednation* attempted an online network that failed because of the limits of its infrastructure, that is, it attempted to stream both pre-recorded and live content before bandwidth and streaming technologies were affordable. This coupled with *Rednation's* inability to raise venture capital or advertisers hamstringed their efforts to such an extent that all that is left of this site is a placeholder page. It can be argued that the use of mainstream social media sites is a much more viable option for minority populations due

in part to lower overhead, potential access to a larger audience base, and greater
flexibility in the type of content that can be produced as is being attempted by *The 1491s*.

According to their website, *The 1491s*, "is a sketch comedy group, based in the
wooded ghettos of Minnesota and buffalo grass of Oklahoma. They are a gaggle of
Indians chock full of cynicism and splashed with a good dose of indigenous satire. They
coined the term All My Relations, and are still waiting for the royalties. They were at
Custer's Last Stand. They mooned Chris Columbus when he landed. They invented
bubble gum. *The 1491s* teach young women how to be strong. And…teach young men
how to seduce these strong women." The first thing that one notices on their website is
that there is no obvious form of advertising. In addition, their home website is very
simple. Instead of maintaining their primary website, *The 1491s* have turned their
attention to using three of the most currently popular social media sites, Facebook,
Twitter, and You Tube.

Though the use of these three popular social media sites, *The 1491s* have solved
many issues that can arise from creating and delivering content**.** First, they have
eliminated the need to raise capital either through venture capitalists or advertisers to
cover the overhead costs such as paying for server space, dedicated webmasters, and
bandwidth costs that plagued *Rednation.com* and led to its eventual demise. Second is
the promotion of new content. Through the use of both Twitter and Facebook, *The 1491s*
are able to gather subscribers or "likes**,"** push out notices of new works available online,
promote live performances, or comment on issues of the day. Third, by using You Tube
The 1491s are able to distribute original content to a global audience that is not tied to a
demanding programming schedule that is the norm for both terrestrial and online media

networks. Finally, *The 1491s* can and produce work that in the case of *Slapping*

Medicine Man, directly plays with a common misnomer that tribal shamans dispense

wisdom through a thoughtful manner. Or, in the case of *Blood Quantum Leap*, a parody

of *Quantum Leap*, addresses the issue of blood quantum, that while a full discussion

regarding this beyond the scope of this section at its basic level, blood quantum is a

federally imposed measurement that determines if you are or are not indeed a member of

a tribal nation or nations or merely a descendent of one that has received harsh criticism

within the American Indian community.   Finally, *Geronimo E-KIA: a poem by the 1491s*

was a direct political response to the code name given to Osama Bin Laden when Seal

Team Six was sent to eliminate him. This video is their most political, as it is a direct

multi-vocal response to the inappropriate use of the name Geronimo who is seen in the

American Indian community as a hero who fought to defend his homeland and way of

life as a code word for the most hunted man on the planet.

While both *Rednation* and *The 1491s* were/are unique in their missions to provide

content for American Indian audiences that are counter-hegemonic both have had

different results. Where *Rednation* has effectively gone offline due to trying to develop

an online media network with the intent of producing broadcast quality programming that

now unfortunately exists as an echo online, *The 1491s* continue to produce interesting

works that have no set program schedule, and are viewable, but are not at the broadcast

quality that *Rednation* was attempting to produce**.** In addition, *The 1491s* have partnered

with other American Indians groups, such as the American Indians at Dartmouth College,

which has expanded the types of available content. It also suggests that, as Benda

asserted, a parallel system. In this instance, it is a parallel online media system ironically

embedded in an arguably hegemonic commercial mainstream online venue that functions as a vehicle to address a human need.

Discussion

These two case studies demonstrate, perhaps in inchoate form, the initial stages of parallel institutions. Conceptually, both offer models of resistance to existing mainstream systems that clearly – whether in terms of access to a wider pool of news information or representation by a dominant culture inherently inimical to a minority's identity – indicate the ability of social sub-groups to create their own parallel institution to meet specific social needs. These models have existed throughout human history, but it is the efficiency and cost advantage of digital technology that places such alternative communities on a greater "social framework" than ever before. Conceptually speaking, we divide social framework into three main themes and sub-themes:

Open System	Digital Infrastructure	Social Impact
Relational	*Self-sustaining*	*Social/Cultural Effects*
Normative	*Expropriation*	*Public (i.e., governmental) reaction*
Public Good	*Scalability*	*Private (i.e., corporate) reaction*

Benda's (1978/1991) conceptualization of Parallel polis was broad and does not lend itself to empirical study. Therefore, based on our preliminary case studies and comparisons to existing theoretical frameworks we have established a sketch of our parallel polis perspective that would lend itself to more social scientific empirical testing.

The perspective consists of three primary areas, each with three sub-sections. Rather than a threshold that a case would reach to be considered a parallel system under these measures, we see this as a matter of degrees, or a continuum.

The first category is "Open System." A parallel system must be open, as in open source, with relatively unencumbered entry and exit of participants and absent of coercion. Under this open system, a parallel framework is fundamentally relational. That is, a voluntary system is based on relational elements (Mische, 2003). The more variability in the message or idea the more likely it will port across culture and social differences. Moreover, strong and weak relational elements form the foundation of voluntary associations. There needs to be standard norms of acceptability and functionality in any emergent structure, as there is no coercive framework, norms are an important cohesive element (Jetten, Spears, and Manstead, 1996).

Since the online world has from the beginning of its creation in the 1960s in academic and military circles modeled under "open systems" where participants shared information with each other (after all, that's how the Internet system itself got started), "Open System" is a key feature of parallel polis. What Indymedia do not share with existing mainstream media systems is their capacity for interactive sharing amongst its members and participants. Like the "process book" or "Wikipedia," Indymedia as a species of information gathering and dissemination, addresses notions of what constitutes the "public good?" In this respect, there is a normative function to their broadcasting character: Indymedia and 1491s exist for the soul purpose of their members and by providing them and the wider public notions of how we relate to the outside world that

truly reflects their own standards of decency and human integrity. Both these **networks** encourage human expression, human exchange and human understanding.

The Internet allows, as Castells (2004) argues, access to not only greater sources of information, but human expression never before conceivable on such a grand scale. It is this scaleability, that along with sustenance and appropriation, make up what we term "digital infrastructure" that provide the backbone to a parallel polis. This scaleability is most visible with Indymedia that started out as one sole enterprise in Seattle during the WTO ministerial in 1999 and suddenly saw chapters created throughout the globe in a relatively short time. Because parallel institutions such as Indymedia fall outside traditional public or private models of socio-economic of maintenance, they can be more flexible in how their community works. Indymedia began with borrowed or discarded equipment, with sweat equity as a guiding principle rather than capital underwriting by financial firms (although several technology companies provided donations). While some corporate or private sources exist to underwrite the mission of 1491s, the volunteers that are recruited to help sustain the organization shows social capital may drive this enterprise. Presumably this social capital is the result of committed individuals who find 1491s better expresses and captures their social needs than any other existing mainstream institution.

The third aspect of the social framework of parallel polis is perhaps the most difficult to express and capture – "Social Impact." Human history has repeatedly shown that alternative or parallel systems do have impact on community life – from black market groups to the Illuminati or Freemasons, society has rarely been immune to the influence of such alternative groups. At the same, there have been reactions from

existing mainstream organizations towards these alternative groups, often resulting in social approbation if not worse (i.e., jailing and social ostracization). By dint of an alternative group's social stigmatization by a powerful social or political organization (usually the existing government), this is indicative that some social influence has taken place that warrants its oppression by existing mainstream entities. This impact is often hard to quantify, since alternative organizations hide themselves in the face of threats from the outside. The relative transparency of Indymedia and 1491s places them in a different light. Parallel polis is not about secret societies, but organizations whose relative openness places them into a different universe. It is the organizational capacity of the Internet that perhaps fundamentally alters our view of these sub-groups.

The sub-themes that appear under each major category are representations of social framework that work in complex ways. The goal is to capture this complex dynamism, yet with the caveat that the Parallel polis cannot fully capture, nor explain, the mechanism by which social institutions achieve Parallel polis status. At least one of the sub-themes must be present in each category; for example, our case studies indicate that under "Open System," Indymedia operates as a relational enterprise funded and supported by its members and contributors as much as it operates for their benefit, at the same time that a notion of the "public good" is inherent in its mission statement. Concurrently, 1491s as an emerging Parallel polis operates within the same "Open System" elements: namely, it's a relational entity by virtue of social and communicational exchanges within its structures, as well as promoting the "public good" by virtue of its existence and its willingness to offer an alternative vision of a marginalized minority to larger society.

Political actors and socials activists have seized the Internet as a primary weapon in dissemination of news and information otherwise not available to them. Considering the escalating cost of media ownership (see Curran, 1991), the Internet provides a ready dissemination tool previously unavailable to generations of social activists, whether in the form of the social demonstrations of Arab Spring or more durably the online entities of our two case studies. Because of the Internet's cheaper transmission and distribution costs, Klotz (2004) argues that this places greater primacy in dissemination of issues rather than personalities, hence increased primacy to social institutional building on the Internet.

The public sphere, "or in more traditional terminology, 'public forum,'" is of particular relevance, since this Habermasian (1962/91) notion captures, perhaps more in normative fashion that in descriptive form, the interplay between media and political participation. The suggestion here is that public sphere, and by extension, civil society, are harbingers of sustainable democratic or "classical liberal theory" (Curran, 1991:29). Civic engagement cannot exist, either in normative or descriptive form, without the stimulus provided by media:

> They distribute the information necessary for citizens to make an
> informed choice at election time; they facilitate the formation of
> public opinion by providing an independent forum of debate;
> and they enable the people to shape the conduct of government
> by articulating their views" (Ibid).

When these three elements are combined into a powerful distribution technology such as the Internet, that facilitates chat rooms and other public for not witnessed in

Habermas's original public sphere – the 18th century salons, cafés and taverns – the question arose as to whether the current public sphere constitutes an enhancement (Dahlgren, 1995) of the model enumerated by Habermas, or a debasement (Habermas himself, 1962/1989).

Conclusion

The churn of such debates often have the trademark of academic occupational intrigue, even as they try to make bona fide attempts at explaining social phenomena. What seems most telling is to simply observe daily life and the Internet's uses: one sees it as an instrument of organization and dissemination (e.g., the inner-city riots in France, 2005) and as an instrument of strategic communication campaigns (see, for example, Bennett, 2004). It is not just the spectacular eruptions of the Arab Spring and its corollaries, but instances such as the "People's Parliament" in Canada that attempts a more grassroots version of the existing Canadian Parliament in Ottawa as well as the "Young People's Parliament" in England that proposes to give greater voice to a newer cohort of citizens. Or, according to Tilly and Wood, the events that took place in March 2008 when "3,000 delegates from 50 civic organizations, social movements, trade unions, and the 'Revolutionary Left' met in Harare and created a People's Convention" (2009: 1). Such attempts are only possible in this heightened digitized era. We may comfortably say that institution building may range from the mundane to the "revolutionary."

In the main, Parallel polis offers intriguing possibilities of socio-political explanation of the dynamics of the Internet: both in political and structural terms. Political by way of offering a critique of existing social institutions that are not meeting the needs of society, and structural in that the means of operating a Parallel polis is now

possible due to digital advances never previously imagined. The possibility of Parallel polis infected the body politic seems ripe; whether this translates into a significant social movement is another issue. But it does fit within existing distributed cognitive structures and even expands it into perhaps a normative process.

This is only a surface treatment of these cases and the application of a Parallel polis framework. The potential utility of such an approach to this type of case is clear. In fact, the application of existing social movement frameworks to this type of phenomenon may miss definitive nuances, such as the importance of autonomous infrastructure and its constructive resistance strategies as process of online community building, but it may signal a start towards better understanding the nature of political expression and social movements in the digital world. Or in the words of one commentator: "It is not so much that the existence of technology changes our consciousness, as the technological determinists believe, but that our consciousness of technology needs to change before there can be any transformation in the way it is used" (Sklar 1994: 317). Parallel polis may in the end help to usher in this transformation.

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