# Social Capital and the Networked Public Sphere: Implications for Political Social Media sites

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## Abstract

*This paper presents a theoretical lens for research on social media use in eParticipation, along with an example case study. The idea of the public sphere and how it can be applied to eParticipation research is presented. The public sphere is discussed in relation to Castell's notion of the network society as the "networked public sphere", and social capital is introduced as a possible explanation for why some people choose to participate while others refrain from doing so. An example case is presented and analysed in terms of the public sphere and social capital. Finally, the argument is made that working public spheres, enacted through various online social media platforms, can contribute to increased social capital and increased political debate among citizens*

## 1   Introduction

Jürgen Habermas' concept of the Public Sphere has been used as the philosophical background for a number of eParticipation studies [1, 2]. eParticipation can be defined as the use of technology for inclusion of citizens in the public discourse [1]. The idea of the Public Sphere as a "place" for reasoned debate provides researchers with a concept that helps explain the importance of eParticipation studies, and several researchers have discussed the importance of creating online public spheres to renew democracy [3-6]. However, few eParticipation studies provide an in-depth description and analysis of the public sphere. The public sphere is treated as a black box, even though there is a vibrant debate going on in other fields of research, such as media studies, on what a public sphere is, how it is created and maintained, and the consequences of different forms of public spheres. As such, there is a need for theoretical clarification of the usefulness of the public sphere concept in eParticipation research.

Jürgen Habermas was first to present the idea of the public sphere, as "that domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed"

[7]. Habermas saw the public sphere as a forum for elite thinkers, not as a space open to everyone, and claimed that in the 20th century the public sphere is said to have declined because of mass communication, the capitalist state and the growth of the middle classes [8]. Other philosophers have argued against this, claiming that the public sphere should include everyone [9] and that the Internet and networks have created a global, networked public sphere [10]. Social media, with its focus on sharing and participation, as well as a steadily increasing user base, could attract even more citizens to participate [11]. Social media also has functionality such as collaboration, discussion and feedback, that could help foster participation [12], and the successful campaign of US president Barack Obama showed us that social media can in fact be an effective tool for political use [13]. Some claim that as much as 70-80 % of all eGovernment projects fail [14]. By moving participation from proprietary government platforms to social media applications, researchers see a potential for attracting more participants [11]. Citizens have already begun using these channels to express themselves politically, through citizen journalism and activism [12, 15, 16].

A related issue is how we can explain participation in public spheres. eParticipation projects often struggle with few users, or users that leave after an initial burst of interest [11] , due to a lack of purpose, etiquette and rules for conversation [17], as well as little collaboration and missing tools for providing feedback [18]. Trust is a central element when explaining social media use [19, 20]. Trust is also a central element in social capital [21], leading us towards the idea that social capital and functioning public spheres are interlinked. Societies with high amounts of trust has a higher degree of civic engagement and community formations, as citizens trust that their own engagement will be reciprocated by other citizens [20].

Social capital refers to "connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them"[21], and can also be understood as simply valued relations with the people around us [22]. A lack

of trust and reciprocity in relations with others can provide some explanation as to why there is a lack of etiquette, collaboration and rules for conversation. At the same time, successful participation in public spheres could well lead to increased levels of social capital [20]. The challenge is to discover how to go about this.

This paper aims to contribute to clarify the value of using the public sphere concept in eParticipation studies by reviewing literature on the public sphere, introduce the concepts of the network society and the networked public sphere, and present social capital as possible explanatory factors for why people participate. The role of social media in creating networked public spheres for eParticipation is discussed, and the argument that increased social capital could be seen as an important outcome of successful networked public spheres is made visible through applying these issues to an example case.

## 2 The networked public sphere

In this section, a brief summary of the public sphere concept, its many interpretations and disagreements is presented, and it is argued that in our current network society, we are moving towards multiple and fragmented public spheres online.

### 2.1 The public sphere

The public sphere concept has different meanings to different scholars. Habermas' original public sphere was restricted to the ruling classes [7], while his colleagues kluge and Negt, concerned with the class struggles of postwar Europe [23], extended the public sphere to include the working classes [9]. In later years, researchers have begun talking about an online, or networked public sphere [5, 10].

The Public Sphere is said to have arisen simultaneously as the nation state, as private citizens began to meet, exchange ideas and form "public opinion" [7]. The semantic meaning of what an "opinion" is and what constitutes a "public" is central to the Public Sphere. It is only when the bourgeoisie (property owners and the upper class) begin to challenge the power of the church and state that it makes sense to talk about a "public" forming an "opinion". Public opinion is the shared understanding of an issue, reached through debate by rational citizens [24]. The public sphere is "an essential component of sociopolitical organization because it is the space where people come together as citizens and articulate their autonomous views to influence the political institutions of society" [10], and having access to an online public sphere includes more people in the public

debate, as many are reluctant to discuss politics in offline settings [25]. It is in light of this that the notion of the Public Sphere is valid as a philosophical backdrop for eParticipation.

Dahlberg has identified six requirements that need to be present in a Public Sphere:

*Autonomy* from state and economic power. Rational-critical discourse involves engaging in reciprocal *critique* of normative positions that are provided with reasons and thus are criticisable rather than dogmatically asserted. Participants must be *reflective*, and critically examine their cultural values, assumptions, and interests, as well as the larger social context. Participants must attempt to understand the argument from the other's *perspective*. Each participant must make a *sincere* effort to make known all information, including their true intentions, interests, needs, and desires, as relevant to the particular problem under consideration. Every participant is *equally entitled* to introduce and question any assertion whatsoever [26]. All of these do not have to present in every forum, but in order to create a Public Sphere we need to see at least some evidence of deliberative debate [27].

There is disagreement as to what we should consider a public sphere. Splichal discusses the public sphere of contemporary European politics, and draws a line between weak and strong public spheres [28]. The former talks about enlightened individuals that meet and construct shared meanings, and who are "members of a complete commonwealth or even cosmopolitan society", while the weak public sphere is concerned with freedom of the press, and the public's right to access information and act as an "effective check on the legislature based on people's distrust" (of the government) [28]. The strong public sphere, which is the one that most resembles Habermas' own visions, is an idealised "space" for a small proportion of the public, based on ideals held by the ruling classes, and have been criticised for excluding certain social groups, and especially for not including the working classes [9]. Others reject the idea of enlightened thought altogether, claiming that modern day media consumers are active readerships who constantly form themselves, change and evolve into something new, and because of this constant evolution we cannot adhere to a set of principles from the past [29]. In the information society it no longer makes sense to talk about bourgeois or working class. We have all become "citizens of the media" (ibid.).

A number of researchers have pointed to the Internet as the location of the modern day public sphere [4-6, 30]. However great the potential, there is some concern about the challenges facing this online public sphere. A case study of womenslink, a forum for

women's organisations in Ireland, showed that the free exchange of ideas was hindered by the institutional affiliation of participants [31]. Others call for patience, claiming that the Internet has not revitalised the public sphere yet, but that there is hope for incremental changes that could revitalise the public sphere [32], and studies have shown that online public spheres are indeed emerging [33-35], especially in social media such as Facebook, blogs and YouTube [10].

Bourgeoisie or working class, elitist or open, weak or strong, on- or offline. There are many variations and many different opinions as to what constitutes a public sphere. It seems clear that Habermas' public sphere is not present in today's society. His idealised public sphere excludes everyone that is not within the cultural sphere of the idealised "Bourgeoisie", and as Hartley (1996) shows, is far from how we view citizens today.

This does not mean that we should think of every conversation as a public sphere. Rather, we should look towards the requirements developed by Dahlberg [26] to ensure that we have an open and inclusive dialogue, where citizens can come together and form public opinion. The next section will examine the concept of the network society, and show how this impacts on the public sphere.

## 2.2 The network society

The functions and processes of society are increasingly organized through networks. Networks influence culture, business and politics alike [36], as institutions in society now operate more as networks and less as closed groups of families or organisations [37]. A network consists of several nodes, and the overlapping and multiple connections between nodes. Nodes can be individuals, organisations, societal institutions, business and government [38]. If we expand the idea to include systems of overlapping networks, one can conceptualise government as a network in itself, and simultaneously as a node in a larger societal network. Conceptualised as a single network, government is closed to people from the outside and operates on its own, as a group.

Conceptualised as a node in a larger interconnected network of individuals, institutions and organisations, we have a tool to examine how government policy is shaped not only by government, but also by the several external nodes that provides government with information and input. This government-as-node view is what makes network theory a powerful theory for examining Public Spheres in eParticipation, as it makes visible the different nodes of a networked Public Sphere [39, 40]. The latter view is supported when we look at how decisions are made globally. Regional and global institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations influence national policy, and are in turn influenced by a multitude of different actors, operating both globally and on the national and local level [40, 41]. From the local and spatially anchored public sphere of the past, new communication technologies and the global media system have created a "multimodal communication space…[that] constitutes the new global public sphere" [10].

The network society theory belongs to the "macro-social…the extended social field of forces" that influence all aspects of society [42]. Ideas and innovations only reach as far as the current macro-social environment allows, and no one knows when, where or how these changes come about, only that they often coincide with technological innovation (ibid.). In the past we have moved from hunter-gatherers, via the agricultural society towards the industrial society and now the network society [36].

Macro-social conditions are seldom linear and clear-cut. Instead we have different paradigms living side by side for prolonged periods of time [42]. The industrial revolution did not happen overnight, and today one could argue that there is a tension between the technocratic bureaucracy of the late post-war era and the culture of collaboration which existed in the early post-war days [42] and which is now emerging again with social media [43]. The network society is one of many competing descriptions of the times we live in [38], and arguably the one which is best suited to explain the success of social media, due to the common focus on the power of the network.

By connecting nodes that would otherwise not be able to find each other, networks can facilitate the formation of communities. Community can be described as the back-bone of civil society, as civic engagement is often channeled through civic organisations, where community formation is a central aspect for the organisation to function as one of society's pillars [20]. Defining community is not easy, as the concept is used for many things in many different contexts. One approach is to separate "community-as-value" and community as descriptive values [44]. Community-as-value brings together a number of values, such as solidarity, trust and fraternity [45]. The common denominator for community-as-value can be interpreted as a description of positive relationships between people, and these values are interlinked with Dahlberg's requirements for the public sphere [26]. It is more likely that communication will be autonomous, critical, reflexive, sincere and inclusive if one is able to form a community based on trust, solidarity and a sense of belonging to a fraternity of civic-minded peers.

Community as descriptive value can be separated into gemeinschaft (volunteer communities) and

gesellschaft (constructed or top-down initiated communities) [46]. For eParticipation studies using the Public Sphere as philosophical backdrop, it is most useful to think about community as gemeinschaft. EParticipation is concerned with voluntary acts of participation [1], where citizens form communities of interest in order to discuss political issues.

The formation and importance of communities for civic engagement were not as big an issue in the past. In the times before communication technologies were introduced, there were no restraints on people's abilities to communicate. The only available technology was the voice of the individual, which was situated within a limited geographical entity. When man began using technology to communicate this changed, introducing power struggles where those who had access to communication technologies held the upper hand. The right to communicate became a political issue, and was often appropriated by the people already in power, and network and community access became important. [28]. A networked public sphere, where every citizen has the right to participate, could well contribute to reduce this imbalance in power.

With the advent of the network society and globalisation of government, we move towards a public sphere that is no longer spatially constrained, and therefore by necessity reliant on communications technologies. The network can facilitate the formation of communities, by tying together nodes of people that would not meet without access to the network, and value-based communities, gemeinschaft, are based on values that correlate with the requirements for a public sphere. As such, we should strive towards facilitating community in our attempts to create a multimodal networked public sphere for eParticipation.

## 3    Social capital

The theory of social capital is useful when discussing the importance of communities in eParticipation. Social capital refers to

*"connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them … 'social capital' calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a sense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital."* [21]

### 3.1    Theoretical constructs

High amounts of social capital have been seen as an explanation for why the Scandinavian welfare societies function as they do. In spite of high taxes, big government and few incentives to work hard, the Scandinavian countries are among the most well off societies in the world [20]. This is explained by the high amount of social capital in Scandinavia, which acts as "grease" for transactions, lowering the cost of doing business as there is less need for formalised contracts and expensive legal agreements (ibid.).

One of the major criticisms of Social Capital is that it is difficult to define and measure. Social capital is often measured as levels of individual and institutional trust. A high level of individual trust lowers barriers to participation and simplifies transactions, as there is less need for written contracts, control and measurement. A high level of institutional trust indicates that government institutions such as police, judicial system and administration are functioning well. Reciprocity, the degree in which people are willing to give something back when they receive something, is another measure of social capital [47, 48]. The level of trust and reciprocity has direct consequences for political participation and people's sense of belonging to a community (ibid.), Without trusting that other actors will carry out a rational debate, and that you will get something back by participating in the discussion, one can assume that there will be little activity and difficult to create and maintain a public sphere [49]. With high levels of trust and reciprocity, individuals benefit from their personal social capital by gaining access to the resources of the people in their network, and groups benefit from the aggregate resources of the group members [50]. For eParticipation this could typically be opinions, ideas, experiences or the skills needed to drive a political initiative forward.

Social capital can further be divided into bonding and bridging, where bonding social capital is the connections between tightly knit individuals in a group (such as the traditional village) and bridging social capital is the connection between different groups, where individuals have ties to two or more groups [21]. Both types are important in the networked public sphere. Bonding social capital allows for tight communities where opionons can be formed and tested, while bridging social capital helps ideas and arguments spread from one community to the next. Recently a third type of social capital was introduced and labelled "maintained social capital", the ability to keep one's connections even when physical proximity is removed [51]. This latter type is related to social media, and the way we maintain relationships through sites such as Facebook and Linkedin.

### 3.2    Applications in previous studies

Yang, Lee & Kurnia [48] have done a review of Social Capital usage in Information Systems studies,

and found a number of studies using the theory. The studies fell into two categories: Measurement of impacts of IT on accumulation and creation of social capital, and the role of Social Capital in the development and use of IT. Typical research topics include knowledge sharing, e-learning, and IT as a connecting factor for rural and geographically dispersed communities (ibid.).

Several eParticipation studies have used social capital as their philosophical basis. A study of social capital in social networking sites (SNS) shows that the characteristics and user population of SNS' is important for the level of social capital and political debate [52]. A study of community media as a channel for eParticipation uses social capital as its interpretive lens [53], and a study of youth engagement in participation argues against Putnam's idea of declining social capital due to time spent in front of screens [54]. As stated by Putnam (2000), social capital appears as trust and reciprocal norms in social networks. Community is essential to social capital [55]. This leads us towards the conclusion that there is a connection between social capital and the public sphere, as per Dahlberg's requirements [26]. As discussed in section 3.2, the values that tie communities together [45] are similar to the requirements for the public sphere. It is a lot more likely that communication will be Autonomous, critical, reflexive, sincere and inclusive if one is able to form a community based on trust, solidarity and a sense of belonging to a fraternity of civic-minded peers, and the community values are central elements of social capital [55]. As such, social capital should function as a good measurement of public spheres.

Another point is that social capital concerns the immediate and personal connections between people and events more than distant and formal relationships with government and policy [55]. If we agree that public spheres are important for democratic societies, this implies that politicians and policy-makers should become active participants in the public sphere, engaging in a direct dialogue with citizens. This would in turn likely lead to increased amounts of social capital, with all the societal benefits this brings (see [20]).

# 4    Example case – social media politics

In this section, the above raised issues are applied to an example case study of a Norwegian political party's online community web site. The analysis shows how combining the networked public sphere with social capital helps us understand how political parties use social media to engage voters and party members .

## 4.1    Case description

The Norwegian labor party runs its own online community for party members and sympathizers, called *MyLabor*. The objective is to inform, facilitate debate and information sharing, and to act as a resource for party members in their work in local party groups. The site is divided into a number of different zones, most of which are geographically based. A zone is a subsection, or site within the site, of the MyLabor web site. Most local and regional branches of the party have their own zone, and there are also zones for the individual party leaders as well as topical zones for campaigning and some high profile political issues.

The site is structured similarly to a blog. The main content is postings and comments, as well as some set pages with information about party activities, election campaigns and other party-related issues. The postings and comments are considered to be the most important part of the site.

The objective of the case study was to examine three of these local zones to uncover who communicates, what they communicate about, and how they do it, as well as to uncover to what degree the three zones can be seen as public spheres. The case serves as a good example of the theoretical implications we can draw from combining the networked public sphere and social capital.

## 4.2    Case analysis

Social network analysis [56] was conducted on multiple levels for the three zones, examining the topics being discussed, the personal networks of people addressing each other in debates, and the people acting as bridges between zones. Further, a descriptive statistical analysis was conducted to examine how many people participate in discussions, the number of comments on each post and which postings get the most comments. Finally, a content analysis examined the communication types people used in comments. A total of 539 postings and 731 comments made between February 2009 and February 2011 have been downloaded and analyzed.

The analysis shows some evidence of community formation in two of the three examined zones. Few people comment regularly, and a majority of the examined postings have only one comment or no comments at all. However, there is a core community of six people in each zone, who contributes regularly and helps maintain some sort of network. In the third zone, there is a core  community of 12 people who comment regularly, address each other by name, and

who seem to know each other well enough to hold lively discussions on a number of issues.

This type of bonding social capital is very important to the debate. In all three zones, the core community members are addressing each other by name, referencing other discussions they have had in the past, and are using a type of language (greetings, references to common experiences and previous debates) that suggests these are people who have online friendships.

Further, the social network analyses show that even though there are few people participating, there is some evidence of weak ties between the three zones. Two people have commented in all three zones and seven people have left comments in two of the zones. These weak ties help spread ideas between the zones, and we can say that these people have a high degree of bridging social capital, as the content analysis shows that they play an important role in the spreading of ideas between different local party groups by sharing what is being done on specific issues in other local groups. Without these bridges, the zones would be silos, and ideas would not leave the immidiate, bonding network that constitutes the individual zone. Bridging social capital helps spread ideas and information, and allows the zones to act as nodes in the larger party network, rather than simply remote villages where no outside influence reaches the core community.

The topical and person to person network analyses strenghtens the impression from the descriptive analysis. There are few people except the core participants discussing more than one topic, or addressing more than one other person. The exeption is the third zone, where three central nodes make a lot of comments, which again generates answers from others. These three inner core members of the community strenghten the ties between both topics and people, and as such could be seen to the ones with most personal social capital. Their personal social capital also adds to the community, in that their discussions attract others, who then contribute to create some very lively and educational discussions. We also see that participants trust that they will be met with some degree of civility and reciprocity in the form of responses to their arguments, which makes them contribute more to the discussions. Comments and arguments generate more comments and arguments.

We also see that participants who are met with sarcasm or silence, what we could call a lack of reciprocal respect, experience a lack of trust in the community and leave after making one or two comments.

There is also some evidence of maintained social capital between some of the participants in the most active zone, as the most active participants are members of different political parties and therefore not likely to have personal relationships offline. There are also participants from the central party organisation, praising the local party for their efforts in creating an online discussion space. Many of these ties between people who only meet online could be said to be personal. People seem to know each other even though they only meet online.

The content analysis further helps us identify the presence of a networked public sphere. In terms of Dahlberg's criteria [26], the findings vary. As the zones are part of the ruling Labor party's own network, we cannot say that the MyLabor site is autonomous from the state. However, the debates on the site are not moderated and open to everyone, and in that sense the site is autonomous.

In terms of a rational-critical discourse and reflexive arguments where participants attempt to understand the perspective of his/her opponents, findings vary. There is evidence of a rational-critical discourse in some discussions, while others have a lot of irrational or ungrounded comments. In some cases the discussion is far from reflective, while other cases show the opposite. Discussions will sometimes wander off-topic, and lead to other unrelated debates.

The only point where Dahlberg's criterion is truly met is inclusion. Everyone can create an account and participate, and there is, according to the moderators, no censorship of the possible topics or issues being raised.

Although not all of the criteria are met, we should still consider the zones to be part of the networked public sphere. There is evidence of some deliberation, important political issues are discussed, and there are weak ties between the different zones that help spread ideas.

The community in the zones can be seen as Gesellschaft (forced) because the community is created by the central party, and most postings are made by party officials. However, in the cases where participants comment and conduct a lively and strong debate, those postings are transformed into gemeinschaft (volunteer) communities based on trust and reciprocal actions, where social capital plays a role in the community's formation and maintenance. One of the most interesting findings from the content analysis is that there is a "metacommunication" debate going on between some of the regular contributors, where they discuss how to conduct debates, the language which is and is not suitable to use, and other issues related to what they want the community to be like. Such actions are more likely to occur when the participants have a true sense of community [57].

The MyLabor site is arguably a strong public sphere. While the examined zones do not strictly adhere to Splichal's [28] idealized description, the participants in the zones do meet and they do construct shared meanings through the discussions. And as Hartley [29] shows, the other criteria for a strong public sphere should be considered obsolete in our times, due to their elitist bias.

Finally, there are instances where discussions in one zone have been lifted up and used in other sources, such as mainstream local media, which again adds to the networked public sphere, or network of multiple public spheres, if you will.

The findings from this analysis are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of case observations**

| Theory | Concept | Case observations |
|---|---|---|
| Public sphere | Dahlberg's criteria | Partially present: autonomous discussions, inclusive debates, some reflection and some rational-critical discourse |
| | Network society | Ties between internal core actors and between different zones contribute to maintain a networked community |
| | Gemeinschaft community | Metacommunication and tone between participants contribute to Gemeinschaft |
| | Weak/strong | Has aspects of strong public sphere, but not all of them |
| Social Capital | Bridging | A total of ten people contribute in more than one zone, acting as bridges. |
| | Bonding | Each zone has a core community that contributes regularly, and who seem to know each other |
| | Trust & reciprocity | Plays a big role. Trusting relations and reciprocal actions contribute to participants' staying. Lack of reciprocity makes participants leave. |
| | Maintained social capital | A fair proportion of the participants only meet online, but still address each other as if they have a "real" relationship |

## 5 Discussion

The definition of the public sphere as "that domain of our social life in which such a thing as public opinion can be formed" [7] is what makes the public sphere such a useful concept for eParticipation, as the purpose of eParticipation is to engage citizens in political debate [1]. The public sphere provides us with an established concept of participation that is easily understood across disciplines, as well as by the general

public. However, for something to be called a public sphere there needs to be some evidence that the communication we are observing is autonomous, critical, reflexive, sincere and inclusive [26]. Aside from Habermas' definition [7], there is much disagreement on what the public sphere is, if it exists at all, how to measure it, and if the Internet can be seen as a public sphere. The author's opinion on this matter is that those who call for a public sphere that is in line with the bourgeois ideals of the past are in the wrong. As Hartley [29] and Poster [6] show, the public of today is different from the public of the past, and this means that we should not judge the present with the ideals of the past. The modern day public sphere is not freed from rules, but in a globalised, fragmented and multi-faceted world, we need to allow for a variety of voices and forms of communication. In the MyLabor case, the moderators have taken explicit steps towards this, by acknowledging that by opening up for debate, they are also inviting those who are not well trained in the current political communication paradigms. This is also being discussed in "meta-communication" debates among participants in the discussion.

As to the argument of whether or not the Internet constitutes a public sphere, the answer depends on how you stand in the question of what a public sphere is. Supporters of the bourgeois public sphere would most likely say that the Internet is not a public sphere, because of its fragmented nature, and the tone and style of much of the discussion going on online. However, by the standards set by Hartley [29], Poster [6], Castells [10] and others, the Internet (along with the traditional media and face to face meeting places) constitutes the modern day public sphere, albeit a fragmented one, where different communities meet to discuss a huge number of different issues. Some more politically oriented than others, but all contribute in their own way towards creating not one, but several "public opinions". As Hartley [29] shows, there is no single public in the information age, but a fluid and constantly evolving readership that forms and reforms itself as different communities form in response to current affairs. This is reflected in the three examined zones of the MyLabor web site where, apart from a few core members, different groupings of people will "meet" in discussions of different topics.

One reason why we need to look online for the modern day public sphere is that more and more of society is organised through networks [36, 37]. Networked community values bear many similarities to the requirements of the public sphere [26], and the global nature of present day politics means that we need to embrace the network in our conceptualisation of the public sphere [10], and talk about the networked public sphere. The networked public sphere exists, as

already pointed out, as many fragmented "mini spheres". In a networked and interlinked world, it is no longer the case that all of us meet in the same forum and discuss the same issues. Rather, there are many communities discussing many different issues, that link up to form the public sphere of the network society.

Social media is a child of the macro-social changes brought about by the network society. In social media, we can connect otherwise fragmented pieces of information, and with the enormous user base (according to alexa.com, social media sites are among the most visited sites in the world), reach out to a global audience. Citizens are already using social media for civic, political and activist purposes [12, 15, 16], and the successful campaign of US president Barack Obama [13] shows that the public sphere is alive and well in social media. The networked nature of social media could also facilitate gemeinschaft-like communities online, in a time where the fragmentation of family structures and an increasingly mobile population threatens to tear apart gemeinschafts such as families and neighbourhoods. However, there are still obstacles, as the current macro-social conditions society is not clear-cut. There is still a tension between the technocratic bureaucracy of the late post-war era and the culture of collaboration in the network society.

As the example case shows, Social Capital is well suited for research on public spheres in eParticipation, as it measures the power of connections between people. Social Capital can be used to explain the ties between social media users, and can also function as a tool for explaining why social media applications have become so popular in such a short amount of time.

Social capital and social media are both concerned with networks, communities and with helping the people around you and Social Capital as theoretical lens provide us with a good explanation of the reasons why so many people take part in online communities, seemingly without getting any rewards for their contributions. Because of the interconnected values of social capital, communities, networks and the public sphere, social capital could act in two ways, both as a determinant of participation, and as an outcome of participation. High levels of social capital strengthen participation, and participation in turn leads to even higher amounts of social capital.

## 6    Conclusion

The paper has shown the theoretical insights of applying social capital and the networked public sphere on social media use in eParticipation. The concept of the public sphere is presented, and it is argued that there is a great deal of disagreement on how it is defined. Further, it is argued that eParticipation studies using the public sphere as their philosophical backdrop should acknowledge these disagreements. Habermas' ideal public sphere is not present today, we should instead strive for an open and inclusive public sphere, where citizens can come together and form public opinion based on ideals of an open, critical and inclusive debate.

Macro-social changes are moving us from the industrial and towards the globalised network society, which introduces the need for communication technologies in order for a public sphere to function. Networks facilitate community formation, and communities thrive on values that are similar to those of the public sphere. Thus, facilitating community formation should also facilitate the creation of a multimodal networked public sphere, which exists simultaneously on- and offline and in a number of different media, where social media is one of the most important.

As the example case shows, Community values and the public sphere are linked with social capital, which acts as "grease" for interpersonal transactions and communication. As such, social capital should function as a good measurement of public spheres. We should also expect to see increasing levels of social capital in those who participate in public spheres, making social capital both a requirement and an outcome of a working public sphere
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### 6.1    Limitations and possibilities for further research

The public sphere is conceptualised in many ways and in different fields of research. While I have attempted to cover some of the current debate on the public sphere, there is a need for more research on how we conceptualize it. The same can be said for social capital, where there is little agreement on how we should measure it. However, as a theoretical concept used to explain why some people participate and others do not, social capital is still useful.

In addition, there are other forms of intangible capital (cultural, political) that could further explain participation in public spheres, and research should be conducted on these.

Finally, the presented lens could be improved by an increased focus on technology, by conceptualising the IT-artefact as a networked Information Infrastructure.

## 7    References

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