# 4 'Who do you think we are?'

*– A content analysis of websites as participatory resources for politics, business, and civil society*

The World Wide Web has consolidated itself as a common communicative arena for highly diverse political, economic, and cultural interests in contemporary society. The websites of political parties, state agencies, business corporations, NGOs, and even local communities or individuals, seek to interest, and possibly involve, the general public in their specific issues and agendas. This study presents a content analysis of a broad range of websites from different social domains and areas of the world. Their ways of addressing users project a particular organizational identity, while at the same time anticipating certain kinds of agency by users, from information collection to communicative interaction and concrete interventions into established social institutions and ongoing controversies. The findings suggest that the participatory potential of websites in these regards is more limited than has frequently been assumed by both research and public opinion, also in national settings with high levels of digital and economic development. The configuration of website functionalities or affordances, in fact, bears witness to distinctive ways of simulating or avoiding participation and interaction in different social domains. While some previous research has called for a 'politics of representation' concerning media representations of citizens and their interests, this article concludes by introducing a 'politics of interactivity' that might assess the use value of websites and other interactive media for citizens as they participate in the structuration of society.

# Introduction

During the past decade, the World Wide Web has come to be employed routinely by political parties, corporate business, and social reform movements alike as a means of generating attention for their issues and agendas, and as a public space in which conflicting interests can be negotiated. So far, however, empirical studies have tended to examine the websites of different social sectors separately (for a review, see McMillan, 2000). The present study compares a broad sample of websites originating within several key institutions of contemporary politics, economy, and civil society. One aim is to produce a baseline account or overview of how various social actors present themselves on the web. Another aim is to explore the extent to which different types of organizations rely on similar communicative strategies in order to express their broadly political interests in the same arena. The web amounts to one shared cultural forum (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1984) in which definitions of issues and agendas, ends and means, are articulated and contested in public.

A common denominator for the analysis of otherwise diverse websites is available in the *forms* of communication by which they address and engage the user. The presence or absence of concrete functionalities – from discussion groups and downloads to newsletters and votes-of-the day – bears witness to the social profile of the organization behind a given site. Such elements, moreover, anticipate particular forms of user involvement, both at the interface and beyond – in the diverse political, economic, and cultural contexts embedding websites and citizens. Particularly in the case of interactive media, research must ask not merely what media may do to people, but also what people can do with media (Katz, 1959). The communicative forms of the web are an important part of its message (McLuhan, 1964) – *to* and *about* society.

It should be emphasized from the outset that the present study examines the *potential* of the web for political participation and other kinds of social involvement by the public, not its actualized uses in different constituencies, contexts, or institutions. The focus of empirical attention is on the medium, not its audiences. Within this focus, one advantage of departing from communicative forms and functionalities is that they carry over from online to offline settings. Communication in its many variants – from rallies and whistle stops, to newsgroups and blogs – is an enabling condition of political action. The article examines websites as potential forms of political interaction, discussing whether and how (online) interactivity might facilitate (offline) interaction, as well.

The first section below presents an interdisciplinary theoretical framework for the study of websites, simultaneously as discourses and resources. The argument is made that the concept of communicative affordances, or invitations to interact, may help to integrate social-scientific and humanistic notions of communication, and that the concept of genre may serve to specify the discursive elements of websites as affordances. Following a brief review of previous research on the websites of various social institutions, the methodology section develops a research design for a content analysis of a sample of websites from different social sectors, identifying their formal and generic features. The results of the comparative analysis are reported, and the findings are discussed with particular reference to the potential of websites as participatory resources for the general public in political and other social contexts. The final section outlines a 'politics of interactivity' that addresses some of the implications of the web for citizens' agency, and reconsiders the relevance of form for further research on the social uses of media.

# Technologies, affordances, and genres

One common challenge for research on mediated communication has been how to avoid a determinist notion of technology as a *sufficient*

condition of specific social actions and developments, while recognizing that information and communication technology can be their *necessary* condition. The internet did not lead inevitably to people sharing their music files, but it was one precondition for this practice as well as its consequences in the music industry. In response to a prevalent constructivist trend for the past two decades (for an overview, see Biagioli, 1999), some recent work reemphasizes the invariance of technologies in certain respects, even as they enter into shifting social contexts. An important intervention comes from Hutchby (2001), who argues that radical constructivist positions have taken the "single-minded view that the discourses surrounding technologies are the only phenomena with any possible sociological (and social) relevance" (p. 33). The implication has tended to be that technologies are best understood as either 'texts' or contextual constructs with little permanence. Deriving the concept of 'affordances' from the work of Gibson (1979) on the biology and psychology of perception, Hutchby instead suggests that technologies – like other artefacts and objects – do carry particular properties as potentials. Though neither determinate nor finite, in the sense of being universally predictable, these potentials are actualized and "emerge in the context of material encounters between actors and objects" (p. 27). Just as technologies have certain potentials and not others, the social process of actualizing these potentials under given historical circumstances enable certain forms of interaction and not others.

The concept of communicative affordances reemphasizes the *relationship* between technology and social form, and the concrete *process* in which technologies become resources for particular social purposes. Actualizations often will develop and mature over time; a given potential is actualized as part of a complex setting; and some potentials might never be 'discovered.' Compared to the notion of 'bias' in classic medium theory (described in the Introduction to this volume, p. 19), which tends to focus on the inherent features of full-fledged technologies, affordances point to an ongoing social and cultural 'programming' of technologies (see also Finnemann, this volume, on the cultural 'grammar' of the internet). This last perspective has become

all the more relevant with the coming of digital technologies, compared to the analog technologies that were at the center of early medium theory (Innis, 1951). The social shaping of digital technologies occurs over time in a variety of stages and settings, so that, for example, affordances that have been identified through software development, next become available as general tools to be implemented within specific organizations and, in the end, by their individual employees or members. Work on organizational communication by, for example, Wanda Orlikowski (Orlikowski & Robey, 1991; Yates & Orlikowski, 1992) has shown that such processes of development and adoption are frequently recursive, as technologies become integrated with organizational structures through assimilation, resistance, and feedback. (See Jørgensen & Udsen, this volume, on the history of computer interfaces.)

For an analysis of concrete interchanges between a website and its users, affordances can be understood in discursive terms. Whereas affordances were originally thought of in material and physiological terms of how humans and other animals may interact with the natural environment, media carry affordances that invite specific forms of interaction and interpretation. Accordingly, a website can be examined as a genre, defined broadly as a discursive form of address, affording the user particular kinds of information and communication. Like classical dramatic, lyrical, and narrative genres, the genres of 'mass media' as well as of computer-mediated communication can be examined for the interpretive positions and social uses that they offer their audiences. Familiar genres are currently being reproduced, or are emerging in remediated forms, on the internet (Crowston & Williams, 2000).

The concept of genre comes with a long history. Recent research, in addition, has witnessed a revived interdisciplinary interest in the category of genre simultaneously as a textual and a social phenomenon (Bawarshi, 2000; Miller, 1984, 1994). The present study draws on the cultural-studies tradition (Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1992), which has made important contributions to sociologizing the humanities, and to discursifying the social sciences. In keeping with his def-

inition of culture as a whole way of life (Williams, 1975 [1958]), rather than a separate cluster of artefacts and activities, Raymond Williams (1977) went beyond the study of genres in terms of their stylistic features as aesthetic *products*, emphasizing instead their place in a *process* of social interaction. Genres, accordingly, have three defining characteristics:

- *Characteristic subject matter* (e.g., the 'public' content of news, the 'private' content of fiction);
- *Formal composition* (e.g., narrative or didactic forms of expression through either texts, images, or moving images);
- *Mode of address* (e.g., the anticipated relevance of an advertisement or a public-service announcement for an audience).

In the case of websites, their content and formal features bear witness to the characteristic concern and subject matter of the organization in question and, next, to the possible involvement of the public in the organization. A website's mode of address affords users particular discursive positions from which to interpret and interact with the organization. It is the concrete elements and forms of such affordances that are examined empirically below.

To sum up, new media do not in themselves imply new politics. The web does, however, carry specific affordances of information and communication through which different organizations articulate their interests, and which different publics may appropriate for their own ends. It is in this respect that websites constitute potential resources for political participation. Before outlining the features of the website genre that will be analyzed in further detail in order to assess this potential, the following section briefly reviews some previous research on organizational websites.

# Webside studies in review

Under the heading, "Who do you think you are?", Dominick (1999) provided one of the first detailed studies of personal homepages. The web is a forum of self-presentation, image, and identity for both indi-

viduals and organizations. Covering different types of organizations, the present analysis takes up the question, 'Who do you think *we* are – and what can we do *together*?'

The use of websites by organizations for communicating with their constituencies or 'stakeholders' (see Nielsen, this volume, p. 135) has been examined in empirical studies, so far mostly, as mentioned, separately by social sector. The members and activists of *political parties* and other interest groups, according to some early enthusiasts (Negroponte, 1995; Rheingold, 1994), would be empowered on the web. A more skeptical position has been advanced by a second wave of more detailed empirical studies (R. Gibson, Nixon, & Ward, 2003) (see also Hansen, this volume). Findings include indications that "participatory elements" may be subordinated to "vote-maximizing" strategies in party websites (Römmele, 2003: 15). Research on European parties has shown that classical top-down political communication remains key to their websites, even if facilities for bottom-up interaction is sometimes available, depending on the ideological profile of each party (Norris, 2003). In the case of Japan, the internet has been found to serve as an important new means of political influence especially for minor parties (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003).

*NGOs*, in their turn, have given priority to web and other internet communication in what Bach and Stark (2004) described as their "co-evolution" with interactive technology. In response to the globalization of economy and culture, this approach can be understood as an attempt by organizations to mobilize technology for global causes, or a way of 'spatializing international politics' (Rodgers, 2003). Also in local contexts, innovative genres of online communication can promote the web as a public space, sometimes through action research involving both activists and scholars (Ridell, 2005). Still, one dilemma for activist organizations is how to have their websites address both "the needs of member publics" and their "media needs" vis-à-vis the greater public sphere, as represented by mainstream or established media (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001: 263).

In the case of *parliaments*, one study of US Congress sites concluded that members would essentially advertise themselves (Owen,

Davis, & Strickler, 1999), while another found that members of Congress sought to attract coverage by 'old' news media through their websites, rather than engaging voters and citizens in interaction (Lipinski & Neddenriep, 2004). US state government home pages, relatedly, appear to have matured into a small number of formal types, but continue to pose problems in terms of the density of their information and, not least, how to make it accessible for citizens (Ryan, Field, & Olfman, 2003). The majority of small developing countries, moreover, have been found to present themselves through official sites, but with tourism and current government policies as the primary content, rather than, for instance, interaction around investment opportunities or cultural issues (Mohammed, 2004).

*Business* has relied on the web, not just to to sell or advertise its goods, but as importantly to maintain a presence in the public sphere (see further Nielsen, this volume). Some early studies of corporate-sector websites found that companies with a product, service, or retail focus respectively, differed in their interactive features (Ha & James, 1998), but also that corporate sites appeared not to cater to their potentially multiple audiences, beyond their immediate customers, the news media, and the financial community (Esrock & Leichty, 1999). A more recent study suggested that the websites of *Fortune* 500 companies offer comparatively little substantial information even to journalists (Callison, 2003).

*Personal homepages*, finally, do not, strictly speaking, make up a social sector with interrelated organizations. In Habermas' (1989 [1962]) terms, they could be said to represent the sphere of intimate or family life. Nevertheless, in the present context, personal homepages are of considerable interest since they provide much-publicized avenues into public debate for the average citizen, at least in principle. In fact, studies so far have concluded that they rarely serve this end (Dominick, 1999; Döring, 2002; Papacharissi, 2002). Instead, family, professional, or hobby dimensions of life are highlighted. Compared to homepages, blogs now may be considered more applicable for purposes of debate. Again, however, research has questioned whether blogs actually serve as arenas of political exchange to the

extent assumed by at least some news media (Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, & Wright, 2004).

Earlier research on the websites of different social sectors, in sum, can be said to reiterate a common conclusion in organizational communication studies (Jablin & Putnam, 2001), namely, that internal and external communications are – or should be – two sides of the same coin. On the web, organizations commonly seek to involve users across that divide, thus facing particular challenges regarding interface design. From the users' perspective, the question is to what extent the interface may actually deliver a participatory resource.

# Methodology and research design

The aim of the empirical study was to identify, categorize, and interpret the features of a sample of websites by which different organizations communicate with the public. For analytical purposes, these features serve as operationalizations of the affordances of websites, anticipating particular forms of user involvement. This section describes the features that were singled out for content analysis in relation to the three aspects of the website as genre (formal composition, mode of address, and characteristic subject matter).

Content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2004) has traditionally examined the ways in which media represent social reality, which are necessarily selective and consequently debatable. Familiar controversies have to do with 'bias' in the news media and 'excessive' violence in television fiction. Beyond 'content' in the narrow sense of 'representation,' the approach also lends itself to systematic studies of the formal features of media. Form carries meaning. The interactive and other dynamic elements of the web pose a special challenge in this regard (Weare & Lin, 2000). The present study developed its categories of analysis through a pilot study of diverse websites (five from each of the five social sectors). The full set of categories is listed in the Appendix.

Beyond the *formal composition* of basic textual, visual, and audiovisual constituents of information, the coding scheme documented elements that are specific to the web and other internet environments, such as clickable entities, links, and 'members-only' nets with password-protection. With regard to the *mode of address*, the presence of one-way as well as two-way, push and pull dimensions of communication were noted: from user to site, between users, through immediate downloads or ready-mades such as e-cards, or by subsequent newsletters. 'Anticipated communication' refers to instances where information is presented as a resource for communication in a separate context, for instance, an offline meeting or a different online forum. 'Anticipated action' registers a potential course of action or a resource which has no specific or necessary relation to the organization in question, for example, a spreadsheet that has been prepared so that users may document the state of their local natural environment and the impact of various sources of pollution on it. Both these forms of anticipated interaction are important aspects of the relationship between websites and their social contexts, and are discussed further below. In addition, the presence of voting on specified issues, as well as quizzes and other games of information, were noted. And, suggestions from an organization for users to join, sponsor, work, or buy were each coded. Although several of these last features are specific to one or a few of the social sectors, they do overlap, so that, for instance, some political parties sell merchandise through an online shop.

The communications of organizations operating in different social sectors will have different *characteristic subject matters*, concerns, and agendas. At the same time, organizations must situate themselves in the wider social context of their operations, including shifting conceptions of politics, through the media available. In order to explore how organizations conceive of themselves, and how, accordingly, they address themselves to users on the web, a sample of websites from five different social domains was constructed:

- National parliaments as classic arenas of deliberation and dialogue;

- Political parties as interest-based actors in processes of defining and allocating values;
- Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) as issue-focused actors in such processes;
- Businesses as economic actors with political stakes;
- Private individuals as minimal actors of political articulation and action.

While the media sector is certainly one key condition for the negotiation, legitimation, and allocation of values in contemporary society, the focus of this study is placed on the self-organized communications of sectors and stakeholders on the web. One characteristic of the internet is that it allows organizations, to a degree, to circumvent traditional media.

Given the diversity of the relevant organizations, offline as well as online, no single sampling frame could be employed. The point of departure was their offline characteristics, as verified by a number of sources (see the Appendix for additional details). First, parliamentary sites were examined in fifteen democracies, randomly selected from within three stratified levels of economic development (GNI). Subsequently, three instances of each of the other four types of websites were sampled in each of the fifteen countries. (In the analysis, the data concerning parliamentary sites (N=15) were weighed so as to enable comparison with the other sectors (N=45).) Second, the two largest and the smallest party in each parliament were, to the extent possible, identified, so as to include a range of party types, often the current administration and opposition parties in addition to one minor party. Third, NGOs were sampled, primarly from the online list of UN-accredited organizations, secondarily from established online NGO directories. Fourth, the Top 100 lists of business journals covering companies in the various countries, served as the basis of random selection, supplemented with local stock-exchange listings. Fifth, personal homepages were randomly selected from lists posted by a major local internet service provider (ISP) or from local portals and other listings.

In sum, the sample for analysis included 15 national parliamentary sites and 45 sites in each of the other four categories, N = 195. Given the dynamic and open-ended nature of the relevant universe, as well as the unavoidable convenience aspect of certain stages of sampling, it is not possible to generalize about the characteristics of websites in each social sector as such. Furthermore, the comparatively small sample meant that some of the expected values in the tabulations were too low to allow for standard tests of significance. For exploratory purposes, however, the sample enables a comparative analysis of websites belonging to different sectors, and for drawing preliminary conclusions about indicative differences and similarities between them.

The coding was performed in real time during June-July 2004 by the two authors, documenting the presence or absence of the analytical categories above in a spreadsheet with reference to the three top layers of each site. In view of the complexity of coding a dynamic entity such as a website, the analysis did not rely on a standard procedure of independent coders, but on consensual coding (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992: 32). By documenting a number of uncertain or marginal (as well as analytically interesting) instances, the procedure generated elements for an 'audit trail' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985: ch. 11). On the one hand, such a document goes beyond merely measuring the intersubjectivity of coding procedures, and enables subsequent reflexivity, dialogue, and theory development, both within a research team and with other scholars. On the other hand, the document identifies opportunities for later qualitative analyses, while contextualizing these within the coding scheme of the content analysis.

The next section reports the main findings of the analysis in tables and commentary. As a baseline study, it did not set out to test particular hypotheses. In order to explore the discursive forms and political implications of websites, the analysis instead addressed the following research questions:

*RQ1: Which formal features of websites serve as resources enabling user participation within the organization in question and, perhaps, beyond?*

*RQ2: To what extent, and in what ways, do the distribution and config-*

| GNI-level | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sectors | Parties | Companies | Parties | NGOs | Companies | NGOs | Parliaments | Companies | Parliaments | Personal | NGOs | Personal | Parties | Parliaments | Personal | Total |
| Categories | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Still images | 15 | 14 | 15 | 14 | 15 | 13 | 15 | 15 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 13 | 210 |
| User-site | 15 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 12 | 15 | 12 | 13 | 15 | 14 | 14 | 9 | 12 | 206 |
| Photographs | 15 | 15 | 14 | 13 | 14 | 12 | 15 | 15 | 15 | 14 | 13 | 14 | 14 | 9 | 14 | 206 |
| Ext_links | 15 | 14 | 14 | 14 | 11 | 14 | 12 | 12 | 15 | 13 | 12 | 14 | 12 | 15 | 13 | 200 |
| Archive | 15 | 15 | 15 | 13 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 13 | 15 | 14 | 8 | 13 | 14 | 12 | 11 | 200 |
| Click_ent's | 14 | 15 | 14 | 13 | 13 | 13 | 12 | 12 | 15 | 13 | 11 | 11 | 13 | 9 | 11 | 189 |
| Download | 15 | 14 | 9 | 11 | 11 | 9 | 12 | 9 | 15 | 4 | 8 | 6 | 3 | 9 | 3 | 138 |
| Image effects | 9 | 13 | 8 | 7 | 11 | 9 | 6 | 12 | 0 | 8 | 8 | 6 | 9 | 3 | 9 | 118 |
| Anticip_comm | 7 | 10 | 6 | 10 | 7 | 10 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 7 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 1 | 78 |
| Animation | 8 | 8 | 5 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 5 | 76 |
| Other_language | 6 | 8 | 3 | 5 | 10 | 4 | 6 | 6 | 9 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 6 | 0 | 71 |
| Exchange_info | 5 | 3 | 8 | 4 | 0 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 10 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 63 |
| User-user | 7 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 0 | 6 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 8 | 5 | 6 | 3 | 3 | 6 | 61 |
| Newsletter | 13 | 11 | 7 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 54 |
| Speech | 11 | 6 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 5 | 12 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 52 |
| Joining | 13 | 1 | 6 | 10 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 45 |
| Video | 10 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 6 | 5 | 9 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 44 |
| Music | 10 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 6 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 0 | 2 | 38 |
| Members' net | 6 | 9 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 37 |
| Working | 1 | 11 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 33 |
| Buying | 1 | 10 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 26 |
| Anticip_action | 1 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 25 |
| Voting | 4 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 0 | 25 |
| Sponsoring | 8 | 0 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 21 |
| Photo_effects | 0 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 20 |
| Ready-made | 6 | 4 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 18 |
| Quiz'n games | 1 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 18 |
| Sound effects | 2 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 16 |
| Total | 233 | 230 | 158 | 155 | 152 | 151 | 150 | 149 | 144 | 143 | 140 | 133 | 130 | 111 | 109 | 2288 |

Note: The figures refer to the absolute number of instances of a given formal feature, as distributed across social sectors and levels of economic development (GNI). Both the rows and the colums are sorted (left to right, and top to bottom), according to the row and column totals.

**Table 4.1:** Count of occurrences (corrected for number of parliaments)

uration of these features vary across social sectors and levels of economic development?

RQ3: What are the implied political uses of websites originating in different social sectors?

The last research question is elaborated in a following section which discusses 'the politics of representation' simultaneously as a discursive and an institutional phenomenon. Websites represent events and issues and, in doing so, represent the interests of their different constituencies and stakeholders to varying degrees. Equally, websites can be said to hold a 'politics of interactivity,' since their participatory potential may enable social action with implications beyond the interface.

# Site maps of society

*Discursive divides*

Table 4.1 provides an overview of the distribution of different formal features in websites across the five social sectors. Each social sector is subdivided according to the three levels of economic development. The distribution suggests, first of all, that the familiar infrastructural digital divide (Compaine, 2001) recurs in the form of a discursive divide, since websites originating in the more affluent parts of the world, include more, and more complex, functionalities. Second, with some variations, private companies and political parties similarly exhibit a higher level of discursive complexity than the three other social sectors. While hardly surprising, given the scope of their financial and professional resources, these characteristics serve to underscore the fact that information and communication technologies need to be given a cultural form, and to be socially implemented, before they may serve as a public resource. Being online does not equal being in touch. In the terminology of diffusion theory, which has given priority to the *material availability* of technologies (Rogers, 1962), a further process of symbolic diffusion is necessary to ensure their *discursive accessibility* (Jensen, 2002: 140): new media must be perceived, first as meaningful and relevant, next as manageable and applicable to the task at hand, by individuals, organizations, and whole societies.

Each of the five sectors, moreover, has a distinctive communicative profile, at least in certain respects:

- *Companies* distinguish themselves by what is known in cinema, advertising, and other media as production values, building and maintaining their images and brands by providing a diverse and presumably pleasurable user experience. This is true, as well, for the group of companies with the lowest GNI, which top parliaments with the highest GNI in terms of features overall. Companies also stand out, in part, in presenting their message in more than one language;
- *Parties* in the two upper GNI groups join companies in offering substantial production values. Moreover, parties employ their websites to maintain contact with members and other interested users through newsletters; in the terminology of pushing and pulling information, party sites invite visitors to pull a later push of information. As elaborated below, party sites also provide various facilities for users to interact with the organization as well as with other users;
- *NGO* sites, similarly, hold facilities for getting involved, including suggestions for joining and sponsoring the organization. The production values, again, appear relatively strong here, if at a lower level than either parties and companies;
- *Parliaments*, perhaps surprisingly, communicate through a comparatively narrow range of forms, so that all three GNI groups are found toward the right side of the table. It is noteworthy, though, that except for the parliaments with the lowest GNI, complex functionalities such as video and audio are present, typically reproductions of speeches and parliamentary proceedings;
- *Personal* homepages, finally, tend to have low production values as well as a limited range of other features. Both a professional-style layout and the provision of, for instance, newsletters and downloads normally will require an established and consolidated organization. (But see Hansen, this volume, on politicians' 'personal' websites.) Other features, however, may attract web users to personal homepages, over and above the presentation of self, for example, quiz and games. A specific

feature of the personal sites is music, which otherwise is present almost exclusively in the groups of companies and parties with the highest GNI.

*Partners in discourse*

A further analysis suggests that the websites of different social sectors resemble each other in their communicative strategies on several key points. Of particular interest here are the kind and degree of participation that a website may facilitate, either in the immediate interchange between user and site or with a view to subsequent involvement in organizational activities and social life more generally. The categories of anticipated communication and action, and of user-user interaction, in particular, were applied in the coding and analysis to capture these aspects. Websites can point beyond the information that they themselves provide, and to which users may reply, to communication which will take place at a physical location (meeting of the organization), in another online setting (newsgroup), or between visitors to the site in question through its facilities (community). Also, websites can suggest and facilitate courses of actions which visitors, upon deliberation, may undertake, but which have no necessary relation to the organization in question. The motto here might be, 'Do the right thing, not because we say so, but because it's right.'

In these regards, the different sectors of the sample enter into some

| GNI category | Social sector | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Company | NGO | Parliament | Party | Personal | Average |
| 1 | 33,3 | 13,3 | 0,0 | 6,7 | 6,7 | 12,0 |
| 2 | 13,3 | 20,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 6,7 | 8,0 |
| 3 | 0,0 | 13,3 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 0,0 | 2,7 |
| Average | 15,6 | 15,6 | 0,0 | 2,2 | 4,4 | 7,6 |

Note: The percentages indicate the proportion of sites in each sector, subdivided into GNI levels, which feature both 'anticipated communication' and 'anticipated action.'

**Table 4.2:** Anticipated action AND anticipated communication (corrected for number of parliaments, % of possible score)

suggestive configurations. First, a combination of the features 'anticipated communication' and 'anticipated action' can be seen in Table 4.2 as characteristic both of NGOs and of companies particularly in the rich part of the world. While the percentages indicate that these features may be relatively rare overall, NGOs and companies account for noticeably more instances than the other social sectors. Even though these organizations could be expected as a matter of course to announce, for instance, their offline meetings – debates and fund-raisers (NGOs), commercial presentations and stockholder meetings (companies) – the specific combination with references to the welfare of other humans, animals, or the environment serves to project a general social commitment. This combination of commitment and participation is, in large part, the historical legacy of NGOs, and it is a legacy that companies can rework and remediate as part of their effort to substantiate their longterm public service, above and beyond legal and contractual obligations: legitimacy anticipates business. (See Nielsen, this volume, on an 'ethical' discourse of corporate websites.)

A second configuration of sectors arises from the feature of 'user-user' communication in some websites. This feature is commonly taken as an indicator of how the web, and the internet as such, might enhance participatory practices of communication in society. Table 4.3 indicates that the personal homepages join the NGOs and the political parties of this sample in enabling communication along the user-user, and not just the user-site, axis. For parties and NGOs, presum-

| GNI category | Social sector | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Company | NGO | Parliament | Party | Personal | Average |
| 1 | 13,3 | 26,7 | 0,0 | 46,7 | 40,0 | 25,3 |
| 2 | 0,0 | 40,0 | 20,0 | 46,7 | 53,3 | 32,0 |
| 3 | 6,7 | 33,3 | 20,0 | 20,0 | 40,0 | 24,0 |
| Average | 6,7 | 33,3 | 13,3 | 37,8 | 44,4 | 27,1 |

Note: The percentages indicate the proportion of sites in each sector, subdivided into GNI levels, which include user-user features.

**Table 4.3:** User-user (corrected for number of parliaments, % of possible score)

ably, the involvement of users with each other is a constitutive part of involvement with the organization. It should be noted that, in most personal homepages, the user-user element takes the form of an online guestbook, rather than a discussion forum. Nevertheless, this does provide an arena for decentralized exchange with a participatory potential, prefiguring blogs as a personal means of expression (diaries) that was remediated into a genre of public communication.

The few instances of company websites with a user-user element might be surprising as, already in 1997, *Business Week* reported that "Netrepreneurs are finding they can turn the intrinsic cultural appeal of communities into a real business proposition" (Hof, 1997). Having possibly been overgeneralized in reference to business as a whole, the commercial value of communities may apply especially to knowledge and entertainment industries that are able to build interpretive communities (Fish, 1979; Jensen, 1990) around their immaterial products and services. In the present sample, a user-user element was offered, for example, by telephone and toy companies. (See also Walther, this volume, on offical websites of television series.)

Interestingly, the parliamentary websites in this study rarely include user-user facilities. This is in spite of the fact that parliaments symbolize dialogue on behalf of the citizens that they represent. One interpretation is that because parliaments are understood as already representing the citizens that elected them, there may be no call for additional public debate in that context. Indeed, such debate might transgress the boundary between parliamentary and extraparliamentary processes, just as it might draw attention to the more or less arbitrary stages of the political process as such. As institutions, parliaments make up a bounded and ordered multitude of voices that should perhaps be left to communicate among themselves. In Habermas' (1989 [1962]) sense, the 'representative' form of government in which the sovereign presented himself to the population as the embodiment of the ruling order, was replaced institutionally by liberal forms of democracy, but has remained as a discursive residual: presidents, prime ministers, and parliaments *are* the political process as discursive manifestations, also when remediated on the web.

*Sector profiles*

The features and composites that have been analyzed so far, may be summarized in the form of a three-part profile for each of the social sectors. Table 4.4 lays out the five profiles, indicating in each case the relative prominence of an aspect in three levels – high, medium, or low.

|  | Production values | Anticipated communication and action | User-user features |
|---|---|---|---|
| National parliaments | Medium | Low | Low |
| Political parties | High | Low | High |
| NGOs | Medium | High | High |
| Businesses | High | High | Low |
| Personal homepages | Low | Low | High |

**Table 4.4:** Summary of features by sector

First, political parties and NGOs both afford substantial user-user features to the public, whereas NGOs rate high, and parties rate low, on anticipated communication and action. This may reflect more of a horizontal or bottom-up approach to participation on the part of NGOs, compared to a classic, hierarchical approach within parties. Second, while both businesses and NGOs emphasize anticipated communication and action, businesses in the present sample tend not to follow up this potential for interaction with the public through user-user features. Third, parliaments present themselves primarily as broadcasters of their own activities, rating low on both user-user features and anticipated communication and action. Fourth, personal homepages do offer functionalities for interchange with other users but, as mentioned, especially in the form of guestbooks and the like. Finally, and not unexpectedly, given different economic resources, the distribution of production values is uneven, although, perhaps surprisingly, parties outrank businesses in this regard in the two higher GNI levels (see Table 4.1).

# Presentation and representation, interactivity and interaction

A way of synthesizing the findings of this website analysis with a view to their political implications, is to reexamine the distribution of formal features with reference to classic categories of communication theory, such as one-way and two-way communication, broadcast and multicast, and, with specific reference to computer-mediated communication, push and pull. Are users enabled to talk back, to talk among themselves, and to communicate in a context and at a time of their own choosing? The configuration of such characteristics, in particular, suggests the participatory potentials (and limitations) of websites from the users' perspective.

Table 4.5 provides an indication of the degree to which the websites of different sectors emphasize 'presentation' and 'interactivity' respectively. Presentation denotes a composite of the features newsletter, download, archive, and ready-mades, whereas interactivity refers to a combination of the features user-user elements, exchange of information, and voting. Presentation, accordingly, emphasizes the presence of information from and about the organization in question, whether as documentation (archive) or as an ongoing service (newsletter) (downloads may serve either of these purposes). Ready-mades, while requiring the active intervention of users, similarly makes available prepackaged information according to the agendas of the organization. Interactivity, in its turn, refers to the facilitation of communication which involves users in some form of collectivity with other users around the organization's area of activity.

The table ranks the social sectors according to the extent to which they afford interactivity, over and above the extent to which they choose, and have the resources, to offer presentational production values (as expressed in a quotient, i.e., interactivity features divided by presentation features). It is noticeable that parliaments and companies may not aim to support dialogue around their core activities, despite statements of principle about social responsibility and corporate governance. In the few cases where companies in the present

sample facilitate interactivity in communities, as mentioned, they are rooted in products, services, and brands. This is in contrast to parties and NGOs, which give relative emphasis to interactive features, presumably as part of their ongoing organizational processes of deliberation and debate. Personal homepages, while boasting a high quotient, tend to offer interactivity in the form of guestbooks, as already noted, rather than deliberative dialogue, and their profile can be understood as a mixed bag of presentational and interactive features.

| Sector | GNI | Interactivity | Presentation | Quotient |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Company | 2 | 0 | 31 | 0,00 |
| Parliament | 1 | 0 | 10 | 0,00 |
| Company | 3 | 3 | 24 | 0,13 |
| Company | 1 | 6 | 44 | 0,14 |
| Parliament | 2 | 3 | 10 | 0,30 |
| Party | 1 | 16 | 49 | 0,33 |
| Party | 3 | 7 | 21 | 0,33 |
| NGO | 1 | 9 | 26 | 0,35 |
| Parliament | 3 | 3 | 7 | 0,43 |
| NGO | 2 | 14 | 28 | 0,50 |
| NGO | 3 | 11 | 19 | 0,58 |
| Party | 2 | 19 | 32 | 0,59 |
| Personal | 1 | 15 | 21 | 0,71 |
| Personal | 3 | 12 | 14 | 0,86 |
| Personal | 2 | 19 | 20 | 0,95 |

**Table 4.5:** Presentation and interactivity (occurrences of constituent features)

The further implications of the two formal aspects of presentation and interactivity can be interpreted with reference to two (notoriously ambiguous) theoretical concepts, namely, representation and interaction, which have been given a variety of formulations in sociology, political science, and media and communication research. *Representation*, for one, has at least two distinct meanings: language, texts, sounds, images, and their various mediated forms serve as *discursive* representations, among other things, of citizens and their circum-

stances. Elected officials serve as *political* representations, mouth-pieces, or 'representatives' of citizens and their interests. Whenever information is presented, in a medium or a political forum, it represents something, and it does so from an interested perspective (Habermas, 1971 [1968]). If someone feels mis- or underrepresented, one avenue is to present alternative representations in whatever media are available. In previous research, these issues have sometimes been addressed under the heading of a 'politics of representation' by cultural studies as well as by postcolonial studies (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995) and anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). Representations of issues and people in any medium carry interested and contestable perspectives. Such representations contribute to the ongoing constitution of the subjectivity of actors and the structures of society.

*Interaction*, next, is the root of a key term in current media and communication studies, namely, interactivity (Kiousis, 2002). Its origin, however, is not in technology, but in sociology, in the interaction between humans within social contexts. From there, it has been transferred, by various metaphorical degrees, to the human-computer interface (Jensen, 2000) – interactivity at the interface may facilitate social interaction far beyond the interface. Like representations, the forms in which interactivity are implemented on the web and in other media serve as preparatory conditions of action within established political institutions, and they suggest a 'politics of interactivity' for research as well as for public debate: individuals, organizations, and whole societies are invited on the web to interactively affect their own discursive representation, with longterm implications for their political representation in national and international fora. The present study has begun to show how the websites of parties and NGOs may anticipate rather different kinds of public participation, how businesses appear to signal rather than practice dialogue about their social commitment, how parliaments could be said to broadcast themselves to the electorate, and how personal homepages may merit their name by implying that the personal is not political.

# Conclusion

This study has produced a preliminary baseline of information about the formal features of websites as potential resources for political and other social participation. With regard to specific affordances (RQ1), the analysis identified 'anticipated communication' and 'anticipated action' as particular resources for user involvement, across the online-offline divide, and sometimes outside the organization in question. These two elements point beyond more commonly noted features such as newsletters, downloads, or online communities, which were also found in this sample together with a wide range of audiovisual components with varying production values.

The distribution and configuration of website features (RQ2) can be summarized in two interrelated points. On the one hand, websites in the richer regions of the world, not surprisingly, tend to include more, and more complex, features. On the other hand, websites from each of the five social sectors nevertheless exhibit particular profiles across GNI levels. The different ways in which the social sectors address users – as citizens, consumers, private individuals, and so forth – carry a number of implied political uses of the information and communication on offer (RQ3). First, parties and NGOs in the present sample, while facilitating the involvement of users, anticipate rather different, hierarchical or horizontal modes of communication and user activity. Second, the parliamentary websites do not seek to involve users in dialogue. Third, the business sites, despite their relative emphasis on anticipated communication and action, in fact rarely enable users to follow up on, for example, documents about corporate governance. Finally, personal homepages, as suggested by other research, as well, constitute a separate discursive arena whose main political implication could be said to be the absence of politics as a collective concern. In sum, the findings suggest that the communicative affordances of the web for the general public may be more limited, and more specifically attuned to the sector-specific interest of particular organizations, than is sometimes assumed by both research and public opinion.

The present study has substantiated the relevance of studying form (see also Barnhurst & Nerone, 2001; Meyrowitz, 1994) in order to assess the participatory potential of websites. The sample of the empirical analysis, however, was comparatively small, and further research is needed to establish whether these patterns of presentation and interactivity can be generalized. Global differences, also *within* the five social sectors, should be examined in more detail. The limited affordances of websites in less affluent regions of the world may be explained, in part, by a limited diffusion of the internet: the audience for such affordances remains small. Also, in some countries, mobile phones will be as, or more, important than personal computers and web browsers as points of access to the internet.

Most centrally, analyses of form and content should be supplemented by more quantitative as well as qualitative research on how internet users themselves respond to and rely on interactive features in a political perspective. Similarly, studies of how organizations come to serve as their own media on the internet, partially replacing the established 'mass media' and possibly remediating older movement-based media such as party presses, are called for. The analytical categories of anticipated communication and anticipated action, as presented in this study, serve as one contribution to theory development concerning such a shift. Weblogs, finally, including news-oriented and corporate blogs, have been taking over some of the functions of websites, potentially adding interactive depth, even if the jury is still out on their possible implications for electoral and other political processes (Rainie, Cornfield, & Horrigan, 2005).

In conclusion, the web may participate, by enabling its users to participate, in processes of representation and interaction – through specific forms of presentation and interactivity. From the perspective of empirical website analysis, the question is whether and how these communicative affordances configure as a participatory potential. From the perspective of political practice, the question is whether and how such potentials might be realized by particular users, segments, and sectors of society.

# Appendix

*Analytical categories*

*Formal composition and configuration of information*

Still images (graphics, drawings, cartoons); image effects (activated by cursor movement or transition); photographs; photographic effects (e.g., virtual tour); video; animation; speech; music; sound effects; clickable entities; external links; other-language version(s); archive (text, video, audio); 'members-only' net (password-protected).

*Mode of address and communication*

User-site (e.g., contact details); user-user (e.g., discussion forum); exchange of information (with/out moderation); downloads; newsletter; ready-made communication (e.g., e-cards); anticipated communication (i.e., information as resource for communication in separate context, offline or online); anticipated action (i.e., potential course of action with no necessary relation to the organization in question); voting; quiz; joining; sponsoring; working; buying (e.g., online shop).

*Sampling frames*

The selection of *national parliaments* was based on the country listings of GNI per capita from the 2002 online statistics of the World Bank (2004) in three levels: High = $39,470 > GNI/cap > $8,790 (46 countries); Middle = $8,530 > GNI/cap > $780 (86 countries); Low = $710 > GNI/cap > $100 (63 countries). Only countries included in the 2002 listings, and countries in which the parliament had its own home-page, were considered in the sampling process; in cases where random sampling produced a country without a homepage, the next country on the list was included. Furthermore, democracies were defined in accordance with the existence of an independent, democratically elected legislative assembly, the existence of more than one political party, and/or assessments (primarily from the OECD, EU, UN, and US State Department) of whether the most recent election could be considered free and fair. The resulting countries were: Canada, Denmark, Malta, Spain, USA (high); Bosnia & Hercegovina, Bra-

zil, the Philippines, Slovak Republic, Venezuela (middle); Ghana, Kenya, India, Moldova, Mozambique (low).

Regarding *political parties*, when the principle of 'the two largest and the smallest' did not apply (because of fewer parties or missing homepages), other parties in the same country or parties in the next country on the GNI list with a similar parliamentary position, were sampled. *NGOs* were taken from the list of those accredited with the UN, first in that country, in the countries next on the GNI list, and finally with reference to two online NGO directories, http://www.gdrc.org/ngo/ngo-databases.html and http://www.devdir.org/. When operational lists of *commercial companies* could not be procured from, e.g., *Fortune*, www.top500.de, or www.asiaweek.com, particularly for the low GNI countries, sampling departed from the companies registered with the local stock exchange. *Personal homepages*, finally, were drawn as far as possible from a local ISP and, in Canada and the US, from Yahoo's listings, and subsequently from localized portals and other lists, as identified through Google or Yahoo searches.

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