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**“Here’s your fucking use of power!”**  
**Notes on how bloggers communicate politically<sup>1</sup>**

INTRODUCTION

Weblogs (hereafter blogs) have attracted increasing attention both in the media and in research. Some observers welcome blogs and other digital technologies of the *new social media* as hitherto the most democratic feature of the Internet (e.g. Lintulahti 2006; Arina 2007).<sup>2</sup> Others are more critical, taking blogs as a sign of growing narcissistic individualism characteristic of the postmodern society (see discussion in Hodgkinson 2007). The question many theorists (again) tackle is the extent to which such media really enhance democracy, i.e. increase opportunities for free expression, participation and political influence as well as interaction between citizens and political elites. Many of the earlier Internet enthusiasts eventually turned hesitant, and even became sceptics. Today the promise of a stronger democracy seems to be in the air again; now in the form of the horizontally expanding blogosphere.

1. This chapter is an extended and refined version of a paper under the title “Politics on the blogosphere,” presented at the international seminar “Politics on the Internet – New Forms and Media for Political Action”, November 24-25, 2006, University of Tampere.
2. The term ‘social media’ refers to the new internet software and services which are based on user-generated content and which foster social interactivity. The term emphasises the transformation from one-to-many modes of mass-mediated communication to decentralised many-to-many, or peer-to-peer (P2P), communication. Such social software include e.g. wikis, RSS-feeds, social bookmarking services, podcasting, social networking platforms such as MySpace, Facebook, LiveJournal, SecondLife and Habbo Hotel.

This chapter approaches the question of the empowering possibilities of the Internet from a limited perspective, tracking how blogs and bloggers communicate politically.<sup>3</sup> My starting supposition is that blogs can be a powerful tool for political communication by merit of some of their defining characteristics: easy connectivity between blogs through linking practices which builds a kind of visible ‘mass’ to their political activity on the blogosphere (cf. web-pages with emphasis on informational content rather than on interaction), an easy publishing technology which speeds up and extends web publishing to ever wider publics, and the diary/journal format which enables multi-party, peer-to-peer conversation between bloggers. While blogs still have a relatively short history, they have already proved to be a phenomenon that no serious political actor, candidate, or corporation can afford to ignore (e.g. Einhorn 2006; Economist.com 2006).

I also strive to make an analytical point as to *how* we should approach communication on the blogosphere. As noted above, blogs have re-established visions of improved democracy by offering opportunities for free and relatively equal discourse between citizens (though much less between citizens and political elites). Against the background of such hopes stands the irrefutable influence of Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy and the related assumptions of ‘rational’ communication and the legitimate democratic process (e.g. Habermas 1984 and 1996). My suggestion is that this theory has always been somewhat displaced in its understanding of communication and that, consequently, it has tended to place unnecessary restraints on democratically meaningful communication. As I have argued elsewhere<sup>4</sup>, Habermas and his followers have not

3. Like Brian McNair (2003, 4), I understand political communication in a wide sense as ‘*all purposeful communication about politics.*’ This view includes three areas: a) all *forms* of communication undertaken by politicians and *other political actors* for the purpose of achieving specific objectives, b) communication addressed *to* these actors by non-politicians such as voters and newspaper columnists, and c) communication *about* these actors and their activities, as contained in news reports, editorials, and other forms of media discussion of politics. It should also be noted that political communication does not denote only verbal or written statements but also *visual* means of signification such as body language and public protests.
4. Tiina Rättilä, “*In your face! On the nature of political performance as communication.*” A doctoral thesis (in progress), University of Tampere, Department of Political Science and International Relations.

taken sufficient theoretical notice of how communication between people is not mere exchange of speech acts but relies extensively on extra-linguistic communicative means such as signs, gestures and sounds. Arguably, if we accept that without bodily encounters (real or imagined) and visual and aesthetic clues communication loses its meaningfulness for human beings, a linguistically defined model of communication is untenable even as a normative ideal.

In order to understand and theorise communication more authentically, then, we need to pay serious attention to its different dimensions, verbal and nonverbal. In order to do so, I suggest we turn to the analytical language of performance. *The performative perspective on communication*, as developed in the works of, for example, Erving Goffman (1959) in sociology, Richard Schechner (2002, 2003) in theatre/performance studies and Judith Butler (1990, 1997) in gender studies, acknowledges that various extra-linguistic forms of communication, bodily signs, sounds, and visual and aesthetic markers etc., offer effective even if often unconscious means of communicating ideas, feelings, even arguments. Performative dimensions of communication are well understood by us all, at least instinctively, in our everyday social encounters; not to mention skilful political actors and orators who sometimes command highly impressive artistry in their public presentations. Public performance has also been an important, and sometimes, the only available communicative media, in conditions of censorship and repression, for new social movements and sub-cultural groups. For example, the historical labour movement, the women's movement(s), the civil rights movement and, more recently, the anti-capitalist and anti-globalist movements have all been finely versed in performative communication.

The question of this chapter is, then, what happens to this rich estate of political communication when it turns virtual. Is there any 'body language' on the Internet, or inventive use of visual and symbolic signs? And if indeed such communication can be found, why would it matter for democracy?

I will start by discussing briefly some of the characteristic features of blogs as social and political media (second section). I will then move on to introduce the performative perspective to political communication (third section) and to discuss some of the special characteristics

of blog communication (fourth section). The main interest of the chapter is in considering how the performative perspective can be used to analyse communication on the blogosphere. Some outlines are given in the fifth section, and finally, a test case is reviewed in the final section of the chapter.

## BLOGS AS SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MEDIA

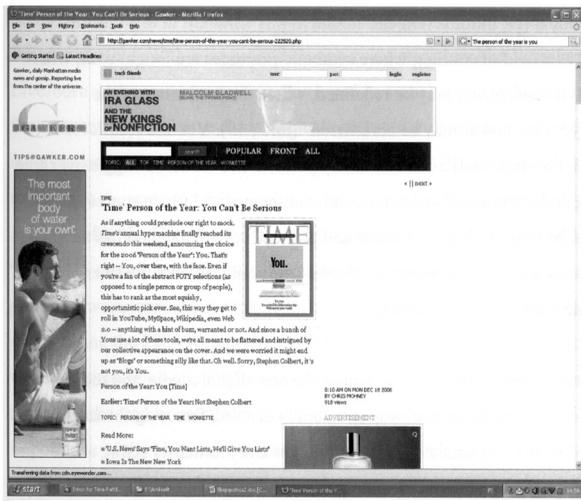
Time magazine made an interesting choice for the 2006 'Person of the Year.' It didn't pick Bill Gates (named year before) or Tony Blair (also a prior nominee) or any other 'Great Man' with indisputable political and/or economic influence. Instead, Time's choice for the person of the year was 'You,' or rather, all of us who use the new 'social' Internet. According to the Time editor Lev Grossman, the new Web is "*a tool for bringing together the small contributions of millions of people and making them matter. Silicon Valley consultants call it Web 2.0, as if it were a new version of some old software. But it's really a revolution*" (Grossman 2006). The cover of the issue, featuring a mirror-screen with the imagined projection of 'You' on it, is reproduced in the blog below, where it is sarcastically commented on by the blogging community "Gawker" ("Time Person of the Year", [gawker.com](http://gawker.com)) and their readership. (See picture 1.)

Time's peculiar choice tells something essential about the development of the Internet at the beginning of the third millennium. Yet, its current stage is not easily pinned down by such hotchpotch terms and distinctions like Web 1.0 versus Web 2.0, or informational media versus social media etc.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the Internet has since the start developed in a complex process which has been influenced by various, often conflicting interests, visions, and technical solutions. As Chris

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5. The latest development of the Internet is often referred to as the spread of 'Web 2.0' phenomena. According to Majava 2006, 90), Web 2.0 refers both to technical changes in the Internet environment like increases in rapid broadband connections and the growth of net-based software development, as well as to social and cultural changes in its communication structure. The latter changes the point to the growing importance of ordinary net users as the real beneficiaries of the 'net revolution', as Time magazine also recognised. The emerging *read/write web* is generating an information environment that is more interactive and multivocal and ultimately more democratic than the older Web 1.0 environment.

Atton (2004) notes, we need to move away from essentialised notions of the Internet and consider it, instead, as existing in a complex of features and pressures which are at once technological, historical, social, cultural, economic and political (cf. Introduction and Jordan in this volume). In this view the Internet appears “as a field of conflict, where symbolic resources are fought over, where citizenship and civil engagement may be redefined, where the predations of the asymmetries of symbolic



**Picture 1.** The writer to a group blog called “Gawker” comments on the choice of ‘You’ as Time’s person of the year, in his entry on December 18, 2006. The posting includes links to Time magazine as well as to other Internet sources. The comment section of the posting (not featured in the picture) contains a lengthy discussion on the subject by visiting commentators. Like all posts, this one also has its individual URL-address (also falling out of the picture frame) which other blogs can link to when referring to this particular posting.

power may be rebalanced” (Atton 2004, 19). Yet, the conflict is not ‘only’ symbolic; it also translates as an adamantly political and tactical struggle over free versus controlled, and commercialised versus anti-commercialised (open source) uses of the Internet. It can be argued, then, that social and political communication has never been

as politicised as it is today. Rephrasing Hobbes, we could say that the Internet hosts thriving communication 'of all to/against all'.

Mark Poster (1995) has called the development of the new digital media 'the second media age.' While the 'first media age' was structurally centred, featuring (broadcast) systems of one-to-many communication with politicians and journalists acting as the gatekeepers of information and public opinion, the second media age is characterised by decentralisation, many-to-many (or all-to-all) communication, individualisation of media consumption, interactive technologies and more democratic opinion formation. Perhaps the most shocking feature of the new digital media has been the massive breakthrough of peer-to-peer production of web content (cf. Lappalainen and Häyhtiö & Rinne in this volume). Today the Internet makes it possible for anybody to become content producers and publishers, a type of citizen journalist. The net's peer groups can work much faster and much more knowledgeably than any institutionalised news room, as could be witnessed e.g. during the Asian 2004 tsunami catastrophe (Sirkkunen 2006, 56).

As part of the wider Web 2.0 phenomenon weblogs add yet another flavour to this constellation of forces in and around the Internet. Advanced blog technologies are central to the development that has brought easy and almost free web publishing into the hands of the end-users previously placed at the receiving end of the communicative hierarchy. Blogs have provided a much welcomed counter-weight to the power of commercial interests and financial capital on the Internet, in effect revolutionising (say optimists) the nature of communication in our contemporary world.

Weblogs date back to the early 1990s, but the first public blog service was introduced by *Blogger* in 1999. With Blogger and other service providers like WordPress and LiveJournal, the software quickly developed its signature outlook of webpages with frequent entries in reverse chronological order, blogrolls (links to 'friend blogs'), archives, comment sections, 'permalinks' (individual URL-addresses), 'tags' (words used to describe content) and RSS-feeds (via which blogs can be subscribed to). After 9/11, and later after the US attack in Iraq, the number of blogs quickly multiplied as individuals "rushed to describe their personal experiences and find an outlet for their heightened political

awareness” (McKenna 2004, 3). An interesting milestone in blog history was when during the 2004 American presidential election campaign a number of bloggers were accepted as on-site media representatives in the nominating party caucuses alongside the traditional media (Kilpi 2006) – which was a clear sign of the rising importance of the blogosphere. Today the number of blogs exceeds 100 million (or more) and keeps growing day by day.

While the bulk of blogs are maintained as personal reflection boards, many focus on politics too, though there is cultural variation in the popularity of political blogs. Posts on political blogs are often critiques and refutations of content produced by journalists, politicians and other powerful public figures, and they frequently link to other blogs as well as to diverse sources available throughout the Internet, articles, speeches, academic studies etc. The style of commentary varies from short notes urging the readers to ‘go and check it out,’ to debates with the readership/commentators and lengthy political essays. Some bloggers are motivated to highlight issues that have received little attention in the mainstream media because of bias or neglect (McKenna 2004, 5).

So far, relatively little survey data is available on the bloggers as a political constituency. A 2004 American survey among the top 125 political blogs showed that political bloggers are typically white, well-educated men who had participated actively in traditional forms of politics before taking up active blogging. This would seem to suggest that only a few non-elites have taken up the opportunity to engage in political communication on the blogosphere. “At least at this point in time, there has been no revolution of idea makers,” concludes McKenna (*ibid*, 24). The survey also indicated - which is interesting - that after taking up their blogging activity, bloggers became less motivated in participating in off-line political action. This finding would seem to support the thesis that engagement in ‘cyberlife’ increases individualisation of communication patterns.

Political bloggers contrast somewhat with the general blogger population. A 2006 telephone survey made by the Pew Internet & American Life Project showed that bloggers are overwhelmingly young adults, that they are less likely than other Internet users to be white (60% were white, 11% African American, 19% English-speaking

Hispanic and 10% other ethnicity; of the overall Internet users more than 70% are white), and that they are evenly divided between men and women.<sup>6</sup> As to the ‘consumption’ of news, the survey found that 95% of bloggers get news from the internet and that the majority of bloggers like to gather news from diverse sources. Moreover, bloggers are as likely as the general Internet population to pursue non-partisan news sources: 45% of bloggers said they preferred getting news from sources with no particular political point of view, 24% preferred getting news from sources that challenge their own political views, and only 18% stated preferring getting news from sources sharing their personal political ideas. (Lenhart & Fox 2006)

What, then, is the existing or potential political significance of blogs? What kind of role do they have in the Internet’s public sphere? To Drezner and Farrell (2004) the influence of blogs is puzzling, considering that their readership still does not match that of the mainstream media, that there is no central organisation to the blogosphere, that there is no ideological consensus among its participants, and that the vast majority of bloggers lack proper policy expertise. “*Despite these constraints, blogs appear to play an increasingly important role as a forum of public debate, with knock-on consequences for the media and for politics,*” Drezner and Farrell conclude (ibid., 4).

For instance Michelle Micheletti (2006) suggests that blogging has played a major role in the campaigning and the results of recent presidential and parliamentary elections in e.g. the US, Britain, Finland and Sweden. Blogs have also caught the attention of the mass media and the business world, now eager to enter the playing field themselves – as witnessed recently by the acquisition of MySpace in 2005 by the media giant News Corp for \$580, and of YouTube by Google Inc. in 2006 for a staggering \$1.65 billion. The rationale behind these big-scale corporate acquisitions becomes understandable considering that MySpace has more than 130 million users around the world, and that YouTube gets around 100 million daily hits, not least by bloggers (MSNBC.com 2006).

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6. According to the survey statistics, 147 million American adults used the Internet in 2005/2006. 57 million American adults read blogs and 12 million kept their own blog. In Finland over three million people used the Internet in 2007 (79% of the population, age 15 and up), of which around one million read blogs (33%) (Statistics Finland 2007).

Micheletti suggests that blogging is a sign of the times, proving that we need to take information-seeking, -providing, -retrieving and -interpreting seriously. Growing distrust in government, politicians, political parties and the mass media make information-seeking and political understanding “*more than just political foreplay for real political participation (like voting).*” Blogs enable a form of communicative participation increasingly important in times when citizens question the prefabricated information packages provided by experts, parties and organisations. Blogging also illustrates how “political communication and political understanding have entered the DIY [do-it-yourself] world.” In the world of such politicised communication, the media, advocacy groups, corporations and even established organisations invite ordinary people to involve themselves directly in communicative actions. “*Political communication is, therefore, no longer just a way of getting across messages. It is action in itself that mobilizes and structures political thought and engagement*” (ibid. 2006).

A remarkable example of such DIY tactics is the growing use by ‘citizen journalists’ of camera phones and videocams to record off-line incidents involving visible misuse of power as well as other politically sensitive material (consider e.g. the Abu Ghraib -pictures) in order to expose it to the public via the Internet (for a closer review of such uses, see Häyhtiö & Rinne 2009). The last section of this article explores one such example. Related to this development Drezner & Farrell (2004) note that bloggers have first-mover advantage in formulating public opinion. The comparative advantage of blogs in political discourse is the low cost of their real-time publication. Immediately following an event of political consequence – a presidential debate, a terrorist attack etc. – bloggers have the ability to post their immediate reactions before other forms of media can respond. Beyond initial reactions, bloggers can also respond to other blogs reactions before the mainstream media has time to react (ibid., 16). Mickey Kaus (2003) explains:

“[T]he virtue of speed isn’t simply, or even primarily, that you can scoop the competition. It’s that you can post something and provoke a quick response and counter-response, as well as research by readers. The collective brain works faster, firing with more synapses”.

## POLITICAL PERFORMANCE AS COMMUNICATION<sup>7</sup>

Along with the linguistic turn of the social sciences in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the notion that the human world is linguistically and discursively constructed started to gain high theoretical ground. Moreover, in the wake of the influence of first pragmatism and later Habermas, dialogical speech and the communicative competence it requires of participants in discourse came to be taken as the primary normative ideal for democratic life.

Habermas's basic theory and argument is that communicative action is by definition linguistic and argumentative, and therefore rational. It is based on the communicative competence of the members of society, and it is necessary for maintaining mutual understanding and coordinating subjects' actions peacefully. In modern conditions where the dictates of money and power increasingly control social and political relations, communicative action is also potentially (but rarely in practice) pluralistic and democratic, providing much-needed basis for commonality and social cohesion between individualising subjects. (Habermas 1984, 397)

To some critics Habermas's theory has over-emphasised the power of language as (rational) speech. His critics have pointed out for example, that the idea of universal communicative competence rests on untenable gender and power -blind assumptions regarding human subjectivity. Another argument is that the rational-consensual communicative style tends to privilege speech which is formal, disembodied and dispassionate, thereby undervaluing expressions of identity, cultural commitments and emotion. There is also the inevitable question of power, as feminist and postmodern critics have repeatedly noted. Rational communication, they argue, cannot effectively address issues of power, because power does not typically appear as 'bad arguments' which could be argued away with better ones. (Of such critiques, see Rättilä 1999.)

Nonetheless, Habermas's theory is problematic on other accounts as well. Ideals of communicative and participatory democracy often come with a distrust of aesthetic representation, as J.D. Peters (2000,

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7. This section of the article utilises ideas developed in the author's doctoral dissertation, chapters two and three (Rättilä, forthcoming).

563) claims. Habermas himself valorises conversation, reading and plain speech as worthy forms of democratic discourse and is frankly hostile to theatre, courtly forms, ceremony, the visual, and rhetoric. In Peters' view, Habermasian communication

“is a resolutely sober affair -- an Apollonian principle, one of unity, light, clarity, sunshine, reason. He slights the Dionysian side of language, its dangers and irrationalities and its creative bursts. The term ‘communication’ invites one to envision the social life of symbols in a subtly normative way, unlike terms such as rhetoric or discourse” (ibid.).

To be fair, Peters adds, Habermas does appreciate thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, who fathom the world-creating and political powers of language, but his purposeful reading of these thinkers aims more to rescue normative capital from them than to discover the complex and quirky side of their understanding of language.

But what is the danger for Habermas in defining the public sphere aesthetically? At stake is nothing less than the whole direction of modern politics. Given the Nazi aestheticisation of politics and Habermas's lifelong struggle against fascism, it is not hard to imagine why he resists theatre, rhetoric, narrative, festival or spectacle from entering into the political. Yet, public representations “*can be more than smoke and mirrors, more than Nuremburg rallies, more than ermine and purple*” (ibid., 565). Habermas's ‘iconoclastic’ stance toward symbolic communication both leaves us with an impoverished account of how communication in fact works and impedes the imagination of alternative forms of participatory media. This is an important point, when thinking of the evolving forms of communication on the Internet. Moreover, modern democracy is practically unthinkable without forms of social and political representation, both political and aesthetic, which mediate society for us. Modern media, Peters reminds us, are means for ‘imagining community.’ Our plight is only that the making of such public visions has become largely undemocratic and is left to ‘*the experts or the commissars*’ (ibid., 566).

As a contrast to the linguistically determined models of communication we can consider the role of *visual* means of signification. Think for example about the conspicuously visible role that many social and political movements have played in Western political life. This point can be taken concretely: namely, movements have often strived to make themselves visible in the public eye. I don't want to say that only movements do so, however. In fact, to a large extent all political actors do. Yet it is an emblematic feature, especially of movements, that they re/represent ideas and problems through public demonstrations, protests and (sometimes) through symbolic or physical violence; marching something like live public theatre on to the streets and other public spaces. This communicative strategy is compatible with postmodern art, or avant-gardism before it, which have struggled to challenge dominant ideas and practices from within the discourses of power, questioning overriding meanings and striving to produce alternative ones. Similarly, the core purpose of *the politics of performance* is to expose the realities of power to the public eye, to probe dominant cultural codes, and to deny overbearing political truths.

While performance has a number of usages in different walks of life – business, sports, the arts and everyday social encounters - in social science and critical theory it has a more

focused field of reference. In social scientific (sociological, anthropological, theatrical) approaches performance is typically used to refer to 'everyday drama,' and to the ways in which the elements of this drama constitute social-political categories and relations. In Erving Goffman's terms (1959) a performance is the pre-patterned and role-governed activity of a given participant which serves to influence other participants in a given situation. Here the stress is on the relation between the performer and the audience, that is, on the social context and the social 'functions' of performance rather than on the performer's own personal contribution to the situation. In critical and poststructuralist approaches the emphasis is elsewhere, on the possible fissures, breaks, and opportunities for resistance that are embedded in the performance's citationality, in the way the performer repeats or 'reiterates' the familiar and expected speech acts and gestures. The basic idea and assumption is that the cycle of oppressive social norms

can be broken by citing the given category – role, norm, identity – differently through exaggeration, subversion etc.

Judith Butler's renowned theory of gender construction works in the latter theoretical frame (1997). In order to understand what performance means in the present context, we need to discuss it in relation to Butler's work, and Butler's work, in turn, in relation to John L. Austin's (1975) and Jacques Derrida's theories (1988) of performative speech acts. First, Austin used the notion 'performative' to describe utterances such as 'I take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife.' In such cases 'to say something is to do something.' Promises, bets, curses, contracts, and judgments, then, do not *describe* actions; they *are* actions (Schechner 2002, 110). Performatives are an essential part of life, notes Schechner, "[e]ven when the heart says 'no,' if the tongue says 'yes' a performative occurs" (ibid.). Moreover, since the primary purpose of the performative is to do rather than simply to assert something, Austin suggested that its success had to be judged not on the basis of *truth* or *falsity*, as was the case with 'constative' assertions, but on whether the intended act was successful or not (Carlson 2004, 61). Performance is successful, 'felicitous,' if uttered in appropriate circumstances.

This presupposition of the authentic performance in 'felicitous circumstances' and the implied separation between *non-mimetic* (genuine, real) and *mimetic* (copying, representing) speech was later fiercely criticised by Derrida. Derrida argued that it is only by virtue of citation, or 'iterability,' that performative utterances can succeed (1988, 18). A performative could not accomplish what it is meant to accomplish if it were not identifiable as a citation. This is the equivalent of saying that performatives, in being by nature repetitions, are 'acted', an idea that Austin and Habermas would most likely oppose. Yet, for Derrida, citation is never exact or 'pure' because it is always being adapted to new contexts. Any citation or sign can break with any given context (Carlson 2004, 75-76).

Using first Austin's idea that speech acts are performatives and later Derrida's 'correctum' that all speech acts are socially and politically ungrounded citations, Butler (1990) has argued that a social category like gender is not a primordial attribute but a category constructed in/through 'gender producing' performance. Moreover, gender is not 'done' by a pre-existing subject, but the subject is itself constituted

through the same performative acts. Butler also argues that since gender is citational, it can never precisely repeat the 'original' which does not exist to begin with.

This idea has been found fruitful for countering the power of stereotypical social and political categories. Namely, if categories like gender are reproduced by, and their force relies on, indefinite citations of performative acts, this power can be interrupted and resisted by breaking the citational chain. Butler's examples of such resistance include gender parodies like drag-performances, cross dressing, gay-identified dressing etc. which question the myth of originality and create new practices of gendering. Drag, for instance, might refuse the equation of gender with biological sex. The biologically male body outwardly adorned as female may denaturalise sex and gender by highlighting the distinctions between them (see Pitts 2003, 43).

Overall, I endorse Butler's theory, yet, would like to point to a slight terminological difference between Butler's understanding of performance and the understanding suggested in this article. To Butler performance equals a somewhat stable category, in that it is that which appears to be (or *is posed as*) the person's identity; it is therefore more an 'image' than activity (in Butler's theory performatives are the active, the 'doing' element). In my usage, however, performance is an activity, an event, a public 'happening,' and by nature 'politics of the exceptional.' The distinction between performatives and performance as I understand them is that the function of linguistic and extra-linguistic performatives is to fix meanings and thus to produce regularity and 'sameness' in political life. Performances, however, are meant to play with and disturb those meanings and regularities. Performativity, a related term to the other two, refers to a liminal space between performative and performance, to a moment when the performative ceases to appear 'natural' and is opened up for critique and alteration.

Performance in the sense I am using the term can be physical, visual, linguistic, and/or symbolic, or all at once. Performance is an act that 'reiterates something differently,' or at least iterates it in inappropriate ('infelicitous,' as Austin called them) circumstances. It regularly features some element that breaks up routines, catches attention, generates new questions and provokes reactions - acceptance, rejection or something in between. Here, ritualistic performatives turn

into politicised performances. Performances typically employ visual (often bodily) means to mark the difference between the normalised and the suggested 'other' representation.

Jessica Kulynych (1997) points out that the notion of performativity is important also for understanding the possibilities for innovation in Habermasian deliberative participation, which she claims Habermas himself is able to acknowledge to an extent. Just as protestors may expose the contingency of concepts like justice and democracy, a dialogue may in the end expose the limits and contingency of rational argumentation. Once we are sensitive to the performative nature of speech, language and discourse, we can see that deliberative politics cannot be confined to the rational statement of validity claims. Kulynych argues that,

“[d]eliberation must be theatrical: it is in the performance of deliberation that which cannot be argued for finds expression. Indeed it is precisely the non-rational aspects of deliberation that carry the potential for innovation” (ibid., 334).

## VIRTUAL PERFORMANCE

It is possible to argue that the Internet features specific characteristics which invite users to communicate performatively. The Internet is a vast space filled with content that competes for readers' and viewers' attention. In order to create interesting profiles of themselves and to express their identities and goals in recognisable ways, net activists are required to put up distinctive visual and graphic – but often also argumentative – 'shows' that can be likened to 'live' political performance.

The difference between online and off-line performance is, however, that in the latter the actors bring their showcase into an open space where they can be seen and heard by all. They are by definition *public* performances. The nature of publicness is different on the net, where it changes into a kind of quasi-publicity where actors can perform anonymously and hide their 'real bodies' and identities from the public view.<sup>8</sup> Scandalously to political conservatives, at least, this

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8. For a qualification to this argument see the discussion at the end of this chapter.

feature provides endless opportunities and incentives for creative freedom by the Internet's 'communication artists'. On the Internet, one has to put all the more effort into the communicative performance, especially political performance, to make it effective. In this perspective, performative communication on the Internet need not shock anyone; it can rather be expected and looked for.

Net activists have found a myriad of ways to put on such performances, sometimes very annoyingly to those they are directed at, like virtual sit-ins and mass emailing campaigns aimed at closing down the targeted organisation's server and blocking access to its web site. Such DOS (denial of service) tactics are part of the 'electronic civil disobedience' artistry, a notion that sprang up in the late 1990s in the context of mobilising international support for the Mexican Zapatistas against the government's military aggression (Atton 2004, 20-21, see also Jordan in this volume). The performative, visually and aesthetically arresting, nature of the action was fittingly disclosed in the name of the group behind it, the "Electronic Disturbance Theatre", as well as in the group's decision to fill the government's log with the names of the people killed by the military during the Zapatistas' uprising in Chiapas (*ibid.*, 21). Other equally famous, and controversial, to be sure, acts of electronic civil disobedience include the mass emailing campaign in 1998 against the French government in order to turn down the MAI (Multilateral Agreement on Investment), the virtual attack on the WTO's (World Trade Organisation) server during the 1999 Seattle demonstrations, and the aggressive attack against the government of Estonia's website in the spring of 2007 during the public controversy over the removal of the bronze Russian soldier statue from the centre of the capital Tallinn. The removal sparked large-scale riots in the streets of Tallinn and other Estonian cities, as well as a severe DOS-attack on the government website arguably by Russian hactivists (e.g. Finn 2007).

Häyhtiö & Rinne (in this volume) discuss another interesting case of virtual performance surrounding the Finnish 'monster band' Lordi after winning the Eurovision song contest in May 2006. The historic victory (itself a product of the Internet age!) was followed by a colossal reaction among fans against the decision of some mass media to publish unmasked pictures of 'Mr. Lordi,' (the singer) despite the

band's explicit appeal after the victory that unmasked pictures not be published. The decision generated an unprecedented collective mobilisation in Finland, including massive e-mail, net, and off-line campaigning against the media participating in the publishing act. The campaign also proved successful, in the end forcing the major target of the campaign, the "*7 Days*" (7 Päivää) -magazine to make a public apology to the band and its fans.

These are some examples of the numerous DIY actionist performances on the net – but what about blogs, what are their communicative styles and strategies? Blogging is a highly personalised form of Internet communication. Bloggers take up and develop virtual identities which in a sense give them a 'public face.' There could be more at stake here, compared to other forms of net communication, in so far as bloggers aspire to maintain the credibility and attractiveness of their virtual personality. Some bloggers become 'virtual celebrities' and may not wish to jeopardise their esteemed position on the blogosphere. We might conjecture that bloggers rely more on the power of communicative and literary wit than the more anonymous net activists. Or does performative communication play a significant role in blogs as well?

"HERE'S YOUR PATRIOT ACT, HERE'S YOUR  
FUCKING ABUSE OF POWER..."

As a test case I briefly hooked up with the blogosphere in relation to an incident which occurred in the University of California library (at Bruin, LA) on November 14, 2006. First a brief account of what happened; pieced together from postings in various blogs (the whole story is also available in Daily Bruin, [www.dailybruin.com](http://www.dailybruin.com)):

On the night of November 14, Mostafa Tabatabaiejad, an Iranian-American student at UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles), was asked by UCLA Community Service Officers to show his university ID during a random check in the Powell library after 11.30 pm. Tabatabaiejad declined or for other reasons failed to produce his ID (it is not known why), after which he was told to leave the premises immediately. He did not comply with the request. Although, there is controversy in blog comments as to whether Mostafa Tabatabaiejad

refused deliberately or whether he was simply so engrossed in the work that he failed to react to the request immediately. The officers left, returning a few minutes later with two University of California Police Department officers to escort the student out. By this time Mostafa Tabatabaiejad had started to walk toward the door with his backpack. One of the officers approached him and grabbed his arm. Tabatabaiejad responded by trying to free his arm, yelling “don’t touch me” several times.

At this point Mostafa Tabatabaiejad was stunned with a Taser a gun which releases electric shocks, as a result of which he dropped to the floor, screaming loudly in pain. While he was still down and crying, the police kept ordering Tabatabaiejad to stand up and stop resisting. He was also told that if he failed to do so, he would be tasered again. Again there is controversy over whether Mostafa Tabatabaiejad resisted deliberately or whether his muscles were enervated so that he was not



**Picture 2.** UCLA police officers are pulling the tasered student out of the library at Bruin. Soon after video footage of the incident is uploaded to YouTube and starts circulating on the blogosphere. Eleven days later the video had reached one million viewers.

able to stand up any way. Tabatabaïnejad did not stand up and was tasered again. Tabatabaïnejad screamed and the officers kept telling him to stand up. Tabatabaïnejad did not follow the order and shouted “Here’s your Patriot Act, here’s your fucking abuse of power...”. He was tasered at least twice more, also after already being handcuffed. As Tabatabaïnejad was dragged through the room by two officers, he shouted, ‘I’m not fighting you, I said I would leave’. In the end, the officers managed to drag Tabatabaïnejad out of the building and he was booked overnight to be released next morning. (The video is available at numerous sites, e.g. at <http://technorati.com/pop/>)

Significantly, in connection with later events, a fellow student present in the library at the time of the incident decided to record it with his/her camera phone. The six-minute video footage, later circulated widely on the net, played a crucial role in the ensuing reaction of the blogosphere to the incident. Arguably, had the reporting on the episode been based on eye-witness accounts only, the reaction would not have been the same. Once on the net, the video triggered a quick and extensive response among bloggers, most of whom were shocked by the extensive use of force by the police. Questions, critique, comments, and demands for re/action flooded the blogosphere. Was the incident related to the US anti-terrorist home security policy? Did racial profiling play a role? Can citizens ever feel safe in the hands of the authorities? What does the incident tell us about current American political realities? The incident was also tackled normatively: In what circumstances is extensive use of force against citizens legitimate? Did Mostafa Tabatabaïnejad ‘have it coming’ because he resisted the police (if, indeed, he did)? Are citizens allowed to argue with authorities and defy them verbally?

What, then, does this test case demonstrate about the patterns of communication on the blogosphere? We can make several observations. The first is that the UCLA incident represents a typical case of political events which today find their way quickly on to the net and begin circulating and resonating there freely. As people now carry their mobile communication devices everywhere, it is more than likely that interesting and exceptional events are quickly forwarded to the net, increasingly by everyday ‘citizen reporters’. As one blogger points out:

“[I]n today’s culture, police and politicians can’t hide their actions as easily as before. Sunlight is the best disinfectant, or so it’s said. Today’s sun is the light of a camcorder or video phone. The people have the power. Use it.”

(Truth to power,” [blogs.ink19.com](http://blogs.ink19.com)).

The new blogging technology has significantly empowered formerly passive observers of public events and processes, turning them into active spectators, interpreters and public actors. Citizens equipped with mobile, camera and videophones, laptops and Wlan-connections are tantamount to a 24-hour ‘citizen watch, guard,’ many times with surprisingly effective results. As one commentator put it, “I’m guessing -- that the police involved in this are going to have a rough few weeks. Cameras in the hands of citizens may end up being a far, far more effective counter to police abuses than guns in the hands of citizens ever were” (“Here’s your Patriot Act,” [nielsenhayden.com](http://nielsenhayden.com)).

Another and related observation is the wide scope and practical influence of blogospheric communication. The blogosphere is a vast and complex, but at the same time effective communication network capable of disseminating information quickly around the world. In the test case, Technocrati found 638 results for the search words “UCLA taser” on November 17, and 2 084 results four days later. On November 25, [nielsenhayden.com](http://nielsenhayden.com) reported that the video had been accessed by one million viewers. Authorities and powerful political and economic elites are already forced to take into close account bloggers’ actions and opinions due to the sheer magnitude of the ‘World Wide Blogosphere’ and the publicity it is able to generate on debated events and issues. In the UCLA case, several organisations responded to the events, including the university administration and police, the established media, human rights organisations, and the Council of American-Iranian Relations (CAIR).<sup>9</sup>

The third point relates to the structure of communication within the blogosphere. Compared to many other technologies, blogging and other new social media are highly interactive, thanks to easy linking functions. On the other hand, ‘conversation’ in blogs is somewhat

9. CAIR is an organisation defending the interests of Islamic people and groups in the US ([www.cair.com](http://www.cair.com)).

curious; it can be directly dialogical as in “Here’s your Patriot Act”, nielsenhayden.com or, in the majority of blogs, only indirectly so when bloggers prefer commenting on issues on their own blogs instead of writing in the comment zones of other blogs. This peculiar conversational practice draws attention to the bloggers’ own virtual profiles and visibility, providing accentuated evidence of what Michele Micheletti (2003) has termed ‘*individualizing collective action*’. The blogosphere is a collective phenomenon, yet not a ‘mass’ where each part would be similar to other parts as when sharing the same ideology, identity or political objectives. The power of the blogosphere relies, rather, on randomly shared common orientations – that is, on individual bloggers’ actions occasionally coalescing into common objectives and campaigns, which then quickly dissolve when the project is completed. As a collective political phenomenon, the blogosphere undoubtedly challenges traditional political elites, who from now on have to learn to address and appeal to a very miscellaneous assemblage of individual voters and actors.

The fourth observation pertains to blogs’ communicative styles. Bloggers like whenever possible to use tangible material to back up their comments and assessments such as photos, videos, podcasts, official documents, pictures, symbols etc. In the UCLA case, many bloggers attempted to reconstruct the events by gathering information from a variety of sources in order to construct a fuller account and interpretation of the episode and its significance. It is interesting to note that, in doing so, bloggers exploited both careful argumentation as well as various visual, rhetorical and symbolic means of communication.

Also, performative communication was displayed, both during the incident itself, as well as in the subsequent communication on the blogosphere. There the performative element centres on the video footage itself, which reproduced the event as ‘a public show’. For example, Mostafa Tabatabaiejad used performative means when being held and dragged in the library by the police, as witnessed by his yell, “*Here’s your Patriot Act, here’s your fucking abuse of power*”. Confrontation, we may note, typically calls forth performative action. Here Tabatabaiejad’s tasered, almost tortured, body became a symbol of oppression of what was taken as unjust use of coercive power. Reactions on the blogosphere were so intensive partly because the bodily element was so strongly

present in the video. Bodies communicate effectively, they are easily related to and sympathised with (Gregory et al. 2002).

The police likewise acted performatively, as shown by their insistent 'stand up' commands and their coercive behaviour overall. Their 'performance' may have been addressed to the other students present in the library, or even to a wider audience. The sense of such a brutal performance lies in that it represents the sort of micropower or biopower techniques which Michel Foucault has described as typical means of modern power to control protesting 'political bodies'. In the current circumstances, where the 'war on terrorism' dominates American political discourse, such controlling techniques also have a prominent political role in domestic security policy.

Blogs per se, as visual and rhetorical representations, are rather rich in communicative elements. Think e.g. of the names of blogs such as "Horsesass.org", "Truth to power", "AlienTed" or "Nihilix". It is interesting that so many blogs and bloggers would seem to be concerned with 'revealing the truth', which are in themselves rhetorical and symbolic performances. Bloggers also use visual symbols as a way of creating, expressing, and playing with their identity. This is one way of 'putting on a show' for those visitors or 'friends' who may be looking. One further observation is that even though bloggers often trifle with the visual and verbal projections of their identities, this does not seem (contra Habermas's beliefs) in any way to prevent them from engaging in 'serious' talk and political commentary.

Earlier critical appraisals of cyberlife have worried about the potentially over-individualising effects of net communication. Their point is that transcending bodies and social differences over the Internet does not really do much to eradicate the problems related to them in real-life political structures and practices. Therefore the insistence of many feminist difference advocates that in order to be effective, resistance to existing hegemonies must be visibly present in real-life public spaces.

Boler (2007) argues, however, that the role of bodies as major social signifiers remains more or less intact in digital communication too. As an example of this, bloggers' personal profiles often include basic information about their age, sex, location, 'ideological' standing and fields of interest. Furthermore, only half of bloggers use pseudo-



**Picture 3.**

An example of a blog with clear performative elements in its linguistic and non-linguistic design of communication.

nyms, according to the Pew survey (Lenhart & Fox 2006). Why so? It seems that the credibility of bloggers as public figures with a virtual 'face' requires putting in such information, and this is the information most visitors seek any way to be able to relate to the blogger. Ironically, notes Bolter (ibid), even in digital communication the body actually functions as a necessary arbiter of meaning and a final signifier of what is accepted as 'real' and 'true'.

Moreover, with the coming of the social media technologies the structure of communication on the Internet has changed dramatically from the earlier text-based modes. It is these social software features of the net which really seem to be thriving in the current development of the Internet.

This is not to say that blogs with and without video footage and other visual 'embodiments' would in themselves be able to correct real-life power differences. Yet, they markedly increase the net's com-

municative potential, and as such, merit much closer attention than hitherto from political researchers.

The above findings support at least partly, the idea embedded in the above critique of Habermas's theory of communicative action and communicative competence. Namely, my argument is that it is not the 'rational' and formal give-and-take dialogue that is crucial for open, democratic discourse. That is, we need not require that *individual* communicators be 'rational' and 'other-orientated' in their argumentation when partaking in public discursive processes. What matters is that the *structure* of communication is 'rational' (quotation marks here are intended); i.e., that public communicative processes are inclusive and open to all interested participants, that they allow different modes and styles of expression, that they accept social and political diversity, and that they make possible the production of new political ideas and public initiatives. The blogosphere, I believe, is one step forward in the process of creating such a structure of public communication.

The nature of the democratic culture the current electronic (r)evolution is crafting is by no means easy to define. Perhaps the best we can do is to say that democracy on the net is becoming increasingly creative, diverse, and messy.

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