

The Danish journalist Stirne Bjerre Herdel ([www.kontrabande.com](http://www.kontrabande.com)) sent me some questions. He is writing an article about the “development in political dialogue in social media on the web.” It is for the Højskolebladet magazine (meaning hogeschool/hochschule/polytechnic).

SBJ: When it comes to politics the parties seem to loose members but people haven't lost interest in politics. In stead of showing up for political meetings they gather on the internet in big or small groups or communities. They blog and they arrange activities, they discuss. What is this form of political communication? Does it contribute to democracy and the political debate or does it undermine serious politics with endless gibberish in niche groups that will never be heard anyway?

GL: With the millions of users we can't really look down on the Internet anymore. I just read that Denmark got the most dense and effective network economy. It is indeed true that we are living in the Age of the Long Tail. Business begins to see this as opportunity and translates this in to economic models, but the political class is nowhere near ready to engage with the idea that we have left behind representative democracy and its inherent push to create majorities. When it comes to politics we have to think big and better vote for a hand full of parties. In many Western countries there is still only a choice between two or three parties. In terms of prosperity that would be comparable with the consumer goods on offer in a Cuban state supermarket. In fact, as you indicate, the 'popular' parties of the past struggle with a steady decline of membership. They have compensated their lack of proper representation with an increase of PR means. Politics has become a business opportunity for spin doctors. We do not need to repeat the Situationist critique of the society of the spectacle here. It would be much further build on Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum and how this disembodied archipelago of signs called mutates when it enters the Web 2.0 age.

SBJ: What can citizens get out of this form of communication when it comes to democracy in political influence?

GL: Let's start with the observation that the Internet itself has become less and less democratic. This may be unavoidable as millions of ordinary users do not want to get involved in complex issues around (global) internet governance. The very idea that the Internet itself could be new digital public domain, like squares in the past, or the fourth estate in the age of the industrial revolution, does only exist on the level of tiny content particles. Increasingly users delegate power and responsibility over the network

architecture into the hand of large firms such as Google where they trade their privacy against the free use of incredible web services such as Google Earth and YouTube. Let's face it: there is less and less autonomous infrastructure, in a time when it is so cheap and easy to run a web or email server from your own bedroom. This lack of self-organization has an impact on the structure of the online political interventions that you asked about. We can hardly speak anymore of 'tactical media' in this respect. Even do-it-yourself is no longer an appropriate image. What we see happening is extremely fluid and instable 'smart mobs' (Howard Rheingold) that gather, connect, act, and then disappear and dissolve the built-up structure. I would not say that politics have become immune yet against the speedy activism. Quite the opposite. As long as the medium or platform is new, like Hyves, MySpace, Studie-VZ or Bebo, one can generate a lot of media attention, but these windows of opportunities close down soon so one has to be constantly on the move.

SBJ: How can/should politicians use this development?

GL: Really, as an autonomous anarchist I should be the last to consult politicians what they should, or should not do. The political class figured out quickly how to create a presence at the social networking sites. Look at how US presidential candidate Barack Obama is using YouTube. It's all pretty obvious. Is this innovative or even subversive? I doubt. Will it reach a few more young voters? Perhaps. This is not the political change that many hope for. We should not mix up PR strategies with a genuine form of dialogue and debate. Politicians still have so much to lose, publicity-wise, that they cannot simply effort to join debates online. They will be slaughtered. Without the constant protection of their PR-people, spin doctors, policy advisors and lawyers they cannot go anywhere, say anything. This harnessing of the political class is going in a completely opposite direction as Web 2.0--and that's what makes their appearance in this networked environment so predictable and hypocritical.

SBJ: Have social medias taken over the political debate and activism or do real life debates and organisation still serve a purpose--and if so which?

GL: Taken over? No, there isn't any statistical evidence for that. Television, assisted by newspapers and radio, are still dominating the political agenda. The Web is playing a strange, new role in all this. For many, Internet is the perfect place to hang out and escape the boring, pre-programmed world of the 'old media'. Simultaneously, society is moving into the Internet at the

same time, just think of the re-invention of advertisement out there. What we see happening is not an easy convergence of media. Real and virtual mix but in unexpected manners. That's the fun of it. However, the current crises are not properly addressed either in cyberspace. It's really questionable to think that the paperless Internet is contributing in a positive way to the global warming and environmental pollution that we have in China as the place of production and Africa as the waste basket. But I remain positive. Remember that all these hyped-up self-important dotcom people in the late nineties had no idea about their own upcoming crash, let alone about the social aspects of Web 2.0. This makes me optimistic about Web 3.0, 4.0 and so on. Why won't some Afro-Brazilian consortium draw up the principles for the Internet architecture in 20 years time?