Digital Structure and Communicative Politics

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Abstract

This masters' thesis, 'Digital Structure and Communicative Politics' (SÖX202, 41-80, 30 ECTS), authored by Martin Berg, under supervision of Jan-Olof Nilsson, will be presented on seminar 2002-10-07 at the Department of Sociology, Lund University. One of the main concerns in this study is the perception that individuals are able to exceed the subjective reality by means of communication. Following the theoretical discourse of Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991), a change of the subjective reality is seen as associated with changes at the objective level. Considering this theoretical framework, the conception of 'digital structure' (the internet and its text-based interface) as offering an arena facilitating transformative communication is related to a notion of identity politics. Understanding how a political platform, disconnected from the established political infrastructure, emanates from digital communication and its structure is the main purpose with this study. By elaborating the concept 'co-operative sub-realities' in dialogue with Jürgen Habermas (1995, 1997), a new dimension is given to the concept subjective reality and interpersonal communication. Focusing on personal transformation through communicative action, fundamental questions related to social change through social interaction are sketched and discussed in the light of characteristics of 'virtual space'. An understanding of how social digital life differs from everyday life in 'real space' is developed, laying the foundation for an integration of the concept of 'digital structure' into the theoretical framework, striking a balance between 'real space' and 'virtual space'. Considering the ability to interpersonal transformation and social change through communicative action when performed within 'virtual space', a 'digital communicative politics' is developed. This politics builds on the idea that digital structure enables a disembodiment and objectification of one's self. Taking into account the discussion of how 'real space' relates to 'virtual space' and the attempt to integrate a macro- and micro perspective of sociology while undertaking an analysis of the digital structure, the study differs from contemporary attempts to understand the politics of virtual space.

Keywords: internet, communication: political aspects, information technology: political aspects, cultural politics, identity politics, communicative action.

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1 Introduction

In this masters' thesis, issues concerning overarching changes in late-modern social life are discussed in the light of digital communication and processes of social construction of self and reality. At first, this study was aimed to discuss the political potential of virtual universities and computer-mediated distance education – how social change could be achieved by partaking in education not offered in the same social system as the students'. However, during my exploratory literature studies, I understood that the subject matter was not so much about the mere characteristics of virtual education as it concerned the basic qualities of digital communication. Within, as well as outside the academic scene, much has been written on phenomena related to digital communication, Internet and virtual communities. In this study, however, my intention is to investigate these phenomena from a political point of view. By combining a number of theoretical perspectives, I try to understand digital communication and engagement in virtual communities from a political point of view.

It is important to bear in mind that when discussing late-modern society, social change through communication in virtual communities and so forth – I treat issues that are reality only to a minority of the world's population in total. I am fully aware of the fact that a majority of the individuals populating our planet have not used, nor will use, a computer ever in their lives. This fact, however, does not prevent me from discuss phenomena (such as the ones discussed in this study) actual in western parts of the network society.

1.1 Background, main objectives and methodology

The discussion of how digital communicative action relates to social change is complex. One example that also works as an underlying source for my personal pre-understanding is my masters' thesis in sociology of religion (Berg 2000), based on a case study of an on-line chat community for gay men. In that study, possibilities to use digital structure as a catalyst for social change was discussed. By focusing on central thoughts of contemporary visions of 'cyber-prophets'[1], I found that participation in online 'counter-cultural' communities might well be a powerful

factor in social change, especially considering the dialectic relationship between the individual and society as presented by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991).

The argument I pursue in this study, builds on a combination of two key themes. The first theme is the perception that individuals are able to exceed the subjective reality by means of communication. Following the theoretical discourse of Berger and Luckmann the change of the subjective reality is seen as associated with changes at the objective level.[2] The second theme relates to the conception of digital structure as offering an arena facilitating transformative communication. These two themes together constitute a major factor in understanding how a political platform, disconnected from the established political infrastructure, emanates from digital communication and its structure.

Following this line of thought, one main aim of the study is to establish a theoretical framework concerning the dialectical relationship between the individual and society. Focus is on potential personal transformation through communicative action. In chapter two, the reader encounters an outline of fundamental questions related to social change through communicative action and social interaction. Chapter three highlights characteristics of 'virtual space'[3] in order to develop an understanding of how social digital life differs from everyday life in 'real space'. In the fourth and concluding chapter, the study seeks to integrate the concept of 'digital structure' into the social theory developed in chapter two, striking a balance between 'real space' and 'virtual space'. Considering the relationship between these two spaces and the attempt to integrate a macro- and micro perspective of sociology, the study differs from contemporary attempts to understand the politics of virtual space. In my view, research on digital communities underscore the relevance of a view of the social order as a process, especially when it comes to regarding 'real space' and 'virtual space' as two intertwined parts of one single reality.

The understanding employed throughout this study is in tune with the field of cultural studies with emphasis on its plural and interdisciplinary qualities, allowing for theories and methods to converge.[4] As Peter Dahlgren (1999: 78) points out, '[w]ith its emphasis on the relationship between culture, meaning and power, cultural studies has addressed the field of the political in a variety of ways'. Inherent in his

thoughts, is a kind of scientific approach intending to analyse social meaning by '[s]eeking to elucidate the political dimensions of texts, social relationships, and spatial arrangements'. The search for elements of social change is something that has saturated my work in the hunt for the political dimension of a cultural artefact such as the Internet.

As pointed to above, I make use of an analytical research design based on two methodological themes: theory and structure. The theoretical approach basically consists of the sociology of knowledge as presented by Berger and Luckmann (1991) in a dialogue with Jürgen Habermas (1997; 1995), discussing concepts such as 'lifeworld', 'system' and 'communicative action'. To study the digital dimensions of reality is a complex project. One way of dealing with this complexity is to use the model outlined in my masters' thesis (Berg 2000) as one point of reference, particularly aspects regarding communicative limitations and possibilities inherent in the digital structure, replacing the use of qualitative techniques, used in that study, with a focus on theoretical issues concerning digital communication and virtual communities.

2 The reciprocity of social transformation

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I sketch the main characteristics of the sociological thoughts of Berger and Luckmann, starting with a few preliminary points regarding the relationship between the theoretical framework and the understanding of the digital structure discussed more in detail in chapter three.

In order to give the reader an idea about the nature of the connection between 'virtual' and 'empirical' reality, the 'sylvester.se' and 'sylvia.se'[5] are illuminating examples in the sense that they show how digital communication actions work to provide a platform for homo-, bi- and transsexuals - social 'minorities' standing in 'contra-discursive' relation to the surrounding contemporary society – to communicate.[6]

The basic element within these communities is the personal homepage, where the user presents him-/herself using digital photo images (categorized as non-pornographic or pornographic personal photo images or pictures of other object), personal statistics such as body stature, hairstyle, music preferences and so forth. Often, the user utilizes a text as a form of personal presentation, not unlike the ones used in personal/classified advertisements. Once logged in, it becomes possible for the users to commence digital communication. This can be done in a number of ways. For example, the users can write messages within the existing built-in message system or they can use the on-line synchronous chat line. In addition, they can also post messages on the discussion boards, that is, categorized topics related to the users' concerns and interests. By performing various search operations, it is possible for the user to find an individual to his or her liking. By pressing a button, a list of possible matches becomes visible and communication starts – or, the user can simply, peek around for a while. Regardless of choice, the user's presence in this digital communication system is 'saved'. Let me exemplify. By surfing on homepages within the virtual community, the user's 'chosen' names is added to a list labelled 'last five

visitors'. The user reveals his/her interest in a specific user by frequent visits to the homepage of this specific user, thus creating a kind of social relationship.

When presenting the central concepts of 'virtual space', a thought that comes to mind is that the interface[7] disconnects the body from the communicative situation. Understanding digital communicative acts as processes makes it possible to incorporate a view of the individual as experimenting with various identities, expressing desires difficult to expose in 'real space'. Firstly, using my example above as a point of reference, it is possible to establish a kind of intimacy with 'real space' by making use of photo images or other descriptions and pictures, as a part of one's self-identification(s). There is no guarantee however, that these images truly depict the user's actual facial structure or body stature for that matter. Secondly, by participating in virtual communities, individuals reach out to and are able to communicate with people who share their interests and concerns. This in turn, provides a self-understanding based on a process of interpersonal mirroring within the communicative act. Last but not least, one important function of virtual communities relates to the fact that, people who normally never would communicate are now given a possibility to do so. This state of affairs does not imply that everyone, all of a sudden, takes the opportunity to chat with anyone.

Let me now turn to the key concern of this chapter, namely the main characteristics of sociology as expressed by Berger and Luckmann (1991). Having in mind the kind of social interaction that takes place within 'virtual communities' my aim is to investigate the social construction of reality in terms of a dialectic process characterised by a reciprocal relationship between the individual and society.[8] Focus is on ways in which digital communication between individuals may provoke changes at a variety of societal levels.

A fruitful point of departure when trying to grasp the dialectic relationship is to start with a presentation of the basic notion of society and individual, namely questions concerning the concepts of reality and knowledge.[9] Further on in this chapter, I discuss Berger and Luckmann's perceptions of reciprocity within the dialectics that construct society as well as the individual.[10] All this will be done in a modest exchange with Habermas' perception of communicative action. From the discussion

in chapter two I want to derive a discourse on ways in which the conceptual terms 'co-operative sub-realities' and 're-socialisation' may work as agents for social change.

2.2 The dual character of reality

When stating that society possesses some kind of objective facticity, at the same time that it also is constructed by actions expressing subjective meaning, Berger and Luckmann (1991: 30) combine two classical sociological statements. This is an interesting, but yet complex thought since the relationship is dialectic. Despite its complexity it applies to the idea of 'virtual space'. In 'virtual space' the only reality present is the digital 'text', produced by the participants. The individual performs a social activity by, say, participating in a chat group. As s/he interacts with other individuals in digital communication, a text is produced – a text, constituting the digital reality. When thinking of politics, changes at the subjective level is translated to the objective/societal level – or, put differently, activity in 'virtual space' can affect the individual (subjective reality) that, in turn, changes society (objective reality).

It is obvious that an understanding of society from the perspective of Berger and Luckmann, has to take its point of departure in an analytical separation of the objective and the subjective realities. For example; an individual in 'real space' experiences the world as one entity interpreted through his/her subjective reality. In 'virtual space', on the other hand, the individual experiences him-/herself as being part of two parallel realities. In addition, the individual is also able to experience and take control over the subjective reality.

Objective and subjective realities are only separable in an analytical sense. They are dialectically interrelated, the one reality is always found within the other and vice versa. Understanding this dialectic relationship is not a simple project but rather, as Habermas (1995: 151) proposes, the most central problem in social theory that consists in connecting 'in a satisfactory way the two conceptual strategies indicated by the notions of "system" and "lifeworld". Habermas (1995: 154) argues that 'the lifeworld remains the subsystem that defines the pattern of the social system as a whole'. These two conceptual strategies or dimensions are deeply interrelated and in one way or another equal to the terms 'objective reality' and 'subjective reality' if we regard lifeworld to be a set of different but yet similar subjective realities of a group of

individuals. So far, it is possible to sort out these two analytical dimensions of reality to the same extent in 'virtual space' as in 'real space'. However, this division becomes more obvious in the case of 'virtual space' since it is a reality that exists exclusively as a text.

Following this line of thought I start with a discussion of the concept of 'society as an objective reality'. However, focus is mainly on how the subjective reality affects its objective counterpart. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to examine the ways in which human activity (which ought to emanate as a result of a subjective reality) or, externalisation, as I aim to describe it, manifests itself in the objective reality.

The objective social world is at hand prior to human activity and in this sense, individuals, as collective constructs and makes sense of the world. This does not imply that reality exists independent of human interpretations, but rather, as Berger and Luckmann (1991: 70, emphasis in original) maintain, '[s]ocial order exists *only* as a product of human activity'. With this view as pointed out by Berger Luckmann; '[n]o other ontological status may be ascribed to it [the social order] without hopelessly obfuscating its empirical manifestations. Both in its genesis /…/ and its existence in any instant of time /…/ it [the social order] is a human product'.

Taking the perspective of Berger and Luckmann, externalisation is understood as the active re-creating part in the process of social construction. In virtual communities, the social activity is the only factor that constitutes the (visible) reality. In those 'isolated' communities the world is less complex and, in addition to that not more than a 'sub-reality' – a reality within another. How then could society possibly be changed? As an answer to this question, Berger and Luckmann (1991: 70) state that, with the aim '[t]o understand the causes, other than those posited by the biological constants, for the emergence, maintenance and transmission of a social order one must undertake an analysis that eventuates in a theory of institutionalization'.[11]

Following this argument, human activity that nurtures and re-constructs the social order gets institutionalised – a multifaceted process between existing institutions and power relations.[12] In order to understand the origins of institutionalisation, a recognition of the concept of habitualisation is necessary. Human activity performed with a high frequency becomes habitualised, implying that the performer understands

the action as a pattern or model. Once habitualised, 'the action in question may be performed again in the future in the same manner and with the same economical effort' (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 71). In order to understand the basic arguments in this study this state of affairs is a key issue. By participating in a digital communication of the same type as the sylvester.se or sylvia.se mentioned above, it is possible for a homosexual individual hiding his sexual preferences to expose his sexual preferences, taking on a homosexual identity. When interacting in virtual space it becomes possible to control the manifestation of the subjective reality in its objective counterparts. It is easier to control the signifying flow in the borderland between the objective and subjective. Having a homepage with a presentation representative for this identity a person can habitualise a self-understanding as homosexual, internalising this experience, hereby laying the ground for a homosexual identity in real space. Not all human actions (once again) transform into institutions, instead, the '[i]nstitutionalization occurs whenever there is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors' (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 72). Since, 'real space' phenomena by necessity only are represented in their absence in 'virtual space' (communication is performed by means of textual exchange), the process of institutionalisation occurs immediately. In this sense, we are dealing with a collective process in which the mentioned typifications are shared within a social field, or more exactly, '[t]hey are *available* to all members of the particular social group in question, and the institution itself typifies individual actors as well as individual actions' (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 72, emphasis in original). To summarise, the social order as an objective reality and lifeworlds emerges from human habits when transformed into institutions through complex processes of mirroring and transmission of actions. In the midst stands the subjective reality that, as will be pointed out in the following, is based on a process of internalisation. In this borderland between subjective and objective reality lies the political potential that will be extensively discussed later on in this study.

On account of the fact that the subjective reality is a major factor in understanding how social change occurs, the role of communicative action becomes crucial. Communicative action links individuals in a dialogical relation and by doing so it also changes the subjective reality. This understanding constitutes the foundation of the politics of digital communication, a point I will shortly return to. Having said this, Berger and Luckmann's view of the construction of the individual and society

becomes clearer. By quoting the well-cited phrase '[s]ociety is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product' (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 79) this section is brought to an end.[13]

Having the 'objective reality' in mind, I now flip the coin to take a closer look at the concept of 'society as a subjective reality'. Berger and Luckmann (1991: 33) argue; 'the individuals live their lives as taken for granted simultaneously as being a world that originates in their thoughts and actions, and is maintained real by these'. The thoughts of Berger and Luckmann can be combined with Habermas (1995: 130), who notes that, '[t]he unproblematic character of the lifeworld has to be understood in a radical sense: qua lifeworld it cannot become problematic, it can at most fall apart'. From this point of view, the everyday life situation is the best way to understand a social phenomenon. Yet, as Habermas continues (1995: 131), 'it is only in the light of an actual situation that the relevant segment of the lifeworld acquires the status of a contingent reality that could also be interpreted in another way'. In my understanding, the social interplay of everyday life within the objective world is made meaningful by collectively sharing a set of symbols while a self-understanding emerges. The process of internalisation is an important aspect of all this. The young child undergoes a primary socialisation that provides him/her with a basic linguistic system that carries a set of norms, and already habitualised social behaviours represented at an institutional level. However, focus in this thesis is on the life-long secondary socialisation process that deals with diametrically different obstacles. Berger and Luckmann (1991: 160, emphasis in original) explain;

> [t]he formal processes of secondary socialisation are determined by its fundamental problem: it always presupposes a preceding process of primary socialization; that is, that it must deal with an already internalized world. It cannot construct subjective reality *ex nihilo*. This presents a problem because the already internalized reality has a tendency to persist. Whatever new contents are now to be internalized must somehow be superimposed upon this already present reality. There is, therefore, a problem of consistency between the original and the new internalization.

According to the quote above, the individual is continuously re-created through his or her relationship to significant others situated within his/her social field of reference. The significant others transfer their attitudes to the individual, who becomes a reflection of their conversation – the individual actually becomes what s/he is named. Returning to sylvester.se and sylvia.se, it becomes easier to understand

the power of digital communication. The users of this kind of communities help creating one another. Berger and Luckmann (drawing on Mead) entitle the theoretical abstraction of these reflecting agents 'the generalized other' and tell us;

> [w]hen the generalized other has been crystallized in consciousness, a symmetrical relationship is established between objective and subjective reality. What is real 'outside' corresponds to what is real 'within'. Objective reality can readily be 'translated' into subjective reality, and vice versa. Language, of course, is the principal vehicle of this ongoing translating process in both directions (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 153).

The thought pointed to in the quote above has its origins in thoughts presented by Georg Herbert Mead (1947). In his discussion he develops an understanding of the attitude of the generalised other as the attitude of the entire society. This implies that the individual must, inevitably, understand the attitude of the generalised other in order to understand him-/herself. Herein, lies the key to understanding both the link between objective and subjective reality, and the relationship that exists between 'real space' and 'virtual space'. With this view, the interaction with significant others in 'virtual space' provides a new dimension in 'real space' as they become included in the concept of 'the generalised other'. In his/her contact with significant others, communicative action mirrors as well as re-creates the individual. The basic feature of a social community, 'virtual' or 'real', is the presence of the generalised other in combination to different sets of significant others. However, the character of the generalised other might change after having internalised the reflection of the significant others in 'virtual space'.[14]

Furthermore, Berger and Luckmann (1991: 153) explain that the generalised other's 'formation within consciousness means that the individual now identifies not only with concrete others but with a generality of others, that is, with a society. Only by virtue of this generalized identification does his own self-identification attain stability and continuity'. Following this argument, a close relationship between the formation of individuality and the basic structure of society is at hand.

During the secondary socialisation phase, the individual participates in different sub-realities rather than in a single one as is the case when it comes to the primary socialisation phase in which the family is the initial instructive institution. Berger and Luckmann (1991: 38) suggest that participation in a sub-reality for which the

individual not yet carries specific rutinisations enriches the reality of everyday life since the person is able to 'incorporate into it the knowledge and skills required' for this reality. The activity within these sub-realities is based on internalisation of institutional sub-fields demanding and encouraging the individual to make use of certain role-specific linguistic patterns or vocabularies. In the sub-realities the conversation is the first and foremost medium, connecting individuals. The conversation, Berger and Luckmann (1991: 173) conclude, 'gives firm contours to items previously apprehended in a fleeting and unclear manner /…/ Generally speaking, the conversational apparatus maintains reality by "talking through" various elements of experience and allocating them a definite place in the real world'.

2.3 Co-operative sub-realities and re-socialisation

When discussing reality, using the conceptual model described above, namely an understanding of the individual as creating society and vice versa, the 'passive activity' performed by the objective reality is manifested in the externalising activity of the individual. In line with this thought, Habermas (1995: 154) regards the objective reality as being related to the lifeworld (or, from my point of view, the subjective reality) that 'remains the subsystem that defines the pattern of the social system as a whole'. The most important factor in the process of social change, then, would be the subjective reality. Berger and Luckmann (1991: 176) maintain that this reality is possibly to transform since '[t]o be in a society entails an ongoing process of modification of subjective reality'. With this view, the transformation of subjective reality becomes 'subjectively apprehended as a total'.

As noted above, the secondary socialisation phase is a life-long, never-ending process. To transform a subjective reality totally (which is impossible, but yet an analytical exercise) implies an alternation, processes requiring an absolute re-socialisation. These processes 'are different from primary socialization because they do not start *ex nihilo*, and as a result must cope with a problem of dismantling, disintegrating the preceding nomic structure of subjective reality' (Berger and Luckman 1991: 176-177, emphasis in original). The individual her-/himself cannot be re-socialised on her/his own terms, but is in need of a social platform, or social 'laboratory' in order to accomplish this personal transformation. Berger and Luckmann (1991: 177, emphasis in original) continue by stating;

> [t]he most important social condition [for a successful alternation] is the availability of an effective plausibility structure, that is, a social base serving as the 'laboratory' of transformation. This plausibility structure will be mediated to the individual by means of significant others, with whom he must establish strongly affective identification. /.../ These significant others are the guides into the new reality. They represent the plausibility structure in the roles they play *vis-à-vis* the individual (roles that are typically defined explicitly in terms of their re-socializing function), and they mediate the new world to the individual.

Participation in sub-realities (such as sylvester.se or sylvia.se) during the process of secondary socialisation, works as a means for re-socialisation. This is actualised in contemporary society that is divided into different levels, and/or institutional spheres from which socialising elements emanate. The family is not necessarily the most important source for the formation of a young individual and the local community or city is not necessarily the most important arena for the grownup individual. In late modern society, the individual can experience him-/herself as being at home in places that not automatically have to be in close proximity to him/her. With this in mind, the situation calls for a consideration of the following quote in which Berger and Luckmann (1991: 158) argue that the degree of socialisation stands in relation to the social order. They say, '[s]econdary socialization is the internalization of institutional or institution-based "sub-worlds". Its extent and character are therefore determined by the complexity of the division of labour and the concomitant social distribution of knowledge'. Moreover, they argue (1991: 158), '[s]econdary socialization is the acquisition of role-specific knowledge' and 'requires the acquisition of role-specific vocabularies, which means, for one thing, the internalization of semantic fields structuring routine interpretations and conduct within an institutional area'. This means that 'subjective identity is a precarious entity. The subjective identity is dependent upon the individuals' relations with significant others, a relationship that may change or disappear' (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 118).

As seen in the above, the process of re-socialisation requires a plausibility structure that 'will be mediated to the individual by means of significant others, with whom he must establish strongly affective identification'. This could be a sub-reality, that is, a social sphere of reality. However, there is a need for a social activity aimed to re-socialise the individual in order to get the process going. To widen the understanding of the concepts used by Berger and Luckmann as well as Habermas, namely the concept of subjective realities or lifeworld, I prefer the concept of 'co-operative sub-realities' since it incorporates co-operative acts in the virtual communicative

situation. Within a co-operative sub-reality, the participants' textual conversations aim to create a social order mediating and carrying elements between the subjective realities involved. This social activity, then, is by necessity what Habermas calls communicative action. As Berger and Luckmann argue in the above, conversation is what connects individuals in a situation similar to 'co-operative sub-reality'. Re-socialisation occurs in dialogue or more accurately, always within a certain lifeworld (regarded as a set of subjective realities). Habermas (1995: 126, emphasis in original) argues;

> [c]ommunicative actors are always moving *within* the horizon of their lifeworld; they cannot step outside of it. As interpreters, they themselves belong to the lifeworld, along with their speech acts, but they cannot refer to "something in the lifeworld" in the same way as they can to facts, norms, or experiences.

One way to interpret this quote is by means of Habermas' (1997: 285-286) term 'communicative action'. Communicative action is to be found 'whenever the actions of the agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts of reaching an understanding.' This involves a kind of collective thinking since individual success is not the primary goal in this context. Rather it is 'the negotiation of definitions of the situation that is the central element of the interpretive accomplishments required for communicative action' (Habermas 1995: 139).

How is it possible to understand this communicative action as a transforming power within the 'co-operative sub-realities'? First of all, there is a need to consider the fact that '[e]veryday communicative practice is /.../ embedded in a lifeworld context defined by cultural tradition, legitimate orders, and socialized individuals. Interpretive performances draw upon and advance consensus' (Habermas 1995: 182). The leading theme within the communicative sphere or situation, he argues (1995: 137, emphasis in original) must be mutual understanding between the participants. After all 'communicative action serves to transmit and renew cultural knowledge; /.../ it serves social integration and the establishment of solidarity'. At the same time communicative action 'serves the formation of personal identities'.[15] To summarise, let me say that the transformation of an individuals' subjective reality takes place within the lifeworld (or the 'co-operative sub-reality') as a consequence of successful communicative action. Two individuals from different social economies and/or

cultural fields that participate in a situation of communicative action are engaged in both a subjective reality (that sometimes is related to different objective realities) and a common one of their shared co-operative sub-reality. These two parallel realities of a person will indeed affect each other, which in turn will change and enhance the perceptual mode and self-understanding of the individual involved. In the following chapter, these thoughts will be further developed when outlining some political aspects of life in 'virtual space'.

3 Digital structure and communicative action

Following the discussion outlined in chapter two, it becomes obvious that participation in 'co-operative sub-realities' changes subjective as well as objective reality. Politically, the communicative action within virtual communities differs from face-to-face communication. However, the nature of this difference has not yet been clearly demonstrated - this will be done in the following. The majority of the themes presented below relates to computer-mediated communication (CMC), emphasizing how digital communicative acts differ from face-to-face communication. I have already outlined some central differences between CMC and face-to-face communication, yet more is to be said on the matter. As Castells (1996: 363) observes, '[t]o some analysts, CMC, and particularly e-mail, represents the revenge of the recuperation of the constructed, rational discourse. For others, on the contrary, the informality, spontaneity, and anonymity of the medium stimulates what they call a new form of "orality," expressed by an electronic text'. These thoughts are only a part of what will be said in the following.

Let me commence this chapter by a consideration of the already mentioned term 'digital structure' that will be a key theme in the following. Understanding 'digital structure' implies a dual perspective. At the same time as 'digital structure' is a cultural, economic product of 'real space' it is also the backbone of the digital dimension of real space. In other words, digital structure functions as a mediator between hardware/information systems and the human user. In chapter two, I pointed to the necessity to perceiving 'virtual space' as a part of 'real space' due to the fact that they are closely interrelated, the one is a representation of the other and vice versa. In this sense, the similarity between how these two spaces relates to one another and the relationship that exists between subjective and objective reality is striking. My interest lie in the borderland that links virtual and real space and focus is on human agency as a constructor as well as a mediator of these two spaces.

3.1 Introduction

When studying contemporary research and authorship on 'cyber culture' and 'virtual communities', 'virtual space' is often described (often under the definition

cyberspace) as a new or a parallel world or universe, where the burdens of everyday life do not exist. This is a perception I term 'the dream of the virtual Jerusalem' in my masters' thesis, in sociology of religion (Berg 2000). Some of these "visionaries" (or cyber-prophets as I name them), such as the American psychologist Sherry Turkle, will be presented later in this chapter. One characteristic of their texts is the discussion of the concept of 'real space' as something insufficient. Life in 'virtual space' is often understood in terms of being transcendent in one way or another. Naturally, my intention in this study is by no means to encourage this utopian view of the imagined electronic world. The 'co-operative sub-realities' discussed in chapter two, are spheres within the objective reality and need to be regarded as such. It is, then, impossible to conceptualise 'virtual space' as a world disconnected from 'real space'. Having this in mind, I position myself along with Kevin Robins (2000: 79), especially since he highlights an important aspect inherent in contemporary cyberspace discourse. He argues, '[t]here is no alternative and more perfect future world of cyberspace and virtual reality. We are living in a real world, and we must recognize that it is indeed the case that we cannot make of it whatever we wish. /…/ We should make sense of them in terms of its social and political realities, and it is in this context that we must assess their significance'.

The understanding, as expressed in Robins' quote above, works as a central theme throughout my study. As he suggests, the Internet and the communicative possibilities given in digital structure must be understood 'in terms of its [this world] social and political realities' (ibid) in order to embrace social change. According to Robins, it is important to bear in mind that virtual communities and 'virtual space' exist as a part of 'real space' and subsequently he poses the question of how one can understand 'the significance of virtual communitarianism in the contemporary world' (2000: 86) by examining their possibilities and limitations – this new technology needs to be approached by beginning in '[t]he real world, which is the world in which virtual communities are now being imagined' (Robins 2000: 91). The aim of this chapter is to examine 'the significance of virtual communitarianism', that is, how participation in 'co-operative sub-realities' can (or cannot) work as a political platform. Prior to pointing out the characteristics of the political agenda, there is a need to discuss the nature of digital communication.

3.2 Cyber-prophets and the re-construction of identity

This section takes its point of departure in the sharp and distinct critique of Kevin Robins, pointing to important characteristics of contemporary utopian ideas inherent in cyberspace discourse, with focal point in the discursive status of cyberspace and its role in the real world. In Robins view (2000: 77), it is possible to grasp the contemporary debate on cyberspace as a representation of a 'common vision of a future that will be different from the present, of a space or reality more desirable than the mundane world'. Following Robins' view, this is a thought, comparable to 'a tunnel vision' that 'has turned a blind eye on the world we live in'. With this understanding in mind, I now outline the main thoughts of some 'cyber-prophet's within this field. Contemporary research has, of course, not been unaffected from these visions.[16] In this study, I have chosen Howard Rheingold (1995: 281), as one pf two representatives of the 'cyber-prophets'. Once he stated, '[m]any other social scientists have intellectual suspicions of the hyper-realist [what I name cyber-prophets] critiques, because so many are abstract and theoretical, based on little or no direct knowledge of technology itself. Nevertheless, this perspective does capture something about the way the effects of communications technologies have changed our modes of thought'.

Another key visionary in the field of virtual space is Sherry Turkle. Rheingold and Turkle represent distinct 'utopian' (but indeed important) views of 'virtual space' and digital communication. Among these two Rheingold is the pioneer. In 1995, he published 'the virtual community' which more or less became a bible for users of the text-based Internet in its early days.[17] Like others in this field, he envisioned that '[p]eople in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support' which is to say that '[p]eople in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind' (Rheingold 1995: 3). This quote introduces an important thought, namely, the thought that when communicating digitally people enter a state of bodilessness. The technology, it is said, enables people to ignore human basic needs and qualities, transforming them into another state of being. In the technology, Rheingold (1995: 4) traces a political potential within the communicative technology since it, to a minor economical cost, empowers the digital citizen by providing 'intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most important, political leverage'. This thought needs to

be understood in the light of the discussion of virtual communities maintained in chapter two.

What are then, the positive qualities of virtual communities? A main feature is, of course, the possibility to encounter persons with the same interest, sexuality, or religion. Rheingold (1995: 27) says, '[i]n a virtual community we can go directly to the place where our favorite subjects are being discussed, then get acquainted with people who share our passions or who use words in a way we find attractive'. The factor that makes these encounters more interesting than the ones found in 'real space' is the idea of bodilessness. He continues his argumentation by stating that due to the bodiless condition in 'virtual space', variables as gender, age and physical appearance do not matter. However, the individual can, if s/he wants, reveal such characteristics. In virtual communities, Rheingold concludes, we can be perceived of 'as thinkers and transmitters of ideas and feeling beings, not carnal vessels with a certain appearance and way of walking and talking (or not walking and not talking)' (Rheingold 1995: 26).

Moving on to Sherry Turkle, a set of, similar thoughts will be presented. In her opinion, in digital communication the individual is liberated from the constraints of everyday life. In her writings, she presents a somewhat dark picture of 'real space', perceiving it as a place holding people back from living life to the full. She emphasises (1995: 9-10) the fact that in 'virtual space', it is possible to 'talk, exchange ideas, and assume personae of our own creation' and as an outcome of this '[w]e have the opportunity to build new kinds of communities, virtual communities, in which we participate with people from all over the world, people with whom we converse daily, people with whom we may have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet'. In 'virtual space', she says (1995:15) 'the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections; it is language; sexual congress is an exchange of signifiers; and understanding follows from navigation and tinkering rather than analysis'. The above needs to be understood in terms of 'eroding boundaries between the real and the virtual, the animate and inanimate, the unitary and the multiple self, which is occurring both in advanced scientific fields of research and in the everyday life' (Turkle 1995:10). Her argument implies that due to socio-historical changes, it is more or less impossible to live social life in 'real space' to the fully. Instead, society is re-created in the digital dimensions of this forgotten

world. Digital communicative spaces can be used to find oneself, to experiment with identities, exploring new aspects of ones personality. Turkle continues this line of thought by arguing that it is in 'virtual space' phenomenon that the poststructural theories become meaningful. Prior to the development of ICT [Information and Communications Technologies], she says, these theories 'spoke words that addressed the relationship between mind and body', despite the fact that they 'had little or nothing to do' with peoples lives (Turkle 1995:15). Since computers nowadays play diametrically different roles than envisioned in the late 1970s' she draws the conclusion 'that we are moving from a modernist culture of calculation toward a postmodernist culture of simulation' (Turkle 1995:20).

A basic feature in her understanding of digital communication is that identities become reconstructed when entering 'virtual space'. She states that '[w]hen we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass' – something she sees as 'our cultural work in progress' (Turkle 1995: 177). This implies that it is 'very easy to present oneself as other than one is in real life' and that 'many people turn to online life with the intention of playing it in precisely this way' (Turkle 1995: 228). This identity play enables us, she contends, to 'adopt an online persona' and as a result of this, '[s]ome feel an uncomfortable sense of fragmentation, /../ [s]ome sense the possibilities for self-discovery, even self-transformation' (Turkle 1995: 260). According to this understanding, communication and social interaction in 'virtual space' serve the purpose of providing people with opportunities to explore their inner dimensions in a alternative ways. Turkle holds, with a political spirit in mind, that;

> [v]irtual reality need [sic] not to be a prison. It can be the raft, the ladder, the transitional space, the moratorium, that is discarded after reaching greater freedom. We don't have to reject life on screen, but we don't have to treat it as an alternative life either. We can use it as a space for growth. Having literally written our online personae into existence, we are in position to be more aware of what we project into everyday life. Like the anthropologist returning home from a foreign culture, the voyager in virtuality can return to a real world better equipped to understand its artifices. (Turkle 1995: 263).

As noted in the quote, the idea of bodilessness is central within this field. Another interesting, but infrequently discussed, theme is that the participants in a digital communicative situation often re-construct their physical appearance. As David F. Shaw (1997: 142) notes in his study, the initial thought among his respondents were

to communicate by leaving the body. However, 'all had made overt efforts to attach bodies to other communicators'. This would mean that 'not only do the users create the missing contexts from which to communicate, they also create a context for an idealized concept of gay culture which is necessarily rooted in and leads to their lived homosexual experiences'. Both Rheingold and Turkle regard contemporary society as being poor when it comes to social interaction, since contemporary society prevents the individual from expressing his/her social nature. When entering 'virtual space' and placing ourselves within digital structure, reality changes. Of course, as Rheingold and Turkle say, there is a difference between communication in 'virtual space' and in the 'real' world – but in my view, this difference is not as extensive as they argue. As Shaw points out, the body is always present in 'virtual space', but the expression it takes is imaginary, hence an imagined object. When interacting in 'virtual space', emoticons or 'smileys' are often used. The concept of smiley consists of a combination of alphabetical signs constructing a simple representation of human facial expressions. Smileys are used to express individual moods of the user, indicating happiness, :-), irony ;-) or, perhaps, surprise :-o. The use of these symbols can be understood as denoting a need for a bodily mediating element within the communicative act.[18]

It is easy to disconnect 'virtual space' from our lives in 'real space'. Robins (2000: 92) notes that '[w]e can too easily think of cyberspace and virtual reality in terms of an alternative space and reality. As if it were possible to create a new reality which would no longer be open to objections like that which has been left behind. As if we could substitute a reality more in conformity with our desires for the unsatisfactory real one'. The digital structure presents itself as offering salvation – possibilities for re-creating a 'new world'. Following this line of thought, he concludes that some theorists frequently discuss 'virtual space' with an utopian spirit 'expressing the principle of hope and the belief in a better world'. Politically, this statement could be reversed by perceiving 'virtual space' from the opposite perspective. One would then see dissatisfactions about, and rejection of an old one instead of hopes for a better world.

The belief that the body is disconnected from the communicative situation is not rare in academic discourse. An interesting, but, as I will explain, not sufficiently substantial critique of this belief, is found in an article by Edgar A. Whitley (1997) in

which he discusses the relationship between the body, behaviour and identity within the field of digital communication from a perspective of socialisation. In his article, he questions 'the role that socialization plays in shaping the norms of individuals and hence the ability to portray an identity that is not the result of socialization over a long period of time' (1997: 156). As noted above, it is possible to sort out a common theme among the presented 'cyber-prophets', more specifically a belief that physical attributes are removed within the process of digital communication. Whitley argues that this is valid not only in the case of digital communication, but also for communication mediated through telephone and postal services. For example, and referring to the postal service in London with its hourly delivery system, he states, 'letters, which can hide the physical identity of the sender, could be exchanged at a similar rate to that which possible with many electronic mail systems and yet there were no claims that the postal service would allow people to play with their identity in the way that they apparently do in cyberspace' (1997: 154). Further on in his article, he notes that bodily representation does not guide the communicative act in the same way as the choice of words does. To express a different identity, one has to use a different vocabulary. But, as pointed out by Whitley, this is not unproblematic, 'rather the choice of words is the result of a process of socialization associated with a particular identity. It is therefore very difficult to learn a new identity without being socialized into that role' (1997: 153).

However, Whitley does not sufficiently incorporate the significance of the secondary socialisation as a life-long process in his discussion. As mentioned in chapter two, secondary socialisation is a never-ending process in which the communicative action takes a central place as mediator of experiences and interpretations, accomplished by a process of mirroring and dialogue. Whitley (1997: 161) does not seem to notice this state of affairs. In this sense, he represents a deterministic standpoint. He argues, 'having open conversations is not the same as creating and maintaining a new identity', instead the individual that intends to do so encounters extreme difficulties if not already 'socialized into that new role'. By excluding possibilities for an individual to acquire a new understanding of self as well as his surroundings, Whitley avoids issues related to the importance of secondary socialisation. He summarises, in a rather harsh manner, '[m]odern technologies may be providing opportunities for new forms of communication and are allowing us to explore different aspects of ourselves but they are not mechanisms for overcoming the requirements of learning

socialized knowledge and are not therefore an enabling mechanism for creating new identities' (1997: 162).

The idea that re-creation is achieved through transcendence is a reoccurring, yet not unproblematic topic. As Kevin Robins and Frank Webster (1999: 260) argue in their discussion of contemporary visions of 'technoculture', there is a need for an alternative political agenda that can be formulated 'in terms of the meaning and significance of distance – in terms of the battle to be fought over the meaning of passage'. An agenda that is positioned '[a]gainst the technocultural objective of transcending – or annihilating – distance, and in the light of a deeply-rooted anxiety in the relation to external reality'. The basic question of this politics, then, is how it is possible for people to leave their bodily stature in the encounter with others – an approach 'resolutely opposed to the ideal of immediacy and intimacy in virtual community'. The thought expressed by Robins and Webster has parallels in Jeff Lewis' (2000: 120) argument when he states that '[c]omputers are conduits and creators of meaning, knowledge, relationships and power. But they must also function for the disassemblage or deconstruction of discourse' – or, put differently, 'in an evolving institutional and visceral democracy computers must constitute a form of perpetual threat, in humanity and negative imagination'. Of importance here, is to ask how change is possible and how the digital structure possibly could catalyse such a process. Following Robins and Websters' discussion, it becomes obvious that, in order to make sense of digital phenomena, there is a need for a new kind of socio-political agenda. The mission does not necessarily include dream of empowerment – but, as they say – to encounter a possibility to 'be drawn out of ourselves' by means of digital communication.

3.3 Digital communication and virtual communities

The main concern of my previous masters' thesis (Berg 2000) was, by means of digital qualitative interviews, to understand the meaning of CMC among the studied gay men. In the study at hand, my main concern is rather the digital structure itself. As Alex Galloway (1998, not paginated) points out in his essay on the methodology of studying digital phenomena, 'contemporary theory does not engage substantively with the object of its analysis, the digital'. His statement has important methodological implications that need to be clarified. As Galloway continues his article, '[d]igital studies takes digital technology as its object of analysis. Specific

topics within digital technology include the Internet, the digital object (e.g. a web page) and "protocol" (how digital objects are organized)'. Given his methodological point of view, the central theme is the interface – or digital structure, as I prefer to name it – on which all digital communication depends.

Having in mind, the sylvester.se and sylvia.se example, one of most important qualities of a digital communications environment in 'virtual space' are the communication with textual elements and the interaction with others by typing down your words whilst being seated in, say, your home at a safe distance from that 'social space'. Communication can be synchronous as well as asynchronous, where the former (real-time chat for example) involves two or more persons collectively building a dialogue resulting in a text. The latter mode of communication offers the user a possibility to carefully think through his or her contribution to the conversation. The final result of this type of communication is the same as in the case of synchronous communication that is a text consisting of different threads. Normally, each and every thread or sentence is marked with the chosen name of the user.

Following the discussion above and considering the interrelationship between 'real space' and 'virtual space' combined with Robins' search for a view of 'virtual space' as a part of 'real space', it is possible to sort out other important aspects of the 'digital structure'. As Galloway puts it, the objects connected to the digital structure 'are always derived from a pre-existing copy (loaded) using various kinds of meditative machinery (disk drives, network transfers)' and 'they are displayed using various kinds of virtuation apparatuses (computer monitors, displays, virtual reality hardware and other interfaces)'. Whatever the case might be, these objects work to provide an interface or structure that enables a production of digital representations of 'real space'. This structure makes all the difference between digital communication and face-to-face dialogue or 'real-space' communication.

On the previous few pages, I have outlined visionary thoughts and wishes, empirical descriptions and methodological notes. Now, I continue with a discussion of how digital communication affects social interaction. Face-to-face communication differs from its digital counterpart. As Amitai Etzioni (2001: 85) puts it, face-to-face communication is 'significantly superior to most CMC systems as far as

identification, accountability, and authorization are concerned'. Naturally, communicational mode changes when the transmission of visual signs or the corporeal language is absent. One can easily rank these qualities higher than the ones found in digital communication. But, as Etzioni (ibid) continues, 'it should be noted that there are no design difficulties in providing a much stronger basis for interpersonal knowledge in CMC systems. In fact, several forums already demand that participants use their true names, and others verify such claims'. This can be discussed *ad infinitum* but the fact that it is possible to hide ones true name is of great importance when it comes to understanding the political power of digital communication. This will be further discussed in the next chapter. For the time being, the main concern is the difference between digital and face-to-face communication with respect to the emerging social bonding between users.

As has been pointed out by Leslie A. Pal and Cynthia J. Alexander (1998: 6) 'technological developments do not automatically enhance our communicative competence, not just in terms of communicating our own views and assumptions, but equally important, in terms of our willingness to hear alternative perspectives and perhaps to acknowledge their legitimacy'. The willingness to communicate is not necessarily included in the possibility to participate in the communicative process. Could possibly the 'digital structure' encourage the individual to participate in such a communicative project?

One can grasp a difference between social interaction and communication within 'real space' compared to 'virtual space', but wherein lies this difference? Robins (2000: 91) argue that our point of departure by necessity must be placed in 'the real world, which is the world in which virtual communities are now being imagined'. One could ask if not all parts of our reality, then, are imagined and mediated through symbols, language and signs.[19] Robins goes further and informs us that we need to 'recognize that difference, asymmetry and conflict are constitutive features of the world' (ibid). What makes the world go around is human interaction – and hence, if individuals interact within 'virtual space', some kind of society-like phenomena will be the outcome of the process. Naturally, 'virtual space' is a part of 'real space' but that does not necessarily imply that these two spaces do not differ.

The social psychologists Peter J. Carnevale and Tahira M. Probst (1997:238-240) point out a number of factors influencing the development of conflict within digital communication and hence also specific social dynamics. They pose that the perceived anonymity affects the interactive social process regarding 'social facilitation, deindividuation, and so forth' at the same time as formerly hierarchical levels are flattened by the fact that '[p]eople have greater access to superiors, just as superiors have greater access to subordinates'. As pointed out above, text-based communication differs considerably from a face-to-face situation. However, I do not agree with Carnevale and Probst when they claim that 'text communication is thought to be less "rich" than other forms of communication, making it more difficult to interact on complex topics' (ibid). Rather, it is possible to reflect, plan and argue before formulating a sentence within an asynchronous digital communicative situation. Since all forms of digital communication, by necessity, is done through textual exchange, there is an absence of social signifying practices due to the fact that '[s]ocial context cues, and nonverbal behavior, act as signals of norms and of people's intentions, and hence they regulate social behavior' (ibid). The authors do realise that the situation is open to change by the increasing number of photographic material used in electronic communication.

The ability to create groups is another interesting feature of digital communications systems. Based on interests, for example, a set of persons can join together, exchange thoughts and experiences, crossing frontiers and overcome social as well as economical obstacles. One interesting aspect illustrating this is the fact that it is impossible to estimate the size of the audience in a digital communicative act. Furthermore, Carnevale and Probst, discuss the 'ability to edit, and store others' and one's own communications' (ibid) that is enabled by digital structure. Later on, in my analysis, this ability will work as a central theme in my argumentation. Continuing this theme, I return to Etzioni who argues (2001: 83), '[c]omputer-mediated communications enable people to communicate regularly without significant economic or other cost and without being in close proximity either spatially or temporally' since it can be not only synchronous but also asynchronous. Since the 'digital structure' eliminates geographical distances, '[t]hese communications evolve across both geographic borders and time zones, and they encompass individuals who are home-bound because of illness, age, handicap, or lack of social skills'. These distances are not merely geographical but also social as they

provide 'safety for people who seek to communicate but fear leaving their home, a major consideration in many cities' (ibid).

As noted above, digital communication and virtual communities raise different questions than the ones possible to sort out when discussing 'real space' phenomena. The term 'virtual community' is polysemic since it refers to an imagined collective where 'everything' seems possible. The term community on the other hand is much more complex. I intend to make use of a definition of the term community following Etzioni (2001: 80-81) as 'first, a web of affect-laden relationships that encompasses a group of individuals – relationships that crisscross and reinforce one another, rather than simply a chain of one-to-one relationships'. This is to say that 'communities require some measure of commitment to a set of shared values, norms, meanings, and a shared historical identity' (ibid). With this view, the term 'co-operative sub-realities' becomes widened and more nuanced at the same time.

Social relationships need to be 'affect-laden' and build on intimacy in order to provide the desired environment. There has to be something more than a mere set of common symbols – the individuals connected to this structure also have to engage actively in a 'life-giving' process. With this theme in mind, John Tomlinson (1999: 162-163) argues, '[w]e can account for this in terms of an intensified phenomenological focus that the medium elicits: the lack of physical presence and consequent narrowing of symbolic cues available amplifies the exclusive engagement of the dialogical situation of face-to-face interaction'. In a rather fascinating way, Etzioni concludes that life within virtual communities can empower social relations in 'real space' as life within these communities enrich real life. In his words;

> virtual communities can contribute to a rich social life, albeit in ways that differ from face-to-face ones. Off and online communities can fulfil the same basic needs, although each has strengths and weaknesses of its own. Indeed, they can supplement one another rather well, and thus sustain and enrich interpersonal and communal life (Etzioni 2001: xvii)

Quiet contrary to what he poses, one can find arguments supporting the idea that interaction within 'virtual space' does not provide the same qualitative outcome that interaction in 'real 'space' does. Etzioni provides an illustrative example, when clarifying this by saying, 'the argument that virtual communities cannot do what real communities can /.../ is analogous to the argument, when Model T cars rolled off

assembly lines, that cars could not do what horses could: become your friends. Both modes of transportation, though, get you there, and cars command some obvious advantages of their own' (Etzioni 2001: 97)' The two types of interaction are, simply, different from each other. The question is, however, in what way they differ. Once again, Etzioni proposes that '[o]nline communications seem to be superior in that they can reach more people, even those dispersed over large areas' whilst '[o]ffline communications benefit from the fact that they are built into other social activities (for instance, having a drink in a neighbourhood pub), and hence require fewer specific initiatives than online communications' (Etzioni 2001: 83). This is not a controversial issue, but interesting when considering Robins' demand for a political understanding. Etzioni, and also Turkle and Rheingold, emphasise the delights of digital communication compared to – and note this – its 'real space' counterpart. It is fair to say that, in their writings, political understanding is not given priority. To grasp the political dimension the social construction of reality must be understood as a process.

As discussed above, the social practice of everyday life is the most important factor in the social construction of reality. It is important to bear in mind that not only the social groups benefiting from digital communication and virtual interaction are those experiencing difficulties expressing themselves in social arenas in 'real space' – however, their benefits are distinctive. In reference to Robins' discussion, concerning the need to perceive 'virtual space' as a part of 'real space', I perceive them as interrelated in the same way as subjective and objective reality. Perhaps this is even better phrased by Etzioni, who concludes '[n]o subject lends itself to a false dichotomy like that of virtual and real communities. But the two are not opposites, not exclusionary, and not necessarily good for the same things' (Etzioni 2001:97). If they are not opposites, what are they? Tomlinson (1999: 156) proposes that 'we have to think of the experience brought to us by telephones, television, networked computers and so on as occupying a distinct specialized "space" in the lifeworld of the individual'. However, I find it important to note that telephones and networked computers are in no way comparable objects. As Rheingold (1995: 27) argues, 'you can't simply pick up a phone and ask to be connected with someone who wants to talk about Islamic art or California wine /…/ you can, however, join a computer conference on any of those topics, then open a public or private correspondence with the previously unknown people you find there'. An important aspect of this idea is

discussed by Manuel Castells (1996: 362). He states that virtual communities are 'generally understood as a self-defined electronic network of interactive communication organized around a shared interest of purpose, although sometimes communication becomes the goal in itself'. Following this line of thought, it becomes easier to communicate digitally, since individuals partaking in the communication share interests and feelings, thus numerous social barriers are removed.

As noted above, one of the main problems within the research of digital communication and virtual community is the fact that constant reference is made to 'real space' in which innovations, technical as well as social, are ranked with reference to habitualised and institutionalised phenomena. But, as David Morley (2001: 441) holds, '[w]hat is needed here is the rejection of any conception of "imagined community" which depends on the extrusion of alterity, in order to bask in the warm glow of self-confirming homogeneity'. To follow up and further develop the thought expressed in the quote above, Morley (ibid) perceives its consequence being a move 'towards a conception of "community-in-difference", which recognizes the importance of dialogue about our ineradicable differences and focuses on the mundane pragmatics of neighbourliness'. It is of great importance, indeed, to recognise 'virtual space' as an element or dimension of 'real space', enabling communication that differs from communication taking place in everyday life. In his study of computer-mediated communication among homosexual men, Shaw (1997: 144) found, '[w]hile the playground potential of the IRC [Inter Relay Chat – a purely text based chat system] inarguably exists and people will /.../ try on different personalities, the uniqueness of #gaysex lies in the fact that it presents an opportunity for gay men, who often go through life hiding this most vital aspect of their identity, to try on this real identity'. The main objective thus becomes to enter 'real space' better equipped to understand the real world, after having internalised specific communicative or behavioural patterns acquired in 'virtual space' (Turkle 1995: 263). Perhaps it is due to this state of affairs that Castells (1996: 362) states, '[i]t is still unclear how much sociability is taking place in such a new form of sociability' and that one thing is clear – that 'such networks are ephemeral from the point of view of the participants'.

3.4 Digital democracy and the search for a politics

Leaving Turkle and her colleagues, I now aim to discuss themes such as 'virtual politics', 'digital democracy' and so forth. I have already outlined some political aspects of the 'digital structure' and the kind of communication it enables. In the following, I will sketch some of these efforts and show that the concept of politics shows little or no relationship with contemporary society. Let me start with Edwin R. Black, who in his 1983 presidential address 'politics on a microchip', warned the Canadian Political Science Association, of how ICT was changing governmental politics. In his words (1998: xii), the;

> [c]omputers are changing our governments as well as our electoral politics. Not only do they change the way parties conduct elections and the way we watch election returns, they are changing the choices our elected representatives make for us and the way that public servants deal with us implementing those choices. It's happening right under our noses, it's important and dot enough people are paying attention.

He notes that one of many changes that could emerge from an evolution like the one he mentioned is the 'changing of bureaucratic subcultures that deal with the framing, phrasing, and weighting of policy choices' (Black 1998: xii). According to my understanding, the changes he feared are neither based on identity nor are they similar to the visions of virtual communities and fluidity of identity as presented by Turkle and Rheingold. Rather he, as theorists normally do, connects the concept of 'digital politics' to existing political infrastructures. This is an improper approach, since little or no attention has been paid to the importance of identity politics. Kathryn Woodward (1999: 22) points to the fact that political identities and commitments have shifted in late-modern society. Moving away from traditional political categories (such as class), an identity politics has emerged which takes into account variables as 'ethnicity and "race", gender, sexuality'. To base an identity politics exclusively on the concept of collective identity is a somewhat risky enterprise. The subject matter of identity politics must, according to Woodward (1999: 24), 'involve claiming one's identity as a member of an oppressed or marginalized group as a political point of departure' and as such, this politics needs to involve a 'celebration of a group's uniqueness as well as analysis of its particular oppression'. Woodward (1999: 26) regards politics as being about the process of 'recruiting subjects through the process of forming identities /.../ and through "new social movements" putting on the agenda identities which have not been recognized

and have been "hidden from history", or have occupied spaces on the margins of society'. A keyword in this context is visibility. To form a politics based on the idea of identity, it is necessary to connect the perception of self to other's perception of it.

This perception is closely related to digital communication. Lewis (2000: 104) introduces an important theme, stating that as a cause of their adaptable character, communicational systems such as the Internet 'has provided a stimulus for the formation of a new cultural politics'. After having made a more extensive presentation of how virtual politics is normally approached, I will return to questions related to cultural politics, or identity politics in order to explain what Lewis means.

Mainstream efforts promoting 'digital democracy' and 'electronic revolutions' as pointed to above, draw from existing political infrastructures. This approach, combined with the expansion occurring within the field of the digital infrastructure such as installation of broadband connections etc. gives a clear-cut picture of how digitality has been regarded. Pal and Alexander (1998: 6) argue that '[h]owever sophisticated a system may be, technological change offers no easy "solution" to alleviate complex social and political problems or ameliorate sociopolitical and economic cleavages'. It is easy to put faith in the technological development, especially when it comes to its possibilities to change the real world. An illustrative example of this state of affairs is the notion that innovations such as the telephone, the television, the cellular phone, not to mention the computer, would instantly change our way of living. This has not been the case. Pal and Alexander (ibid) warn us against thinking in this way. They say that '[w]e should not expect any technological silver bullet to deal with such complex and recalcitrant issues'. Still, marginalized groups in western political system are left out, due to, among other things 'economic dependence, weak political influence, and social inequity'. Another interesting reflection is the installation of a digital infrastructure in order to enable people connecting to the Internet. In Sweden, for example, this is a theme, attracting considerable attention. The Swedish government has put a great deal of resources to accomplish this. Underlying this is a basic understanding that once a person is physically connected, the democratic process takes care of the rest. But, as Pal and Alexander (1998: 6) contend, '[I]t will take more than digital systems to spark the political interest of an increasingly cynical citizenry. Fostering an "attentive" public will involve much more than the nationwide installation of hard drives and modems'.

The politics of minorities conceptualised in late-modern society, such as homo-, bi- and transsexuals[20] discussed in this study, needs to take its departure in the individual, which in turn can affect larger groups by an externalising activity in social space.[21] This thought will be further explained in chapter four. One basic idea is, as Morley (2001: 435) puts it, 'physical visibility of different groups in social space is analogous to their visibility – or otherwise – in the virtual space /.../ the social relations of these two dimensions, the virtual and the physical, work to reinforce each other in important ways'. It gets even more interesting when considering changes occurred in late-modern society. Today, the individual is not necessarily associated with the local, instead, in different ways connected to other significant sources of interaction. This state of affairs is often labelled 'deterritorialisation'. Interacting on different social arenas widens the political effect. In the words of Morley (2001: 427) and referring to globalisation in particular, 'not only to the destabilizing effects of globalization, but also to the simultaneous process of 'reterritorialization' which we see around us, whereby borders and boundaries of various sorts are becoming more, rather than less, strongly marked'. This could, be seen as an explanation of the rising number of the virtual communities. In a globalised world, the concept of 'natural' home – a place to experience human bonds in a world characterised by confusion and search for belonging, is devoid of its original meaning.

In order to perform political action in virtual communities or in other social arenas, there is a need to publicly externalise what has been apprehended in communicative action. A politics of visibility or 'what we might call the politics not simply of representation, but also of social recognition, by means of which the issue of who (properly) "belongs" where is determined' (Morley 2001: 436). The digital structure provides a possibility for a person to act and to be seen, but most important – it provides possibilities to enlightenment and political awareness. In line with this thought, David Paletz (1998: 93) understands information technology as a means of joining people (yet mostly like-minded) together. With this view information technology 'can facilitate political organization' into groups that 'may not be able to compete successfully with the well-funded political action committees of interest groups'.

Using the terminology of Berger and Luckmann it is easy to understand the relationship between 'externalisation – institutionalisation – internalisation' as something that does not vary between individuals. This is, of course, not the case. People are deeply involved in various different power relations that affect the social manoeuvres of the individual. Morley (2001: 427) points to an important aspect of this problem namely the fact that 'insufficient attention is often paid /.../ to the extent to which many people are still forced to live through the identities ascribed to them by others, rather than through the identities they might choose for themselves'. It may well be the case that a person can elaborate his or her identity to some extent, communicate with like-minded in order to gain personal insights and so forth. This is, however, not a universal phenomenon and clearly there is a need for an analysis of power relations with respect to this type of phenomena. Morley continues (2001: 428) by posing the question, 'which different groups get to participate in this framework' despite the fact that 'increasing numbers of people are now included in this network of connections'. Are these groups – to use Castells' terminology - the 'interacting' or the 'interacted'?

As the network society arises, a new kind of societal differentiation emerges. Castells (1996: 371, emphasis in original) illustrates this by stating that this new culture implies a factor that differs between 'two essentially distinct populations: the *interacting and the interacted*. This factor is '[t]he information about what to look for and the knowledge about how to truly experience a system different from a standard customized mass media'. There will be a division between the ones that 'are able to select their multidirectional circuits of communication [the interacting], and those who are provided with a restricted number of prepackaged choices [the interacted]'. This division he argues, 'largely frames the system of domination and the processes of liberation in the informational society' (Castells 1996: 374). Indeed, society changes due to new forms of communication technology. For sure, this technology does not really add a virtual dimension to 'real space'. However it 'radically transforms space and time, the fundamental dimensions of human life' in a way that makes '[l]ocalities become disembodied from their cultural, historical, geographic meaning, and reintegrated into functional networks, /.../ inducing a space of flows that substitutes for the space of places' (Castells 1996 1:375). This thought urges us to take power relations, communicative action and differences into consideration when discussing this kind of politics.

Once again, the important issue is not to compete with the existing political infrastructure – rather identity politics must be understood as a pre-political stage when taking into account the perspective of western-world 'democracy'. In order to be a politically aware subject in a 'democracy' one needs to grow into this awareness. Participation in 'virtual communities' makes this possible.[22] In light of the following quote in which Andrea Ricci (1998: 171) states that '[d]emocracy is still – even in the era of the Internet – a matter of rules, architecture, power and institutions' it is easy to understand that the governmental politics will not change – but the people electing politicians will indeed. This is a question of how to make emancipation and democracy possible in contemporary society. Lewis (2000: 119) argues that 'democracy cannot be conceived in terms of institutional and legal processes separate from the visceral conditions of everyday practice; rather, democracy needs to be associated with the disassemblages, self-assertions and the multiple movements of heterodiction'. In this case, virtual communities and digital communication catalyses the process. As Rheingold (1995: 14) states, '[t]he political significance of CMC lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy' and that '[v]irtual communities could help citizens revitalize democracy, or they could be luring us into an attractively packaged substitute for democratic discourse' (1995: 276).

4 The essence of digital communicative politics

4.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters aimed at laying a ground for, how a political stage, disconnected from the established political infrastructure, surfaces as an emanation from digital communicative action within 'co-operative sub-realities'. This theoretical framework concerns the dialectical relationship between the individual and society, providing a model for an understanding of potential personal transformation processes through communicative action. With this approach, two major themes become visible. The first theme connects to the possibility for individuals to exceed the subjective reality by means of communication, provoking changes at an objective level. The second theme relates to an understanding of digital structure as offering an arena facilitating transformative communication acts. Following this line of thought, my concern lies at two analytical levels. On the one hand, the concern is to illustrate the ways in which communicative action in general provokes processes of social change. On the other hand, the concern is to demonstrate how these processes change when the communicative action is mediated through digital structure. These levels will be further explained when summarising central themes related to the notion of politics.

4.2 Communicative action and social change

The main discussion in chapter two concerned the relationship between subjective and objective realities as understood by Berger and Luckmann. Following their theoretical discussion, social interaction in 'virtual space' (participation in 'co-operative sub-realities') is perceived as working as an extra layer in the social process that constructs reality. In 'virtual space' the one and only factor constituting reality is the social activity represented by textual elements. Looking at it in this way, "virtual space" is an uncomplicated social sphere. As pointed out above, social interaction (externalisation) becomes habitualised when performed repeatedly and with a high frequency, hereby internalising the performed activity as a pattern or model. Having performed an activity in 'virtual space' makes it easier to perform it in 'real space'. In

this context, it is important to note the fact that interaction in 'virtual space' allows for a possibility to control the manifestation of the subjective reality in its objective counterparts. The participants can easily manage the signifying flow in the borderland between the objective and subjective. Given the fact that the users choose what parts of the subjective reality they desire to articulate, the only references to 'real space' behind the text appearing on the screen are the nickname and the linguistic quality of the typed words. A fruitful approach to an understanding of how an individual re-creates him-/herself by means of communicative action is to connect the interrelation between subjective and objective realities to the process of secondary socialisation. By applying a theory of institutionalisation, transferring the idea of social interaction in 'virtual space' to an objective level, a political strength emerges. As individuals re-socialise themselves within 'virtual space' they internalise a way of being, impossible to achieve prior to their entrance into the scene of digital communication. Continuing the externalising activity in 'real space', knowledge achieved in this way becomes a part of everyday life. Once at hand, 'a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors' (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 72), the institutionalisation commences and the process of social change starts.

Drawing on a discussion of mainstream efforts concerning the raise of a 'digital democracy', one main objective in the previous chapter was aspects related to the actual nature of 'virtual space' politics. One thought emphasised in this chapter concerned the shift of the nature of political identities and commitment in late-modern society. Moving away from traditional political categories, new groupings emerge providing an opportunity for an identity politics to surface, giving variables such as ethnicity, gender and sexuality a new dimension. This emerging identity politics, enabled partly by 'virtual space', has an impact on phenomena in 'real space' due to the fact that 'virtual' and 'real space' are inseparable in the sense that they reinforce each other in a number of ways.

Apart from the fact that 'virtual space' works, actually, to induce communication between individuals, the identity politics based on social interaction in 'virtual space' work also to engage participants in identity-forming processes laying the ground for social movements to emerge. Understanding communicative action in this way, identity formations emerge, impossible to construct merely within the realm of political and social life in 'real space', thus challenging existing political hierarchies.

By providing such possibilities to act and to be seen, digital structure makes visible hitherto hidden elements, thus creating a new kind of political awareness.

Having recapitulated the discussion of chapter two and three, my aim is henceforth to formulate the nature of 'digital communicative politics'. This politics is labelled 'digital' since one of its prerequisites is the digital structure. In this text I also use the term 'communicative' due to the fact that communication is the most important factor in the process of social change. The combination of these two qualities, the digital and the communicative, composes a political concept.

Earlier in this study, I stated that the politics of minorities conceptualised in late-modern society, needs to take its departure in the individual since individual thoughts and experiences are important parts and have an impact on the formation of groups in 'real' as well as in 'virtual space'. My concern in this study is the politics of sub-cultures and minorities who experience oppression as a cause of their identities or sexual preferences such as homo-, bi- and transsexuality. In the case of these people, it is essential to be visible and to achieve this they have to clarify and understand their position in society. Participation in 'co-operative sub-realities' makes this process easier since 'virtual space' make social as well as geographic distances irrelevant. Communicating in 'virtual space', people encounter new sets of significant others and in that way widen their experience of the 'generalised other'.

I have suggested that a communicative process of 're-socialisation' through participation in 'co-operative sub-realities' catalyses social change. By making use of the conceptual model outlined above an understanding of how people may be drawn out of themselves becomes visible. Understanding the term 'co-operative sub-realities' as a group of individuals gathering around a topic exchanging experiences, a political platform is created. This platform enables the participants to explore issues related to their self-understanding. Perceived from the perspective of the individual, participation in 'co-operative sub-realities' provides an arena for targeted externalisation. In this way, the participants are given possibilities to experiment with their identities, formulating verbal expressions related to oppressed desires. Following this line of thought, individuals are positioned within a process that works to internalise a self-understanding, applicable to life in "real space". This is a political perspective building on a combination of communication and identity-play, that is,

an arrangement aimed at providing the participants with a new language and self-understanding.

The political model outlined above does not appeal to Castells (1997: 351) who warns that 'on-line politics could push the individualization of politics, and of society, to a point where integration, consensus, and institution building would become dangerously difficult to reach'. Quite contrary to the view expressed by Castells, it is more proper to ask, if consensus is reached more easily in a politics based on established political infrastructure. Continuing his argumentation, Castells (1996: 476) states, '[t]he fact that politics has to be framed in the language of electronically based media has profound consequences on the characteristics, organization, and goals of political processes, political actors, and political institutions'. In my view, he falls into the same trap as do several theorists within the field of virtual politics. 'Virtual space' must be understood as an intertwined part of 'real space', to neglect this state of affairs is in my view a serious misunderstanding. When reflecting Castells' notion of the division between the interacting and the interacted, however, a decisive observation becomes visible. All politics cannot be reduced to participation in 'virtual space' since this would eradicate every notion of democracy. What Castells forgets is the fact that 'on-line politics' is a pre-political stage, disconnected from parliamentary processes and formal authorities. Politics based on digital communication aims at creating a political awareness changing society partly by means of institutionalisation and partly by means of rearranging the context in which political elections take place. Having the contra-discursive identity politics as a point of reference, the politics I refer to differs from the one presented by Castells.

It is essential to bear in mind that digital communicative politics is an identity politics that differs from the established political infrastructure. Chris Barker and Dariusz Galasinski (2001:56) present a discussion of a 'politics of re-description where cultural politics involves the struggle over "naming" and the power to re-describe ourselves'. As pointed out earlier, the apprehension of a new understanding of self and society is central for participation in digital 'co-operative sub-realities'. Facilitating interpersonal mirroring and communicative action, the digital communication supports the individuals in disconnecting themselves from oppression and complex linguistic power relations inherent in 'real space'. Cultural

politics, as they (ibid 2001: 61) put it, 'concerns the writing of new stories with "new languages" (or to be more exact, new configurations of old languages or new usages of old words) that embody values with which we concur and that we wish to be taken as true in the sense of a social agreement or commendation'.

Perceiving this politics using the terminology of Berger and Luckmann, one could state that cultural politics is about apprehending or internalising new social modes in order to facilitate the process of institutionalisation. Cultural politics 'centres on the struggle to define the world and make those definitions stick' (Barker and Galasinski 2001: 61). The theoretical model of social change as presented by Berger and Luckmann gives the impression of explaining the idea of cultural politics in a satisfactory way. The process of defining reality 'concerns the multi-faceted processes by which particular descriptions of the world are taken as true' (ibid), something that by necessity 'includes forms of cultural and institutional power so that cultural politics concerns both languages and policy' (ibid). Understanding the 'co-operative sub-realities' as being primarily an arena for the emergence of cultural politics, the following quote illustrates the core of the social processes occurring;

> [t]he forging of 'new languages' of identity whether as individual therapeutic practice or the collective struggles of identity politics can never be a simple matter of casting off one identity and taking on another through an uncomplicated re-description of oneself. Rather, rewriting self-narrative involves an *emotional shift*, a moving of psychic identifications which constitutes a transformation of one's whole being. Personal change is thus much more complex and difficult than the notion of re-description or rewritings sometimes implies (Barker and Galasinski (2001:37, emphasis in original).

A similar thought is presented by Habermas (1995: 136). Applying his argumentation on the question of digital communication, it is possible to understand that participants in a virtual community 'can develop personal identities only if they recognize that the sequences of their own actions form narratively presentable life histories; they can develop social identities only if they recognize that they maintain their membership in social groups by way of participating in interactions'. In this light, the notion of communicative action and interpersonal mirroring becomes even more significant. The communicative action is a collaborative act since a sharing of a mutual understanding of the present situation is necessary.

The main question is how to politically understand the relationship between internalisation, externalisation and institutionalisation in the light of communicative action. It is rather simple, actually. To communicate with like-minded, is a prime concern of oppressed individuals since this enables them to strengthen their self-understanding, thus facilitating the positioning process within the surrounding (oppressive) society. Being two central factors of this process, habitualisation and institutionalisation make these new descriptions of self and society stick. Using the situation of homo-, bi- and transsexuals as an example is one approach. During the last few years (at least in Sweden) the social situation for individuals with such sexual orientations has been improved, resulting in a growing number of individuals "coming out of the closet", initiating the process of institutionalisation. Their status as a minority group has worked to strengthen their collective identity. At the same time, they have, for the time being, been acknowledged as 'normal citizens'. This is, of course, an ongoing process, the outcome of which one can never tell. As Lewis (2000: 119) argues, the possibility to emancipation is not found within the utopian ideas of digital identities. Rather 'emancipation becomes a contingency of our ability to act, to construct and reconstruct our individual and collective dominions of meaning'.

The question is not so much about retrieving a new identity (as the cyber-prophets probably would say) as it is about modifying the present. This is done by forging of a new language. Steven Epstein poses the question concerning the origins of supplementary identities a concern shared with most 'cyber-prophets'. He says, '[p]eople make their own identities, but they do not make them just as they please. Identities are phenomena that permit people to become "subjects" who define who they are in the world, but at the same time identities "subject" those people to the controlling power of external categorization' (Epstein 1998:145).

Having discussed the first level of my analysis, I now move on to the second level by posing questions related to how the communicative processes change when mediated through digital structure.

4.3 Social change and digital communication

Working with two key analytical categories, I aim to explore the 'digital structure' as an interface making digital communication differ from its face-to-face counterpart.

The first analytical category relates to the idea of bodilessness. One major characteristic possible to sort out in theories of digital communication is that the participants are perceived as disconnected from their bodies. Perhaps, the case is not disembodiment, but the absence of a practice of bodily representation. As Shaw pointed out, the body as a reference is often present within digital communication in a psychological manner. However, this fact does not diminish the possibility to experiment with identities in various ways. In virtual space, it is fruitless to hold on to a view of the body as bearer of identity. Instead, one must view the absence of a body as a means of adding specific qualities to the communicative situation. As pointed out by the 'cyber-prophets' a basic characteristic of digital communication is a state that Lewis (2000: 116) describes as 'the moment when the body is fully engaged with its technology; the separated individual remains ultimately powerful since s/he is now the confluence of new subjectivities and new meanings through her/his resolution with technology and the networked others'.

In the previous section of this chapter I stated that one basic quality of digital communicative politics is the possibility to forge a new language. One obstacle in the formation of such a language in 'real space' is the lack of significant others, outlining the basis for this exchange. Another, and perhaps more important obstacle, is the fear one experiences when body and mind are connected, since it is a connection that one seeks to avoid, it is, in a sense, illusionary. The individual, as possessor of a body, is involved in a large number of social relations implying expectations concerning how to behave, how to act, what to say, and so forth.[23] In my point of view, choosing just any identity in 'virtual space' is associated with a certain kind of limitations (due to linguistic limitations, imagination and personal life-story). One can, however, present oneself in many different ways. The bodiless condition of virtual space provides a structure encouraging people to induce in communicative acts.

The second category relates to the concept of experiencing one self as the other. The disembodiment and transformation of the individual into textual objects enable individuals to perceive themselves and their actions as a social interplay taking part on the screen. With this idea in mind, individuals are able to perform and take part of the immediate outcome of their performance simultaneously – as if positioned outside the actual communicative stage. Drawing a parallel to the process of coming

out of the closet, it becomes possible to perceiving the act in the same way as if video recorded or written in a text.

Directed and authored by the users, a social drama takes form on the screen in front of their eyes. The only limits of this social drama consist of the participants' own imaginative and linguistic skills (in every instant), implying that they can envision what life would be if the authentic identity would be expressed in 'real space'. Perceiving digital structure in this way parallels Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein understanding (2000: 211). They state that modernity was characterised by 'a split between fact and fiction, between history and literature, between experience and imagination'. Late modern society and the existence of Internet erase the relevance of these binary concepts. Weinstein and Weinstein argue that 'what once might have been fragments of my personal literary imagination become participants in social relations and, therefore, become what they could never have been without the interaction'.

Our imagination takes charge over temporal realities such as 'virtual space'. Experiencing oneself as the other is to objectify one's concealed identity, incorporating it as a comprehensible part of the individual. Since it is textual elements that represent individuals, the communicative act takes the form of the wishes of each and every user. Once released from cultural markings, symbolic codes and personal life-stories, the appropriation of a fictive identity becomes the significant difference between digital communication and its face-to-face counterparts.

The main characteristic, then, of digital politics is that the users in 'virtual space' objectify themselves by becoming inscribed into the textual flow. The jointly constructed texts constitute and create the digital reality. Turkle (1995: 22) searches for an understanding of what happens 'if the first objects we look upon each day are simulations into which we deploy our virtual selves'. Participation in digital 'co-operative sub-realities' enables different identities to be mediated through the digital structure. Perceiving oneself as the other, as Johan Fornäs (1995: 279) states, 'has to be reconciled to the insight that all human beings are irreversibly separated yet unavoidably intertwined, and that symbolic texts, while never substituting completely for the self, the world of the Other, are only means to connect to them, through

winding processes of interpretation. Then it becomes possible to discern not only oneself but also each other'.

The two analytical categories presented have one thing in common – they deal with the perception of identity. Identity is thus understood as one's own self, manifested in textual objects or in the identity of others related to one's textual self. It is fair to say that these two categories always deal with the process of rewriting one's self-narrative, something that could be conceived of as a kind of politics of re-description. This implies an understanding of the body as removed transforming the individual as well the surrounding reality into textual elements. This provides a possibility to re-describe one's own social position, life and personal history. The re-formulation of one's social and personal life stories, using the encounters and social interaction in 'virtual space' as a point of departure, becomes a powerful part of digital communicative politics. In the transition between 'virtual space' and 'real space' a new or alternative self-understanding emerges. Forging a new language within the 'co-operative sub-realities', the communication works as an agent making this political growth possible. Being bodiless and the ability to objectify oneself in combination with a new set of significant others, one ends up in a situation that radically differs from everyday life in 'real space'.

5 Concluding remarks and further studies

5.1 Findings and reflexivity

Some final words need to be said about this study. In the beginning of chapter two, I outlined an example (sylvester.se and sylvia.se) illustrating a connection to an empirical reality throughout the text. This choice is not random. Being a gay-white-middle-class male with a great deal of personal experience when it comes to communication in 'virtual space', I have a certain degree of pre-understanding that unquestionably has affected the writing of this thesis. Personally, I have experienced a 're-socialisation' by participating in 'co-operative sub-realities' similar to sylvester.se and sylvia.se. In an essential way, my analysis differs from contemporary attempts to understanding 'digital structure' and the relationship between 'virtual space' and 'real space'. My understanding differs in the sense that I have incorporated the dialectics of reality and the relation between subjective and objective reality as expressed by Berger and Luckmann.

Furthermore, it is important to explain why this masters' thesis has been written in English when my mother's tongue is Swedish. As the world develops into a state of globalisation, communicative skills in English become even more important. Having accepted the challenge to write this thesis in English, I have learned a lot that will be useful when writing something similar in the future - it has been time-consuming and demanding, but nevertheless amusing.

5.2 Further studies

The re-signifying practices made possible by digital communication are, on the one hand, totally new phenomena caused by the existence of digital structure. On the other hand, these phenomena are something typical for society of today. Community building is central in late-modern society and, as pointed out in chapter four, digital structure adds important qualities to the communicative situation. In my point of view, the most interesting theme is how counter-cultural activities such as those within the 'gay community', right and left wing extreme politics and other imagined communities with a need for a common symbolic system independent of time, space

and socio-legislative regulations, can use digital structure as a political platform. In a future study, such as a doctoral thesis, the theme of ´digital communicative politics´ could be further developed, making use of an approach as the one in this study in combination with qualitative interviews as I did in my masters' thesis in sociology of religion (Berg 2000).

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Endnotes

[1] By the term cyber-prophet I mean a visionary of the possibilities provided by virtual space (ie. cyberspace.

[2] Berger and Luckmann are not the only ones dealing with the process of social change as a consequence of social interaction. Piotr Sztompka (1999: 12-13), for example, states, '[t]o get our bearings in the complex domain of social change, we need to introduce a typology of social processes. It will be based on four major criteria: (1) the form or shape that the process takes; (2) the outcomes or results of the process; (3) the awareness of social processes in the population; (4) the moving force behind the process'. Making use of this typology, one needs to take into consideration 'the level of social reality where the process operates, and /../ the temporal scope of the process' (ibid). Having this typology in mind, the Berger and Luckmann model of social change is possible to be compared with other similar thoughts. Making use of Berger and Luckmann today might be regarded as a bit strange since a great deal of contemporary attempts is at hand. Pierre Bourdieu, who discusses the relationship between habitus and field is one example. His discussion is similar to the one of Berger and Luckmann when stating, '[o]n the one hand, the objective structures…form the basis for…representations and constitute the structural constraints that bear upon interactions: but, on the other hand, these representations must also be taken into consideration particularly if one wants to account for the daily struggles, individual and collective, which purport to transform or to preserve these structures' (Bourdieu 1989, cited in Ritzer 1996: 537). In my point of view, Berger and Luckmann emphasise the subjective level to a greater extent than does Bourdieu in his writings on this social interplay and hence their theory serves my main objective in a better way than contemporary attempts. Another and more recent example of a contemporary attempt to understand this process is found in the writings of Manuel Castells (1996: 476), who argue, '[p]rocesses of social transformation summarized under the ideal type of the network society go beyond the sphere of social and technical relationships of production: they deeply affect culture and power as well. Cultural expressions are abstracted from history and geography, and become predominantly mediated by electronic communication networks that interact with the audience and by the audience in a diversity of codes and values, ultimately subsumed in a digitised audiovisual hypertext. Because information and communication circulate primarily through the diversified, yet comprehensive media system, politics becomes increasingly played out in the space of media'.

[3] Using this term, I label the electronic environment or what often is called cyberspace, virtual reality and so on. The most important aspect of the term (that in reality may differ from case to case) is that it relates to a purely text-based environment. In opposition to this term, I talk about 'real space' as indicating the physically perceptible world (often labelled IRL (In Real Life) in the word of mouth).

[4] For an extensive explanation of the perspective, see also Alasuutari (1995: 23-37); Storey (1996); du Gay (1997) or Turner (1996).

[5] Presently (in September 2002) sylvester.se (a community serving homo-, bi and transsexual men and women and their friends, found at http://sylvester.se) and sylvia.se (exclusively aimed at homo-, bi and transsexual women, found at http://sylvia.se) each has more than 50.000 members.

[6] With minority I mean not more than an imagined group positioned in cultural opposition to the heterosexual culture. For a further explanation of this theme, see Butler (1990, 1993); Foucault (1990). The view of the nonheterosexual individual as possessing certain qualities connected to his/her identity has emanated from specific socio-historical changes leading to a regarding of individuals with the mentioned sexual preferences as being a group having the sexuality as primary common quality. Instead of regarding the sexual activity as something the individual performs, it came to be regarded as

a personal quality. Foucault (1990: 43) states, 'the nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology… The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species'.

[7] The interface is the visible part of computer software or, more properly, the environment in which all actions within 'virtual space' are performed. On can understand the interface as the mediating link between the user and what is behind the screen (hardware, software and network operations).

[8] I follow the definitions used by Habermas (1989:138). He defines society as being 'the legitimate orders through which participants regulate their memberships in social groups and thereby secure solidarity' and personality [when talking about individuals] as 'the competences that make a subject capable of speaking and acting, that put him in a position to take part in processes of reaching understanding and thereby to assert his own identity.'

[9] In this thesis I follow the definition that Berger and Luckmann use which more exactly could be defining ''reality'' as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent from our own volition (we cannot "wish them away"), and to define "knowledge" as the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics' (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 13).

[10] It is important to bear in mind that my objective is not to discuss the ontological status of reality or identity; instead these issues are regarded as questions of metaphysics left out of from my discussion.

[11] When Berger and Luckmann pose that causes of this could be 'posited by the biological constants' they refer to a discussion, which I do not aim to develop any further in this study. However, the discussion about biology as a cultural construct is well presented by Judith Butler (1990, 1993).

[12] Institutionalisation and institution are complex terms that need to be clarified. With institution it is meant a concept of historical truth- understood by the individuals as being natural in some sense. The process of institutionalisation is involved in numerous power relations found at a multitude of social levels. Foucault (1990: 93) argues, 'power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society'. Hence, it is more or less impossible to say how the process of institutionalisation works – it is a product of a complex interplay between individual and society deeply involved in power relations affecting the process.

[13] What is labelled objective reality or social order is what I would like to place on equal footing with the problematic concept of culture (and as noted also the Habermasian term 'system') that so often is found in the sociological literature. As pointed to, culture is taken seriously within the field of cultural studies and is a crucial factor to have in mind while reading this study. When discussing culture as an element in the process of social construction of reality it is not difficult to understand it as a one-dimensional phenomenon. It is of great importance to have in mind, that what is constructed as reality or culture is not a simple and easy-to-grasp concept, but rather, as Johan Fornäs (1995: 1) so poetically puts, 'a web of flows, multiplying, converging and crossing. Some of the interconnecting whirls of culture are clearly visible on the surface, others are hidden deep below. Some are strong and irresistible, others local and temporary. They flow in various directions and intersect at different levels. Above all, they are polyphonic, resulting from complex intersubjective processes of communication rather than directly from objective external nature or from within a singular subject'. Within this 'web of flows', the individual and his/her subjective reality is situated as an element interconnected to the institutionalising whirls of culture. Hence, what Berger and Luckmann name 'objective reality' is not a simple concept but rather an utterly problematic aspect of our reality. The social order, objective reality or culture, then, is a multidimensional human product that cannot be regarded as one entity. More properly one could understand culture as a pluralistic phenomenon in which symbolic sub-realities can be found or, to talk with Habermas (1989: 138) once again, as 'the stock of knowledge from which participants in communication supply themselves with interpretations as they come to an understanding of something in the world'. Whatever the definition of culture might be, as a 'product

of human activity' (Berger and Luckmann 1991: 72) it needs to have emerged from the subjective parts of reality.

[14] Following Mead's perspective (that is crucial to understand the one of Berger and Luckmann), one needs to regard the relation between the individual and the generalised other as a crucial moment in the development of the self. With his own words, '[t]he organized community or social group which gives to the individual his unity of self may be called the "generalized other." The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community. Thus, for example, in the case of such a social group as a ball team, the team is the generalized other in so far as it enters–as an organized process or social activity–into the experience of any one of the individual member of it' (1947: 154). This indicates that participation in 'co-operative sub-realities' (analytically regarded, a ball team could be such a sub-reality) affects the individual's self-understanding by means of 'modifying' the generalised other. Developing this perspective, Mead (1947: 154-155) argues, '[i]f the given human individual is to develop a self in the fullest sense, it is not sufficient for him merely to take the attitudes of other human individuals toward himself and toward one another within the human social process, and to bring that social process as a whole into his individual experience merely in these terms: he must also, in the same way that he takes the attitudes of other individuals toward himself and toward one another, take their attitudes toward the various phases or aspects of the common social activity or set of social undertakings in which, as members of an organized society or social group, they are all engaged'. Considering his theory in an understanding of individual and/or social change the following quote provides a central thought; '[i]t is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking. In abstract thought the individual takes the attitude of the generalized other toward himself, without reference to its expression in any particular other individuals; and in concrete thought he takes that attitude in so far as it is expressed in the attitudes toward his behavior of those individuals with whom he is involved in the given social situation or act' (Mead 1947: 155-156).

[15] In my discussion, identity figures as a common theme. One interesting and indeed important aspect of the 'co-operative sub-realities' is the question of identity as a common phenomenon. David Morley (2001: 442) points out that 'at some moments, members of disempowered groups will deliberately reify and 'essentialize' their identities, in order to mobilize for political action and compete for resources that are distributed on an "ethnicized" basis, despite the fact that at other times, and in other contexts they will readily and routinely undercut such fixed claims on their identity by recourse to more "demotic" and fluid discourses'.

[16] I find this interesting of two reasons. First of all, the public discourse on a phenomenon constructs it by giving it a significance that is later on apprehended by the final user. Hence, if the general belief is that one can, for example, change ones sex by communicating through CMC – this is in a sense what one can do. Of course this argumentation depends on differing between different societal levels of reality and having the discussion of signifier/signified in mind.

[17] Rheingold (1995: 5) defines virtual communities as 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace'. These should be understood in the light of the Net as being 'an informal term for the loosely interconnected computer networks that use CMC technology to link people around the world into public discussions'. These two are phenomena connected to the idea of cyberspace that should be regarded as the 'the conceptual space where words, human relationships, data, wealth, and power are manifested by people using CMC technology'. These definitions are important to have in mind, not only when reading Rheingold, but also the section about Amitai Etzioni and Manuel Castells.

[18] Smileys can, in one way or another, express a wish to have the human body represented in the digital communicative situation. Another interpretation can be that the use of emoticons compensates a

minor linguistic ability. The sign :-) that denotes happiness can be used since the user wants to present him/herself as having this facial expression in the moment of writing. It can also be used to give another significance to a phrase that not is thought to denote something happy. The use of smileys can be theorised *ad infinitum* and one has to keep in mind that the use of this 'language' does not need to imply anything special – simply it is easier to write a symbol than a complicated phrase expressing a state of mind. Another interesting issue in this context is the existence of this common lingual phenomenon – perhaps it could be regarded as a factor giving 'virtual space' status as a reality in a sense drawing it more to its 'real space' counterpart.

[19] This is something that works as a key concept of Castells' argumentation when talking about the thought 'that through the powerful influence of the new communication system, mediated by social interests, government policies, and business strategies, a new culture is emerging: the *culture of real virtuality*' (Castells 1996: 329-330, emphasis in original) As Castells (1996: 372-373) suggests, the 'historically specific to the new communication system, organized around the electronic integration of all communication modes from the typographic to the multisensorial, is not its inducement of virtual reality but the construction of real virtuality'. Normally, critics of cyberspace and electronic media argue (as does for example Kevin Robins) that the discourse on 'virtual space' is disembodied from the physical reality of our human lives. He concludes that 'they implicitly refer to an absurdly primitive notion of "uncoded" real experience that never existed' since '[a]ll realities are communicated through symbols. And in human, interactive communication, regardless of the medium, all symbols are somewhat displaced in relationship to their assigned semantic meaning'. One could then say that human experience of reality always has been, in some sense, virtual. This because 'it is always perceived through symbols that frame practice with some meaning that escapes their strict semantic definition'.

[20] Of course, this applies to many social groups in our society. The reason behind the use of homo-, bi- and transsexuals as examples in this study is that these identities have their reason in a self-experienced definition. Other groups based on identity (such as those based on 'race', gender and so forth) are of a different kind. These identities are based in relation to a definition in relation to others. The main difference, then, is that, one the one hand, identities can be defined from within, and on the other hand, be defined from the outside. This is an interesting and crucial question, I believe, to have in mind when discussing self-development through communication and mirroring in others.

[21] I reference to this view, John R. Gibbins and Bo Reimer state (1999: 141), '[l]locality and difference also characterize postmodern political features. It is likely that particular futures moulded to specific environments will multiply; and not as subcultures to the dominants but as a feature of the dominant. Local and regional political solutions will differ around leadership, organization, agenda and support. So postmodern futures will also be plural and pluralized rather than singular and monolithic, both because central leaders have lost their capacity and will to impose centralized solutions, and because their former customers have changed products and allegiances. The bricolaged nature of political spaces is likely to become the dominant pattern in Western societies. Alongside this, we expect that various futures will be shared in other places and cultures in the world. Globalization will ensure that transnational and international futures will be forged at all levels, and especially across sub-governmental levels'.

[22] In interesting connection to this is what Mina Ramirez (1998: 46) terms 'group media'. This could easily be translated into 'digital interaction' and as such work as a 'medium which becomes a means for small groups to develop a critical attitude towards the reality of the self, the group, community and society through participation in group interaction from the perspective of their profound life-community values expressed in their own language and symbols'. According to Ramirez, this kind of interaction can enable 'growth in political maturity'.

[23] This does not imply that it is impossible to engage in identity-plays in 'real space' that is, of course possible. However, that kind of play is connected to another set of obstacles than in virtual space.