Navigating the Mediapolis

Digital Media and Emerging Practices of Democratic Participation

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The relationship between the Internet and democracy has spawned an impressive body of literature stretching from the early years of the Internet to the present. Most of the discussion animating this literature revolves around the assessment of the “impact” of the Internet on democracy. This impact is described as either positive (enhancing, invigorating democracy through access to information and debate and low-cost participation) or negative (slacktivism, clicktivism, echo-chambers, incivility). More specific questions concerning the ways in which particular civic and political organizations have employed Internet-based media to advance their goals and participate in the democratic process have also been posed and answered. This chapter contributes to a more recent trend in the literature: it attempts to take the discussion beyond the straitjacket of “impact” thinking and to examine the relationship between the Internet (along with the numerous new communication media spawned by it) and democracy in particular instances, taking into consideration the complex social and political environment in which it takes shape. The question concerning the role the Internet and new media take on in contemporary democratic systems becomes a question of
identifying more complex and contingent interactions, in which the technologies and communication formats associated with the Internet represent only one element among many. How critical is that element in particular democratic developments? What are the lasting consequences (if any) of its use by social actors pursuing their democratic interests and rights?

Here I will introduce, or rather reinvent, an anchoring concept intended to capture the web of interactions and mutual dependencies among citizenship, politics, and the media—that of the mediapolis (Silverstone, 2007). The mediapolis is constituted not only by media technologies, organizations, and content. It also comprises political bodies and civic formations, and importantly, individual people and groups living their daily lives. The mediapolis is indeed the nexus (although not always digital) where the trajectories of all these constitutive entities and forms of life meet and mesh.

The mediapolis as originally introduced is an apt metaphor for the interweaving of social and political life with communication networks and media discourses. At the same time, it poses a significant challenge: these intersections and interdependencies must be analytically disentangled in order to understand them in more concrete theoretical and practical terms. This is the project of this chapter. The question of whether the Internet and digital media have any positive or negative effects on democracy is not its concern; instead the focus is on discerning particular patterns in how these media are implicated in democratic processes. It will try to elucidate the inner makeup and workings of the mediapolis with the hope to put flesh and nuance in the place of the sweeping generalizations whose time has come and gone.

I have been a fascinated observer of the incorporation of digital media into civic initiatives and interventions for a number of years across different geographic locations. My project “New Media and Citizens’ Voices in the European Public Sphere: The Case of Bulgaria” focused on a variety of instances of civic mobilization in my native Bulgaria, a former communist country and a newcomer to both democracy and the Internet. The project consisted in a series of qualitative case studies that relied on data collected from online publications and discussions, individual interviews with key participants, news media texts and shows, and official documents related to the events under consideration. The following analysis is informed by this dataset. I will present the individual cases only in a nutshell, omitting the details, and will aim at isolating the common threads and the specific lessons each case teaches students of the interplay between new media and democratic participation.
WHY MEDIAPOLIS?

The quest for discovering the impact of the Internet on democracy has taken various turns, but one of its early and most popular tropes has been to ask whether the Internet has the potential to recreate the ideal-typical “public sphere,” which according to Habermas (1989) was lost under the dual pressure of the market and the state. The concept of the public sphere has been a touchstone in the debates concerning the relationship between forms of communication, mediated or not, and democracy. It was only natural for academics to pick up that concept from their toolshed when trying to determine the value and promise of the newly emergent communication forms that computer networks have engendered. From early computer-conferencing systems through newsgroups, online discussion forums, Facebook, and Twitter, the question whether the public sphere is being enhanced and invigorated by the communicative practices evolving on these platforms has occupied researchers of democracy.

As much as optimism has run high, the use of the Habermasian public sphere as a benchmark when observing and assessing the deliberative quality of actual online interactions has produced disenchanting results. Already in early computer conferencing systems and mailing lists, researchers found the domination of some participants over others along with new sources of inequality, and most discouragingly, group polarization instead of consensus building (Kiesler and Sproull, 1992; Herring, 2003). As Internet discussion spaces became more widely available, and the number and diversity of people participating in them grew, behaviours such as flaming, incivility, and putting down opponents spread like wildfire. It became more difficult to find in these online fora the kind of rational-critical debate oriented toward consensus that defined the early bourgeois Offentlichkeit (Janssen and Kies, 2005). The tumultuous multivocality of the online discussion space defied the expectation that cool, self-disciplined, and disinterested exchanges in the name of the greater good had a chance to flourish. At best, the existing public sphere-like spaces on the Internet where issues of common concern have been discussed in the spirit of true public-mindedness have been homogenous in their ideological makeup and fragmented across fault lines of conflicting convictions and interests (Dahlberg, 2001). And all that was happening even before the market had reared its powerful head.

Once media corporations moved their business onto the digital networks, the online space quickly started transforming into a gigantic shopping mall and entertainment arcade (Dahlberg, 2005; Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2006). The
traditional corporate mass media and the failed public sphere of Habermasian theory herded public attention into the familiar pastures of mass consumption and light-hearted distraction, this time through a digital fix. This is not to say that the venerable tradition of democratic deliberation in the public sphere did not gain anything or was diminished. On the contrary, in small but significant ways the dynamics of the digital fora brought new and broader attention to the theory of the public sphere and helped illuminate some of its deficiencies. These fora gave numerous people the opportunity to enter public sphere-like situations and through trial and error to figure out what works and what doesn’t in these spaces, what they are good for and what their limitations are. The notion that it is possible and indeed feasible to engage with others in a discussion of issues of common concern, even when these discussions did not produce glorious outcomes, steadily gained traction and became an element of the common sense of a wired and later wirelessly connected populace (Bakardjieva, 2008; Kaposi, 2006; Papacharissi, 2004).

A more practically oriented line of research on the democratic affordances of the Internet and digital media emerged from studies of organizational communication that sought to register the uptake and establish the relevance of digital communication media for civic organizations and movements (Bimber et al., 2005; Bennett, 2003; Bennett and Segerberg, 2011; Della Porta, 2011). To the extent that such organizations are seen as the main stakeholders and actors of civil society, it has been important to determine if and how their mandate is supported and expanded by digital communication networks. The research findings in this area paint a more optimistic picture in the sense that voluntary organizations have been shown to take advantage of digital media to construct a solid and effective communication infrastructure to support their internal interactions, both horizontally among members and vertically, from leadership to members. Organizations have been also proven to deploy digital media in connecting globally with partners and supporters and to build solidarity and undertake action across national borders. Their own structures have flattened and become more inclusive; they have made successful use of digital media as tools of mobilization and logistics in the course of larger and smaller initiatives.

A key aspect of digital media’s role vis-à-vis civil society, however, remains unexplored in this framework, which equates civic involvement with formal organizing and explicit activism. That is the critical question of whether attention to and participation in civic issues and initiatives has gained a new
chance to be wider and more inclusive beyond the very small cohort of those carrying formal organizational membership and those identifying themselves as activists. What about the rest of the citizens who are perhaps lured by the commercial pastures mentioned above, or simply bogged down in their daily concerns of breadwinning, child-rearing, mortgage-paying, and the rest? Does the digital communication environment make joining the organizations of civil society more attractive? Receding numbers of NGO members worldwide seem to indicate that this is not the case. And yet massive global initiatives as well as more and more frequently occurring civic actions, protesting, demanding, or charting political and social change at the national and transnational level, have been erupting around the world (CIVICUS, 2013). Technological determinism and cyber furor aside, in the complex mix of factors responsible for these initiatives, conspicuously and indispensably, analysts have found the smaller or bigger traces of digital media.

So then who are the citizens who join such initiatives? Where are they coming from if not from the organized entities of civil society? What do we know about their relationship with the public sphere and the political world? Papacharissi (2010) has offered an intriguing hypothesis concerning this question. She has argued that in the digital age citizenship gets individualized and privatized. Ironically, its locus becomes the private sphere, from where networked individuals express their personal views and selectively form thin and volatile alliances with others across the network in pursuit of privately meaningful goals. Publicly oriented activities, she notes, are increasingly enabled within a “digitally equipped private sphere,” in which the individual has the opportunity to practice his or her new “civic habits with more autonomy, flexibility and potential for expression” (21). Papacharissi believes that in the private sphere individuals feel more in control of their civic fate, their civic autonomy, and individual identity. That is why it is the private sphere where contemporary citizenship withdraws and fortifies itself. The paradox of this privatized and isolated citizenship is only understandable when digital media are taken into consideration.

In an earlier study, I described the phenomenon of “subactivism” (Bakardjieva, 2009), a label that is also intended to capture the relationship between private life (or sphere) and public engagement. Based on in-depth interviews with Internet users conducted in Canada, I demonstrated that there are a variety of practices (or in Papacharissi’s terms, “habits”) by which people engage with public and political issues without leaving the realm of private life. To me, these are practices that remain largely subjective and submerged. They have to do with what
Giddens (1991) has called “politics of the self.” These practices constitute the individual’s efforts to make social and political choices in their daily life congruent with their personal values, or in more general terms, to be the person they want to be. They involve the exposure of individuals to public discourses and their responses to the positions offered in these discourses. I believe subactivism is the necessary precondition for any overt civic and political participation that manifests itself in the public realm, but, importantly, it is not all there is to citizenship.

Digital media indeed enable the individual to socialize his or her private thoughts and responses in an expressive mode. They do support a condition of “networked individualism” (Wellman et al., 2003) in which persons connect to others to the extent that their individual interests and choices coincide. But digital media by themselves do not guarantee an audience, a following and, most significantly, they do not guarantee solidarity. While expression can be anchored in an isolated private individual and select audience and attention can be given or traded among networked individuals, solidarity is the hallmark of the emergence of a collective—the moment where individuals recognize themselves in each other and articulate a shared goal and responsibility for developments going beyond their private lives. Solidarity can be experienced in a deeply personal way, but it goes decisively beyond the individual’s private sphere and individualistic preferences. It involves other people beyond the immediate private circle, in negotiation with whom an issue, a principle, or a demand is attributed public significance and is defined as a shared object of engagement or action. Solidarity culminates in collective identity and collective action that attempts to make a difference in the public world. My argument, in contrast with Papacharissi (2010), is that the role of new media is not simply to allow citizenship to be drawn into and anchored in the private sphere, which they do, but to create a bridge between these privately meaningful civic sentiments and impulses and the larger field in which other people, organizations and institutions operate. This larger field can usefully be termed the mediapolis.

The mediapolis is a concept coined by Roger Silverstone (2007), in which he blends together the classical definition of the polis (following Hannah Arendt) and the idea that our contemporary relations with other people, be they private, public, civic or political, are fundamentally embedded in a media environment. In Silverstone’s words the mediapolis is
the mediated space of appearance where the world appears and in which the world is constituted in its worldliness, and through which we learn about those who are and who are not like us. It is through communication conducted through the mediapolis . . . that public and political life increasingly comes to emerge at all levels of the body politic (or not). (Silverstone, 2007: 31)

Unlike the private sphere, the mediapolis is, according to Silverstone, pluralistic and multivocal. Communication in it is multiple in form and inflection. It harbours conflicting and competing discourses, stories and images. Compared to the Habermasian public sphere, the mediapolis is uneven, fractured by power and difference. And yet it is inclusive in its own way because it is constituted in the practices of those who produce sounds, images, and narratives and of those who receive them. For my purposes, the most important feature of the mediapolis is that it mediates between the present and immediate realities of everyday life and the world that is spatially and temporally beyond immediate reach. The concept of the mediapolis captures the insight that the media have become a “second-order paramount reality” (Silverstone, 2007: 31), intertwined with the directly experienced world. Thus my choice is to look for the democratic affordances of digital media, not in the ways in which they, by themselves, make access and participation in the public sphere easy to achieve, or in the ways that they make citizenship an item of the private world of networked individuals. I choose to consider the effects of new media on civic participation by placing them within the complex tangle of the mediapolis where communication via traditional and new media formats intertwines with, and partly constitutes, the daily life of individuals in their capacity as spectators and participants. The mediapolis is the terrain where people form relationships with distant others in various forms and constellations. As such, it brings to everyday life new ethical and political dimensions.

From this perspective, then, the mediapolis is not only a public sphere because it is uneven, multivocal, and conflictual. It is not only a private sphere because it involves interaction, recognition, sociability, care, and solidarity with distant others. It is not only an organizational infrastructure because it reaches deeply into the daily lives of private individuals and becomes a conduit of the elementary agitation, engagement, and mobilization that precede any form of organizational life. At the same time, the mediapolis contains the essential elements of all these previous constructs. It emerges as a triple helix in which the
strands of traditional media production and reception practices, new media use practices and organized collective action are tightly entwined. Democratic participation crucially depends on all these strands and necessitates their successful navigation. Consuming traditional media content could increase awareness of public issues and generate private discussions on these issues, but it remains enclosed in the shell of private existence, or, as I have argued with regard to sub-activism, it remains subjective and submerged. Using new media formats could generate streams of free and creative interpersonal exchange outside of the immediate personal world, but it cannot exceed the limits of purely expressive efficacy. Organized collective action is citizens’ best chance to impress the institutions and to bring about actual social and political change, but disconnected from the other two strands it is typically small-scale, isolated, and thus negligible. Therefore, in what follows my aim will be to identify strategies and forms of navigating the mediapolis that have succeeded in articulating the elements of the strands described above to achieve an effective civic intervention into the public and political world. With this task in mind I turn to my case studies.

BLOGS AND BLOCKADES: THE SAVE STRANDJA CAMPAIGN

The case of Strandja, a mountain in the southeast of Bulgaria that had its status of protected natural territory cancelled and then reinstated under pressure from citizen protests, captured my attention in 2007. This was a prominent example of consciousness-raising, mobilization, and action that spanned the full breadth of the mediapolis. At the core of the controversy captured by this case is a set of legal procedures initiated by interested corporations and municipalities challenging the natural reserve status of the mountain. Initially, the efforts to protect that status (and the mountain) from uncontrolled commercial development involved nongovernmental organizations, rich in legal and environmental expertise, but poor in influence and following. These organizations appealed to the political institutions and tried to intervene as a side in the legal hearings. Their claim was that the elimination of the protective mechanisms (sought on the basis of an administrative formality) would open the mountain for unbridled construction with devastating consequences for its natural habitat. These complaints and warnings, however, fell on deaf ears until the point at which the country’s Supreme Administrative Court passed a decision in favour of stripping Strandja of its legal protection.
As this news surfaced in some traditional and web-based media outlets, environmentally conscious bloggers picked it up and started discussing it, vigorously amplifying its traction and significance. The Bulgarian blogosphere went on fire, spinning numerous interpretations of the court decision and making connections with endemic problems plaguing Bulgarian society, such as bandit privatization of public resources, judicial corruption, and political subservience to corporate interests. These thoughts and opinions originating from networked individuals travelled along the threads of interpersonal connections. They were eagerly reposted, commented on, and reframed via blog comments, online fora, e-mail, and SMS (social networking sites were still to gain popularity in this particular country at that time). The websites of the NGOs that had struggled against the decision started attracting traffic, and their positions and arguments were embraced by the online public. The online media, as one of my informants told me, threw the citizens’ masses behind the otherwise isolated civic organizations. Excited and aware as the digital media users may have become, all the discussion was nothing more than chatter that could be easily ignored by the state institutions and allowed to subside and die out, especially in a country with less than 30 percent Internet users.

The events, however, took a different course, because on the critical day of the publication of the court decision somewhere in the space between the networked individuals with their private views, blogged as they may have been, and the structures of the civic organizations, a group of citizens marginally related to the latter created an improvised site calling for a street protest against the court decision, to be held at a specific time and place in the centre of the Bulgarian capital. Attracting a small but spirited crowd of protesters, this call made the issue fully erupt into the space of public visibility in Bulgarian society. The protesters, equipped with homemade posters, blocked a central street intersection, understandably attracting police and, subsequently, traditional media attention. Once the street protest made its way into the pages of the newspapers and the screens of the television programs, it elevated the long-neglected issue into a prime concern for the wide Bulgarian public. After a series of protest actions and escalation of media debates, this eventually led to a major shift in public opinion in support of the mountain’s status as a natural reserve. At the time, the coalition government felt insecure, so the parties represented in the parliament swiftly agreed to overturn the court’s decision and leave Strandja under legal protection.
Cutting through the details and country specificities, the case is indicative of the necessary connection between diverse actors in the mediapolis: formal civic organizations, private citizens and groups willing to engage and publicize their opinions on the issue, and traditional media journalists and organizations. The civic organizations contributed expertise and acted as watchdogs of the decision-making processes taking place in state institutions. Bloggers and forum participants translated the specialized terms and concerns into everyday language and spread the word across numerous intersecting circles of Internet users. They were also the ones that helped materialize the protest into real bodies and collective action. Finally, journalists and media organizations brought the turmoil into the living rooms of the majority of Bulgarians. Diverse spaces of mediated visibility—the online blogs and forums, the central squares of the city, and the pages and screens of traditional media—were all tightly intertwined in putting the issue on the agenda of the political institutions and compelling them to act on it.

While no clear-cut recipe can be extracted from the Strandja case, its analysis reveals the consciously or intuitively drawn trajectories through which civic engagement was able to break out of the confines of the private sphere and passive spectatorship and transform first into collectively targeted and conducted set of activities, and second into effective intervention into the public world and political decision-making. The various strands of the mediapolis were effectively connected through the work of key translators such as bloggers, online forum participants, and civic-minded journalists ready to break the story into the spaces of visibility provided by traditional media. The case threw into sharp relief the specific and indispensable roles of the various actors involved in the events—civic organizations, new media authors and users, traditional media, and the wider public, along with the functional links among them.

COOKING UP RESISTANCE: BG-MAMMA AGAINST GMO

A Bulgarian case revolving around adamant public resistance to the liberalization of the regulations on genetically modified organisms (GMO) offers a valuable opportunity to trace the fine mechanisms through which individual and small-group concerns shared through online media consolidated and transformed into an audible public voice and source of political pressure. A group of Bulgarian mothers frequenting a popular forum for discussing mothering, bg-mamma.com, formed a powerful alliance driving a wide public campaign
against proposed legislative changes concerning GMOs. The collective action that originated from the forum discussions was the main reason the issue acquired widespread public visibility and was eventually resolved by the political institutions in a way that satisfied the citizens’ demands. That is why in the analysis of that case the main question posed is (to use Melucci’s now-classic formulation): “How is collective action formed and how do individuals become involved in it? Through what processes do individuals recognize that they share certain orientations in common and on that basis decide to act together?” (1989: 30). The important new element that my study adds to this query is the interest in how digital media are involved in the construction of collective action. How do they help individuals bridge the conceptual and physical distances that separate their private spheres and come to understand themselves as a collective with shared identity and goals?

A careful look into the origins of the campaign leads to a thread of 700 posts that occurred in one of bg-mamma’s forums, The Gossip Shop, which allows a wide variety of topics to be brought up for discussion. The in-depth analysis of the content and relationships constituted through this sequence of posts reveals the various dimensions of the issue, and the process through which individual views gradually blended into solidarity and the determination to act together, in order to bring about actual policy changes. The thread was initiated when a longtime member of bg-mamma called on fellow-participants to sign the petition started by the Coalition “For the Nature” (a coalition of environmental NGOs) regarding the proposed amendments to the Law on Genetically Modified Organisms that would allow growing GMOs in the protected (natural) territories. The Parliamentary Committee for the Environment was supposed to meet to discuss this amendment two days later and thus the author of the post insisted that an urgent response was needed.

Once again, as in the previous case, the initial formulation of the issue and its importance came from organized civil society, from the NGOs working in the area and concentrating significant scientific and legal expertise. They were the ones keeping an eye on the dealings of the parliament and blowing the whistle regarding the risks and potential detrimental consequences of the otherwise obscure legal amendment. Missis Emilia Spirolonova, the nickname of the bg-mamma user who made the initial post, acted as a go-between connecting the initiative of the NGOs with the interlocking social networks created in the process of longtime group discussion of privately significant motherly interests. Because of her status as a respected participant in the online community of
mothers, her words were taken seriously and put up for consideration by forum members. Her call for urgent support of the petition was by no means blindly or obediently followed. After all, the site bg-mamma was little more than a space where networked individuals established casual relationships with one another, led by their particular motives and interests in specific topics. No agreement regarding the issue in question existed or could be easily reached, despite the interpersonal familiarity and previous exchanges among forum members. Thus, the issue was subjected to thorough critical deliberation in all its aspects: scientific, practical, economic, legal, political, and ethical.

The scientific debate asked what genetically modified organisms were and whether and how they could do harm to individual health and to naturally grown organisms that enter the traditional foods served at Bulgarian tables. Participating mothers took nothing for granted and went out to consult an impressive variety of sources, both strictly scientific and popular. The practical dimension of the issue was formulated around the role and responsibilities of mothers having to feed their families on a daily basis and thus to make decisions regarding the health risks of the foods they buy. The mothers involved in the discussion also considered the economic implications of GMO liberalization and what those could mean for traditional Bulgarian agricultural products and practices. The legislative and policy aspects of the issue had to do with Bulgaria’s membership in the European Union, the legal obligations stemming from it, and the procedures through which legislative changes were implemented. The various possible economic and political interests implicated in the lawmaking were also debated at length.

Over the course of approximately two weeks and 700 posts, a small group of about twenty-five lay women and men traversed a steep learning curve to arrive at an informed decision as to which side they were on vis-à-vis the GMO debate. Their exchanges were not always levelheaded and cool, considerate and polite. There was heat, emotion, and animosity in many of the posts. And yet, the overall process contained all the elements of careful weighing of the positives and negatives based on evidence, reason, and deeply felt commitment to personal and public welfare. The meeting and clash of diverse personal views slowly led to the formation of several camps of opinion, to we-they differentiation, and thus to a set of political positions on the issue. Participants eventually identified with one of these positions and made further efforts to help their position win out in the debate. The consensus achieved by the group at the end of the day was imperfect. Those participants who did not share the opinion of the
majority were not won over or integrated. They simply left. Those who stayed, for their part, were highly energized by the heated exchange. By working hard to convince others, they had reached a high degree of conviction of the merit of their cause and a feeling of responsibility for the future developments concerning GMO. They could not remain passive spectators any longer. They felt the need to do something to influence the course of events.

The next stage of the online discussion was marked by a search for the most effective ways for the group to intervene in the legislative process by making their position known to parliament and to the wider Bulgarian public. It was clear to them at this point that piling up arguments online would not make any difference. They came to the realization that the next logical step toward their now clearly set goal of stopping the proposed legislative changes would be to attract attention to the issue and to convince the Bulgarian public that lifting the tight control over GMO proliferation involved serious risks and poorly understood consequences. Once determined to act, the group had to come up with a series of steps that would take their voices and positions out of the online enclave in which they were initially formulated. Interestingly enough, as their first move to “materialize” their digital dissent, they collectively wrote an open letter to be delivered to the respective institutions and the mass (traditional) media.

After eight different drafts, crafted collectively through the online forum, the letter was finally completed and approved by the majority of the discussants.

With the appearance of this text representing the collective will and position of online participants, a curious transformation from individual to collective identity and from virtual to actual involvement was set in motion. First of all, the open letter had to be signed, and so it became imperative to decide who “we,” the co-signers, were. This led to the group’s choosing to label itself as “an initiating committee of parents and citizens registered in the site bg-mamma.” Then, the letter had to be printed out and distributed in a hard copy down formal channels, such as to governmental offices and the headquarters of media organizations. This required real people to knock on real doors and demand formal receipts confirming the delivery of their document. The online forum served as a management system distributing tasks and monitoring their realization. It helped individual actions to be collectively targeted and collective action to be implemented by individuals.

The progressive embodiment of the collective action that started with the delivery of the open letter went through several stages, including rallies in front of...
of the parliament and in central places in the city. Drawing on its own social networks and with the help of supporters, the group issued information leaflets, organized a poster exhibition in a central place in the city, and produced an open-air concert, all aimed at attracting public attention to the issue. Once their digital voices materialized in the physical spaces of the mediapolis, the traditional media, up to this point reluctant to dedicate much coverage to the GMO debate, were compelled to step in. Although the coverage by television stations and newspapers was not always supportive of the protests, the work of some like-minded reporters gave the views critical of GMO sufficient public exposure. The mothers from bg-mamma, in the meantime, went on to build a wide coalition of civil-society organizations, including not only environmental NGOs but also agricultural producer associations and even the association of Bulgarian chefs. The position of this strategically composed united front could not be ignored by those in power.

The further stages of embodiment of the dissent involved the appearance of mothers with small children in the offices of the government and at the sittings of the parliamentary committee responsible for the legislative changes. The mothers recruited scientists and legal experts to provide evidence and justification for stricter control of GMO proliferation at this committee’s meetings. After several months of struggle to influence public opinion via different initiatives by all interested parties, the parliamentary committee rejected the amendments and retained the more conservative regime of GMO regulation. Despite numerous legal imperfections in the existing legislation and control mechanisms, the wide opening of the door to the growth of GMO in Bulgaria was averted for the time being.

In the bg-mamma vs. GMO case one can clearly distinguish the already familiar strands of the mediapolis intersecting and enhancing one another, similar to what was observed in the Saving-Strandja events. Digitally mediated interpersonal and group discussions created the momentum that triggered street protests, generated traditional media coverage, and led to a shift in public opinion and eventually in institutional response. The intertwining of spaces and practices found to be central to the Strandja campaign, with some modifications, proved critical to the growth and success of the anti-GMO movement as well. Here, it was not individual blogs and sites, but an online community of interest that served as the cauldron in which the voices of individual citizens found resonance and grew in authority. The path to the pages and screens of traditional media once again passed through the streets and squares of the city,
although not so much with acts of disobedience (blocking traffic), but in various creative and expressive forms.

Representatives of the mass media won over to the side of the civic action similarly played important bridging parts. The initiation of the anti-GMO campaign by a digitally constituted collective body offered a perspective on the fine transformation of private into collective meanings, interpretations, and positions, and the fluid conversion between individual and collective, virtual and embodied actions. The complex web of the mediapolis spanned and interlaced the everyday lives and private concerns of individual mothers, their publicly private online discussion, their initially modest and progressively louder and more visible pronouncements into the public spaces of the city and the mass media, their strategic interactions with civil society organizations. It brought their concerns into high public visibility and provided a platform for their dialogue with the political institutions. It was not the digital media alone, but the thoughtful navigation of the different strands of the mediapolis by the mothers that broke open the otherwise exclusive chambers of political decision-makers and allowed for wider participation in the regulation of GMO.

FENDING FOR THE FOREST: FACEBOOK FACEOFF

The third case that I turn to in my effort to cast light on the workings of the mediapolis is framed around a series of civic actions set in motion by a small group of young professionals in 2012. These actions targeted the proposed changes in the law regulating the use of Bulgarian forests. Convinced that the amendments were detrimental to the preservation of and public access to popular mountain destinations, and that they catered to the interests of a small number of commercial players, the group set out to “activate” a wide circle of citizens with a view to blocking the reform. The key members of the group described themselves as skiers and nature-lovers who felt they had a stake in the rules that regulated forest utilization. For years they had been worried by the fact that with the assistance of politicians and governments an effective monopoly—a small number of companies—was being established in the tourist and skiing industry in Bulgaria. Iconic skiing destinations were being taken over by powerful business monopolies that subsequently undertook unjustifiable and damaging construction projects in the mountains. The newly proposed amendments were going to free the hand of these companies to carry such projects even further and to consolidate their private control over these valuable
public resources. “But could an ordinary person save a whole forest? Could such a person stop Tseko Minev [an influential banker with business interests in the ski areas under consideration]?”

These were the questions that one of the young skiers asked himself when he decided to start a blog looking at the developments concerning forest regulation and utilization practices in the country. He was a lawyer, and he combined knowledge, passion, and tenacity in his analytical commentary on the legislative measures and business developments concerning the forests. With time, his blog and his position became “recognizable,” as he himself put it, among the main players and helped him make acquaintanceships with activists of eco-organizations. This contributed to the gradual process of his own “activation,” as he described it. The notion of “activation” is central to this case. It captures the dynamic through which a private individual concerned about a public issue that is personally important to him/her steps out of the subjective and submerged “subactivist” (Bakardjieva, 2009) mode of operation and emerges into the spaces of appearance of the mediapolis, even if marginally at the beginning.

Other disenchanted skiers and snowboarders like the lawyer-blogger looked for their own ways to express their objection to the dominance of one particular company and its preferential treatment by the political powers. They organized an initiative labeled “Ride 4 Vitosha” where young people rode their skis and snowboards on Vitosha, a mountain close to the Bulgarian capital, to show that they were determined to stand up against backroom dealings that gave a select company a monopoly over the exploitation of the mountain. A short video narrating the issue and picturing the event was published on vimeo.com (http://vimeo.com/34606144) and gained over 4,000 views in a couple of days. Some media covered the action. More important, “Ride 4 Vitosha” became a Facebook profile that brought together people interested in the cause. Notably, at the time this case was unfolding, Facebook was already a prominent platform favoured by many Bulgarians, especially the young. It proved to be a key addition to the structure of the mediapolis, as it represented a space where private interactions among social networks of friends and family shared territory with public-minded issues and campaigns appearing in the form of Facebook groups and pages. Thus, it became a matter of a few clicks to pull the civic issues one supported or championed into the private horizon of people one personally knew, and vice versa, to find personal connections to the previously unknown others who supported civic campaigns.
In the experience of the group at the heart of this case, face-to-face meetings in cafes and clubs, gathering places of winter sport lovers, were also an important point of passage. These meetings could be then digitally written and thus perpetuated in platforms such as Facebook and in web pages. The diverse fabric of the mediapolis was thus thickened and strengthened around these particular actors and the issue they were championing. A closed Facebook group and a series of google.doc documents allowed them to discuss and organize internally. Subsequently, a carefully designed Facebook page became their communication platform and alternative medium from which they disseminated information and rallied supporters.

The real challenge to the group, however, was to complete what I referred to as “the triple helix of the mediapolis” by weaving in the strand comprising the traditional mass media, which provide the only straight avenue into the attention field of the public at large. Taking their message out into the mainstream media was not an easy task in this case because of intersecting business interests between the corporate players the group was critical of and media organizations. The young people had to be very creative in elaborating a strategy containing a whole range of forms intended to engage the mainstream. Their efforts could be seen as taking three main directions. Enunciating and sourcing is the practice exemplified by the blog of the young lawyer that spelled out the social and legal significance of the issue. It was further extended through the Facebook page collecting and interpreting information concerning the forests, their preservation and regulation.

Through skillful performance on such platforms, the group, now named “For Vitosha,” managed to place itself as what Couldry (2010) has called a “source actor,” that is, an actor who serves as a source for journalists and officials, and as such is able to exert conceptual influence on the framing of an issue. Beyond that, the online publications of the group, as members pointed out, served to translate the legal problematic into “human language,” making it accessible and relevant to wider circles of people. A second distinguishable strategy is that of chiming and pestering. The group tirelessly instigated well-planned actions that attracted attention to the issue in artistic and playful ways: celebration of the end of a ski season that had never started due to the obstructions caused by the monopoly under attack; sending postcards to governmental and municipal representatives; decorating a central street bearing the same name as the mountain, Vitosha, with SOLD signs, and many others. Third, they became one of the main drivers of a substantive street protest that attracted several thousand people and blocked a
central city intersection on the day the controversial amendments were voted in by parliament. This decisive takeover of a central space of appearance and the disruption of the normal course of city life, like in the cases previously discussed, led police and, along with them, the mass media to become engaged.

A populist government, which at that time was sweating under the critical scrutiny of the European Commission for failures and irregularities in its judicial and legal reforms, was finally compelled to directly address the issue. The prime minister invited representatives of the protesters to a series of discussions, and eventually, under public pressure, the changes in the law concerning the forests were vetoed by the president.

CONCLUSION

Although the cases recounted here offer solid ground for optimism, the farthest thing from my mind is to present them as recipes for civic success and, by extension, as an assurance that new media enhance democracy. On the contrary, the lesson I believe these cases teach us is that the new media are only one among many elements of the complex field of opportunities and constraints in which civic actors operate. In order for these media to become a vehicle of effective democratic participation, they need to be taken up in a way that transcends the established models, that goes beyond the rulebooks of the public sphere, but also beyond the secure and comfortable practices of individualized and privatized digital citizenship. The opportunities offered by the new media lie in their affordances for bridging, traversing, and interweaving these distinct realms and modes of operation into the fabric of the mediapolis. In the digitized mediapolis, visibility is never guaranteed to citizens, but it can be creatively accomplished through smart and open-minded navigation across isolated social and organizational realms. In terms of content and forms of discourse, the new media provide different levels of translation between social languages and cognitive frameworks. The writing of bloggers and Facebook group participants articulates complex legal, economic, and political issues in the everyday vernacular of ordinary citizens. Websites and forum discussions successively generate and elaborate on the signs and slogans carried in street protest. All these media taken together reframe the arguments put forward in newspaper articles and television shows.

Furthermore, beyond a focus on the struggle for visibility (Silverstone, 2007) and the importance of voice (Couldry, 2010b), a comprehensive understanding
of the mediapolis needs to include the question of audibility. Civic action in the mediapolis would amount to no more than a social happening, performance, and feel-good self-indulgence, if it never achieves anything. Efficacy can have numerous dimensions and respective measures, but central among them are capturing the attention of the wider public and forcing the political and administrative institutions to respond to the demands of citizens. A series of questions along these lines arise from the case studies presented above. Who are the citizens and groups who marshal the new media technologies and expressive forms competently enough to attract attention and response? What (and whose) are the issues for the tackling of which new media prove to be appropriate and effective means? From the evidence produced by the three cases it appears that the success of the civic initiatives could be attributed to the combination of digital media affordances and the education and cultural capital (not just technological proficiency) of the middle and upper-middle class urban professionals who put them to work. This observation confirms a suspicion that has already arisen in the literature: namely, that the gift of content generation and creative expression through digital platforms and genres is far from equally distributed and gives advantage to certain classes of users and citizens over others (Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Brake, 2014). The digital divides may be subsiding, but the visibility divides persist, even though their configuration changes.

The political and administrative institutions, for their part, face the dilemma of remaining deaf and rigid in the face of citizen demands, or on the contrary, of succumbing to knee-jerk reactivity without sufficient consideration as to how broadly shared and representative the vocal and visible concerns propagated by the digital media actually are. Yet another challenge is the need to discriminate between genuine and manipulated civic initiatives, because in the age of digitalized production of visibility the race is on among powerful players to engineer their own “citizens’ voices” and appearances.

In sum, when the full dynamics of the mediapolis are brought to light, the democratizing quality of digital media, only one of its components, can be neither neglected nor blithely celebrated. Democratic participation, it seems, remains as contested as ever. Access to it is contingent upon the coming together of new technologies of mediation and newly equipped civic agents who may be smarter and more numerous than the political and civic elites of the past, but who face their own challenges in a transformed field of opportunities and constraints. The rules and figures of this novel quest for inclusion and audibility in a digitally enhanced mediapolis have only begun to emerge.
REFERENCES


