

Bringing ‘A for Anonymous’ and Public Sphere Theory Together

Web 2.0 is understood as a new, a higher level of internet applications. In this regard, it also promises a renewed possibility for democratization. Thus, the ring is cleared for the second round of a well known debate. On the one hand, the internet-enthusiasts get ready. They want to argue now that the long awaited breakthrough for an internet-based democracy might realize. On the other hand, the internet-skeptics are prepared to deflate these newly rising hopes. It is difficult to withdraw from this scene, while both parties now get in touch.

Nonetheless, I will not repeat these positions and counter-positions, since we all know the arguments. They are sharpened and fully developed, but they tend to repeat since the 1990ies. In an earlier publication, I have suggested to name this constellation the “either-or-debate” (Yang 2007*). The discussants – at least in part – tend to share a one-dimensional view on the relation between internet and democracy. Either the internet pushes us to more or to less democracy. In order to escape this infinite loop of pros and cons, I have suggested taking a more differentiated view on the empirics of the public sphere. My thesis was that the internet at the moment does democratize, but it democratizes only peripheral parts of the general public sphere. There is more light now, on the backstage. The civil society now profits from the advantages of the internet, when it uses its websites for raising critical consciousness (and so do Nazis). But the internet does not affect the front stage of the media theater much. Still, this sphere is dominated by television, radio, and newspapers and the messages in this realm have rather lost than gained quality.

These thoughts are not only repeated here in order to enlarge the social web around my few and unimportant publications. Rather, they shall elucidate the direction of the arguments to come. That is to say that the problem, why Web 2.0 might lead rather to a rerun than to a Democracy 2.0 debate, is deeper rooted. It is not done with the differentiation between general and partial publics (whatever by the way ‘partial’ in a ‘public’ sphere means). In order to escape the voices of cyber-utopians and proponents of digital Armageddon, we should at least focus on two additional aspects. Nonetheless, the internet/democracy-debate suffers – at least – from two additional opaque points. One is a rather fundamental problem of how we want to frame the relation of internet and democracy. The other one refers to the logic of social inquiry. My specific answers to both questions leads to the content of this article, namely reading the Anti-Scientology-mobilization in the web2.0 with the help of Arendt, Sennett, and Habermas.

First, in the discourse the constellations of camps actually are more complicated. Utopians and Dystopians at least share one belief. They point at what the internet ideally might provide. By contrast, internet-pessimists call cyber-optimists unrealistic, while the latter criticize that the former ignore factual potentials. The virtual is real. This leads to some dilemmas of conclusion that are best described in terms of time. At the moment, there is no indisputable, overall, and rapid democratization through the internet. But this doesn't necessarily imply that it will not come at some point in the future. Even if now and in the future this model will face a lot of realistic obstacles, it is not so easy to conclude that therefore it is undesirable. Consider democracy itself. There has never and probably will never be a perfect 100% democracy on earth. Still, this does not necessarily mean that any fight for democracy, how vain it might be, is not worth living for. By contrast, the question is allowed, why we actually should believe in the internet as a normative ideal for a lucky future. If our thoughts wander to the level of ideal aspirations, where concepts like freedom, equality, and solidarity are at home, wouldn't we find it quite counterintuitive to discover computer-technology at this place? With other words, it is difficult to see, why we should desire to put a network of machines between us to produce democracy technically.

However, in the debate about the internet and democracy until today the ground on which media and democracy relate to each other, remains underspecified and frequently is taken for granted. In short: What does 'democratic medium' actually mean? We (Rucht, Zimmermann, Yang 2008*) have tried – like many others in the last years (Dahlberg*) – to operationalize this roughly in quite general terms. Most developed and promising today is the agenda of deliberative democracy. (Gutmann/Thompson; Bohman*) It addresses the issue of the quality of communication within the public sphere. However, this state of the art needs further development if confronted with the web2.0 challenge. This is so, because Web2.0 seems to bring a lot of qualitative shifts that are not part of the earlier "either-or"-debate.

In short, current empirical approaches are not very useful to understand this change. They were made for different purposes, namely the measurement of the overall status quo. (Our study for example revealed that web contents are not really higher in democratic quality than newspapers.) Applying these kinds of methods to the web2.0 would equal to an explorer, who drives with a lawn mower through a newly discovered biotope. You get to know how many tons of bio material on average goes on a hectare¹, but you might learn nothing about the uniqueness of a yet undiscovered species. Therefore, I suggest going back to the theoretical literature and especially to history, in order to make our consciousness critical for

¹ Still, this quantitative information might be useful.

the new, which always is just a recombination of the old. In short, I will suggest interpreting web2.0 with the help of three authors: Hannah Arendt and her understanding of political action in contrast to labor and production, Richard Sennett and his emphasis of anonymity in public speech, finally, Jürgen Habermas, who describes the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere. The payoff for the topic is obvious. All three theories describe changes. All three theories deal with democracy and deliberation. None of the authors has a hydraulic/technical understanding of the relation between media and democracy. Instead, they all have an understanding of a lively democratic agency. With Arendt, we can try to read the social web as a Polis. With Sennett, we can ask, whether web2.0 re-cultivates the political theater. With Habermas, we can understand how the business model that web2.0 actually is, may empower subjects to make emancipatory claims.

Now, several objections are allowed that criticize the adoption of these three authors.² At this point, I ask the reader for some patience. Before, the adoption of these theoretical concepts is explained more in detail, the second problem needs to be unfolded. If the question is, what kind of democratic potential the Web2.0 offers an average user, then we need to understand intensively cases of original, genuine, and pure web2.0-mobilizations. Let me qualify this claim. With ‘original’ I mean that studies about online mobilizations frequently deal with organized collective action. Some higher instance implements a web-mobilization. Frequently, these are computer freaks themselves. They want to prove the power of the technology and its borders. In my opinion, they do not count. Not only are they responsible for having caused the whole trouble, but also can we not expect every citizen to be a technical genius. If we really want to know about the democratic potential of the web2.0, we should look at cases, where ordinary users organize themselves without the guidance of professionals.

With ‘genuine’ and ‘pure’ I mark a similar problem. Nearly all cases, I find in the literature, deal with online-mobilizations that have started offline, have an offline political context, and/or are complementing not replacing traditional media use. One example: The International Campaign to Ban Landmines was one of the first cases described in the literature as having profited much from the rising potential of email-communication. However, as a former intern of the German section of this Campaign I know that it is nearly impossible to state the share on the campaign success, the internet is responsible for. You always have to

² Of course, none of these three intellectual giants had access to the internet. Their theories are made for millenarian changes in European history not for dotcom-trends. Their oeuvres are too magnificent and it is a sacrilege to take some pieces out of these artifacts, to apply it empirically and so on.

think about thought experiments: What would have happened if campaigners had not used email? And the answers are quite unsatisfying. Campaigners had just continued to use telephone and fax. Without the internet, they of course had campaigned against land mines. The campaign idea even was developed at a time, when the internet did not play much a role and so on. This old example still holds true. If we look at left-progressive social movements and their protest campaigns in the internet, we will discover soon that the motivation comes from offline, namely face-to-face discussion and that the internet is not irreplaceable.

This argument may sound like a “cyber-reality”-position that claims only pure virtual actions to be the ‘real thing’. The opposite is true. The “good old social movement politics” today is maybe even stronger than in the (highly overestimated) 1960ies. The point here is a different one. The problem of inference can be solved, if one singles out a case of a genuine online mobilization. This is to say that only such a mobilization would show nothing else than the difference, web2.0 *potentially* makes.

When looking through the existing case studies, one hardly finds such a story that fulfills both criteria. Either cyber-freaks protest to defend some of their stakes. Their general world-view pictures a clandestine community of hackers. They defend their hacker-ethics and their small life-world against a giant ‘big brother’ – a conglomerate of state and economy that enslaves society by means of computer technology (catchword in Germany: stasi2.0). And/or the online activities of conventional social movements, interest groups and political parties are discussed. In both cases it is not so easy to see the picture of ‘ordinary citizen participate in the internet’ fulfilled. Instead technical professionals (computer freaks) or political professionals (activists, lobbyists, spin doctors and so on) are the driving forces.

Again, I have to emphasize that this is not a statement against research on conventional political organizations and activities. The argument is rather to unsettle the common belief that this approach is the only way. To grasp the full potential, which Web2.0 has in terms of democracy, I therefore suggest understanding an extraordinary, very marginal, and maybe politically absolute irrelevant protest campaign in the Web2.0, namely the Anonymous-mobilizations against Scientology.

**Graphic 1: Anonymous against Tax Exemption for Scientology, February 2008
(probably in the US)**



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Anonymous_Scientology_9_by_David_Shankbone.JPG

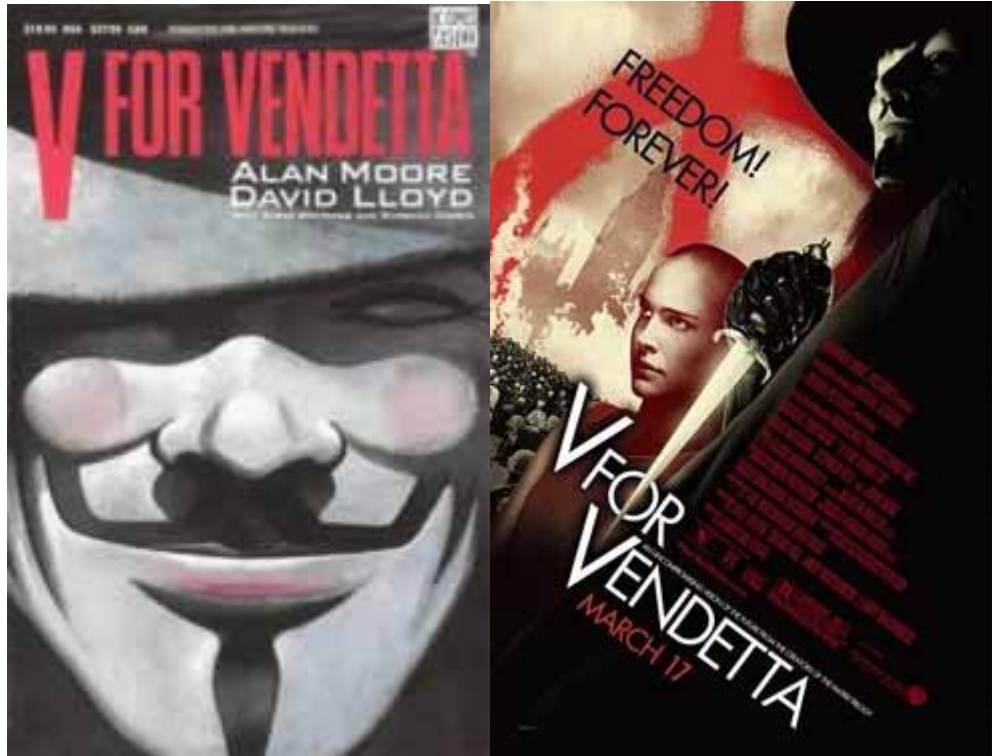
Part I: A Voice Out of the Dark

For approaching the Anonymous it would be totally naïve just to repeat their story-telling. Such a repetition, of what already stands on Wikipedia and hundreds of times is distributed over youtube in form of anonymous³ speeches, is not the task here. Instead, aspects of political theory guided my observations throughout a research that was never actually planned in before. To unveil the curtain step by step, let's go to the cinema with an anarcho-communist. This may sound odd, but it best meets how this research started. During winter 2006, I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the realm of Berlin's organized anarchism. One of my many desperate (and eventually unsuccessful) approaches to find a group that would accept me as an participant observer, led me into one of those many public viewings of political movies. Usually, these were heartbreaking documentaries about the bitter fate of

³ Written in capital letters 'Anonymous' will refer to the campaign. Otherwise, 'anonymous' refers to not communicating one's name.

people in the South suppressed by global capitalism. However, the activists surprisingly were watching a very ordinary blockbuster – V for Vendetta.

Graphic 2: .Alan Moore’s Comic and the Wachowski-Brothers’ Movie: V for Vendetta



Source: Wikipedia

Of course it soon turned out that the movie was neither ordinary nor orderly. Instead, it contained three in one. On the one hand, it was a customized, conformed blockbuster. It was the screening of a comic. The actor of the female star role was quite famous (Natalie Portman). The punchy story contained much noisy violence and the difference between bad and good was not difficult to grasp. Around the globe, almost every thirteen year old would like to see it. On the other hand the film of course smuggled in some political correct attitudes. The main character – a man masked like the phantom of the Opera – was fighting for justice within a totalitarian science fiction society. This should have been obvious for everybody, since the hero, who Zorro-like wore the name V (V for Vendetta), is introduced as the reincarnation of Guy Fawkes. This historical figure once (1605) tried to bomb the parliament in London (the gun powder plot) and V wears a mask with his facial features.

However, this leads us to the third and most important aspect here. The movie was not only a Hollywood like narration of Robinhoodism, but was stuffed with speech, symbols and episodes that stemmed directly from the very heart of anarchist ideology. (This was not

amazing, since the author of that comic was Alan Moore, a confessing anarchist, and the directors of the movie had been the Wachowski brothers.) Ordinary people won't notice this aspect. It rather seems that the main protagonist shouts out some emotional sentences driven by his personal anger and frustration. Nonetheless, neither I nor the anarchists could ignore this fact. In fact, it was quite funny to see a faceless man in a carnival costume giving speeches that – with only minor changes – you will also find in the writings of Franz Fanon, Rudi Rocker and many others. This kind of pop cultural politics allows the movie to be anarchist propaganda and entertainment – at the same time.⁴

Nearly a year later, I saw Guy Fawkes again. This time, a spontaneous internet mobilization – A for Anonymous – had raised against the removal of a video from youtube, in which Tom Cruise praised his religion, the Church of Scientology. Its members had bought Guy Fawkes-masks and in their online distributed polemics against Scientology they imitated the dark and angry voice of V. The campaign was quite successful. Not only the clip today is visible again on youtube, but also Scientology's public image in general got severely damaged. The criticism on Scientology entails that the organization maltreats its members, especially deviant persons. In the perspective of Anonymous Scientology in general is a dangerous political sect. Their message is: We are like V and Scientology is like the big brother government in the movie.

In the beginning, protest is articulated exclusively online, including cyberattacks. Later, the campaign even organizes street action. To avoid misunderstandings: The Anonymous is not a flash-mob. Instead, it is one of the few cases where political online social forces have spread to the offline sphere. Additionally, the campaign is genuinely transnational and has not been following any visible national logics. The only national structure is given by the fact of language (although they have a quite special language, see below), but in sum, Anonymous conducts a global fight against a multinational political sect.

⁴ It is important to understand that it is not communicative guerilla. It is not subversion. It is not political fun. Instead, this form of message is honest, earnest, and even authentic. This cultural opposition means something but does not say it literally, while subversion tactics say something but do not mean it. V says that he is an anarchist. In the end, he even brings Fawkes' project to an end. The parliament is bombed, while Tchaikovsky's 1848 is played in the background. For anarchists around the world this movie must appear as the science-fiction manifesto of their inner beliefs.

Graphic 3: Screenshot of the Stolen Tom Cruise Video



http://de.youtube.com/watch?v=UFBZ_uAbxS0&feature=related

At first, I was convinced to know what had happened. Using youtube, some left-alternative activists and/or computer freaks just started to implement the movie politically. They have designed their campaign in parallel to the movie. This way, they cashed the cultural resources of the movie, politically and applied a typical tactic: First, spread your message in a form that is widely acceptable (as a blockbuster, as a comic). At the same time, seed some moments of doubt within the mainstream consciousness (some critical aspects in the story that no one will reject, for example Robinhoodism). Wait a while, and then harvest your work. You can produce cultural resonance now by recalling consensual elements of the mainstream culture. Consequentially, they opposed Scientology and connected their struggle to the movie. This way, they can justify their campaign by saying: “Aren’t we all a little bit like V?”

In the following, I collected a lot of information online about the campaign and soon had to learn that my initial hypothesis was wrong. Although they indeed used the mechanism of cracking common apathy and indifference about Scientology by using culture, the whole campaign had a very unusual political basis. Neither was it organized and designed by a

professional hacker-community nor was it a public relations campaign of an advocacy group that watches religious sects. The most astonishing point was that it did not really fit into the usual cultural world of left-progressive activism. In this regard, also did my initial suspicion that the Anonymous served for spreading anarchist ideas turned out to be wrong. All information collected suggested that the name 'Anonymous' indeed described best what the campaign consisted of: an anonymous swarm of anonymous users who seemed to apply nearly randomly memes and avatars from the Web2.0 in order to smash Scientology's public image. They had no political background, no further political goals, no clear cut political identity and they did not even understand their struggle as a political fight (e.g., for justice, humanity, freedom ...). They weren't even critical about religion in general. Instead, Anonymous was a NIMBY-protest in the Web2.0. The only difference to other protests that state "Not in my backyard!" was that the backyard was youtube. It was not a political mobilization that we can interpret as a social movement phenomenon. In Tilly's typology this campaign can rather be compared to a brawl between two competing cultures.

At this point, although I did not have the time to enter into an ethnographic fieldwork within the Web2.0, nonetheless, a deeper understanding of the Anonymous' life-world became necessary. Therefore, I requested for a personal interview with one of those Anonymous at their online discussion forum. My following reconstruction of the Anonymous campaign is in large parts based on this single interview. This fact might have biased the whole analysis. Nonetheless, I am quite convinced to offer a satisfying picture, since the interview in first front helped me to understand the many cryptic self-descriptions of the Anonymous, one finds in the internet. This means, the interview was not the main source of information in quantitative terms. It rather helped me to understand the sense of all those seemingly unrelated memes. By this, the interviewed Anonymous offered me a key to open the lock that prevents the access to their world. However, for this maybe individually biased key there are not many alternative modes to encrypt the phenomenon.

At the beginning of the Anonymous there was nothing. The whole mobilization equals a voice that came out of the dark. This voice was provoked, when the administrators of youtube removed a movie from the internet. Prior, an anonymous person had stolen a commercial-video that Scientology used to attract new members. In the clip Tom Cruise praised this religion. Cruise's fanatic action movie-style amused many users on youtube. In reaction, Scientology asked youtube for removing the clip and so complied youtube. The reaction of the many anonymous users who wanted to see Cruise, embarrassing himself, can best be described with the etymology of the word 'sabotage'. When the first machines spread

in French manufactories, the everyday life routine of workers changed fundamentally. In sum, the tools started to take the place of the human workers. Now, the workers were totally dependent from the rhythm, need, and logic of the tools. In response, workers took off their wooden shoes – sabots –, threw them into the machines and by this caused a standstill. The sabotage was born. Translated to the Anonymous this picture is helpful in two ways. First, the seemingly unimportant act of removing one of the literary millions of clips caused a break in the everyday routine of users. It was, as if administrators had thrown their wooden shoes into the wheelwork of users' online-activities. The steady flow of click and watch, 'send a link to a friend', 'add this clip to your favorites' and so on had abruptly been ended. Second, from the perspective of many users this opened up a general question about the relation of technique and human beings. Is youtube a mass medium for distributing videos, selected by administrators and their interests, or is it a self-organized platform for the free exchange of whatever anybody wants to publish? For many users the answer was obvious. The removal of the Tom Cruise video deserved a strike back. Some one should sabotage this instrumentalization of the internet.

In the first angry discussions these questions were most important. Since youtube technically was not the place for chats, angry users moved to 4chan.org, an image board based in Japan. At this point, it should be mentioned that one of the best evidences that the underlying social strata was not very left or organized is 4chan.org itself. Actually, I have awaited a discussion forum for serious, detached political deliberations. Instead, the words and more so the pictures exchanged rather served those needs, all pubertal youngsters around the globe have in that age. This means Anonymous evolved out of a life-world that is neither politically distinct nor very professional. On these Web2.0 boards quite ordinary users communicate for leisure. Doing this, they want to stay anonymous and therefore the username "Anonymous" or "Anon" is used frequently. This usually accepted anonymization therefore became the name of the project: The Anonymous.

In general, the chats between these anonymous users are difficult to understand for ordinary people. In large part it is a special language and contains abbreviations like 'lol' (laughing out loudly), symbols like :-(, swearwords, unfinished thoughts. Users on 4chan do not use subordinate clauses, since they rarely even build main clauses. In German speaking internet areas, it sometimes is hard to identify this speech as German, since at least half of the words belong to a transnational computer-kid-English.

Graphic 4: Screenshot Showing Excerpt from the Original Thread on 4chan.org



See full thread: http://4chanarchive.org/brchive/dspl_thread.php5?thread_id=51051816

Every ‘civilized academic’ at this point will tend to turn away in disgust, but the productivity and force of these interactions (that is far away from the formal deliberative ideal) should not be underestimated. The voice of Anonymous soon clothed with a clear-cut style, built its own structures, and developed its own action forms. This means Anonymous was from the beginning much more than a mere negative protest coalition. At first sight, the campaign can be read as a mere negative reaction to Scientology: These Anons just are some angry people who hide away behind masks, because they fear being mobbed otherwise by Scientology agents. Beyond being against Scientology, there is nothing specific that holds them together. Thus, A for Anonymous is just an empty and arbitrarily used avatar.

While indeed the strategic aspect of anonymity plays a role for wearing masks during street actions, this interpretation nonetheless misses the point, since protest in the offline realm occurred at a later stage and thus can not claim to indicate the core of the phenomenon. Additionally, A for Anonymous is all but pluralistic. Instead, Anons cultivate an even mythic unity. In their messages the menace against Scientology liturgically repeats with a booming

computer voice: “We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us.” Legion (meaning just ‘many’) hereby refers to a biblical figure, who was obsessed by a multitude of demons. This unity leads to a very closed and unique aesthetic style. Colors of Anonymous web-presentations are mainly black and white and only a handful of key-terms, symbols and claims are allowed.⁵

Graphic 5: Logo for De-motivating Scientology



<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:AnonymousDemotivator.jpg>

Instead, the Anonymous was relatively uniform, an independent social subject. At this point, I am quite reluctant to use big words like ‘community’, ‘collective identity’, ‘solidarity’, and so on. This is so, because a premature application of such fixed theoretical concepts runs the risk to miss the point. Therefore, I start with a rather open notion of “world” in the sense symbolic interactionism understands the term. The Anonymous share and reproduce the same world and this universe equals to a giant computer game. In first front, this sphere can be understood

⁵ This is remarkable for all those familiar with left-progressive decision-making. Usually, on activists’ leaflets one frequently finds many claims together that are the results of heated discussions. A demonstration against war cannot be only against the war merely, it must be mentioned that activists are against capitalism, sexism, racism, environmental devastation, discrimination of the handicapped, the old, regional cultures and so on. The A for Anonymous mobilization instead is a very uniformed collectivity.

as a Mythos, a sensible narration of a heroic fight between Scientology (the totalitarians from the movie) and the Anonymous (V for Vendetta). That the Anonymous understand their fight against Scientology as an adventure game, expresses in the key terms they use in order to organize their actions. Protest action against Scientology is called a 'raid'. Preparation of these raids is very calculated and in every aspect oriented to a measurable success. In this regard, the very nature of Scientology, which bases on many science-fiction elements, supports this game character. As the interviewed explained to me, the foremost goal of each 'raid' is to destroy the point level of the attacked Scientology chapter. Internally, Scientology operates with a crude point system. If a chapter attracts bad media coverage due to the Anonymous, the headquarter of Scientology punishes this chapter with a reduction of points. Knowing this, the Anonymous behave like computer gamers and celebrate each raid in terms of perceived point losses of the attacked Scientology chapter. For evaluating their actions they have developed own terms. A good action for example is a "win", a very good action an "epic win". This also exemplifies that Anons have developed an own value system. The aim of each Anon is to stand out by bringing in a new idea that according to their shared values, all other Anons have to celebrate as an "epic win". In short, they want to be cool.

The logic of this 'political campaigning as computer gaming' also implies that Anonymous need no traditional structures. There is no central authority, no organization, no votes, no formal membership, and no political representation. The power of Anonymous stems from the fact that the cooperation within the computer game logic sets free an enormous action potential. Consequentially, raids by Anonymous equal to an intelligent swarm that is able to focus its action just through a very primitive form of communication and a wild collage of memes, cultural citations, and software templates.

This moment of fighting a religious sect like playing a computer game indeed has dangerous aspects. This was more so, since Anons in the first time had no contact to organized advocacy groups that worked politically against Scientology. After a while, this changed. A very experienced activist (Mark Bunker) contacted the forming Anonymous structures, offered his support and warned the Anonymous not to underestimate Scientology's abilities to strike back. Allegedly, Bunker also convinced the Anonymous to stop using illegal tactics of denial-of-service-attacks. This entrance of ordinary political activism into the universe of the Anonymous elucidates the very nature of this Web2.0-activism. In accordance with the character of an adventure game, the newly arriving political professional is welcomed as an additional role. The interviewed Anonymous explains this entrance, as if he received an own avatar. In sum, the Scientology expert is named "Wise Beard Man" and this

explains that most of the other Anons see themselves as dynamic youngster, not very interested in intellectual work.

Graphic 6: The World of “Wise Beard Man”, Marc Bunker and His Website



Source: xenu.tv, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:MarkBunker-addresses-anon.jpg>

The difference between the political world of Wise Beard Man and Anonymous is best described by showing the different aesthetic styles of both. The usual Scientology-critics have

quite ordinary Websites that are not very elaborated. By contrast, if Anonymous at all built a website, their roots in a global youth culture become visible:

Graphic 7: German Anonymous Website:



Graphic8: Anonymous on Youtube:



Part II: Regression or Progression of the Political?

So far the description of Anonymous tried to show a full picture of this mobilization. If the Anonymous may still appear as a conundrum, the fact should be considered that it is not easy – if possible at all – to characterize those, who prefer to remain anonymous. However, in the beginning the promise was made that this seemingly pubertal brawl of youngster shall inform us about the democratic potential within the Web2.0. In this regard, three authors were named, who in the eyes of Anonymous would possibly receive names like “Wise Old Professors”. Indeed, the very association of Arendt, Sennett, and Habermas to a mobilization of computer kids may seem cheeky. While the Anonymous are children of the computer age, their thinking is rooted mostly in the venerable history of ideas. While the former participate in vulgar virtual riots, the latter wrote thick books in order to keep European thinking alive.

However, it is the one of these three mostly enamored to the Ancients who maybe justifies best, why we shall include the Anonymous into academic reasoning. “Initium ut esset, creatus est homo.” By this sentence of Augustinus, Arendt reminds us that it is the very right of all human beings to excel, to place a bookmark into human universe. Each wo/man is

born to set a beginning, to make a difference. It is exactly this perspective – concentrated in the concept of natality – that best justifies the inclusion of the Anonymous. For sure, in the first instance, readers of Arendt will be piqued by this youth brawl. However, it would miss Arendt's point, if we started living in the past, if we only looked at the Great Revolutions. That every human being is a beginning means that history is not a natural force, in which people just execute structurally assigned roles, but that it is the sequence of single human actions and events. No doing is new on this Earth nor is it perfect, but this does not allow us to congeal in nostalgia and moan about the fall of a Great ancient public sphere. By this, I want to point out that the Anonymous make a beginning. They do nothing new, but they are still important today, simply because, as Arendt would put it, they are mortals, who try to deliver something to posterity.

Academia tends to look down on the internet, while pointing at a glory past. However, from the perspective of the “every human being is a beginning” and Arendt's insight about the constancy of the human condition, we can see the Great ancestors in different light. Ancient Greeks and Romans drank, sang and did all kinds of immodest things at the symposium and in the coffee-houses of 18th century Europe guests still paid for the coffee and not for the deliberations. In sum, if we criticize the internet today for being just for amusement, we tend to neglect that the glorified and idealized public spheres of the past in this regard were not so different.

With this, I don't want to fall into the postmodern chorus of all those now proclaiming the end of rationality, discourse and the political in general. Rather, I want to point out that in the real-world, reason and deliberation have always been deeply interconnected with myths, emotions, affects, and in general the vulgar.

This preliminary remark shall open the perspective, for seeing the Anonymous as a reincarnation not only of a long dead terrorist (Guy Fawkes), but also of what Arendt calls ‘acting’ (“*Handeln*”) within a public room (“*Erscheinungsraum*”). From an Arendtian perspective, the puzzle, how a seemingly chaotic bunch of anonymous youngsters could cause such an effect – without organization, leadership, hierarchies –, easily is solved. If people start to gather and to build a communicative space, the resulting ability of acting together is nothing else than pure political power.⁶ This means that the Anonymous mobilization shows nothing less than the potential of the Web2.0 to offer the ground for reviving the Polis. With

⁶ Arendt refers to an episode in New York's subway. Being fed up with the breaks in the journey, passengers spontaneously gathered and impeded the continuation of journey. By this, they had built power, spontaneously.

the term Polis I do not mean the old web1.0 promise of direct democracy. (The term Polis actually was frequently misused in the democracy-internet-debate). Rather, Arendt's Polis means a collective that cultivates a shared set of values by means of deliberation. In this collective, members are motivated to engage, because they want to excel in terms of the shared values. In this regard, the notion of a computer-game-politics maybe deserves more respect. In short, the Anonymous behave like members of a Polis. They seek for excellence. The 'epic win' can be read as an anthropological constant, a refrain to the "kalos kagathos" of the ancient Greeks. Each Anonymous wants to incorporate the values of the Anonymous in the best way. At the same time, these values are not so far away from the democratic idea. The Anonymous are about the defense of individual freedom and free choice of religion. They criticize Scientology exactly for breaking with this. The Anonymous fight against Scientology's conformism and oppose this with a cultural multitude united behind one mask of subjectlessness. More in general, the Anonymous fight for communicative freedom within the internet. We can read their struggles as a fight to defend the political, the "Erscheinungsraum".

From Sennett's public sphere theory, we can learn a different aspect. Sennett's critique on 20th century media society is based on the positive picture of the bourgeois public sphere. In short, the malaise today is the terror of intimacy. What is lost, according to Sennett are two things. First, people have lost the ability of acting in the public sphere – literally: anonymously. Second, the main problem hereby is that the distinction between public and private got lost. In the era of mass media, consumers are terrorized with all kind of irrelevant intimate and private details of elites. They lost any ability to talk politics in an impersonal fashion and detached from the inner world of participants. Some current examples to illustrate this point: Why do we need all those detailed information about Barack Obama's private life? Does this bring any solution to the world financial crisis? What does it help to know which make-up Nicola Sarkozy's wife wears today? Who cares about Jörg Haider's quasi husband?

What the Anonymous mean in this critical context is obvious. They cultivate a form of impersonal political action by ordinary citizens. Their public speech withdraws from the terror of intimacy. The point in being an Anonymous is not to publish private details of your life, no one wants to know. Although exhibitionism maybe is characteristic for large parts of the blogosphere and youtube, this is not the point of the Anonymous mobilization. At the same time, as the reference to Arendt showed, acting anonymously also does not mean just to serve as a soldier. The avatars used are not uniforms, but still the creative part of individuals is important. In his latest book, "The Craftsman", Sennett clarified his opinion about the

internet. Although he looks down on the amateur publishing within the blogosphere, he very much praises the interaction and skills of Linux-programmers. Here, there is no place to unfold Sennett's positive ideal of the craftsman, but in short, we can imagine the Anonymous with the help of Sennett as political crafts(wo)men. They transform the passive media consumers, who are unable to differentiate between intimate and public, into active citizens, who got skilled in the art of political acting. The Anonymous not only have found a way to articulate political arguments, but also do they revive a political talk, in which arguments and not personal aspects count. The counter image to the anonymous voice of the Anonymous is the TV-match between presidential candidates which – irrationally – suggests that the better looking is the better president.

At this point, the very heart of Habermas' public sphere theory is touched: rational discourse. Those, who have carefully read 'Popular Sovereignty as Procedure', will have noticed that Sennett's point of impersonal speech is also part of what Habermas calls the 'subjectless' or 'anonymous' flow of public communication. However, it seems that there is no relation whatsoever between rational discourse and Anonymous chats. In this regard, disagreement will cause amazement, but it is a widely spread misunderstanding that Habermas wants the whole humankind to live in a "philosophical seminar". Especially, the earlier notion of an "autochthonous" public sphere does allow for a lot of seemingly non-rational communication. Later, the connectedness to the concept of "life-world", which is not so far away from the notion of "world", I have used here, also allows for bringing the ideal of discourse nearer to everyday life. My suggestion is not to stylize Habermas' rational discourse exceedingly.

However, this is not the proper place for a detailed theoretical justification that would allow to bring the Anonymous back into a popular sovereignty, based on public reason. Just in short: the very point of the Anonymous – although they seem to live predominantly in a mythical, emotional, even irrational world – still is a rational cry out. They ask how it can be that no one does something against a religious sect that operates with false allegations, immoral standards, and that deforms the psyche of its members. In sum, the anger of the Anonymous is based on practical reason.

However, the very point in bringing Habermas in here is a different one. In the "Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" the argument is made, that the progress in capitalist accumulation allowed the bourgeois society to build a sphere, where discourse could take place between equals. If we look into the internet-democracy-debate today this idea clearly reappears. The difference though is that Habermas has a more differentiated view on

this development. There is no linear causation. Technical and economic advance do not determine the rise of a democratic public sphere. Rather is history ambivalent and driven by the forces of both normative aspirations and factual developments. In the beginning, the idea and the aspirations of a discursive democracy/bourgeois public sphere are valid norms and facts, but only for some rich men. Consequently, the conflict with the factually excluded working class leads to a new society, in which mass media, social welfare, and bureaucratic politics extinguish the ideals of a public sphere. The actively reasoning audience turns into a passively consuming mass.

Regarding the question which effects (in Plural) the internet has on democracy, this history of the rise and fall of public sphere warns us to assume a simple relation between web2.0 and democracy. For sure, the web2.0 has accustomed its users to freedom. This explains the spontaneous cry out against all kinds of attempts to re-feudalize the communicative freedom on youtube. However, it is still also very probable that in the future the small amount of communicative freedom, we find today in the web2.0, just will fall victim to power interests again. The effect the web2.0 has on democracy consists only in the cultivation of aspirations and normative standards. However, belief in such norms is just a very weak power resource. Therefore phenomena, like the Anonymous, just show a possible trajectory towards more democracy. Without a wider political participation, it will be easy to wipe out these potentials.