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GetUp! for what? Issues Driven Democracy in a Transforming Public Sphere

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Introduction

The term *democracy* is increasingly becoming an empty signifier in the context of western political discourse [1]. Politicians from across the political spectrum appear to be appropriating the concept at will, to justify wide-ranging political agendas. From the war in Iraq to local council amalgamations and everything in between, "democracy" serves as the fundamental principle to justify almost any political argument. This is both its strength and its weakness, and it has major implications for the way we conceptualise the contemporary public sphere and the role of the media within that public sphere. For politicians, invoking democracy is a fireproof way to frame their arguments, as it is very difficult to argue against its basic premise. In other words, democracy is not something one can easily disagree with, without opening oneself up to labels like "fundamentalist", "anarchist" or that other perhaps even emptier signifier, "terrorist". Conversely, this flexibility in its applications is also its main weakness, for this renders the concept essentially meaningless and hence devoid of any power. Derrida's (*Specters of Marx*) challenge to engage with democracy as an ongoing project whose time is always "yet to come" is therefore timely, in that it forces us to engage with democracy in terms of its potential, rather than approaching it as static and "already there". This also affords the recognition that it can never truly be achieved, but rather that it needs to be continuously redefined, as its parameters are always subject to change. In this context, it is timely and urgent to review its parameters in such a way as to expose dominant power relations, which in turn is a prerequisite for meaningful change. We take a specific context within contemporary Australia as our venue for this project, written as it is in weeks after a change of government and in recognition of the role of media in influencing such change.

It is no coincidence that the contested state and status of democracy is paralleled by debates about the media and the public sphere, for these concepts are intimately interwoven and interdependent. The increasing fragmentation of the media, accelerated by technological change and new media environments, is often seen as an important cause of a simultaneous fragmentation of the public sphere into "public sphericules" (Hartley *Key Concepts*). In this context, *GetUp!* provides an interesting case study, as it can be seen as being implicated in such developments. *GetUp!* (http://www.getup.org.au/) is "an independent, grass-roots community advocacy organisation giving everyday Australians opportunities to get involved and hold politicians accountable on important issues", primarily via email campaigns. *GetUp!* can be seen as at once a consequence of media fragmentation and a disintegrating public sphere, and a driver of a new form of democracy that we might call "issues-based", rather than dependent on membership of, and loyalty to, traditional political parties. It thus appeals to distinct public sphericules, rather than a unified public sphere. This paper will explore the potential of this new manifestation of democracy, as well as its limits. For if democracy is an idea that is "yet to arrive", then surely we have a duty to ensure that it arrives at a desirable destination, if only momentarily.

The public sphere, democracy and political participation

In the Habermasian sense of the concept, the public sphere is intimately linked to democracy and political participation, and the public sphere is seen as "a domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed" (Habermas quoted in McKee *The Public Sphere* 4). The media play a central role in this process, as it is "only in the mass media that vast populations of people can come together to exchange ideas" (McKee 5). It is no coincidence then that arguments about the media and the public sphere often run along similar tracks. As McKee notes, "academics worry about trivialisation, spectacle and fragmentation of "the public sphere", while popular commentators say the same things about "the media" (5). He adds commercialisation as a fourth concern, and together these are seen as leading to apathy. "Citizens no longer engage with politics or their own governance. They become lazy and passive. They don't care about issues any more" (McKee 3). The name *GetUp!* is interesting in this respect, as it appears to react to precisely that concern: the exclamation mark suggests a call to arms of sorts, a demand to come out of apathetic hibernation. New media are crucial to this, but we will return to that shortly.

In terms of the concerns about apathy, it is important to recognise that there has never been a "golden age" when "public communication was generally 'quality', serious and rational. For as long as we can trace the record of a public sphere, it has been too commercialised, too trivial and too spectacular for the tastes of educated commentators" (McKee 25). This is not a coincidence, for the public sphere in Habermas' sense is an "ideal", rather than an ontological reality. It is thus a process to be worked towards, but the ideal can never quite be reached. This shows clear parallels to Derrida's argument about democracy as "yet to arrive". How these ideals are to be envisaged then becomes a matter which is always up for debate. Consequently, these debates often centre on what should be included and excluded from the public sphere, which logically leads to value judgements about what is "important" and what is "too trivial". For Habermas, the political function of the public sphere lies primarily in "its ability to challenge, determine or inflect the course of state policy" (McKee 191). But inflecting the course of state policy, for example by voting, is only a logical outcome in Habermas' view, not the fundamental element that drives democracy, which is public discussion itself. Again, what should be part of this public discussion is under continuous debate and depends on one's point of view, for on a basic level, and with an ever increasing array of media channels, there has never been more "public discussion", nor more opportunities for more people to express their opinions in public fora, at least in a western context. The concerns are thus not so much about the volume of discussion, but rather about *what* is being discussed, and perhaps more importantly, about what the *effects* of these discussions are, or rather the perceived *lack* of effects: the neo-liberal juggernaut shows no signs of slowing down, and a common critical response is to decry the perceived lack of political engagement, lack of political alternatives, and yes, apathy. The role of the mass media in this perceived "erosion" of democracy and/or the public sphere is central to many of these arguments, as the mass media smothers us with entertainment, in turn causing us to "amuse ourselves to death" (Postman *Amusing Ourselves to Death*), where we should be engaging in serious discussion.

Perhaps the most influential voice of concern with regards to the role of the mass media in the erosion of democracy and the public sphere is that of Noam Chomsky (*Chomsky on Democracy*), who argues that democracy is under attack.

> The leading doctrine is that the wave of the future is democracy and markets, a future for which America [sic] is "the gatekeeper and the model". That's the   doctrine. The reality is that the world, including our own society, is moving toward a more autocratic and absolutist structure. The scope of the public arena is narrowing. The opportunities for popular participation in it are also declining. In short, the realities are that democracy is under attack (Chomsky 236).

The basis of Chomsky's argument (borrowing from Thomas Jefferson and John Dewey), is that