

## THE INTERNET AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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### *Abstract*

Habermas (1989) proposes a '*public sphere*', a setting where people talk freely on the public issues. In his early works, Habermas was rather pessimistic about the provision of the public sphere; however, soon after the introduction of the Internet as an ultimately decentralized medium, in his later work, Habermas (1996) seems more optimistic about the Internet as the provider of the '*public sphere*'. The Internet which is particularly popular among the young people, not only provides a medium that is cheap and easily accessible but also provides incredible amount of information on the topic of almost any interest and means for communication. It also contributes to the democratic discussions in the society. The Internet provides a medium according to which neither gender, nor age or race is important. Since it does not belong to anybody, it provides a public sphere in which political communication can be held democratically. This paper sets out to explore whether, despite the wide of use of the Internet, tertiary students are aware of the opportunities for democratic communication it provides. The present study aims at exploring the attitudes of the students studying in the Faculties of Engineering and Communication and Media Studies of the Eastern Mediterranean University in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, in the 2003-2004 academic year, to the Internet as the provider of information, a medium for expressing opinions and conversation on the public issues. Data is collected through a questionnaire comprising both structured questions and questions designed according to the five-point Likert scale. The results suggest that, the attitudes of the students studying both hard and soical sciences do not show significant difference stressing the commonality of the Internet for all the academicians.

## INTERNET AS THE PUBLIC SPHERE

German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas has been highly influential in the Western academic circles in the last few decades. Being affiliated to the second generation of the Frankfurt School, Habermas coined the term '*public sphere*' in 1962 which was translated into English about 25 years later in 1989 as: '*The Structure of Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*'. This seminal work has ignited a considerable amount of academic discussions ever since. In his early work, Habermas seems rather pessimistic about the establishment and maintenance of public sphere. The 'public sphere of civil society' is between the state and society and is a place where public opinion is formed. It strives for reaching a general consensus and, therefore, to inform and control the activities of the state. He believes that conflicts will be resolved through free and open communication. In his later work, '*Between Facts and Norms: Contribution to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*' (published in 1992 in German and translated into English in 1996), Habermas seems more optimistic and he proposes that the Internet provides opportunities for democratic participation. In this work, Habermas considers the Internet as the provider of democratic public sphere. Indeed, Habermas has been one of the most influential figures of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the term '*public sphere*' is claimed to be the household term of social sciences in our times. Miller (1999:7) draws our attention to the fact that, following Foucault, who has been cited for 8688 times, Habermas has been cited for 4274 times and stands as the second most widely cited name in the 'Arts & Humanities' and 'Social Sciences' Indexes between 1989 and 1999. He also notes that the name 'Habermas' was used in the title of 206 articles and has been the subject of 247 articles.

### Public Sphere

Habermas (1989) points out that with the enlightenment, under the influence of rationalists' ideas, the church started to lose its importance as a public place; monarchs started to be replaced by the parliaments; and people started to go out of their houses and farms and thus to work and meet outside. According to Habermas, in the ancient Greek, people carried out political discussions in the agora of the polis. Agoras were later replaced by the town halls, coffee houses, salons in Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Habermas (1989:27) defines the 'bourgeois public sphere' as "the sphere of private people (that) come together as a public." Three main aspects of Habermas (1989:36) states the three characteristics of public sphere as: a total disregard of status; discussing the issues that had not been raised until then; and inclusion of all public.

For Habermas, social character of the communication process is very important. Sabo (2000:3) explains that:

The opportunity to discuss universal matters in an unrestricted way is necessary condition of a modern democracy. The public sphere is situated between the public and private sphere and offer the opportunity to discuss the public issues independent of the roles the individuals may have in other spheres.

In a nutshell, in Europe, rich and elite males got together in coffee houses, salons etc. and discuss the public issues, exchange ideas in order to reach consensus for the common good and form public opinion (O'Brien: 1999). Habermas forms the concept of '*public sphere*' on this background. Bourgeois public sphere stands as a significant concept in transition to a more democratic modernity. Habermas stresses the significance of non-

presence of the government in the public sphere where people voice their ideas freely. Habermas (1989) holds that “the discussion should be rational, impartial and validated against universal principles. The public sphere is characterized by communication actions. The aim is to achieve an enhanced mutual understanding of how to solve problems, not to achieve private goals and benefits. The ultimately outcome is consensus legitimized in public and rational discussions.” In other words, according to Habermas, formation of public opinion must be, above all, independent of the leading powers such as the church or the state. This is sometimes named as ‘the civil society’. Secondly, at least in principle, it must be open to everybody. Thirdly, it must be separate from the private interests and must seek for universal norms and their rational legitimation.

In a nutshell, Habermas proposes a normative perspective for forming public opinion. According to Habermas, public sphere is the place where public opinion is not only formed but also expressed. This is the focal point where state and civil society interacts. Individuals get together at the public sphere to reflect critically on themselves and the practices of the state and to be involved in a debate, in public (Habermas: 1996:24).

### **Internet as the New Public Sphere**

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Internet has established itself as an important communication medium of our lives. Currently, there is a wealth of literature both on the theory and research related to the Internet. This interest is the result of its common use and potential to influence the future as the new medium. Since the Internet or the World Wide Web (WWW) has no owner, Grossman (1995) draws our attention to the fact that following the classical Greek and representative democracy, the Internet opens a new era, the one of electronic democracy. Indeed, Rheingold (1993) suggests that the Internet ‘is the great equalizer’ which equally distributes the balance of power between the citizens and power barons (sited in Levine: 2002). Levine (2002) points out that the Internet gives the citizens greater control over the decisions the governments traditionally have. In a nutshell, Suriyasam (1998) summarizes:

The interactive and decentralized nature of the Internet led technological optimists to promote the new medium as a “democratic”, “liberating”, and “equalizing” medium ... that it can potentially change inherently unequal power relations in current societies. Anyone with access to the Internet (e.g. a computer, a connection to the network/ a modem, and a telephone line) has equal opportunity to participate in democratic process.

Since in the former forms of democracy, the barrier to political contribution was rather financial (Levine: 2002), the journalist Gerald Seib (1999), who is one of the writers of the Wall Street Journal, points out that the Internet promises to connect the politicians with voters and with this aspect, it could be considered as the ‘savior of democracy’ (sited in Conhaim: 2000). He further points out that the net reduces the significance of the idea of ‘big media equals big money’.

What is more, it should be noted that, unlike the earlier forms of the media, the Internet provides means for the citizens to make contributions to the political discussions. In other words, the Internet provides opportunities for the citizens not only as the passive receivers but also as the active contributors in political discussions. Shin (2003) expresses this as:

The Internet is the newest and the first interactive communication technology. Web sites have become a common tool for candidates and political parties to communicate their agendas since mid-1990s. Arguments about the Internet's impacts on democracy are intensive.

Conhaim (2000) lists the ways in which the Internet can be used as a means for political actions as:

- E-mail announcement lists for political organizations;
- On-going discussion lists on issues or candidates' positions;
- Formal candidate debates and public forums;
- Candidate and elected officials' web sites.

Currently, on the net, there are thousands of political sites. "For good or for ill, Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians, socialists, Greens, Anarchists – you name it – have found accessible platform for their views ... some would argue that the world has ever seen the Internet is the most pluralistic method of communication the world has ever seen" (<http://smithsonian.yahoo.com/govpolitics2.html>).

Indeed, when compared to the traditional media such as the radio or print, as Ithel De Sola Pool (1983) claims, the Internet has introduced more freedom and with this respect, it has a potential for creating political revolution. Considering the Internet as the provider of means for democratic participation is a very popular argument among the academicians as well. (Among others see, Williams: 1998, Conhaim: 2000, Bimber: 2001, Grossman: 2001, Stromer: 2002, Timisi: 2003, Shin: 2003).

Due to the richness of the literature on the contribution of the Internet to democracy, we would like to adopt the framework suggested by Ulrich (2004:6-8) which, in our opinion, summarizes the uses of the Internet as 'public sphere': as an instrument for the dissemination and retrieval of information, as a medium for simple expression, and as a medium for conversation and dialogue.

### **Internet as an instrument for the dissemination and retrieval of information**

Internet has become an instrument for the dissemination and retrieval of information (Ulrich: 2004:5).

*Information* is without a doubt a crucial element in any democratic process, and clearly the Internet has much to offer in this regard. It would hardly be conceivable for terms such as 'Information society' ... marked by a state of 'information overload' (Ulrich: 2004:6).

The Internet offers a low cost medium not only for reaching but also for copying and distributing information easily, widely and cheaply (O'Brien: 1999, Timisi: 2003). What is more, Baklin (2004) claims that since it includes the development of vast networks that connect all the world, the technology of the net eliminates the geographical borders and makes information and cross-cultural. In other words, enables the individuals to send information globally. Baklin (2004) further draws our attention to the fact that:

lowering the cost of transmission, distribution, appropriation, and alteration of information democratizes speech. Speech becomes democratized because technologies of distribution and transmission are put in the hands of an

increasing number of people and increasing the direct segments of society throughout the planet.

Undoubtedly the Internet facilitated access to the information and lowered the cost and time invested for reaching the information. Converting the world to a global village by eliminating the borders and time differences, and the richness of information people have access to lead to naming our age 'the age of information' and the Internet as the 'information superhighway'.

### **Internet as a medium for simple expression**

The net has provided opportunities for the freedom of expression for the individuals (Ulrich: 2004:5). It lays the ground not only for interaction but also cultural participation. Production and distribution of the information becomes a key source of this free speech. Habermas (1989) suggests that "ideal speech situation" is "a universal rationality in which everybody participates equally, a situation in which communication is not distorted" (<http://www.comms.dcu.ie/flynnr/new-page-9.htm>). The Internet is a discursive arena that allows citizen to debate. Citizens can freely share their opinions with one another without any restriction in the sphere of the net. Computer bulletin boards, for example, provide opportunities for the expression of individual's political ideas. Nevertheless, Gaynor points out that;

The openness of expression which 'the ideal speech situation' demands can be applied to the Internet, where rapid exchange of dialogue and production of information take place unchecked. Indeed, government regulation of electronic communication raises enormous outcries from those who claim that free speech is the essential component of democracy.

### **Internet as a medium for conversation and dialogue**

The Internet provides opportunities for the universal active speech all over the world (Kitchin: 1998, Timisi: 2003). According to Kitchen (1998:101), the Internet provides a "conversational, demassified, non-representational democracy". The Internet not only provides more information than the society needs but also it acts as an agent that challenges the power, knowledge and information through the altering of conventional power relations in the society. The Internet has some dominant features which are, in principle, very similar to those are related to democratic ideals constructed in the idea of the public sphere. Peter (2001) elaborates on this issue as:

In its original formulation, the public sphere as described by Habermas consists of the institutional space where political will formation takes place, via the unfettered flow of relevant information and ideas. Mediated and face-to-face interactions constitute this space.

In a similar vein, Kitchen (1998) states that, potentially, the Internet provides the society a new Habermasian public sphere. In other words, it provides a space available for dialogue between all individuals. Everyone has a chance to participate in a political conversation in unmediated public sphere via e-mail, websites, message boards, discussion groups, chat spaces with the help of the Internet. Stromer (2002; 14) examines in her article that:

The online environment gives people an opportunity to express their opinion on an issue or an event that is on their minds. Even better for some is the opportunity to meet people who are of different opinions and debate the claims, evidence, and underlying values of those opinions.

Stromer (2002) further argues that political conversation is a critical component of the healthy public sphere and is a function of democracy. She points out that the online discussions in its social norms discourage political conversation.

The Internet may have the potential to make an extremely strong contribution to the political process because of the way in which it facilitates reciprocal rather than just one-way communication. Ideally, it could enable billions of people worldwide, enhanced opportunities to speak, publish, assemble, and educate themselves about issues. Ideally, it could enable billions of people worldwide, enhanced opportunities to speak, publish, assemble, and educate themselves about issues. Through the Internet, citizens can access huge amounts of relatively unfiltered information. This information can be used to formulate opinions, and analyze government actions and decisions (Williams: 1998).

Since the individuals are not under any pressure while communicating on the Internet, the participants can express their real feelings about issues honestly. Unlike face to face communication where the identity of the individual is revealed, the internet gives the individuals a sense of autonomy. The participants behave rather freely and they can easily express themselves on political discussions. Stromer (2002:17) explains that the participants:

can express their "real" feelings, their true beliefs on political topics to complete strangers, and they do not have worry about the social ramification as they would if they were having the same conversation face-to-face. Alongside the sense that people feel more comfortable expressing their true opinions online is the sense that they can express ideas that would be labeled sexist, racist, or bigoted in some way face-to-face.

The Internet does not restrict itself with the geographical distance either. The online discussion space involves vast distances and for this reason, presents individuals with divergent political opinions, ideologies, point of views opportunities to be involved in a rational debate (Baklin:2004).

In addition, Burandenburg (2003) argues that the Internet provides an environment of "active participation, corporation and a free exchange of ideas that culminates in consensual agreement".

In summary, the Internet provides a new 'public sphere' in Habermas' sense in which individuals come together for the purpose of the rational discussion. It allows equal opportunity for all participants of the net space to share information, express their ideas, publish their views, and discuss public issues. Many computer bulletin boards and web sites have a political debate conference in the cyberspace. These bulletin boards provide some topics from which people select a topic of their interest and participate in an online discussion.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The present study sets out to explore the attitudes of the tertiary students studying at the two faculties, Faculty of Engineering and Faculty of Communication and Media Studies, of the Eastern Mediterranean University, in the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, towards the Internet as a public sphere. In other words, we set out to investigate whether there are any significant difference between the attitudes of the students studying hard (in this case engineering) and social sciences, (namely the ones studying at the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies). This section sets out to give some background information about the context of the study, research participants, data collection instrument, procedures and analysis.

### **THE CONTEXT**

The Eastern Mediterranean University is located in the North of Cyprus, an island in the Mediterranean Sea, divided into North and South. After the Turkish move, also called the 'Peace Operation' in 1974, the island was divided into two and ever since, on the North, Turkish Cypriots and on the South, Greek Cypriots have been living. After the division, the world imposed sanctions on the North leaving the people there in an economically difficult situation. In this case, on the Northern part, the investment was made mainly on two areas: tourism and education. As far as the tourism is concerned, unfortunately, considerable success has not been achieved, yet. Education sector, on the other hand, proved to be more successful. Currently, on the North part, there are five universities. Among these universities, the Eastern Mediterranean University is the biggest university not only in terms of number of the students enrolled, but also with the variety of programs offered and the area of the campus. It is a foundation university. It was first established in 1978 as the Higher Technological Institute and was later converted to a university in 1986 and was given its present name. Currently, in this university there are students from 68 and staff from 35 different countries. There are about 14000 students. The university comprises three high schools and seven faculties spread to its huge campus.

### **RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

As it has been mentioned above, for the present study, 100 students studying in two faculties, namely the Faculty of Engineering (50 students) and the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies (50 students) were selected randomly. The intention was that, the students of the former will represent hard scientists and the students of the latter will represent the social scientists. Particularly the students studying communications will be working in the media industry in the future and will be the future agenda setters and need to be aware of the political discourse and the Internet as the provider of these possibilities.

#### **Data Collection Instrument and Procedures**

For this study, data have been collected through a questionnaire comprising two parts: the first part set out to explore the participants' demographic characteristics and the habits of computer and Internet use. The second part was designed according to the five-

point Likert scale and sought to collect data on the participants' attitudes towards the use of the Internet as a public sphere.

The questionnaire was first piloted on another student group and, then, delivered to the target population. For delivering the questionnaires, cafeterias in these two faculties were used. Every 20<sup>th</sup> student was given a questionnaire and asked to complete. For the analysis, SPSS program was used and descriptive statistics of the data was obtained.

## ANALYSIS

Firstly, demographical characteristics of the participants will be presented. This will be followed by the analysis of the questions designed according to the attitude scale.

21 % of the participants are younger than 21 years of age, 46 % are between the ages of 22 and 24, and the rest are older than 24 years of age. 65% of the participants are male and the rest 35% are female. 4 % are in the freshman year, 16% are in the sophomore year, 20% are in the junior year and the 27% are in the senior year of their higher education. The remaining 33% are the graduate students pursuing a program for a Master's degree. 51% of the students are from Turkey, 29% from Cyprus, 8% has double nationality, in other words they are Turkish and Turkish Cypriot citizenship. The remaining 12% are from other countries like Iran, Syria Albania, etc.

The students were asked at what age they started using the Internet. 15% mentioned that they started using the Internet younger than 10 years of age. 22% between 10 and 13 years of age which means towards the end of the primary education or in the case of Cyprus, in secondary education. 30% stated that they started using the computers between 14 and 17 years of age, which means during the high school years. Another 30% mentioned that they started using the computers between 18 and 21 years of age which means during their tertiary education and the remaining 3% between 22 and 25 years of age during their graduate studies. Analysis of the data indicates that the students mostly start using the computers in their high school and university years.

The research participants were also asked at what age they started using the Internet. Somehow, it seems that people started using the Internet a little later than the computers. 7% said they started using the Internet younger than 10 years old, 7% between 10 and 13 years old, 29% between 14 and 17 years old, 51% between 18 and 21 years old, 5% between 22 and 25 years old and 1% after 25 years of age. These numbers indicate that half of the students start using the Internet during their tertiary education.

In the questionnaire, the reasons for using the Internet were also explored. In ascending importance, they mentioned that they used the Internet because it was cheap 12%, they had easy access 16%, the Internet's interactive nature 18%, the uncensored nature of the Internet 22%, and easy to reach and communicate with the various parts of the world, that is, the global nature of the net 32%. We also explored the students' preferences in using the Internet. In descending order, they mentioned that research 62%, e-mail 24%, chat 7%, reading news 4% and shopping 2%. We also wanted to know whether the participants subscribed to any chat group. 63% answered negatively and 35% answered positively meaning that they subscribed to one of the chat groups. The data reveals that the Internet is mostly used as a provider of information, followed by the medium for simple expression and then for conversation.

The amount of time spent using the computers was also explored. It was mentioned that 26% daily use computers less than 1 hour, 41% approximately 2 or 3 hours, 14% about 4-5 hours and 19% more than 6 hours every day. In addition to this, the amount of time spent on the Internet is also explored. 40% of the participants said they used it less than 1 hour, 32% about 2-3 hours, 13% about 4-5 hours and 15% more than 6 hours. It seems that the participants spend most of the time they spare for computers on the Internet. The data shows that the computers and the Internet are widely used by the tertiary students.

The analysis of the attitude scale questions will be based on Ulrich's classification of the Internet as a space for getting information, expression of opinion and a medium for conversation and dialogue. This will be followed by the inquiry of the students' attitude towards the Internet as the provider of the public sphere. In this section, 1 refers to Strongly Agree, 2 to Agree, 3 to Undecided, 4 to Disagree and 5 to Strongly Disagree. With this respect, range up to 1.49 is Strongly Agree, 1.50 to 2.49 is Agree, 2.5 to 3.49 is Undecided; 3.50 to 4.49 is Disagree; and 4.5 and above is taken as Strongly Disagree.

### Attitudes towards the Internet as the provider of information

**Table 1:** Attitudes towards the Internet as the provider of information

QUESTIONS	GENERAL	ENG	FCMS
1- The Internet provides access to acquire information.	1,59 <b>A</b>	1,62 <b>A</b>	1,56 <b>A</b>
2- The Internet provides unlimited access to information and equal participation in social issues; therefore, it can lead to great to democratization.	2,06 <b>A</b>	2,04 <b>A</b>	2,08 <b>A</b>
3- Internet can increase democracy by broadening citizens' access to information they want or need.	2,21 <b>A</b>	2,24 <b>A</b>	2,18 <b>A</b>

Both faculties' students agree that the Internet is an important provider of information. When the attitudes of the students from the two faculties were asked towards the use of the Internet for getting information, the means of the responses indicate no difference.

### Attitudes towards the Internet as a medium enabling expression of opinion and a medium for conversation

**Table 2:** Attitudes towards the Internet as a medium enabling expression of opinion and a medium for conversation

QUESTIONS	GENERAL	ENG	FCMS
4- E-mail provides access to democratic communication.	2,11 <b>A</b>	1,96 <b>A</b>	2,26 <b>A</b>
5- Chat provides a mean for democratic communication.	2,42 <b>A</b>	2,34 <b>A</b>	2,50 <b>U</b>
6- Discussion groups in the Internet provide an access democratic communication.	2,03 <b>A</b>	2,06 <b>A</b>	2,00 <b>A</b>
7- Forums in the internet provide a mean for democratic communication.	2,10 <b>A</b>	2,12 <b>A</b>	2,06 <b>A</b>

As far as the attitude towards the Internet as a medium for expressing opinions and a medium for conversation is concerned, apart from the 'chat' programs, to which students

of the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies rate slightly higher than the students of the Faculty of Engineering. All the students agree with the role of the Internet as a medium which enables expression and medium for conversation. The responses to email, discussion groups and forums' as the providers of access for democratic communication do not indicate much difference.

### Attitudes towards the Internet as a medium for conversation and dialogue

**Table 3:** Attitudes towards the Internet as a medium for conversation and dialogue

QUESTIONS	GENERAL	ENG	FCMS
8- Citizens are able to freely share their views mutually one another in a process through the Internet.	1,85 <b>A</b>	1,84 <b>A</b>	1,86 <b>A</b>
9- The Internet provides a space for people to communicate with each other freely.	1,70 <b>A</b>	1,54 <b>A</b>	1,86 <b>A</b>

Students from the both faculties showed agreement with the statement "Citizens are able to freely share their views mutually one another in a process through the Internet" indicating their awareness of communicating on the Internet freely.

### Attitudes towards the Internet as a public sphere

**Table 4:** Attitudes towards the Internet as a public sphere

QUESTIONS	GENERAL	ENG	FCMS
10- Internet contributes to the concept of democracy.	2,40 <b>A</b>	2,34 <b>A</b>	2,46 <b>A</b>
11-Internet contributes to the representative democracy, which suggests governance by elected representatives.	2,64 <b>U</b>	2,76 <b>U</b>	2,52 <b>U</b>
12- Internet contributes the participatory democracy which describes the political system as a system in which all citizens are allowed to influence the public.	2,35 <b>A</b>	2,40 <b>A</b>	2,30 <b>A</b>
13- Internet creates a new form of democracy which is called electronic democracy.	2,42 <b>A</b>	2,48 <b>A</b>	2,48 <b>A</b>
14- E-democracy (electronic democracy) is the utilization of electronic communication technologies, especially the Internet enhancing democratic process.	2,22 <b>A</b>	2,24 <b>A</b>	2,36 <b>A</b>
15- The Internet provides a medium for democratic communication.	2,22 <b>A</b>	2,30 <b>A</b>	2,14 <b>A</b>
16- The Internet provides access to achieve freedom of speech and expression.	1,79 <b>A</b>	1,74 <b>A</b>	1,84 <b>A</b>
17- Freedom of speech is often regarded as an internal concept in modern democracies.	2,03 <b>A</b>	2,12 <b>A</b>	1,94 <b>A</b>
18- Citizens use the Internet for deliberative and participatory aims.	2,50 <b>U</b>	2,54 <b>U</b>	2,46 <b>A</b>
19- Democracy in online communities operates much the same as in real world.	2,80 <b>U</b>	2,60 <b>U</b>	3,00 <b>U</b>
20- Every member of online communities can initiate a discussion and express their ideas and they have an opportunity to initiate a change.	2,41 <b>A</b>	2,50 <b>U</b>	2,32 <b>A</b>

21- In cyberspace, decision can be made through popular votes; referendums and petitions are easier to practice rather than real world.	2,19 A	2,08 A	2,30 A
22- The Internet will allow for a true “participatory democracy” in which citizens can govern themselves without the interference of bureaucrats and legislators.	2,34 A	2,26 A	2,42 A
23- On the Internet gender, race and class lose their importance.	2,19 A	2,12 A	2,14 A
24- The participatory form of democracy, which the Internet assist and create, can help political activism.	2,39 A	2,40 A	2,38 A
25- Political communication is the basis of public sphere. The Internet exposes the democratic character of the public sphere.	2,44 A	2,42 A	2,46 A
26- The Internet is a digitally mediated public sphere to discuss public issues.	2,33 A	2,08 A	2,58 U

Analysis of the data reveals that the attitudes of the students from two faculties are mostly similar, students mostly agree with the role of the Internet as the provider of a public sphere. In two cases, questions 18 and 20 which explored ‘Citizens use the Internet for deliberative and participatory aims’ and ‘Every member of online communities to initiate to chance to express their ideas and they have an opportunity to affect the change’ students of the Faculty of Engineering rated slightly higher than the students of the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies. In relation to the other two issues, ‘The participatory form of democracy, which the Internet assist and create, can help political activism’(Question 24) and ‘The Internet is a digitally mediated public sphere to discuss public issues’ (Question 26) students of the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies rated a little higher.

Tertiary students mostly agree with the contribution of the Internet to democracy. They do not have strong ideas about the contribution of the Internet to the representative democracy (Question 11) and the likeness of operation of democracy in online communities to the real world (Question 19). The mean of the students’ attitudes towards Question 19 means that they are aware of the difference between the real world and online democracy but they do not have very strong ideas about this issue.

Apart from the mean scores, all attitude scale questions were tested by one-way ANOVA in order to explore whether there is any significant difference between the responses of the students of the two faculties with the alpha 0.05. Apart from the questions 26, no significant difference was found. Only in question 26, significant difference between the means of the responses from students of the two faculties was found.

## CONCLUSION

The present study aims at investigating whether there are any significant difference between the attitudes of the students studying at the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies and Faculty of Engineering. The common interest given to the Internet by the hard and social scientists are reflected in the results indicating that the students studying both hard and social sciences have almost the same attitude towards the Internet as the provider of ‘public sphere’ in the sense suggested by Habermas (1989).

Despite the hot discussions the ideas of Habermas raised, he has also been severely criticized because of his desire for reaching a consensus at the end of the public discussions (among others, Sgier 2004, and Mouffe: 1992) and by the feminists for his proposal for the 'male public sphere'. With these respects, the Internet definitely provides more than what Habermas has put forward. The participants not only participate when they want to, they also do not have any commitment to stay or conclude any public discussion. What is more, the Internet accepts the individuals without looking at their identities, that is, on the Internet, neither gender nor age or nationality of the participants matter. What is more, an individual can adopt more than one personality simultaneously or at different times.

What is more, Poster (1999) warns us that Habermas's idea of the public sphere is "systematically denied" in the Internet medium and while studying the Internet, the concept of the public sphere's should be abandoned.

In conclusion, the tertiary students are aware of the Internet as the provider of democracy which is different from the real life one. There, everything can be a topic of discussion, and the individual participates with his/her ideas not mentioning his/her name, age, race or nationality. The growing interest of academicians to the Internet and the opportunities it provides, obviously are going to be topic of discussion in social sciences in the future whereas hard scientists will invest more and more effort to further develop this medium which is not owned by any media patron or any state.

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