

Digital Cultures

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Blogging the City

Digital literacy, as we have seen, is at the center of the changes occurring in the digital environment, inviting new forms of authorship and publication tailored toward the convergence of technologies and digital social practices. But digital literacy is also a framework for understanding the historical evolution tied to the emergence of this new literacy that complexifies the concept of a digital divide and invites a critical if not a radical modification of a set of key concepts and abstractions operative in the articulation of social, cultural, and political norms: presence, location, community, identity, and so on. This evolution is perhaps best observed in blogs, if only because their rapid growth and success make them emblematic.

Digital literacy, in its current state, by touching on all the defining abstractions we have discussed, is not only in conflict with print literacy; it is also at the origin of a broader and more significant conflict, one that opposes models of legitimacy and paradigms of credibility, as they are invested with their own norms and practices (one example: traditional

journalism and the growing online competition for print and conventional media).¹ But it would be a mistake to limit this conflict of legitimacy and credibility to a description or discussion of who can say what and with what authority. It is also essentially about forms of authority—cultural, social, and political—and the material or, in our case, digital support that makes them possible. In order to illustrate this phenomenon, we shall proceed in this chapter in an alternating fashion, weaving a narrative between historical models and abstractions of the political and its origins and descriptions of technologies, and the practices they produce and their current and potential political usages. For this purpose, I chose a relatively accessible model because it figures prominently in both scholarly literature and popular ideas about the history and the origin of political practices. While the model, in its simplest version, tells a rather straightforward story, a closer examination of its elements reveals the ideological choices and the diverse uses of historical narratives. It is this type of usage in particular that is revealing, especially when it comes to understanding the current evolution of the emerging practices in the digital environment, for they are also in a quest for both a history and a legitimacy beyond the one provided by popularity and widespread use and acceptability. One of the more striking aspects of digital culture lies in its almost continuous, uninterrupted dimension (we ought to say almost hourly, for most users): it permeates (if not characterizes) a new daily life marked by new agencies that manage our presence, our communication, and our perception and representation of ourselves and of others. Thus, a new geography is mapped out by the digital environment, one that takes into account the “real geography” (cybertography),² but also one that transforms it into the site of a new life from role-playing games to Second Life.³ Along with this new geography of the digital environment, we witness a growing concern for what I would call authenticity in the virtual. This chapter is an effort to capture some of the elements of this authenticity and its potential implications for forms of political organization and participation. Virtual authenticity is not to be explained by a transfer of a well-known and ultimately problematic category from one model to another; it is not to be restricted to a shift from the real to the virtual. Instead, it consists in the elaboration and experimental development of ways of being within the digital environment that are, so to speak, native, relying on

gies, and reflecting a concern for norms and values that are predominantly those of digital culture. Virtual authenticity is also motivated by an activist desire, by a will to transform and shape the other, the real world that is becoming more dependent on the digital in general.

I. A Tale of Two Cities

Blogging is perhaps one of the greatest success stories of the emerging digital environment. According to David Sifry, the founder of Technorati, his service is tracking a staggering 57 million blogs as of October 2006.⁴ Such a large number, even when taking into account the inactive or abandoned blogs, demonstrates the popularity and the penetration of the model across countries, languages, and cultures. This success has also caused traditional media to adapt blogs for some of their services in order not to be left behind by such a movement.⁵ Some have even resorted to what are known as “fake” blogs for advertising purposes.⁶ Blogging has challenged established journalism and plays an increasingly important role in the political life across national borders (presidential elections in the United States and France, and China and Iran are primary examples of the potential of blogs in “closed societies”). It has also almost instantly created a large body of authors and brought new technologies to a remarkable number of users and thus introduced and normalized new practices in the digital environment.

While many critics question the value and the longevity of blogging, it is evident that it has been the source of significant changes in the relations between digital and nondigital. It has redefined the status of information, of sources and the ways in which individuals as well as groups seek to exchange and evaluate information. Furthermore, and this is the most important factor from our point of view in this chapter, blogging is at the origin of new models and new technologies that are radically reshaping the conventional information production models as much as significant parts of the digital environment. Thus, blogging as an essentially social and intellectual forum of interaction and knowledge production invites us to think about its structure and the ways in which it puts into place forms of membership and modalities of participation and group organization. In order to think through the self-structuring of blogs, I choose the model

of the city as a foundation of citizenship, and, for starters at least, an essay by Émile Benveniste that discusses the differences between the Greek and the Roman models of the city. This chapter, it goes without saying, not only focuses on blogs, but also on “social software” in general from Wikis to all the current desktop and Web tools that are based on some form of collective authorship, sharing, and creation.

The essay was initially published in 1970 under the title “Deux modèles linguistique de la cité.”⁷ Its argument is seemingly simple and exploits an opposition between Latin and Greek, that is to say between the couple *civis/civitas* and *polís/politès*.

The Latin *civitas* is an abstract in the form—*tàs* derived from *civis*. But what is the meaning of *civis*? Benveniste shows, through a lengthy and erudite discussion, that the accepted translation of *civis* as *citizen* is false or at least inaccurate. According to him, “one is *civis* of an other *civis* before being *civis* of a specific city.” In other words, the Latin signifies first and foremost a relationship of reciprocity and interdependence between two individuals or two groups. Thus, the *civitas* is none other than the set of *civis*. And *civis* designates a social status of reciprocity instead of indicating a membership in an abstract and determining entity like a city. It is no surprise to find that for Benveniste the accurate translation of *civis* is “concitoyen” or “fellow citizen.”

The classical Greek model of citizenship could not be more different from the Latin one. In Greek, *Polís* defines both the citizens (*politès*) and their citizenship. It specifies the rules of membership (origin, place of birth, etc.), the rights of participation in the activity of the city as well as the ensuing responsibilities and privileges associated with citizenship. More importantly, it marks a separation between those who belong to the city and those who are outside of its geographical and legal boundaries. It is striking that in most European languages the Greek model of citizenship has been the dominant one (a choice laden with irony since Greece is celebrated as the birthplace of democracy: the model founded on exclusivity of membership grounds, at least in popular mythology, modern forms of democracy). It goes without saying that such a linguistic conception has its political and cultural consequences.

So, if we accept this simplified conceptual opposition between the Greek and the Latin models, where does the blogosphere fit into this

picture? Is it more like a Greek city or does it resemble, in its flexibility and reliance on complex forms of reciprocity and exchange, the Latin *civis*?

The network is a decentralized environment; it does not recognize nor does it have a single authority nor does it work according to a unique model. The digital environment has grown and evolved in large part in response to this decentralization, which has worked against efforts to manage its organization. The absence of an overdetermined center (despite the natural aggregation and formation of diverse, interconnected clusters) puts into relief the fluid and reciprocal relations at the core of blogging. While authorities form rather rapidly and tend to concentrate around a relatively small number of nodes, it remains true that users can easily shift and modify their position within the blogosphere. This flexibility is characteristic of the digital presence.

But what is perhaps most interesting at this stage about Benveniste's observations is that they invite us to interrogate the spatial metaphors that are used to designate blogging activity, especially in terms of structure, organization, and modalities of memberships and recognition. The emergence of blogging clusters is slowly shaping traffic but, perhaps more importantly, it is determining the relevant issues significant to the underlying technology and its formal development and deployment. Blogspace, in this instance, is a flexible public sphere where gatherings are constituted by intersecting domains, each defined by a set of commonly shared interests and an ever-growing number of pointers and links. The spread of news from one domain to another resembles to a large degree the structure of rumor and the ways in which it can either create a new reality or modify the perception of an event. Underlying such discursive activity are forms of mutual recognition and relay, forms that actualize the virtual assembly of a community in the open-ended space of the blog city. Benveniste's Roman model is enlightening here because it puts into relief the interdependence of the technological and the discursive in the constitution and formation of the production, distribution and reception of both identities and knowledge. A brief look at the rapid development and transformation of aggregators, blog-related protocols and norms, the adoption of neighborhood and related concepts as an important metaphor, points to the epistemological underpinnings of this new and problematic production of

knowledge (in various forms and formats) and their reflection of the map of the territory of the blogosphere. In other words, the spatial characteristics of the network shape the concentration of authoritative or knowledge centers and their interrelations. For example, how do tags and their growing adoption via various folksonomies reshape our hierarchical evaluation and organization of knowledge, and how will they influence the current model of search engines and the role they play in directing traffic toward sources of information?⁸ What are the new forms of authority emerging from these practices and how do they interact with currently established ones (this applies to journalism as well as to politics and at times to some scientific research and publication)?

It would seem that a new social contract, informed by the new realities of the digital environment and its evolving literacy, is under development, one that will be well suited to fully accept the challenges posed to copyright, authorship, and intellectual property, not to mention economic models. Furthermore, how will these new knowledge-production conditions affect the academy (publishing, peer review, and Open Access), historical discourse, and the political sphere? These questions go well beyond blogging and blogs, but they point to their unmistakable impact on the nature of information in the digital environment and especially on the role they play and will continue to play in orienting technological developments with immediate and lasting cultural, social, and political implications.

But perhaps one of the more interesting dimensions of blogs is the underlying conception of community they put into place and the ways in which they challenge current models and their political and social manifestations. Along with the emerging community model instituted by the popular use of blogs and their extensions, we also have the shift away from the hierarchical organization and presentation of information to a more semantic and "ontological" model, founded on the proliferation of categories and tags, whether user generated or centrally organized. Despite all the difficulties with tags, it is clear nonetheless that they have opened up the way for a more flexible and adaptable form for marking published material and for marking authorship. A tag, as an independent form of reading, associates a contextual interpretation or appreciation of an item (normally a file) with a reader who is also an author. A tag modifies not only the relations between the original authorship and the material

authored; it also introduces a difference that is digital: it shifts, or at least can shift, the meaning and the significance of a digital object and its status within the meaning-producing hierarchy from its content to an associated description that is exterior.⁹ While tags may suffer, in some ways, from the narrowness if not the impoverishment of what we might call “keyword” culture, they can nevertheless, if properly used, open up public space for a new methodology for valorizing information and its transformation into new knowledge. In the end, tags, a product of blogging culture, display the flexibility of the communitarian model behind the tools and the intricate dependencies on authorship models and their variations within the evolving digital environment. They introduce, in a manner of speaking, a second order of authorship, one that, while not modifying the original content or its attribution, displaces it nonetheless into a space in which it is associated with another form of authorship. This can be applied to any object, to any item that can be accessed via the digital environment. For an interesting case, we can point to a service that encourages its users to associate photos and tags with dictionary words and to measure their popularity and their “affective” status or value.¹⁰ Thus, even language and its words can be subjected to the tagging dimension of digital literacy, promising a potential modification of usage within the limits of a virtual community. One is even tempted to think of this expansion of digital literacy in terms similar to the opposition, in seventeenth-century France, between the Court and the City in the establishment of acceptable usage. In this instance, we would have not only a rivalry between digital and offline, but also, within the digital itself, between conflicting appreciations of literacy.

Benveniste’s two cities have allowed us to frame a discussion of blogs in terms that are essentially focused on community, order, and organization. But we will need to complement it with other models of the city, especially the Greek *polis*, in order to grasp fully its value for an appreciation of the emerging digital environment. While these observations are of a somewhat abstract nature, we shall shortly return to them in detail in order to elaborate some of the implications of the practices they are making possible for both the digital environment and the political sphere. But first, a brief survey of what blogs are and how they are produced

II. Blogs: A Brief Introduction

It has become difficult to talk of blogs, as they have succeeded in becoming commonplace remarkably rapidly, owing in part to press coverage of bloggers and of their impact, especially on political issues, but also because of the growth of easy-to-use tools that allow for the quick creation and publishing of individual blogs.¹¹ But perhaps it is nevertheless useful to start with the simplest questions: What is a blog and what are some of its basic components? A blog is generally a publishing outlet, organized in reverse chronological order and frequently authored by a single individual (although we are seeing an increasing trend toward collective blogs). A blog does not have to focus on a specific topic or subject matter and can cover a set of wide-ranging issues. What distinguishes it are the structural elements of the post and the accompanying components of the blog. A post is normally brief (few paragraphs, although you may have lengthy entries), that is, either a commentary on a recent story or a reporting of a story. The post frequently includes links to sources of the story in question as well as to other commentaries and analysis. And each post, in principle, should also have a Permalink or a link to the permanent location of the entry, a TrackBack link (or a link that can be used by other blogs and automated discovery systems to alert bloggers as to who else has either linked to the post or written an entry of their own related to it). TrackBacks are useful when trying to examine the ecosystem of a blog and to measure the spread of a particular story or entry, that is to say, when one is either trying to generate analytics concerning blogs that are either similar or to see how popular a particular entry is and how many transformations and citations it has received. TrackBack has, however, fallen victim to spammers (spammers flooded blogs and hosts with fake or unrelated TrackBacks) and is currently broken.¹² Blog entries also tend to indicate the day and time of the original publication as well as the author’s handle or name. In brief, a blog is a personal publishing platform that, even in its simplest implementation, can allow broad exposure and immediate publicity. It is also a format that mimics the structure of the journal, highlighting the temporal dimension of writing and the interaction with other sources of information.

Blogs also have sidebars, or a column (some blogs now come in three columns in order to accommodate the need for more “permanent”

information and ads) that normally contains a section about the author of the blog (frequently called a Profile and on some a Colophon where you can read about the author, the tools used to create and design the blog), a link to the archives of the blog (and the archives can be organized by chronological order, i.e., month and year, by tag or category, etc.), a Calendar that highlights days of publication of entries, a Blogroll or a set of links to other blogs read by the creator of the blog (and Blogrolls have become rather sophisticated where you can specify your relation to each of the links), a list of recent entries and recent comments, and finally, a link or links to syndication feeds to the blog. Syndication feeds are links to an RSS or Atom aggregation version of the blog that make it possible for readers to subscribe to your blog. In this fashion, their online or desktop Aggregator downloads every new entry published on your blog. You may choose, as the author of the blog, what kind of feed to generate, that is, whether to give your subscribers access to excerpts of entries or whether to publish full entries, among other details. Syndication is increasingly important because of its integration into most desktop tools (from e-mail clients to stand-alone Aggregators to browsers) and because it fundamentally changes the relations between author, publisher, and reader. With an Aggregator, a reader does not have to visit a blog. And, furthermore, readers can choose to have the subscription feeds appear on their systems in a manner of their choosing by applying simple CSS style sheets. In other words, an Aggregator separates content from form and highlights the value of what has been called micro-information engendered by the structure of blog posts. Furthermore, Aggregators record and display all changes to an entry, allowing immediate access to the editorial work of the author and the successive layers of modification that go into composing a post. This feature is obviously complex and can lead to some critical analysis of finished or polished products, especially in the case of "sensitive" material. At any rate, it is clear that "authorship" is both "strengthened" and "weakened" by aggregation and, if anything, it is in the process of being radically redefined. Aggregation feeds can also support enclosures where authors can include multimedia files (audio for podcasts or video for V Blogging [or Video Blogging], or even sponsored ads). Even with this brief presentation of blogs, we can see why they have successfully become the new "home pages" on the Web, almost completely eliminating the by now

"old-fashioned" static sites and home pages. They have become one of the more visible new symbols of one's digital presence. Because of their flexibility and their widespread availability, they are behind what we call "citizen journalism" and "participatory publishing." But we shall return to these broader philosophical issues later.

Blogs also can have a banner that is commonly an image chosen by the author. Banners can include active hyperlinks to other sites or fixed local pages where the author makes available different material. One of the more popular features of current blogs is the inclusion of publicly shared material that is stored on sites like Flickr (where you can upload photographs for free). In this fashion, the blog has become the new and ever-changing version of the distributed desktop from which the user can write and publish text, pictures, audio and video, and share links and references as well as files stored online. This model has now become more important with the rise of Mashups and services like Yahoo!'s Pipes.

You can author blogs either from online services or via blogging tools that work from the desktop or from a browser. Blogger, for instance, now offers the possibility of posting directly from Microsoft Word (on Windows). Often, you have a search capacity integrated into the sidebar, allowing your readers to search the content of your blog.

There are basically two kinds of blogs: one that is managed by the user directly from her server and one that is hosted by a third party. Hosted solutions are perhaps currently the most popular and there exists a large choice of options, although perhaps the best known are Blogger (now owned by Google), Microsoft's Spaces, and WordPress, to name only a few. Among the for-pay hosting providers there is TypePad (from the creators of MovableType,¹³ and now the owners of LiveJournal and of Vox as well). Both services offer easy setup, a selection of templates and designs, and WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) HTML editors for the blogs.¹⁴ Furthermore, some of them provide easy setup for categories, tags, photo albums, and calendars, whereas in the case of some of the free services, setting up such tools requires a bit more effort. Obviously, there are other services as well.

For the server setup, there are many blogging tools currently available, but perhaps the two most popular ones are MovableType and WordPress. They are powerful and can accommodate large corporate blogs as well as

individual ones. They also allow for the creation of multiple blogs on the same domain and for multiple authors on a single blog. Furthermore, they can be tied to a domain or reside in a subdirectory. For setting them up, the user needs to have access to a server and be able to upload and modify file permissions. The user must be able to have a database (most commonly, either a MySQL or Postgres). Once all files are installed, you can manage and configure all other aspects of the blog from a Web interface. Both tools allow for the configuration and generation of RSS and Atom feeds. You can also choose to ping (or to inform sites that collect such information) servers every time you post a new entry.

One of the main difficulties with blogs is the rise in Comments and TrackBack spams. Automated bots try to write a large number of Comments with links to gambling or pornographic sites. They do the same for TrackBacks. There are currently a number of solutions devised to counter this growing problem: they either require user registration and authentication prior to posting Comments and TrackBacks, or they require some form of third-party authentication of users (such as TypeKey) before allowing users to write comments. There are also tools that blacklist hosts and domain names or keywords that are known to generate spams as well. Finally, a user can post to a blog from a mobile phone, thus leading to the practice of moblogging.

This brief summary of the basic features of blogs is only meant as a background for a discussion of the issues currently raised by the widespread adoption of blogs in a diversity of cultural and political contexts, but before proceeding, a few supplementary remarks.

The popularity of blogging is also interesting because it is the first instance of the success of the Open Source model on a large scale. Most users are not aware of the fact that they are frequently using Open Source tools developed and distributed under the GPL and that the blog designs or the CSS files used to modify the look and feel of blogs are also distributed under the GPL or a similar Open Source license. But beyond this penetration of the Open Source model into the popular use, blogs have created a number of phenomena, from the development of Open Source information resources to the diversification of news sources and the increasing challenge to the "professionalization" of journalism. Citizen journalists now share information, contest the accuracy or the authority of

established sources, and are frequently absorbed into the mainstream. Furthermore, press agencies and news organizations are under pressure to compete with the online independent journalists and sources. Some social-networking sites such as Flickr have become the sites of breaking news, often beating conventional media in reporting a story. Obviously, there is a debate about the value of citizen journalism that is ongoing and that tends to concentrate on the value of established journalistic practices and editorial policies and the dangers of free-form publishing. The arguments also invite us to take a closer look at the viability of the new paradigm of deliberative democracy online, its modalities and pitfalls.¹⁵

Another important aspect of blogs, less visible in the United States and in Europe, is their growing political use against oppressive regimes and the ensuing censorship. Here, we find a more immediately pro-active use of the publishing tools and an exploitation of the flexibility of online publishing and the freedoms it provides. Iran is perhaps the most important and interesting example where we find a mature and complex use of blogs to contest political authority and some of its abusive, authoritarian tendencies. But we can also look to China and some of the Arab countries (especially Saudi Arabia) as well. This political dimension of blogging has led to the development of servers (sometimes supported by Western governments) that allow for anonymous blogging, thus, in theory, protecting the identity of bloggers. We shall not examine in great detail the rise in censorship and the technologies it uses as well as its cultural and political components. One last remark on this topic suffices for the moment: blogging has also led to an increase in filtering and censorship in countries where established political authority is often criticized and contested. And obviously, as in the United States and Europe, we now have a generation of politicians who are bloggers as well. This will eventually lead, in my opinion, to a shift in the modes of public debates and to important changes in the "handling" of political messages.

III. Public Spaces and Virtual Autochthony

Now that we have briefly surveyed blogs and their infrastructure, we can revisit the linguistic model of the two cities proposed by Benveniste in order to see if it provides us with any insight into an understanding of the

potential of blogs and related technologies in shaping frameworks for communities. Benveniste's essay, to limit ourselves to a simple point here, highlights the importance of grammatical relations and their association with a place, with a territory, or, better yet, with an identity intimately associated with a marked space. Thus, in the Greek model, the *polis* is the defining term and entity: citizenship is a function of a set of variables related to its structure from genealogy to territory. The Roman model, on the other hand, proceeds in the opposite way: the association of individuals and their mutual relations define and determine the *civitas*. The Roman model is first and foremost relational: it is based on forms of reciprocity, recognition, and ultimately solidarity among individuals. It is a society formed by qualities that are as Benveniste says "distinctive" of each citizen. The importance of this opposition between the two models lies in the relations between citizenship and space, or, to put it in other terms, it derives from the ways in which it identifies belonging and legitimacy to a connection that is marked by spatial relations and their social and political symbolizations. Everyone can become a Roman citizen, whereas only those born in Athens can claim to be Athenians. On the one hand, a form of autochthony, on the other, a relatively open model of citizenship.

Even with this rapid summary of the opposition between Greek and Roman, we can see the relevance to the current digital environment and its associated framework for a digital identity. While language remains a marker of identity in the digital world, it is less of an absolute symbol. The import of technologies such as blogs and Wikis, as well as the growing number of social- networking sites, lies precisely in the continuous creation of modular communities with relatively open memberships and identities that are tied to a shared interest and not to fixed forms. The fluidity and the rapid changes that characterize such communities, which appear to some as merely fads or passing fashions, are also characteristic of a flexible and experimental form of virtual citizenship that is being slowly but surely developed. This experimental construction of community building relies rather heavily on the technology and is often driven not by an ideological or a social choice but instead by unforeseen uses of technological platforms. In other words, the technology is making possible practices that are essentially social but within the digital environment, and that require a dose of digital literacy that will, in the end, have social and political

consequences. We are perhaps to think of membership in some online communities as a form of education that, like any such pedagogical experience, can shape and form both individuals and groups. If the current digital environment is more akin to Benveniste's Roman model, it is creating a multiplicity and a diversity of Romes, a set of digital spaces where membership is defined by a variety of factors and that can share intersecting membership. Furthermore, and this is part of the evolution of the current technology in its social dimension, we are witnessing a convergence of such sites thanks to publicly available and open tools. Thus, it is relatively easy to share photos from a Flickr account on an individual blog, or, perhaps more interestingly, it is equally easy to share one's readings (via RSS feeds) with visitors to one's blog. Such relatively simple applications of social aspects of technology are significant because they create communities based on multiple values and multiple interests. They also create new spheres of influence and, ultimately, new public spheres that go beyond national borders and linguistic or cultural determinations.

In fact, to return to our Greek *polis* for a moment, the current digital environment shares some significant similarities with the Greek city, despite the affinity with the Roman model and the loss of autochthony implied by digital identity and its insertion within the digital environment. It is not my intention here to establish a simple resemblance and a linear similarity between the current practices emerging within digital culture and the Greek city, especially when considered as the original model for our Western democratic model and the foundation for the conduct and management of public affairs. Instead, in choosing to look at some of the details of the often-celebrated Greek miracle and its Roman counterpart, my objective is to highlight the spatial (and, in our case here, I would add the virtual) dimension of the model and the temporality it activates. In both instances we have a potential for participation that is linked to a form of recognized presence and its symbolisms and manifestations. Spatiality is essential because it not only designates the site of the political, but it also organizes and orders its accepted practices and norms. Such a function has, it goes without saying, an important role to play in the valorization of emerging institutional practices: What is acceptable and what is not? What is valued, what is exchangeable, and what is possible? If the Greek city is a site of autochthony, the digital equivalent is

its dissolution.¹⁶ It signals the shift to a new public sphere and an emerging social space.

Elaborating on Jean-Pierre Vernant's observations, Pierre Vidal-Naquet reminds us that the Greek *polis* creates a new space, a new social space that is endowed with a particular identity: "The city creates an altogether new social space centered on the *agora* with its 'foyer commun' where general problems are debated, a space in which power no longer resides in a palace but in the center, *es méson*. It is in the center that the orator who speaks for the general good stands. To this space corresponds a civic time."¹⁷ The city is first and foremost a spatial displacement, from the court to the center of the city, a center chosen and defined by the citizens, by their collective discussion and will. While the center remains essential as a symbol of equality, it requires a limited and defined space. If the ancient Greek city and its democratic practices are distinguished by a move from the palace to the city center, what is the digital equivalent of such a displacement and how are we to recognize it in the current situation of technological evolution? The digital city, or perhaps we should say cities, are by definition decentralized, with their own spatial characteristics, and yet they all have a home. This home has also a Greek precedent or equivalent (in Vidal-Naquet's description, it is the "foyer commun"), and its goddess as well.¹⁸

The Greek city as a model allows us to capture the spatial significance of the digital environment, especially in its current "social" phase, and to appreciate some of its practices and their cultural symbolism. For instance, each social-networking hub has a number of characteristics that include some or all of the following:

(a) A common entry point that is either a site or an integrated version into a browser or a desktop application. Normally, these entry points have the same look and feel and try to recreate a familiar and distinctive environment.

(b) Access is controlled according to hierarchy of privileges and rights (who is admitted, who can read, who can comment, who can post and who can tag and share, etc.).

(c) A set of rules that govern the community: these mostly relate to some forms of controls over speech and intellectual property.

(d) A set of tools that allow each user to manage his presence and his privacy within the community.

(e) A form of governance of the community that each user must agree to before being admitted.

These brief features highlight the city-like features of each community. They provide a combination of rational and reasonable rules for membership while taking advantage of technological potential. From our perspective here, they are virtual public spaces with their own *agoras*, with their own cultures, and ultimately their own politics. Their significance stems in part from the fact that they are becoming public spheres that frequently replace the public sphere; they are becoming digital sites for discussing and perhaps deciding on questions of common interest. In short, they are operating a displacement from the public sphere as we have known it into a fluid and intersecting set of public spheres. What characterizes these emerging public spheres is first the fact that they are fundamentally digital in nature: they are at once distributed, and able to integrate technological practices and digital literacy with their potential for social and political activism. They rely on the polyphonic nature of digital identity and they translate social networking into socio-technological practices. Thus the creation of multiple and often intersecting communities depends not only on shared interests but also on equally shared or open technologies. It is not my intention here to discuss the benefits of such a model and set of practices nor to evaluate their political role, but simply to point out that they are political in a manner that is historical and thus subject to an eventually comparative approach to the study of the digital environment and the emerging digital literacy. The convergence of social, if not virtual socializing, practices (and here we recall our brief discussion of technology as a potential civilizing process) and digital technology, while at times alienating, can also operate a displacement from passive to active or at least participatory membership. Simple activities like tagging or commenting can become initiatory performances, slowly enticing users into becoming more involved and more adventurous in their digital wanderings. These activities also create micro-communities that can evolve into more significant groupings based on specific and at times narrow affinities. The key factor remains that the technology is both virtually socializing

and at times socially alienating. But the technology is determining because it shapes to a large degree what is and what is not possible and decides what is and what is not accessible. Furthermore, its culture shapes what is known and how it can be known (access as a form of knowledge is one of the main features of the digital environment).

It is tempting to describe the digital environment as the site of emerging democratic practices on a global scale, opening up access and broadening participation to those who had been denied such participation in the past. It certainly is true that the digital has become, in some instances, the site of effective contestation of political authority and has generated a culture of political resistance embedded within the digital environment and its digital literacy. Thus, we can point to examples of blogs or similar sites that give voice to those who have rarely had such an opportunity in the past, making it possible to create a viable forum for political and social action.¹⁹ In these cases, the concept of digital literacy needs to be expanded further, for it covers not only the ability to interact and participate within the digital environment. But it also implies a broader cultural and political literacy, one that takes advantage of the technology in order to make available and accessible ideas and opinions hitherto either altogether ignored or limited to the specialist. Digital activism demonstrates the political potency of the technology and the practices it makes possible, but it also points to the need to reflect on the relations between digital literacy and the political. In the same manner that literacy radically transformed the political sphere, digital literacy has the potential to reinvent political culture. By the same token that reading became an essential feature of citizenship, digital literacy, because of its hybrid nature (combining the mastery of technology with the management of governance and rules for participating in a multiplicity of communities), promises to produce a new social bond that is inherently digital, with its own rules and norms.

Since we have been discussing the digital environment in terms derived from classical models, it is useful to provide an example that would illustrate the digital adaptation of such paradigms. The classical city is in large part organized in such a way as to manage violence and values (economic as much as ethical and political). The digital city has its own violence, an extension of "traditional" violence, but with a technological twist. At its simplest, it is represented by what has been termed cyberbullying. Cyber-

bullying is revealing because it affects mostly (but not exclusively) younger users across cultures and nations and because it has led to the drafting of laws to curb its spread.²⁰ Wikipedia defines cyberbullying as follows: "online bullying is the term used to refer to bullying and harassment by use of electronic devices through means of e-mail, instant messaging, text messages, blogs, mobile phones, pagers, and websites."²¹ Cyberbullying is perhaps the first widespread form of digital violence: it is first and foremost digital (although it consists of the extension and adaptation of well-known forms of verbal violence); it exploits the openness of the digital environment and the polyphony of digital identity by circulating abusive information or making available private and confidential information; it converts and subverts digital presence and the virtual digital sphere into a space of violence. The more a society is connected the more it is subject to this and other forms of digital violence. A classic example is South Korea, perhaps one of the most connected countries in the world today. According to a story on online violence in the BBC: "In a society where social networking is as popular as meeting up for a drink, information spreads quickly. Online mobs first demonise those they disagree with, then the victim's home address, credit card details, and even their boss's phone numbers get passed around. All of Korea's police stations now have a cyber-terror unit to help deal with the problem."²² The emergence of digital violence, beyond the theft of digital identity, invites us to evaluate the model of digital communities and the technological framework underlying their organization in terms of questions that are familiar from our classical models: how to manage violence within the emerging public sphere, and how to negotiate between the freedoms offered by the changes in citizenship while protecting the privacy of individual citizens; how to formulate effective strategies to face the emerging digital threats without necessarily curtailing or reducing the freedoms it makes possible; how to determine the social rules and models of governance to adopt in the new digital environment, especially when considering social interactions and their dynamics. The classical city is perhaps more relevant than one would think, for it succeeded in formalizing the divide between violence and public spaces: on the one hand, the center, the most public of all spaces and the most visible symbol of the new social and political reality; on the other, a more intimate and familial space, the more restricted space where

membership is more strongly determined. By analogy, we can say that the virtual public sphere resembles the city whereas the private virtual sphere or the need for a protected digital privacy echoes the balance introduced into the representation of the city by Hestia and her household.

While cyberbullying is only one concentrated form of digital violence, we can see a slew of variations within the digital environment. Privacy, and particularly digital privacy, is becoming in more urgent need of not only protection but, I would argue, understanding. In other words, a key dimension of digital literacy consists in comprehending the complexity of privacy in the digital environment, for digital violence is always a form of abuse of digital privacy. But digital privacy remains an elusive and contested concept.²³ Digital privacy requires a new acceptance of private space and of its relations with the emerging virtual public spheres. It requires a negotiated settlement between government's tendency to regulate and, in the digital age, to collect, store, and share information about citizens, and the citizens' rights to equal access to the information and its use.

IV. Return of the Voice?

Our classical models of the city led us to an examination of some essential aspects of the emerging digital environment and its social dimensions. The technologies at work in the environment have modified not only the status and locus of the public sphere, but they have also revived or brought back some other, more traditional variables. A case in point is the voice and its reemergence into the digital environment thanks to the growing popularity of podcasting. While podcasting derives its name from a gadget (Apple's iPod), it in effect describes the activity of creating and publishing online a multimedia recording that is made available to users via either an RSS feed or other sites. In short, a podcast is an online published recording that is accessible via RSS (but not exclusively). What is so unique about podcasting and how might we account for its remarkable success and popularity? And what does it say about the role and status of voice in the digital environment?

While podcasting is deceptively simple, it is important to keep in mind its flexibility. It allows users to listen to their chosen podcasts on a variety of instruments: computers, iPods, mobile phones, portable media players,

in their cars, and so on. In other words, it first extends the penetration of the virtual digital sphere into new zones. It also, obviously, extends existing and well-established communication technologies, most notably radio. Podcasting can also be seen as democratizing a communication medium that so far has been limited to either governments or rich corporations, thus allowing any user with a computer, a microphone, and a server or access to a public server to participate in previously inaccessible media. In this case, we can say that podcasting continues the movement of digital literacy in opening up all forms of authorship to its participants, reducing the differences between authors and readers, and here between radio broadcasters and listeners.²⁴ Podcasting represents a clear instance of the revolutionary potential of digital technologies because it demonstrates, perhaps more than any other currently available set of tools, the potential for shifting the hierarchy that has dominated the relations between information producers and information consumers. But it also illustrates how social practices emerge from a convergence of tools and adaptation of known technologies. It destabilizes further the "traditional" media by providing a sophisticated outlet for amateur productions that can now rival the most polished corporate productions.

But podcasting offers also a new marker of digital identity: the voice. In this instance, the voice becomes an added value identifier, one that creates a familiarity and that, at least within the digital environment, much as in "real" life, goes beyond its biometric elements. The voice can become the site of recognition, a recognition not based on biometric samples but grounded instead in the interaction between podcaster and listener. This interaction, however, is no longer limited to a public zone, but has moved instead into the more private corners of the digital environment. Much like the instruments and technologies it relies on, it transfers a form of privacy into the open and public space. It reintroduces a form of distinctive individualism into the otherwise all-too-visible digital environment. Such individualism also transforms its instruments into markers of exclusion; an individual with his iPod and his earpiece is actively separating himself from the crowd; he is consciously staying out of the public space. Listening to a podcast in public is an antisocial gesture but also a manifestation of digital individuality within the traditional environment. If indeed it is true that hell is the music of others, then podcasting is the digital private