Democratic spaces, delayed utopias
Political exile, advocacy journalism and online discourse

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
May 2006

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Abstract

This thesis explores the online practices of two groups: a group of political exiles from Sudan and the other an alternative media organisation, to examine how people construct meanings of democracy. Both groups use online technologies to archive, reproduce, advocate, build arguments, and maintain and expand their social and political networks and offer democratic alternatives in politically restrictive environments. Key results from the research show that online political culture, at least as it is practiced by the groups in this study, are burgeoning novel definitions of democracy and disrupting or ignoring established, liberal models.

The research reported on in the thesis is based on a 24-month qualitative study of online and offline discursive practices. Fieldwork involved participatory work with Democracy Now!, an independent news programme based in New York City and broadcast on television and radio, with a growing online presence, and the Republican Brothers, a Sufi brother and sisterhood in exile from Sudan, with many members now living in the United Kingdom and the United States.

Much of the literature about online democracy has focused on either established democratic political institutions, such as parliament or elections, or on deliberative sites, such as political news groups. Most research in the e-democracy literature assumes a liberal democratic model as the basis for online democracy. While this research has made important progress in establishing how social scientists can study democracy online and to expand discussions on public spheres, pluralism, and mediated political communication, many studies have produced mixed results on how well online technologies support and extend political culture.
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Acknowledgements

I originally came to this topic through the people that have inspired me with their stories of personal commitment to a sense of justice. Through their struggles to define and explain their truths, as well as to see social justice in their lifetimes, I have had the humble privilege to know them and to learn from their knowledge and experience. I would like to thank them now for their inspiration, honesty and support throughout the entire time that I have worked on this thesis. These people include Boo Choi, LaRay Denzer, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Amal Fadlalla, al-Baqir al-Afif Mukhtar, Hanan Babiker Mukhtar, Taysir Mustafa, Savannah Mashahe Steidinger-Ward, Jenny Sundén, Zoe Tenger, Jeannine and Bill Vertrees. I would like to give my deepest gratitude to all of the people who were so kind to take me into their homes and show me the most gracious hospitality that Sudanese culture has to offer. They shared with me their innermost hopes and fears, and I am grateful to them for trusting me with their stories. Another warm thanks to the producers and employees at Democracy Now!, who allowed me to turn the tables on them by putting put a tape recorder in front of them and ask them for their opinion. Without these disclosures, I could not have written this thesis. Thanks to Rajaa Alghatani and Mohamed Abouel for helping with the glossary.

A deep, heart-felt expression of appreciation goes to my supervisors Professor Nigel Gilbert and Dr. Nicola Green for their continuous care and support throughout the PhD process. Their guidance and gentle prodding on issues that I was blind to enriched my thinking and broadened my understanding. Without their persistence, guidance, patience and a belief in my abilities, I would have surely given up hope. My husband Tim Portlock needs a special thank you for tolerating all of the time we had to live apart and lonely while I indulged in finishing my PhD. I must also acknowledge the support given by Agnes McGill, whose intimate knowledge of university administration as well as her tireless dedication to all of us postgraduate students helped me to navigate the PhD process.

Finally I must mention my friend Khatim M. Adlan, who generously saw in me a person worthy to discuss with him his visions for democracy in Sudan, and whose own democratic project was so abruptly cut short in April 2005. It is to his memory and his unfinished project that no doubt will be carried on by those Sudanese people also inspired by his vision, that I dedicate this thesis to.
**Arabic Glossary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Transliteration</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>الغربة</td>
<td>(al-Ghurba)</td>
<td>Alienation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>بركة</td>
<td>(Baraka)</td>
<td>Blessing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>المحبة</td>
<td>(al-Mahaba)</td>
<td>Bond of love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>طريقته</td>
<td>(Tariqa)</td>
<td>Brotherhood (Sufi religious order)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الركن</td>
<td>(al-Rukun)</td>
<td>Discussion corner¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>المهدي</td>
<td>(al-Mahdi)</td>
<td>The Expected One, Messiah, saviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>كرم</td>
<td>(Karam)</td>
<td>Generosity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>المعرفة</td>
<td>(al-Ma'arifa)</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>إجماع</td>
<td>(Ijma)</td>
<td>Consensus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>إجهاد</td>
<td>(Ijtihad)</td>
<td>Independent interpretation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>قادة</td>
<td>(Qaada)</td>
<td>Leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>كافر</td>
<td>(Kaffir)</td>
<td>Nonbeliever (very insulting)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>جلسة صلاة</td>
<td>(Jalsat salat)</td>
<td>Prayer meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ذكر</td>
<td>(zikr)</td>
<td>Repetitive prayers or chants, a meeting for chanting (related to the word for “remembrance”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الجمهورية</td>
<td>(al-Jumhuriyya)</td>
<td>Republican Brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الأستاذ</td>
<td>(al-Ustadh)</td>
<td>Revered teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The term is not an exact translation from Arabic but it is a translation of how the Republicans use the word.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>فتوى</td>
<td>Scholarly opinion on Islam, official opinion on Islamic doctrine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>فتنة</td>
<td>Sedition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>شورى</td>
<td>Consultation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الصوت</td>
<td>Sound or voice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>إنشاد</td>
<td>Spirituals (usually a repetitive chanting of the name Allah sung and accompanied with music, especially with the oud, a string instrument similar to the guitar)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الفكر</td>
<td>Thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>وفد</td>
<td>Travelling political or social group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>الكتابة</td>
<td>Writing, handwriting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Terms and acronyms

**Blog**
From "weblog", a web-based diary or journal, regularly updated and hyperlinked to other online references, especially news information. The defining feature of a blog is the annotated references made by the blogger and thus most blogs are more about providing points-of-view on news events than simply providing information.

**Cable access**
Under the Federal Communications Commission, all cable companies must provide one station for free public use in each community in which it operates. Generally cable access stations provide free or low-cost training on broadcast equipment and television production to community groups wanting to produce shows. The content of cable access shows are mandated to serve the public interest in some way.

**DUP**
Democratic Unionist Party, the political party of the Khatimiyya religious order.

**Indymedia**
Independent Media Centers, a primarily online media-based social movement. The movement is made up of 164 autonomous centres in approximately 56 countries, with the United States containing the most centres (60) for one country.

**FCC**
Federal Communications Commission

**NIF**
National Islamic Front (The Muslim Brothers)

**NPR**
National Public Radio

**Podcasting**
Broadcasting on MP3 files that can be downloaded to personal digital MP3 players. While podcasting got its start with independent bloggers, the software and technology is increasingly being adapted by commercial or mainstream media outlets, including the BBC, Democracy Now!, NBC, and NPR.

**SCP**
Sudan Communist Party

**Umma Party**
The political party of the Ansar or Mahdiyya religious order.

**WTO**
World Trade Organisation
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"We have no option but to be interested in constructing buildings; at the same time, we have no choice but to place, in full view of our buildings, the vision of the Unbuilt—the foundation of possible things', other foundations, other alternative worlds. Perhaps, then, we will not forget to measure Progress from the ground, from other perspectives, other possible foundations, even when we vainly believe that we are, ourselves, standing at the top of the tower"

—Homi Bhabha, *Democracy De-realized* (2003: 34)
1.1 The Unbuilt

Looking at this allegorical nineteenth-century image painted to celebrate Progress in her American incarnation, let us, for a moment, ignore certain elements of the piece, such as the blatant cultural and racist biases that are too easy and obvious to critique. Instead I would like to draw attention to how technology and Progress are interacting in the painting. Progress carries the new communications technology of Gast's time, the telegraph invented in Britain in 1840 (1844 in the US) and linked the American coasts by 1861, in her left hand and in her right she carries a school book. This is very significant: the harbingers of Progress, at least according to Gast, are information and communication technologies. Without information and the means to distribute and exchange it, progress is not possible. After that, all other technologies follow.

Behind Progress locomotives penetrate a heretofore savage and wild land, tamed by their tracks. Farmers with agricultural technologies till the earth alongside her, hoeing paths to new markets for their produce and ploughing forward through the soil toward their destinies. Within the American context of this allegory Progress moves from East to West leaving the Old World, not only of the East Coast but also of Europe and its political traditions, its old hierarchies and ways of thinking behind for the vision and promise of the New World that is cleansed (of its original inhabitants) and remade as a tabula rasa. With Progress technology, information and capital come entwined and move in a linear fashion to organize, order, and unify a chaotic frontier yet a frontier, also, of infinite possibilities.

This allegory of Progress could be symbolic on an additional level, one that Gast perhaps did not originally intend explicitly but nonetheless exists in the popular imagination about information and technology. Progress brings with her not only information, technology, and capital but also democracy to a world filled with chaos. Information and its distribution is said to be a fundamental characteristic of a liberal democracy; a free market of ideas. A utopian vision that has nothing to do with how we live our lives—why should it, a utopia is an ideal, not a reality—yet it is a vision that is peddled nonetheless with each new technology that comes on the market since the beginnings of print, through to the telephone, to broadcast, and now to the Internet.

Contrast Gast's vision of Progress, a vision within which Gast assumes implicitly that we are already living, with Homi Bhabha's commentary on Progress within the context
of humanity's endless pursuit of democracy. Bhabha, a cultural theorist who writes on the postcolonial condition primarily in India, tells us that we should always maintain a utopian vision of democracy, but that we must make it an explicit and separate vision, to remind us of what we have not yet attained and of what could be possible, as we plod up the ladders, carrying bricks on our backs to finish our Tower of Babel. He is also saying that this vision, "the foundation of possible things", affords different vantage points to consider this tower that we are building, so that we might see that our tower is building up to nowhere (34). If Bhabha is suggesting that the buildings that we build are a vision of unity, then the Unbuilt is vision of disunity, not only in its multiplicity of perspectives but also by suggesting that the Unbuilt must remain forever unconstructed; it is something that we continue to strive for and a goal that is never attainable. It is through a plurality of angles and the unreachable ideal that we can see our buildings, our societies, for what they really are.

These two visions of Progress are a good starting point to explore some of the issues that this thesis will raise on democracy and communications technologies primarily because they are exemplars of the two main positions across the sociological field examining “e-democracy”. One prevalent thread makes the claim that the unfulfilled promise of democracy can be realised through new communication technologies. This is premised on the assertion that it is through information and the means to distribute and exchange it that makes a democratic society possible. One follows from the other: the technology will invigorate democratic culture, not the other way around. This could be considered to be a unifying vision of communication technologies' role in democratic processes since it neatly wraps up both democracy and technology into a monolithic ideal. The other is a vision that suggests disunity, fragmentation and a more complex picture of the relationship. In this vision, there is no central democratic public but rather a network of contestatory publics and counterpublics connected through new communication technologies (Warner 2002).

1.2 Questions of democracy, technology and information

Each technological innovation, and in the case of this thesis, specifically communication or information technologies—from the emergence of print via the printing press to digitised information through computer networks—can be said to have gone through an invention
cycle (Winston 1998). Throughout the cycle there are struggles over the design and implementation of the technology, suppressions of competing innovations, uncertainties over which rival technology will win out and how the technology will diffuse and be adopted on a large scale. The social and political contexts of development fundamentally form and shape the arc of technological innovation. For each significant technological innovation, humankind is said to enter a new stage: Stone, Bronze, Iron, Print, Steam, Information. Included in the rhetoric that surrounds a technological innovation is the assertion that innovation invariably leads us progressively forward and that we will live better having that innovation than at any other time in our history. Part of the cycle, certainly, includes hyperbole about how a particular innovation with profoundly transform society (Winston 1998: 2-3). Along with the initial exuberance that surrounds an innovation, a society's meanings, hopes and fears become deeply embedded into the technological artefact.

One of the aims of this thesis is, therefore, to address some of these meanings that people give technologies, especially communication technologies. Communication technologies are quite often positioned to strengthen democracy, for example, and much scholarship is dedicated to explaining the links between technological usages and the revitalisation of democratic institutions. A relatively recent phenomenon has been to link democratic meaning to the Internet, as the technology's development and diffusion has increased since the 1980s and more speculation and research has been focused on the potentials of this particular technology. So strong is this hope for the democratic promise of the Internet that e-democracy initiatives continue to spring up, flush with government money. In November 2005, for instance, the UK government launched its "e-Democracy National Project" fulfilling a goal in the government's overall e-government strategy, which began in 2002, to engage citizens online by the end of 2005\(^2\). This project, still in its early stages, represents a small part of a much larger strategy that has taken four years of planning and iterative steps to implement. The UK strategy is only one of many across the globe being initiated by both governments and civic organisations.

\[^2\text{More information on the e-Democracy National Project can be found at: www.e-democracy.gov.uk. The strategy was initially launched in November 2002 with the publication of the National Strategy for Local Government by the Office of the Prime Minister.}\]
“A Two-Way Conversation: New technology has the power to change the way in which councils engage and work with their citizens; local e-Democracy can open the door to a genuine, two-way dialogue and deliver democratic renewal from the grass roots up” (Office of the Prime Minister 2005, www.e-democracy.gov.uk).

As this quote from the front page of the e-Democracy website demonstrates, many of these e-democracy strategies spearheaded by governments are premised on an implicit assumption that there is something inherent in the very technological quality of the Internet that will invigorate and enliven the relationship between political institutions and citizens. The other assumption inherent here is that citizens want to engage with politics online in the first place; the possibility that they may not be interested in politics at all, rarely comes up.

Communication technologies, from the emergence of print to the Internet, are said to share a common ontological quality that with each innovation increases in its strength: the diffusion of political power from institutions to the mass of society, to the grassroots. The Internet is said to occupy the enviable position of empowering people to participate in democracy like no other communications technology to come before it due to its ability to flatten information and communications hierarchies that pervades the technology. Due to its accessibility and lower bars of entry, both in terms of producing and accessing information, unlike broadcast or print production, these empowering qualities are said to be inherent in Internet technologies. While all communication technologies are said to have this quality—enabling a user to commute from one place to another via a road or to communicate from one person to another via a letter or newspaper—the Internet is said to have an unprecedented reach and power, and this means something for political culture, especially democracy. An early proponent of the democratic potential of the Internet, George Landow, ontologically links communication technologies' "built-in power" to distribute information and knowledge to democracy:

“The history of information technology from writing to hypertext reveals an increasing democratization or dissemination of power. Writing begins this process, for by exteriorizing memory it converts knowledge from the..."
possession of one to the possession of more than one. ... The democratic thrust of information technologies derives from their diffusing information and the power that such diffusion can produce" (Landow 1992: 174; cited in Trend 1997: 155).

While virtually every new communications technology has been endowed with transformative qualities to change the very nature of politics and alter the diffusion of power in societies by the meanings that people give them, the Internet has come to symbolise the equalising and democratising technology par excellence. What makes the Internet more empowering to its users than earlier innovations? Some say it is the lowered bars of entry for producers of information; any one with access to a computer, to a phone or cable line and who has something to say can publish online. Once access to the technology is solved, it is much cheaper to publish online than to print a newspaper or to broadcast a radio or television programme. Those who believe that it is the Internet’s easier access that makes it a powerful democratic tool would point to the recent explosion in do-it-yourself (DIY) online media such as blogs and podcasts, as well as the Internet-based independent media movements and organisations as evidence that the Internet is indeed an information equaliser. No longer are we relegated to be simply "passive consumers" of news information nor does news information need to be mediated by mainstream media. Now with nothing more than a laptop and a wireless card we all can be journalists and take back the media from big news corporations which are considered the definers of news events. Others might say that the Internet is democratic in the way it allows users to access information from a variety of sources and would highlight the growth in news indexers, search engines and portals that enable users to find articles from news sources from all over the world. While I cannot address all of these issues within the limitations of this thesis, these are some of the assumptions and meanings that I seek to question, explore, complicate and challenge.

1.3 Goals and realities of this thesis

While clearly there have been immense changes in how people access and distribute information, organise themselves into social and political movements and engage in political debates brought about, in part, by the widespread usage of the Internet, it is much more
difficult to make a facile leap to the technology “finally empowering” us and fulfilling all of the broken promises of democracy. This thesis, therefore, takes as its starting point a question about the link between a communications technology and democracy. It explores the experiences of Internet users and how they construct its meanings and roles in democratic cultures. Within the thesis, the contending interpretations of new information technologies and what they mean for people in relation to democratic cultures are addressed. Specifically, through focusing on the uses of the Internet, information, news and dialogue among two groups, the research reflects on the meanings that people give to the political discourse that occurs on the Internet in bulletins boards and in online news sites, and considers how political identities are constructed through these discourses. Both how the Internet should be shaped and deployed in societies (should it be free or censored, for instance) and what democracy is, are highly contentious and this is precisely why both are so valuable to study, because they both represent struggles over meanings and interpretations.

1.3.1 Research questions

This study, which is focused primarily on two groups of people who employ web-based technologies to engage in political discourse, aims to be a response to calls for new understandings to be developed in e-democracy based on empirical evidence. In choosing the two groups, the first a small group of political exiles from Sudan and the other, a small, American independent news programme with an Internet presence, the aim was to explore what Internet-based political discourse means for people who either are or perceive themselves to be outside of a democratic political institution. Most research on Internet use and democracy has focused on users who either are engaging in online discourse with other users for purposes of participating in institutionalised politics, such as around election campaigns or referenda, or to engage directly with government and political institutions. Not very many sociological works in e-democracy exist that examine peoples’ online engagements outside of institutionalised politics, nor is there much scholarship that focuses on how people interpret online “democratic culture” or how they construct the meanings that they give to democracy and the Internet. Are Internet users really using the technology in the ways that are envisioned by the hyperbolic claims made about the Internet? In other
words, is it a technology that is finally giving a “voice to the voiceless” and enabling “ordinary people” to finally engage, from a position of empowerment, in the political systems in which they live? Surely one technology cannot promise all of that, can it?

1.3.2 About the study

This thesis represents ethnographic research that was conducted over two years in the United Kingdom and the United States. During the study I spent time with two groups, the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now!. The Republican Brothers is a small political and religious group, a Sufi brotherhood, originally founded in 1945 in Khartoum, Sudan. The Republican Brothers was organised to challenge the British colonial occupation of the country and after Sudanese independence in 1956, the movement transformed to a religious order and maintained a small but influential presence in the political environment during the post-independence decades. From 1985 to 1989 many Republican members were forced into exile because of the continued dangerous political conditions in Sudan. It is with this group of Republican exiles that I conducted most of the interviews for this research. Democracy Now! started out in 1996 as small radio programme on Pacifica Radio, an independent US broadcaster, to provide daily election coverage of the 1996 US presidential race. Since its founding it has mushroomed to a multimedia news organisation with radio and television broadcast and online programmes, and has a reach to over 420 North American broadcast stations and stations in Europe through the Internet. I spent two years conducting fieldwork with both groups and the data that I collected during that time is reported on in this thesis.

1.4 Chapters in brief

The thesis is organised in two parts, a review of the literature and a presentation of new findings. The first half addresses the literatures and theories on information technologies, the role of news journalism and media analysis, and democratic models. In the second portion of the thesis, the empirical research is reported on.

Chapter Two, Three Models of Democracy: Liberal, Islamic and Radical addresses three theories of democracy, liberal, Islamic and radical. The chapter begins with an
exploration into a few of the conceptual dilemmas that arise during debates on the nature of democracy. From there the discussion follows some of the dilemmas raised, specifically about individualism and freedom of speech, to discuss the liberal and Islamic models of democracy. Based on the feminist critiques of liberal democracy, I examine the debates on deliberative democracy and the synthesis of liberalism and socialism as proposed by theorists of radical democracy.

Chapter Three. The Fourth Estate: Journalism and Information in Democracies traces the development of news journalism in Western societies, and how news and information have become intertwined with theories about democracy. In the discussion about the role of journalism in democracy, I focus on the recent development of civic journalism, the growth of professionalised journalistic practices, especially the notion of "objectivity", the Fourth Estate and sociological analysis of media ideology. These discussions about the role of journalism are relevant not only to the later chapters of the thesis, especially Chapter Eight, but also to understand better how theorists of e-democracy conceptualise the crisis of political communication and how the Internet might alleviate some of the alienating effects that they see as endemic to communication mediated by journalism.

Chapter Four. A Fourth Way? E-democracy follows the development of e-democracy over the past three decades since it was first proposed in the early 1970s. I examine the two main streams of the e-democracy literature: e-government, or online mediated engagement with institutionalised politics and e-deliberation, or online political discourse among private citizens about organised politics. This review of the e-democracy literature also shows the value in researching online democratic discourse offline, as most studies have limited their research to online phenomena only. This thesis aims to address empirically this gap which continues to present rich opportunities for further research.

Chapter Five. Methods presents the data and analytical methods utilised in this thesis. Chapters Six to Eight address the two empirically separate but theoretically linked studies and in this chapter I describe in detail the two groups that I researched, how I gained access and dealt with ethical dilemmas that arose during the research. I also discuss my rationale for choosing to use an ethnographic approach to the research.
Chapter Six, Republican Brothers in Sudan and in Exile introduces the first group under study in the thesis, the Republican Brothers. I present the social, political and historical contexts in which the Sufi brotherhood was operating in Sudan before its exile. Close attention is paid to the discursive culture and identity that they developed through their public speeches and discussions as well as their print production.

Chapter Seven, The Republican Brothers Online continues the study on the Republican Brothers and the discursive culture they developed, now in exile and online. I examine how being in exile and online presents unexpected dilemmas for the group as well as a perceived disruption to an identity that they cherish and endeavour to protect. I also explore how they interpret online political discussion and how these discussions are configured into a Sudanese model of democracy.

Chapter Eight An Alternative Voice in the Wilderness: Democracy Now! looks at the second group studied in this thesis, Democracy Now!, a small but influential independent news programme operating out of New York City. In this chapter I examine the short history of the programme and how it fits into the larger contexts of American media politics. I analyse how Democracy Now! journalists construct their roles as such in American democratic culture and how their use of Internet technologies either expand on or contradict their perceived roles. Special attention is paid to the rhetorical strategies employed in the discourses of the journalists online, in print and in recorded speeches to distinguish themselves from what they call “access media” or American mainstream news media.

Chapter Nine Democracy’s Contested Imaginaries synthesises the sociological literature on democratic theories, information, media and journalism and e-democracy. This chapter recapitulates the research questions and shows how this thesis challenges the existing literature on e-democracy. A brief return to the empirical chapters is made to highlight the significant points to emerge from the research.
3 Three Models of Democracy: Liberal, Islamic and Radical

What do we mean by the term “democracy”? Does democracy mean the same thing for all societies, for all people, all the time or does it have multiple and disputed meanings? If it does have disputed meanings or its meanings are contingent, how can we talk about democracy online if we don’t know what definition of democracy we are working with? Therefore, before we can talk about e-democracy, we need to understand better the conceptual frameworks within which we are working, we need an exploration of some of the debates that have been occurring over defining what makes a democratic society. But in our attempt to define what democracy means, we need to get beyond empty platitudes such as “freedom” and “liberty” that function as shorthand words that say little about what we are trying to understand.

Within this chapter I begin with the more general topics on Western liberal democracy and compare these with the debates on democracy as theorised in Islamic thought since it is significant to the context of my thesis. An examination of both Western and Islamic democratic theories is also important since, as I will show later in this chapter, the debate over what democracy is has been overshadowed by Western conceptions of the idea and by examining alternative systems, I hope to present a somewhat more complicated vision of democracy. I will also examine more recent thinking on critical theory’s response to liberal democracy: radical democracy.

2.1 Democracy’s conceptual problems

What makes a society democratic? Is it how political elections are carried out, is it how effectively elected officials respond to their constituents, is it the number of citizens’ rights that are enshrined in a constitution that make it democratic? Is it more libertarian and individualistic qualities that make a democratic society, such as the presence of an open
market economy with few government interventions interfering with what comes “naturally” when capitalists are allowed to buy, sell, and force open new markets?

Part of the problem with talking about democracy as both a concept as well as a system of practice is that it is necessarily a highly contested and elusive idea. Would you recognise a democracy if you saw one, what would it look like, can you honestly think of a democracy, as you define it, that exists today? One characteristic that is said to make up democracy is governance by the people. Some believe that representative governance or direct governance, a system where elected officials enact the will of the people or a participatory system where lots are drawn from ordinary citizens to run government, as it was practiced in ancient Athens, are some features that make societies democratic. If you go for a representative government where officials are charged with the responsibility of executing the wishes of their constituents, is it still a democracy if only less than half of eligible voters voted, and of those who did vote, a paper-thin majority voted for those who end up in office, leaving the large minority of voters to be represented by officials that they feel are not qualified to represent them? And of those who did not vote, why not? Some might say this is due to eligible voters having little or no access to information to make an informed decision to vote, or that it is due to voter malaise, or even that it is a protest against the poor choices of politicians for whom to vote. Or it could be that would be voters are just not interested.

Let’s take another characteristic often attributed to making a society a democratic one, freedom of expression, the freedom for citizens to deliberate on issues that concern them in a space free from state control or coercion. Some question if a society is still democratic if only a small number of voices are able to speak and be heard, such as when large media conglomerates own both the ability to produce and distribute news and information, or if there is simply an indecipherable din of voices or opinions in this space,

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3 In the 2000 US Presidential elections, an average of 41 percent of the eligible voters cast a ballot (Source: United States Elections Project (2004) http://elections.gmu.edu). Of course, this presidential election was said to have not been won but stolen, where President Bush’s Democratic opponent, Al Gore, won the general election but lost the race only after the US Supreme Court declared Bush the winner when the results of the Florida race were disputed. Bush won by five votes in the Electoral College (see CNN). For another example see the 21 April 2002 first round prime ministerial elections in France that, due to voter apathy, gave extreme-right and nationalist candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen 18 percent of the vote, which sent shockwaves across France. Le Pen subsequently lost to Jacques Chirac, his victory is attributed to the highest ever voter turnout since 1958 to ensure that Le Pen did not win in the second round (See CNN 5-6 May 2002).
such as the plethora of online bulletin boards and chat rooms (Barber 1997; McChesney 1999). Is it still a democratic society when, hiding behind the rights of free expression, a radio journalist encourages citizens to pick up machetes and hack their neighbours to death or when a narrowly focused interest group publishes a hit list on their website, complete with home addresses and daily schedules of those on the list?4

I take these examples of what some might say make societies democratic, that is, a government by the people and the freedom for people to access information, to form political opinions and to express them publicly, to discuss further some of the current theories on democracy. As I will demonstrate through the following exploration of some of the fundamental ideas on democracy, theorising around these concepts is a much easier task than pinning them down in practice. Yet in my attempt to demonstrate some of democracy's conundrums I do not want to provide normative definitions of what democracy is. Perhaps by providing some examples of conceptual dilemmas as they exist in societies that are considered democratic, we can have these examples in mind as we consider what democracy means as well as clarify my own position as to what is particularly concerning to me in the context of this thesis. Having said that, in general I am less interested in examining established, official political institutions of the status quo, such as parliaments or congresses, and how they relate to their constituents. Rather my interest is centred on the political culture of democracy, the subaltern publics that engage with each other and with institutions that have the power to legislate and mediate; not only governments or "the state" but also other power positions, such as corporations and media groups that guard and protect their power status in societies.

Democracy pared down to its origin of meaning, "demos", is defined as "the people" and "kratos" means "rule or power" in ancient Greek, and means rule by the people.

4 On 3 December 2003, two Rwandan journalists, Ferdinand Nahimana of Radio Television Libres des Mille Collines (RTLM) and Hassan Ngeze, editor of the newspaper Karangura, were sentenced to life imprisonment and a third journalist, Jean-Bosco Barayagwiza also from RTLM, received a 35-year sentence for using their broadcasts and newspaper to incite the 1994 genocide. More than 800,000 people, mostly Tutsis and moderate Hutus, were killed in 100 days (see The Guardian Dec. 2003).

The Nuremberg Files, a radical antiabortion website based in the United States, publishes in a hit list the names, addresses and other personal data, such as daily work schedules of doctors who perform abortions. Three doctors who appeared on the list were killed and the day following their murders, their names were crossed through in red. On 28 March 2001, after a two-year court battle to close down the website, the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the website was protected by the First Amendment of the US Constitution (see The Washington Post 29 March 2001).
As I will show in the following examples however, "rule by the people" is an ideal rather than a practice, and indeed, in many instances it is an unfavoured ideal. Some argue that demos has a more ambivalent meaning and can either signify the citizen body or the poor masses (Farrar 1992: 19). This ambivalence is evident in arguments about whether democracy is actually a desirable condition for a society to exist in. Arguments against democracy were made by Plato, who was famously opposed to democracy in the sense of universal and pluralistic governance and from the Enlightenment thinkers who believed in civil liberties—for property-owners, that is—through to the framers of the American constitution in 1787. The leaders of the American Revolution, popularly considered the beginning of modern democracy, did not trust the masses to be reasonable enough to rule and thus limited democratic participation to an elite, property-owning (including the ownership of other human beings), male and white minority (Arblaster 2002; Dahl 1989; Lessig 1999). Benjamin Franklin, one of America's Enlightenment thinkers who helped to draft the Articles of Confederation that are the foundation of the US Constitution, was inspired by Native American democratic cultural and political organisations and drew upon some aspects of the Iroquois League's democratic principles to write the Articles, but he consciously left out their most fundamental one: the direct consensus of all citizens (Trend 1996: 9). For literally millennia, the idea that the "masses" should govern themselves was an abhorrent one, with the development of what some call modern democracy progressing in fits and starts well into eighteenth century. Statesmen and philosophers such as Thomas Jefferson, John Stuart Mill and Edmund Burke, to name a few, all denounced a form of democracy that would allow direct participation by all citizens but rather each called for varying degrees of representative democracy (Arblaster 2002). Part of the fear of direct democracy is that majority rule will inevitably turn to despotism. In his criticism of the Virginian legislature, for instance, Thomas Jefferson said: "One hundred seventy three despots would surely be as oppressive as one ... an elective despotism is not the government we fought for" (quoted in Arblaster 2002: 38).

The American Civil Rights Movement's struggle for the universal protection of human rights exemplifies what Jefferson feared, and serves to demonstrate an ongoing tension between two concepts in democratic theory: the will of the majority versus the protection of the rights of the individual. The tyranny of the majority was apparent in the
trampling on basic human and individual rights of Jim Crow laws of the American southern states in place from 1890 to 1965. These local laws mandated the segregation of black and white people in public and private facilities and were reinforced by the US Supreme Court in 1883 by its overturning the Civil Rights Act of 1876. In its ruling the Supreme Court argued that the 14th Amendment, which guarded against discrimination, could only be enforced for issues of discrimination by the state, and not for those committed by private individuals. The persistent social exclusion suffered by black Americans was thus codified into law. The civil rights struggles of black Americans serve not only as an example of the tyranny of the majority but also where social exclusion contradicts constitutional rights; black (male) Americans had the right to vote since 1870 with the passing of the 15th Amendment (black women enjoyed suffrage in 1921 with the 19th Amendment) but were denied it since they were terrorised by white violence and many voting rights activists were killed if they tried to register black Southerners to vote.

The Civil Rights Movement not only challenged state law in regards to segregation, a significant challenge in a federal system, but also reversed social exclusion by violence and "tradition" so that black Americans could act upon their constitutional rights, like the right to vote, and participate in the "demos". The success of the movement, moreover, proved that there are no "natural" rights prior to society and its historical contexts, but that human and individual rights are carved out by a process based on conflict and confrontation, and not one based on a democratic system of consensus and coercive unity. These hard won rights moreover require a constant vigilance in their protection. While there has been much progress since the Civil Rights Movement in constitutionally guaranteeing the human rights of black Americans, many are still not able to fully participate in American democracy as a result of continued racist exclusion from educational, political and economic opportunities, for example, as is evidenced by the allegations of widespread election fraud committed in both American presidential elections in 2000 and 20045. In fact inclusiveness in the "demos" has been out of reach for a majority of people throughout the history of

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democracy either because of acts of constitutional law or by social exclusion or both. In Switzerland, for example, as late as 1971, women were disenfranchised from the democratic process by their country's constitution. It wasn't until that year that they were legally allowed the vote and of course it was the same case for all black South Africans in 1994 (Pateman 1989: 211; Worden 2000: 160). So even where there are representative, democratic, albeit non-inclusive, political systems firmly in place, tyranny can still prevail. In the next section I will explore more the models of modern democracy but here let me conclude on the concept of “rule by the people” by saying that this fundamental idea, as with all the other ideas in democratic theories, has been contested and the ideal of a pluralistic, inclusive democratic rule has rarely, if ever, been realised.

Democracy means more than suffrage for most political theorists (and for that matter non-theorists), however, and the rule of law, the recognition for and protection of civil rights, and the presence of civil institutions, including not only churches or community organisations but also, for some thinkers, a market-based economy, are all argued to constitute a democratic society. Political scientist Anthony Arblaster points out that, “...democracy necessarily has implications for social life, and is better regarded as a way of life, and a way of running a whole society, than a mere political device or method” (2002: 60). Yet, concepts about the definition of democracy become even more muddled when terms like “choice” or “freedom” enter into the debate. Part of the confusion often arises when terms around democratic practice are conflated with terms describing capitalism. This is hardly surprising given that the revolutions in European thought and societies, and the spread of these changes to other parts of the world sparked the move from feudalism to democratic governance which enabled the growth of the fledgling capitalist economic system and the advancement of capitalist states (Barber 2003). The lexicon of market economics permeates the conceptual terminology of democracy and has taken over discussions of online democracy as I will show in Chapter Four. It is often said that democracies contain within them a “free market of ideas” and the media are necessary in the trading, selling and buying of information. The free market, however, is not democracy and indeed it is antithetical to it. Democratic political theorist Benjamin Barber asserts that “[m]arket relations are simply not a surrogate for social relations, let alone for democratic social relations” and that capitalist economies are solely dependent upon the subsidies, tax
incentives and robust private sector that democratic governments provide for their success (Barber 2003: 237-238). While capitalism did broaden certain freedoms in democracies, argues Ralph Miliband, “capitalism, for most of its history, was not associated with democracy in any sense at all; and that most of the conservative and liberal defenders of the system were utterly determined to oppose the advancement of democratic reforms” (Miliband 1994: 24, italics in the original). Indeed as I have already shown, the freedoms and individual rights enjoyed in and often attributed to advanced “capitalist democracies” were not secured by those in management, ownership or government but hard fought for and won by minority rights and labour movements. Left theorists of democracy often critique the rhetoric of democracy positioned as a straw man by advocates of the neo-liberal free market, such as economists Milton Friedman and Friedrich Hayek, and those politicians who have adapted their economic theories to determine and justify policy, so much so that “... the confidence in the omnipotence of markets has been transformed into a foreign policy that assumes internationalising markets is tantamount to democratising them” (Barber 2003: 239). As I will show in Chapter Four which explores e-democracy, the rhetoric that frames the democratic potentials of online technologies is often similar to the discussions that conceptualise democracy as a “free market”.

2.2 Liberal and Islamic models of democracy

There are several examples of democratic political systems before the democratic revolutions that swept through Europe in the 17th century and a century later in North America: the Sumerian city-states had organised assemblies; Europe’s oldest, working parliaments, the Tynwald founded in the early ninth century on the Isle of Man and the Althingi, established in Iceland in 930; and the Iroquois League established in 1450 to end warfare and which successfully kept the peace among the League’s five nations for 325 years, are just a few (Bookchin 2005; Friedman 1979; Rousseau and Mueller 1995). I would like my focus here, however, to remain on the Western liberal democratic model as it has developed in the past century since this is within the scope of my thesis and it is the model that has been most criticised by both advocates of Islamically based and radical democracy. Furthermore, it is often a Western, liberal democratic model that is used to conceptualise e-
democracy. In subsequent chapters, primarily in Chapters Six and Seven which concentrate on the Republican Brothers, I will pay closer attention to the history and model of Islamic democracy as proposed by Mahmoud Mohamed Taha. I will present here an introduction to a few key concepts in order to define the differences between the Western liberal and Islamic models of democracy.

2.2.1 Liberal individualism and consensus

Although there is much debate among philosophers, theorists, political scientists, and sociologists as to the different forms that a democracy can and should take, when debates on what democracy is take place in larger public forums outside of academia (but also within), such as in mainstream media, often the definitional framework to discuss “democracy” is modelled upon liberal democratic theory as it has developed in the West. As Carole Pateman argues not only is the term “democracy” assumed to mean “liberal democracy” but that the two terms themselves are often conflated. To avoid these blind spots when conceptualising democracy she proposes that when thinking of liberal democracies we should consider liberal societies as having one democratic element to them, universal suffrage (Pateman 1979, 1985: 5). Here I shall concentrate on “liberal democratic theory” as it is popularly assumed and critiqued.

The groundwork for modern, liberal Western democracies was laid when European societies’ political structures moved from city-states to nation-states, which were more commonly organised around political boundaries rather than a shared ethnic or linguistic identity (this is especially poignant for the states carved out by European colonial powers in Africa or Asia). At the same time as these political transformations were occurring, societies’ social economic configuration transmuted from feudalism to capitalism, most notably catalysed by the English and French revolutions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The French and American revolutions of the eighteenth century are said to have heralded a second wave of legitimacy for and enactment of democratic political systems and the third wave started in the mid-seventies of the twentieth century with the transition to democracy in Greece, Portugal and Spain (Haynes 2001). But it was the philosophies of the Enlightenment where rationality, the idea that an absolute truth exists in the universe that can be uncovered by empirical study, or the scientific method, and that this scientific method...
could also be applied to societies which led to the development of the modern, liberal democratic model in the West and the concept of “modernity”. The Enlightenment sloughed off old ideas and practices, including the reliance on religious faith to explain the world, and helped to shape the modern secular state and liberal democracies (Hackett and Zhao 1998: 16).

This model of liberal democracy places at its core the individual as primary and above all else including the larger society. Anthony Arblaster describes it as “attaching a higher moral value to the individual than to society or to any collective group. ... [The individual] is more real than society” (Arblaster 1984: 15). David Trend (1997: 5) points to the Western notion of the “autonomous subject, capable of free choice and motivated by capitalistic self-interest” as lying at the core of the liberal democratic ethos. Essential to the liberal theory of democracy is that this autonomous subject leads two lives, one public, one private: the “separability of existence into public and private domains” (1997: 5). The isolation of the “individual” from her social context and familial networks is fundamental to liberal democratic theory and its dichotomisation of the public and the private (Pateman 1989: 122). Pateman (1989) notes that often the liberal democratic “individual” is configured as a male “private” individual that enacts his private rights publicly; “he needs a sphere in which he can exercise his rights and opportunities, pursue his (private) interests and protect and increase his property” (122: italics my emphasis). Benjamin Barber describes the “thinness” of liberal, representative democratic theory: “It is concerned more to promote individual liberty than to secure public justice, to advance interests rather than to discover [public] goods, and to keep men safely apart rather than to bring them fruitfully together. As a consequence, it is capable of fiercely resisting every assault on the individual—his privacy, his property, his interests, and his rights—but is far less effective in resisting assaults on community or justice or citizenship or participation” (Barber 1984: 5).

Within liberal democratic theory the rights of the individual are enshrined in the constitution, and defended and refined through the legal system. Accordingly, consensus building on the rights of the individual occurs through public institutionalised deliberations. The deliberation on those rights occur within the “administrative state” or the legislatures and courts in liberal democracies (Dryzek 2000: 26). Ordinary people do not have a direct influence on the administrative state outside of registering their preferences through voting
and developing public opinion that has an indirect influence on policy decisions. In *Between facts and norms* (1996a), Jürgen Habermas's credits the real power of democracy to be contained within judicial and legislative deliberations. He gives more weight to deliberations that occur in legislatures by theorising that it is through the transformation of "communicative power" generated in the public sphere into the 'administrative power' of the state" that democracy takes place (Dryzek 2000: 25). His emphasis on the deliberative process that occurs behind the closed doors of legislative chambers relegates public opinion (grown from deliberations outside the state) to an alienated or subordinate position within the political system:

> "Set communicatively aflow, sovereignty makes itself felt in the power of public discourses. Although such power originates in autonomous public spheres, it *must* take shape in the decisions of democratic institutions of opinion- and will-formation ... [c]ommunicative power is exercised in the manner of a siege. *It influences the premises of judgement and decision making in the political system without intending to conquer the system itself*" (Habermas 1996a: 486-487, italics my emphasis).

The sole goal of deliberation in liberal democracies is to form consensus on policy that reaffirms the democratic institution's sovereignty. Deliberations are used to smooth out differences, to find commonalities and to reach a common ground. Criticism of this liberal deliberative model often falls on the universalising of communicative influence. The unfair advantage of corporate power, say, in the communicative influence on democratic decision making means that individuals with far less power and reach than a corporation will not have the same (or any) influence on how the state makes decisions on policy. It is in these ways that critics of liberal democracy see that the liberal democratic model reinforces the status quo by using the rhetoric of democracy to justify outcomes of legislative procedures that are at best remotely influenced by public opinion and alienated from the "will of the people" (Dryzek 2000; Pateman 1979, 1985).

Western governments and the private industries these governments protect believe resolutely in the legitimacy of the liberal democratic model, perhaps since liberal
democracies have been so successful in creating vast wealth for the Western elites who run those institutions, and who vigorously market (and some say impose) it globally. Western democracies when confronted about their narrow definition by other democracies in Eastern Europe, Africa, Asia, et cetera, often are viewed as taking the low road: “In the current global context, most who advocate democratisation still do not recognize it as an essentially contested concept” and this perceived attitude of the West, either real or imagined, undermines alternative and equally valid interpretations of democracy (Esposito and Voll 1996: 14).

2.2.2 The Umma
Sacrificing the community and the common good, as well as God, for the sake of the individual is precisely what conflicts with Islamic models of democracy. Many in non-Western societies, furthermore, especially those with first-hand experience of Western “democracy” through Western governments’ hegemonic practices both during the periods of colonisation as well as under Cold War and post-Cold War policies, view the predominance of this narrow definition of democracy with suspicion. A common argument held by both Left and Right Islamic political theorists is that the return to Islamic sources to theorise democracy is a reaction against Western hegemony. It is out of the crises of postcolonial and post-Cold War conditions, philosophers and political thinkers such as Al-Afghani, ‘Abdou, Mohammed Iqbal, and Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, conceptualised Islamically based models of democracy, where Islam and modernity are reconciled through a return to the original sources of Islam and Islamic governance and, specifically in Taha’s conception, a scientific application of Islam and a reunification of the individual with society (Ali 2002; Keddie 1983; Mahmoud 2003). It is a return to the sources of identity and cultural practice that those in Islamic societies employ to find their own solutions to the problems of governance in modern societies. Islamic democratic theories maintain that Western democracies have failed not only to live up to their potentials, but have also failed citizens for two reasons: secularism and materialism. According to theories on Islamic democracy a society cannot be just without God or without the umma, an equitable community under God and this is true of Islamic states. As I have outlined in the previous section, part of the confusion over the terminology of Western democracy arises from liberal ideas about
economics. These ideas are summoned to justify what many in Muslim societies see as very undemocratic and nonliberal social practices and policies. Democratic theorist Abdou Filali-Ansary argues for a clarification of the terminology surrounding democracy in general, a clarification first proposed by Mohamed Abed Jabri, which was originally met with great resistance since it was believed his proposal to replace the term "secularisation" with "rational management of collective affairs" and "democratisation" was really a justification for "Westernisation". Filali-Ansary defends Jabri's position by suggesting that when the terminology is extricated from its historical and political contexts, people will be able to understand the true meanings of these terms and not confuse them with Westernisation (Filali-Ansary 1999: 27).

Islamic theories of a just society based on equity are sourced from an early philosopher, al-Farabi (870/256-950/339)\(^6\). A falsafa philosopher, or a Muslim scholar strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, al-Farabi is credited with being the first Muslim philosopher to formulate an Islamic political philosophy and his work is considered a cornerstone of Islamic governance (along with the revealed texts, the Qur'an and the Sunnah). Influenced by Plato's and Aristotle's political theories, al-Farabi built his philosophy on governance for a particular purpose, to govern cities so that the inhabitants live prosperous and happily fulfilling lives (al-Farabi 2001: x, preface). He describes in his aphorisms 57-93 the virtuous city and its inhabitants, built within the framework of his philosophy. For example, in aphorism 58, he explains that the perfect ruler or king would possess all of these qualities: "wisdom, complete prudence, excellent persuasion, excellent imaginative evocation, bodily capability for struggle, and having nothing in his body that prevents him from carrying out the things pertaining to struggle" (2001: 37). Since no one person can carry all of these qualities to perfection, he says therefore that the city should be ruled by a council of "superior rulers and possessors of virtues" and that these qualities are dispersed among this group (2001: 38). This concept is closely aligned with the concept of a caliphate, or representation of God's will through the umma or Muslim community. In aphorism 62, he says that justice has to do with primarily "dividing the shared goods that belong to the inhabitants of the city among them all" (2001: 40). What are these goods and

\(^6\) The first number, the year 870, refers to the Gregorian calendar, and the second number, year 256, refers to the Islamic calendar.
how, exactly, are the goods divided justly? He says that the goods include monies, honour, ranks, security, and any other goods that people can share and that they are divided among the inhabitants in proportion to what each inhabitant deserves to have. "His falling short of that or exceeding is an injustice. His falling short is an injustice upon himself, and his exceeding is an injustice upon the inhabitants of the city. And perhaps his falling short is also an injustice upon the inhabitants of the city" (2001: 41). Al-Farabi's idea of a just society directly contrasts with the individualism prevalent in Western conceptions of democracy: a grave social injustice is done when even one member of the society is either left behind or exceeding in wealth, status or power.

The three principles in Islam that are cited as the foundations of Islamic democratic practice are: shura (consultation), ijma (consensus) and ijtihad (independent interpretative judgement). The concepts of shura, ijma and ijtihad are of particular interest here as the first term, shura means that no decision, public or private, can be made without a mutual consultation and a mutual, collective judgement, or the second concept of ijma. Decisions can also not be made without having the necessary information and knowledge to make them. Ijtihad refers to how those decisions are informed by the interpretative judgement of individual Muslims, and that through ijtihad, Islam is a living religion. Interpretative practices ensure that the broad principles and guidance as handed down by God centuries ago remain relevant to contemporary Islamic communities. Pakistani political thinker Muhammad Iqbal made the link between consensus, democracy and ijtihad: "The growth of republican spirit, and the gradual formation of legislative assemblies in Muslim lands constitutes a great step in advance" (quoted in Esposito and Voll 1996: 29). Iqbal thought that these shifts in decision-making power from the religious elite to the laity were the only way that ijma could exist in modernity and was necessary in reconciling Islam with modernity. The importance of an Islamic democracy's basis existing on ijma is so significant that the "legitimacy of state institutions is not derived from textual sources but is based primarily on the principle of ijma" (1996: 30). This means the laws governing Islamic societies, or Shari'a, should be the result of the three cornerstones, shura, ijma and ijtihad, of Islamic democracy and that rules, laws, and codes are open to debate, interpretation and contestation within an open, public forum.

Another core difference between Western liberal and Islamic conceptions of democracy is based on sovereignty: in the West the individual is sovereign, in Islam
sovereignty is God's alone. There is a profound link between God, political legitimacy and Islamic democracy and this is based on the concepts of *tawhid* (Unity of God), and *khilafat* (caliphate, or representation) where the sovereignty of God is enacted by people on Earth (1996: 23-24). Political theorist Sayyid Abul a'la Mawdudi suggests that we should conceive of this as a theo-democracy, or that under God, all Muslims should have a say in interpreting Islamic law and that it is through the caliphate, "where democracy begins in Islam. Every person in an Islamic society enjoys the rights and powers of the caliphate of God and in this respect all individuals are equal" (quoted in Esposito and Voll 1996: 26). Yet this theory assumes that the society is unified and monolithic under Islam. Spiritual and intellectual leaders and reformers, such as Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, the executed leader of the Sudanese Republican Brotherhood, one of the groups under study in this thesis, challenged this monolithic conception of Islam in contemporary societies and called for reforms to practices to reflect the realities of a pluralistic and diverse society made up of individuals (and the human rights that are enjoyed by individuals), such as the one in Sudan. The Prophet Muhammad, indeed, proposed a constitution for a pluralistic society at Medina, which has become known as the *Constitution of Medina* and laid down guidelines for conflict resolution and community action, for both Muslims and non-Muslims (1996: 40). Some believe that this constitution includes the Qur'an and the Sunnah, while others believe that Shari'a encompasses the whole of the constitution, but there is general agreement that the "basic principles of Islam represent a 'constitution' for Muslim societies" (1996: 41). Islamic democracy it is argued, therefore, can trace its roots not only through the revelations given to the Prophet but also directly from God through the caliphate.

Despite some fundamental differences between Western and Islamic models of democracy, such as whether societies should be organised around individualism and secularism, or based on religious morality and social equity, there are some core principles that are shared. The process of deliberation, of registering one's opinion, and of political legitimacy gained through consensus is shared by both models. Indeed Turkish democratic scholar Bora Kanra argues that the Sufi tradition (in Turkish: *tasavvuf*), due to its practice of "dialoguing with God", has greatly benefited deliberative democracy not only in Islam but in secular democracies as well (2005: 524). The Sufi practice of intensive self-interrogation...
and a communion with God through discourse will be explored in Chapter Six on the spiritual traditions of the Republican Brothers.

In the following section we will explore one aspect of democracies in general, how information and deliberation are theorised and foster political legitimacy in democratic societies and in particular the radical democratic model and its implication for discourse.

2.3 Two turns: Radical democracy and deliberative democracy

2.3.1 Discourse and democracy: The Habermasian public sphere and its critics

In the last decade and a half, political thinkers theorising democracy have taken a decidedly deliberative and radical turn (Dryzek 2000:1). Inspired by the explosion of the new social movements based in difference and identity of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as critical theories such as poststructuralism and postmodernism, and the troubling demise of socialism, many Left intellectuals in the 1990s sought to reconsider liberal democracy and difference through theories about discourse with the aim to develop a new theory of democracy: radical democracy (2000:57). In these discussions serious challenges to and rethinking of the dominance of liberal democratic theory on its premise of individualism, unity, state power and rationality and reconsideration of the nature of power and resistance to power continues through the nexus of deliberative democracy.

Habermas’s deliberation and communication theories, especially his idea of communicative action and a publicly enacted rational-critical discourse, have had a tremendous influence on current discussions on the nature of democracies, especially what is called “deliberative democracy”. We will return to the concept of deliberative democracy in Chapter Four within the literature review of e-democracy but it bears pointing out here that this theory, as well as Habermas’s conception of the “public sphere” has an undeniable prominence within the theoretical, sociological framework of online democracy. Habermas’s (1962, 1989) often cited theory of social change concerns the formation of a bourgeois public sphere and its relationship to the development of democracy and capitalism in modern Europe. Through his examination of the bourgeois public sphere he explores the interplay between information accessibility, deliberation among peers of equal status outside of state control, the rise of public opinion resulting from these interplays and the impact of
public opinion on the democratic process. Primary to his argument is that this deliberation, what he calls "rational-critical discourse", occurs within a public sphere of equals, information (primarily obtained from the news media) is utilised to inform and to validate argued positions, and that the highest and most valued speech that is considered legitimate is one that is rational, fair and balanced (Wilhelm 1999: 169). This deliberative public sphere, according to Habermas, culminated in the eighteenth century when, at its zenith, the "ascending bourgeois classes ... in struggling against the powers of an absolutist state" created a new basis of political power (Dahlgren 1991: 3). Habermas asserts that the rational-critical discourse is the foundation of public opinion and the public sphere as well as being fundamental to modern democratic societies. Public opinion goes onto influence the deliberative action of state legislators and the decisions they make. Yet, the public sphere also keeps a watchful eye on and confronts the state and the power it wields, through access to and use of an "objective" and nonaligned news media. In the liberal democratic and the Habermasian models media fulfils its role as the fourth estate of government. As I have already discussed earlier, Habermas argues that while the deliberations which occur outside of state institutions in the public sphere are critically important to the legitimacy of democracy, they do not form the core of that legitimacy. Ultimately it is the deliberations made by jurists and legislators who enact policy based, in part, on those deliberations that happen in the public sphere (but which cannot determine policy), that is the heart of democracy (Habermas 1996b: 28). The Frankfurt School, of which Habermas is often cited as being a member (as well as a critic of), considered the media's fundamental power to be in its shaping public opinion and building a consensus of legitimacy (Sharrock and Coleman 1999: 1). For Habermas public deliberations now only occur through the mass media which arose during the twentieth century, and this fact signals the decline and demise of the public sphere.

This public is a discursive one constructed through an intersubjective deliberation that has become sheared of any subjectivity upon entering the public sphere, and out of which rationality and consensus arise. "The Habermasian epistemological framework holds that knowledge is not a neutral representation of an objective world "out there", but it is realised through discourse determined by interests" (Chilton and Schäffner 2002: 14, italics in the original). Rationality does not exist in one mind alone or in the way that a single
person argues her position but it is a coordinated construction between people through discourse with the goal towards consensus. This view of the Habermasian public sphere, one that claims he did consider the subject positions of speakers throughout his analysis is not the one held by a majority of his critics. The more common criticism of Habermas's theory is in his universalising of difference.

It is on this quality that Habermas's conception of the public sphere has been criticised for its shortcomings, especially by feminist scholars, and most notably his assumption that rational-critical discourse within the public sphere is one of equity and full access. Most adherents and critics of the Habermasian rational-critical public sphere tend to rely solely on this aspect of his theory to conceptualise democratic culture: that the ideal democratic discourse is one that is disinterested, objective and universalist, and occurs in a public forum accessible to all. Habermas's public sphere, according to Russ Castronovo (2002: 118) for instance, make spectres out of citizens:

“Democratic subjects are narrowed to a thin, historyless performance by dematerialising imperatives that assign a generic personhood to facilitate incorporation into national publics. As Jürgen Habermas explains, persons enter a public sphere in accordance with an “abstract universality” that recognises individuals as equals by subsuming them “in equally abstract fashion, as common human beings”. ... A ghost gains admittance to the public sphere: what enters is a shadowy outline of the historically rich human actor, in short, a spectral citizen in which the texture of memory and particularistic identity are without substance and rendered historically dead” (Castronovo is quoting Habermas 1989: 54).

Nancy Fraser, in another example, cites Habermas's failure to examine the existence of multiple public spheres in confrontation with each other and their role in discourse that successfully challenges state institutions as a major flaw in his theory. Fraser points out that by solely examining the rise and decline of the liberal bourgeois public sphere, the focal point remains obscured and too exclusionary to conceptualise the “plurality of competing publics,” or counterpublics composed of workers, of women, of queers, of slaves, of minority
religions, etc., that exist in democratic as well as nondemocratic societies (Fraser 1992: 111-118). These counterpublics "contested the exclusionary norms of the bourgeois public, elaborating alternative styles of political behaviour and alternative norms of public speech" (116). In his excellent analysis of the Habermasian public sphere through theorising counterpublics Michael Warner (2002) does not reject Habermas's public sphere outright but rather develops a theory of what he calls counterpublics. Warner's starting point is a "public", and not a public sphere, and this starting point helps to explain counterpublics. For Warner both publics and counterpublics constitute more than a "space" where strangers converge and deliberate, rather it is a group identity constructed through discourse. Both publics and counterpublics share the same traits: the circulation of a group's ideology through discourse is fundamental to the transformation of that group into a "counterpublic" within "the public" and to exert their influence on "the public" (106). Some of Warner's criteria for the social construction of a counterpublic are necessarily circular: that counterpublics are discursive; they self-organise through discourse; they entreat their discourse to strangers; there is ambiguity in who is being addressed (the discourse addresses a particular and a universal at the same time); and inclusiveness in the counterpublic occurs simply by paying attention (89). It is through Warner's counterpublics that Fraser's "subaltern" speak.

Another problem with the Habermasian public sphere, these critics say, is its construction of false boundaries between the "public" and the "private", and how this distinction between the two not only determines who can speak but what can be spoken about and in what ways can issues be discussed. If the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas theorised was a place where private citizens came together to discuss political and economic issues within an Enlightenment framework of a public sphere of rational disinterestedness and universality, and not one of subjectivity or particularity, as an ideal form of discourse, this meant that the discourses of women, the very subjective experience of being female in male dominated societies, were automatically excluded from influencing public opinion. Joan Landes notes that "Habermas overlooks the strong association of women's discourse and their interests with "particularity", and conversely the alignment of masculine speech with truth, objectivity and reason. Thus, he misses the masquerade through which the (male) particular was able to posture behind the veil of the universal"
In other words Habermas never addressed or scrutinised his own modernist assumptions about rationality and universality and their utilisation in discourse, at least in *Structural Transformation*. Habermas himself, however, is critical of how bourgeois discourse developed and acknowledges that there are several public spheres, some that seek to be legitimised by the state, others that react against it (1989: 129-140). But Habermas’s taking for granted a public sphere where the discourse exists among equals has been challenged by feminists theorists for whom the blatant inequality of the bourgeois public is too obvious to ignore (Benhabib 1995, 1997; Dean 2001; Landes 1995).

Seyla Benhabib (1997), for instance, challenges Habermas’s contention that in late-capital societies the distinction between private and public lives is breaking down due to state and capitalistic intervention and suggests, rather, that this blurring of borders between public and private is due to the *agency* of oppressed groups challenging institutions of power, and shifting and renegotiating those boundaries. She asserts that the “struggle to make something public is a struggle for justice” (79). Benhabib makes a few assumptions that are necessary to conceptualising a deliberative model of democracy. Firstly, that there is a “value-pluralism” or a diverse universe of ideas of what is “good”. Secondly, she asserts that the deliberative model proceeds not only from a conflict over values, but also a conflict of interests. Thirdly, she assumes that in contemporary societies it is impossible to carry out these deliberations on a publicly massive and collective scale. She argues that the legitimacy of the plurality of discourses, which occur in many places and at different levels that cross and intersect each other in a network of contestation, must be maintained in a deliberative model (Benhabib 1996: 73). She calls the network a “plurality of modes of association” and describes the procedure of deliberation there as an overlapping and interlocking network of contestation and argumentation (74). Deliberation is a process to be informed, since no individual can possibly possess all the necessary knowledge on a given issue or perspective; it is through deliberation that we gain more information and clarify interpretations (71).

Democratic theorist Iris Marion Young takes the Habermasian public sphere to task on this issue of valued speech, where certain argumentational styles and a command of learned argumentative behaviours are privileged. For example, the model sets out that “the most reasoned and best argument wins”. This means that certain styles of speech are
privileged over others, primarily a more "confrontational and assertive" style (read: male) rather than a style that is "tentative, exploratory, or conciliatory" (read: female) (Young 1996: 123; comments in parentheses mine). Instead of conceiving politics within a deliberative model, she suggests a more inclusive and more accurate description would be a communicative democracy which is not based on argumentation alone but privileges all forms of communication to reach understanding (1996: 125). Whereas the Habermasian deliberative democracy assumes a starting position of unity, because the theory "brackets" or suspends differences and inequities in order to engage in deliberation, communicative democracy assumes a position of plurality and recognises that difference and inequality are never suspended. A pluralistic, diverse, and contested public sphere is preferable in deliberative democracies, Young contends, where there is often little or no unity, and where the goal of deliberations is not necessarily to reach a consensus but rather to reach an understanding of one's own position, to clarify, to deepen and to engage in critical self-reflection on personal views. Indeed, in his examinations of deliberative democracy in Turkey, Bora Kanra contends that more consideration needs to be given to the social learning and "interpretative actions of participants" within deliberative democratic systems with less emphasis on decision making outcomes (Kanra 2005: 519). For Kanra and other deliberative democratic theorists, it is the interpretative process rather than a means to an end that is most significant.

These feminist challenges (and those of other social movements that employ protest and actions to "speak") to reconsider rationality and argumentation, and the terms that make discourse "democratic", are often met with hostility by the state. Let us for a moment consider the following statement: When asked his opinion of political satire aimed at US President George W. Bush on the BBC's Radio 4, Frank Gaffney, assistant secretary of defence under the Reagan Administration had this to say: "It cheapens the political debates, it obscures the political debate. I think it affords people an outlet for their anger that is rather less susceptible to constructive action. Whereas if you're talking about the policy choices and you can debate those on their merits that seems to me to be what a functioning and responsible democracy is all about". Gaffney's opinion falls in line with many who believe that, within democratic public spheres, there is only room for one kind of deliberation, one way of speaking. Many argue that deliberations should always be rational,
but what if certain forms of deliberation that are considered irrational—like terrorism, violence, protest, or satire—are in fact just as rational. Vail and White show in their research on the history of Southern African praise poetry, for example, court praise poets risked their lives when they criticised despotic kings through the satirical metaphors in their poetry even though it was the only acceptable way for the king's subjects' complaints to be heard (Vail and White 1991). The praise poets, who were very aware of the sufferings of the people under their despotic ruler, used the only means available to them to have the voices of the community heard. In fact there may be much rationality underlying the decision to invoke violence to engage in a conversation with societies and states: it sends a strong message and demands some kind of response, albeit usually an equally violent one. In her essay "Debating Muslims", in which Adeline Masquelier describes a conflict that occurred in a mosque in a Nigerien town between traditionalists (the Tijian Sufi order) and reformists ("Izala" an Islamic fundamentalist group) to speak to larger issues of Islamic identity, civil society and pluralism in Niger, she argues that in order to discuss these issues within a Nigerien context, a definition based on a:

"more extensive and diffuse domain of social discourse and practice in which ordinary Nigeriens have the possibility of imagining an alternative modernity. Broadening the concept in such a way allows us to focus on issues of power and gender, identity and morality, citizenship and egalitarianism that are emerging and contemplated in the context of the Izala discourse. And if the concept of civil society is to be of any value to an analysis of the politics of Islamic identity in Niger, it must define and describe a plural—rather than a uniform and unitary—political space" (Masquelier 1999:226).

So Masquelier suggests that it is only by broadening a discursive space that is pluralistic, where issues about power and democracy within an Islamic identity can be addressed. What is also suggested is that when discourse is agonistic, a struggle over the interpretation of social life and politics between adversaries, new knowledge and understanding is constructed and allowed to arise. Furthermore, it is through the process of deliberation for
its own sake, and not necessarily for the sake of making decisions, that social learning can take place (Kanra 2005: 519).

It is a democracy based on pluralism, not only in a diversity of individuals but in a diversity of "subject positions", and conflict that theorist Chantal Mouffe describes as a "radical and plural democracy", one that "rejects the very possibility of a nonexclusive public sphere of rational argumentation where a noncoercive consensus could be attained. By showing that such a consensus is a conceptual impossibility, it does not put in jeopardy the democratic ideal as some would argue ... In a democratic polity, conflicts and confrontations, far from being a sign of imperfection, indicate that democracy is alive and inhabited by pluralism" (Mouffe 1996a: 255). Setting limits on what should be considered rational and legitimate deliberation as well as where those deliberations should take place is in direct opposition to the positions of thinkers like Benhabib, Fraser, Young and Mouffe. The plurality of political expression from all sectors of society—both those who are equal and less so—is precisely what makes a democracy vigorous, its ability to tolerate and accommodate many different ways of engaging in the conversation, many different kinds of conversations, modes of addressing the public and stating one's viewpoint.

A feature worthy to note in the analysis of deliberative democracy is that throughout the literature the "deliberation" part of the democratic model is never explained. What is deliberation in the first place? It is rarely made explicit. A reader of the literature, of course, assumes that deliberation means people speaking to one another, but how and in what context—this is not explicated in the theory. Is it spoken conversations occurring face to face among familiairs or is the political speeches of politicians broadcast on television or posts written on a political online bulletin board, or is it all of these? Habermas in the second half of his *Structural Transformation* is clear about what kind of deliberations were more empowering than others, ones that occur face to face as opposed to those that are mediated. In the twentieth century Habermas claims that these deliberations were mediated by mass media, especially television, to detrimental effect. Deliberative democratic theorists have honed in on the weaknesses they see in Habermas's analysis, primarily what they call the bracketing of difference but they rarely ever address how deliberations occur in late twentieth and early twenty-first societies, that is, that nowadays deliberations are not always spoken, rarely occur face to face and are highly mediated either through text, images, or
through a communications technology, such as the Internet. This analytical lacuna is most apparent in the e-democracy literature as will be explored more deeply in Chapter Seven on the online discursive culture of the Republican Brothers.

2.3.2 Radical democracy and its implications for deliberative democracy

The concept of radical democracy was first theorised and suggested by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their seminal work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985, 2001). In their examination of twentieth century political hegemony and socialist democracy, Laclau and Mouffe proposed that radical democracy is an ideology that unifies liberal democracy and socialism, where both have failed as systems on their own. Liberal democracy grew out of a perception that state power encroaches on individual liberty and underlines the autonomy of the individual whereas socialism envisioned a transition from a capitalist-based political system to one that is based on equitable material distribution and the interests of the society as a whole.

The struggles over identity and difference have overshadowed debates about social justice since the 1960s when the new social movements which were centred on difference and human rights, such as feminism, the Black Power and indigenous peoples' rights movements, had a tremendous influence on radical social theorists during the last decade of the twentieth century. It is around these struggles over identity and recognition that the discursive nature of Warner's counterpublics are organised (2002). Recognising the subjective complexities of counterpublics, Laclau and Mouffe suggest that relationships of power and subjugation are not described in a simple binary terminology and antagonism primarily since subject positions are relative and shift and, significantly, until the terminology of rights exist, there is no conflict with subjugated positions: “‘Serf’, ‘slave’, and so on, do not designate in themselves antagonistic positions; it is only in the terms of a different discursive formation, such as ‘the rights inherent to every human being’, that the differential positivity of these categories can be subverted and the subordination be constructed as oppression” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 2001:154). Separately, Mouffe has challenged essentialist positions to describe identity, particularly those identities that are subjugated, for the reason that “there can never be a closed system of differences … [rather] approach it as a plurality, dependent on the various subject positions through which it is constituted within
various discursive formations. The “identity” of such a multiple and contradictory subject is therefore always contingent and precarious” (Mouffe 1992: 372, italics my emphasis). In order to understand how radical democratic politics work, “abandoning the idea of a unity subject, and its source and the origins of its meanings … it requires conceiving the social agent as constituted by a multiplicity of subject positions whose articulation is always precarious and temporary” (Mouffe 1996b: 25). Bruce Baum employs the example of the conflict over meanings about female genital mutilation between Western and African feminists to show that the essentialist category of “woman” is problematic for the very reason that the subject positions of being a “woman” are mutable (Baum 2004: 1081-1085).

Above all else, as Laclau and Mouffe theorise it, discourse is the fundamental and totalising element in the radical democratic model. Discourse constructs not only the field of discussion but the object of discussion; there is no reality or truth external to discourse:

“The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse had nothing to do with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition. An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of “natural phenomena” or “expressions of the wrath of God”, depends upon the structuring of the discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but rather the different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive conditions of emergence” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 2001: 108, italics in the original).

Laclau and Mouffe suggest that it is only when the discursive milieu becomes democratic that subordination becomes untenable, “[o]ur thesis is that it is only from the moment when the democratic discourse becomes available to articulate the different forms of resistance to subordination that the conditions will exist to make possible the struggle against different types of inequality” (154). It is only when we have the terms to describe oppression and, at the same time, idealise what should be for all of us that we can resist oppression. The
conditions for discourse as well as the discourse itself are central to radical democratic theory. What these radical democratic thinkers suggest is that it is not the state that oppresses individuals but it is *culture* above all else that is oppressive, that we are all complicit in subordinating others, and that this subordination is expressed discursively (Baum 2004).

Furthermore it is around struggles over difference, and recognition and respect by the larger society of those differences that resistance against this diffuse power (which is nonetheless hegemonic) is most apparent. For groups such as those fighting for gender rights, as one example, this point is exceptionally poignant. The cultural politics surrounding the 2004 US presidential election where President George W. Bush was awarded a second term provides an excellent example of how discursive constructions intercede politically and culturally. When exit pollsters asked those who voted for Bush why they voted for him, 35 percent of those who responded said that they were voting for the moral agenda (2004)\(^7\). The phrase “moral agenda” in this election was popularly read as the issue of gay marriage, where Bush proposed to amend the American Constitution to state that marriage is only legally recognised as an institution between a man and a woman. During the election, 11 states placed a gay marriage ban referendum on the presidential ballot which overwhelmingly passed in each state. Now, gay and lesbian rights groups as well as feminist groups concerned with challenging traditional gender roles have to continue to contend with an Administration that takes advantage of cultural issues to make political gains in a *cultural* environment that is openly hostile towards recognising their fundamental rights to the "good life" that is a given for straight people. Judith Butler challenged Nancy Fraser on this very point; whether the fight for gay and lesbian rights is a “merely” cultural struggle and not one over the gendered reproduction of capitalist modes of production and redistribution. Butler points out that by ensuring that the material benefits of heterosexual marriage can never be enjoyed by gay, lesbian and transgendered people, challenges to capitalist hegemony will never see the light of day (Butler 1997b: 272-273).

\(^7\) The Exit Polls were conducted by Edison Media Research and Mitofsky International for the National Election Pool, a coalition of six American mainstream media companies. The polls (N=12,219) were conducted in all 50 states and in the District of Columbia at 250 polling stations by questionnaire or by telephone (for the 500 voters polled who cast an absentee ballot). More information on the poll can be found at exit-poll.net.
The radical democratic model is part of a larger trend in thinking about power and politics and forms part of what Kate Nash calls the new political sociology, where a seismic change in the social sciences has decentred and expanded the definition of politics away from a cohesive nation-state and to a diverse and conflictual society (Nash 2001b). No longer can politics be described as the state set against society, in the new political sociology, “politics is a potential in social life itself”, where groups and individuals vie for recognition (2001b: xi). Furthermore, as Andrew Barry shows in Political Machines (2001: 206-207), political institutions are resolutely "anti-political" in the sense that they seek to contain and restrict dissent, and validate only narrow conditions within which the "political" can occur. Therefore fresh considerations for what is political, outside of the old dichotomies, are necessary to comprehend the complexities of twenty-first century politics.

Some describe this new political sociology and democratic as post-Marxist and postliberal (Hekman 1996; Martin 2003). Post-Marxist in the sense that class struggle can no longer adequately provide all the answers for social transformation or be employed to describe sufficiently the new social movements emerging during the 1960s and 1970s. Postliberal in the sense that politics and the nation-state are not the only ways that societies are engaged in power relationships, as feminist theorists (based on Michel Foucault's work on power) have argued that power is everywhere and nowhere in societies (Foucault 1980).

Nash attributes much of this definition to the influence of Michel Foucault’s notion of power, that power is productive of subjectivity or, in other words, of identity (Foucault 2000; Nash 2001b). Foucault suggests that to understand power we should look at the forms of resistance and attempts made to disassociate these relations (Foucault 2000: 11). This resistance is discursive (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 2001: 152-153). He defines the subject “as someone who is subject to someone else by control and dependence; and as tied to his own identity by a conscience or self knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to” (12). Foucault asserts that to understand power we need to understand how power is resisted, and he defines struggle as being “against forms of domination; against exploitation which separate individuals from what they produce; or against that which ties the individual to himself and submits him to others in this way (struggles against subjugation, subjectivity and submission)” (12). The power of the state previously, or mostly, is perceived as a power that ignores the individual and looks “only at
the interests of the totality... the state's power (and that's one of the reasons for its strength) is both an individualizing and a totalizing form of power, [t]o govern in this sense is to structure the possible field of action of others" (13-21).

If, as I have discussed, Habermas's public sphere is a site of persuasive deliberation and unity built through consensus, then radical democracy's public sphere is a site of intense contention, crackling with strife, conflict, struggle and inconclusiveness; a discursive site where publics and counterpublics contend for a hegemonic positioning of their own ideology (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 2001; Warner 2002). Habermas's public sphere is a gathering place, generally exclusive and reserved for those who speak rationally and for those who are media literate, free from state control where participants can challenge the state's hegemony, especially its hegemonic discourse, in society. Radical democratic theorists do not recognise that hegemony is solely or exclusively held by the state, in fact, the entire notion of the singular sovereignty of the nation-state in an era of late capitalism and globalisation is in crisis since the state increasingly shares its power with other political (and globalised) institutions (Nash 2001a: 83-84). Power is everywhere and nowhere and participants in this public sphere struggle against the strictures of rationality, scientific knowledge of the Enlightenment and liberal democracy. The radical democratic public sphere is messy, cacophonous, and never an idealised place. At its core radical democracy seeks to describe a system rather than to idealise it. Deliberative democracy, then, according to radical democratic theory is a political and cultural process of contending discourses vying to become hegemonic and at the same time, resisting hegemony.

2.4 Conclusions

As I have previously suggested recognition of individual and group human rights does not grow out of a consensus society but is carved out in a space of intense contention. It is precisely this societal conflict according to theorists of radical democracy that makes a society democratic. These struggles over recognition have been extensively discussed by several feminist democratic theorists (Benhabib 2002; Butler 1997b; Fraser 1997; Fraser and Honneth 2003; Gutmann and Taylor 1992). In fact, theories of recognition have come to dominate most contemporary discussions on democracy and pluralism. The politics of
recognition are premised on the realities of a pluralistic society where minority groups or marginalised populations are no longer willing to pay the price of equality by assimilating to the values and norms of the majority (Fraser and Honneth 2003: 7). Recognition is the struggle for social justice, no longer rooted in a redistribution of societies’ resources, but in the validation of different claims to truth and to existence. Public recognition is not just about fair distribution of resources or opportunities among all groups within a society, it is about how differences between groups are interpreted and valued by the society (Baum 2004: 1073). These struggles could not be possible without the twentieth century’s philosophical and political innovation in theorising and constituting universal human rights.

Mouffe in her discussion of radical democracy and the deepening of the “democratic project of modernity” suggests that the abandonment of the rational-critical public sphere is critical to understanding our social conditions in postmodernity:

“Our societies are confronted with the proliferation of political spheres which are radically new and different and which demand that we abandon the idea of a unique constitutive space of the constitution of the political...[m]any ... seem to believe that we belong only to one community, defined empirically and even geographically, and that this community could be unified by a single idea of the common good. But we are in fact always multiple and contradictory subjects, inhabitants of a diversity of communities...constructed by a variety of discourses, and precariously and temporarily sutured at the intersection of those subject positions. ...[The radical democratic project] requires us to abandon the abstract universalism of the Enlightenment, the essentialist conception of a social totality, and the myth of the unitary subject” (Mouffe 1993: 20-21).

Her commentary is also suggestive of what we will be exploring in the following two chapters, on the role of mediated information and communication, and new communications technologies in democratic societies. Both chapters consider how the political is communicated through journalism and new technologies, especially the Internet. I will demonstrate that Mouffe’s suggestion that we abandon the Enlightenment’s “abstract
universalism", "social totality", and the "unitary subject" in order to conceive of a more complex idea of democracy has been difficult to fulfil or even to consider by many social scientists considering mediated political communication in Western democracies.
In large, dispersed and diverse societies, how do people engage politically, with each other and with the political system? One prevalent idea is that participation is necessarily mediated through journalism and mass media, and that through the sharing of common experiences through the media, people participate in democracy. We cannot be at every rally, every party conference or news event that journalists report on. As users of news journalism, we rely on journalists to act as our mediators between those who make the news and us. We rely on the media to understand the position of legislators who represent us in parliaments and congresses, and to communicate those positions to us. We can only know that something happened or something was said because it was reported in the news media. In this chapter, I will review very briefly the history of the development of modern journalism and the theories that link journalism and democracy. I also examine the liberal democratic ideals for journalism as the fourth estate and the critiques of this notion by journalists and media theorists calling for more radical approaches to news journalism.

3.1 Information and communication in democracies

The debates about the role of information and communication in democracies can be better understood by examining the development of the mass distribution of printed materials and journalism. This history is as long as democracy's history as a philosophical entity and a political reality and as the history of both show, developed conterminously, with both having a common thread. Democracy and journalism within a large, diverse society mediate between people and between constituents and politicians, since given the enormity of the population, it is impossible for face-to-face political communication to take place. Media usage, therefore, is the primary way in which people in a mass society can engage
politically with one another and with political institutions. Of course there are many different paths we could take to examine journalism and its position in democracies, such as the development of the underground press or media activism movements. I want to remain focused here, however, on two dominant features of the theories about news journalism: journalism as a confrontation with the state and its role in the formation of public opinion; and the other antithetical position that contends that the media reproduce the ideologies of the capitalist state apparatus, state here meaning the political and social institutions, such as governments and corporations, that collude to advance their own elitist agendas at the expense of a democratic political culture (Althusser 1971; Bagdikian 2004; Herman and Chomsky 1988; McChesney 1999; Schiller 1992).

Through the following examinations of the development of print journalism in Europe and its roles in societies I shall show that the poles between the two positions are not as wide as popularly asserted and, indeed, there is no "bright line" separating the two. Evidence of one information and communication technology, written language, dates back to at least 3500 BC when the Sumerians pressed signs into clay and thus recorded major events, primarily of the rulers, suggests that the groundwork for a dichotomy to emerge between the official and countervailing positions propagated through media was laid early. Of course there were other systems that predate written language to record official history and events—hieroglyphics, bas-relief on buildings, monumental sculptures to name a few—but written language represents an early technological innovation in information distribution because it was much more efficient and portable compared with earlier conventions. In Europe before the advent of mass communications in the seventeenth century, for example, official power was represented by publicity or public, ostentatious displays of might and wealth, such as the wearing of heraldry, which was reserved only for the monarchy and aristocracy (Habermas 1989: 1-12).

Johann Gutenberg invented moveable type in 1450, and while it is popularly considered the invention that radically transformed European communication, archaeological evidence in Crete shows that moveable type was invented as early as 1700 BC, made from a clay disk holding 45 smaller pieces which were pressed into clay slabs. Similar inventions of moveable clay type were also employed China, Persia and Egypt as early as 1045 AD, but up until the Gutenberg press, most publications were made by a
much slower process of either being copied by hand on vellum or paper or by being printed from large wooden or stone blocks (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000: 3). These printing technologies meant that only a relatively few copies could be made at great expense, and as a result, only an elite few could read and have access to printed materials and subsequently, to information. Most information before moveable type was transmitted either by word of mouth or by private letters at markets, fairs, church gatherings, and other public events and private gatherings. Before the development of mass communications, formerly news distribution was directly tied to the state and political activities. One of the earliest news publications is Acta Diurna, a hand-written gazette of the Roman Forum, published regularly between 59 BC and 222 AD. The Acta Diurna reported on senate votes and general news, and were copied by scribes for redistribution across the Roman Empire (2000: 1). In other parts of the world, such as countries under the control of the Ottoman Empire (1299 to 1923), official state information was transmitted through mosques during Friday prayers and by a network of munadi, public criers, employed throughout the empire to transmit official proclamations (Ayalon 1995: 4). This system of official state information controlled the development of newspapers in Arabic speaking countries until the late nineteenth century (Ayalon 1995).

It was Gutenberg’s invention that revolutionised information distribution and since information was much more accessible to a larger population, more people became literate. The new literate mass audience ready and hungry for information hailed the emergence of news journalism. The invention of moveable type was also very timely. As European powers expanded their economic, political, and cultural influence globally through a new era of European colonisation, publication and distribution of information and news events was enabled on a massive scale by moveable type. Reports from far-off colonies, where new economic interests, such as plantations and mines, were vital for early capitalists concerned about their investments in land, slaves and natural resources to stay apprised of events affecting their interests. Flysheets, or small one-sided imprints on a single sheet of paper, were printed as early as 1415 and used woodblocks. Reproductions of letters allegedly written by Christopher Columbus were published as flysheets and distributed throughout Central Europe in 1493 and around the same time banking houses and other financial institutions regularly published newsletters through a similar method (Emery, Emery, and
Roberts 2000: 7). By 1490 every large European city had at least one moveable-type printing press. Most news travelled by the new, private postal system in the form of letters and single sheet bulletins and this information was highly prized and jealously guarded primarily by the new mercantile class that was emerging in the seventeenth century (Habermas 1989).

Resulting from these transformations news journalism arose in Europe in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Presses in several European countries were publishing corantos, or single page newsheets which only reported on foreign news (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000: 7-10). The first domestic news reports to be printed and widely distributed began when Westminster clerks published the proceedings of Parliament in England in 1628. These early, published accounts grew to be known as diurnals, daily reports of local news (2000: 12). A daily German newspaper established in 1616 is considered the world’s first and oldest newspaper. From its beginnings, news journalism arose not only as a direct result of improvements in printing technology but also as a consequence of several interacting factors such as changes in political culture and social structures, the rise of capitalism, the development and improvement of roads and postal services, a rise in literacy rates, and a growing popular desire to read reports on not only developments in government but also events affecting financial interests. It is safe to say, at least for the sake of the arguments here, that the development of capitalism helped to spur the growth of journalism as a definable and distinct institution and one that is intricately tied to the state and to capital, simply because information on daily events was needed by participants in the new economies to make both economic and political decisions.

While the advent of print was momentous for the rise of international commerce and considered to be the “connective tissue” of modernity, it was even more momentous for the masses of people who were not a part of the feudal elite or the Church. Quite early in the spread of the new printing technology after its invention in 1450, it became obvious that a revolution was under way which threatened the established power structures, so measures were taken to limit the powers of the press and indeed to co-opt them (Habermas 1989: 20-21). William Tyndale was forced to print his version of the Bible, written in vernacular English which thus overturned Latin’s (and Rome’s) tight grip on the word of God, outside of his native England in 1526 in continental Europe and 6,000 copies were smuggled back into
England (Bragg 2003: 108). Tyndale lived the life of the hunted, on the run from both King Henry VIII's and the Church's assassins, and was finally captured and executed for heresy in the Netherlands in 1536 (2003: 111). Print and literacy offered the possibility to individuals not a part of the noble or religious classes to create their own interpretative communities, to develop their own knowledge and disperse that knowledge, and to challenge the feudal political system's monopoly over interpretations (Ewen and Ewen 1997: 4-7). In the words of media historians Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen (1997)：“Literacy and access to the printed word were cardinal elements in the overturning of social systems predicated on popular ignorance” and the power elite of the day understood its significance (1997: 7). Queen Mary attempted to control what was printed by founding the Stationers Company in 1556, which served to regulate and control the work of printers (Emery, Emery, and Roberts 2000: 9; SNMC 2004).

Many authorities followed suit and thus developed a partisan press that was under official control until well into the eighteenth century with the rise of the commercially based “penny press” (Hackett and Zhao 1998). It was also during the pre-Revolutionary days in the British colonies in America or in European coffee houses and parliamentary reporters' galleries that a counterpublic of dissent through print was emerging as the ideologies of republicanism, democracy and print were inextricably linked by the pamphleteers, court reporters and parliament ministers alike (Sparks 1992: 278-279; Warner 1990: 97-117). Michael Warner (1990) shows that the American revolutionary writer, printer and eventual president John Adams regarded printing as a technology of enlightenment (with a capital “E”): “while [Adams] argues that learning and the press bring about changes in the political world, Adams assumes that printing's purposes, uses, and meaning do not themselves undergo change. If [the press] were variable in its nature, it might in some circumstances support despotism rather than liberty, and the history of enlightenment would lack a propulsive logic” (1990: 4). Thus the concept of the inevitability of democratic politics and the press as well as a historic progression towards liberation through communication technologies were formulated hundreds of years ago. Warner eruditely shows how print is teleologically infused with republican ideology and an internal democratic logic was construed quite early in its development by the users and makers of print.
Jürgen Habermas argues that a commercial press was only viable after the establishment of constitutionally based democratic states in places like Britain and France and notes that with this transition from a privately funded and ideologically based press to one that was in business to make a profit, polemical coverage of events was abandoned and replaced, comparatively, with more "objective" and balanced reporting. These changes meant that the press was considered more of a public organ, and as a result, was intricately implicated in external forces that looked to exert their own interests through the press (Habermas 1989: 184-185).

3.2 Informed choices, distant politics, mediated democracy

From the start in the rise of communication and information technologies, the nature of media has been a site of power struggles. There is a multiplicity of the meaning for the printed word, that it could lead to, for example, a reordering of the power elite but that power, none the less, remains in the hands of a powerful minority or that it could lead a diffusion of power to the "masses". That journalism over the last five centuries has taken on multiple and contested meanings as to what it should be is besides the point, the history of journalism shows that the institution as it is practiced has been intricately woven into the capitalistic economic fabric from its founding. In fact, according to many media theorists, the advancement of capitalism would not have occurred without journalism (Ewen and Ewen 1997; Habermas 1989). Indeed it was the development of an independent (from the state), commercial press during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that finally liberated information and news from the hands of the state (Habermas 1989). Journalism according to liberal democratic theory acts as the fourth estate to governmental, and in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, corporate power. A prevalent idea advanced in many Western democracies is the notion that the press stands outside of political structures and institutions, making it therefore an objective and disinterested third party which acts as a watchdog of the power of governments and institutions (Sparrow 1999: 3). This notion that the press are a fourth estate coincided with the rise of a commercial press in the nineteenth century. The term was introduced by T.B. Macaulay in 1828 when he wrote (rather negatively) of the press gallery in parliament: "The gallery in which the reporters sit has
become a *fourth estate* to the realm. The publication of debates, a practice which seemed full of danger to the great safeguards of public liberty, is now regarded by many persons as a safeguard tantamount, and more than tantamount, to all the rest together" (cited in Sparks 1992: 278, italics my emphasis).

But within this history, as it took a turn in the twentieth century with the persistent rise of media monopolies, lies an incredible contradiction: that the commercial press would consider its primary goal of the news media to be a public service in a democracy rather than to consider itself as any other business in a capitalist economy, which is forced to make prudent decisions in order to maximise profits and remain competitive (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 1999, among others). This is of course not the case in the twenty-first century. The private news media are businesses first and foremost, their primary and ultimate goal is to provide profits for shareholders, and if there is a secondary benefit to the larger society then it is a residual effect. Moreover given the inextricable relationship in capitalist economies between business and the state, where the state acts for corporate interests, it is even more incongruous that the belief in a commercial news media that acts as a critical watchdog of state power continues to enjoy credence. Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky in their seminal work *Manufacturing Consent* (1988) present a wholly different picture of media's role in democracies. They describe the commercial media as a propaganda model for the state and big business through several case studies on American media coverage of conflicts in Central America and Southeast Asia where US official foreign policy and covert operations were deeply entrenched and implicated in the regions' political realities. Their conclusion, drawn from the research is that the media, while serving a "societal purpose" in Western democracies, is far from independently seeking the truth as a fourth estate, and are complicit in propagating the justifications of Western governments' imperialistic policies in developing countries (1988: 298). The media do this by making editorial decisions and framing news coverage and debates "within the bounds of acceptable premises" that favour the state (298). Furthermore, many critics see the rise of the political persuasion industries, namely the public relations and advertising industries, as detrimental to media's democratic function, and call for an expansion on journalism's role in society (Ewen 1996).
James Curran describes two prevailing theories about journalism and its part in democracy, a classical liberal approach and a model based in radical democratic theory (1991). The classical liberal theory is the most familiar one, where journalism distributes information necessary for citizens of a democracy to make rational political choices during elections and support the development of independent public opinion by providing a space for deliberation free from state control—the fourth estate. Curran describes the radical approach's view of media as "a battleground for contending forces" and not as a space for consensus (Curran 1991: 29). Howard Tumber (2001) contends that journalism faces two pressures in its ability to perform this function. From one side it has pressure from media conglomerates and from the other side it faces extreme competition from the Internet for journalism’s, until now, exclusive role in providing information to citizens. Tumber blames the 24-hour news cycle, due to the demands of the “always-on” Internet and cable broadcast news, as exacerbating the problem of legitimacy in journalism, where the “information revolution” on the Internet emphasises “speculation and argument [rather] than about gathering information” (Tumber 2001: 98). He suggests that journalists need to develop a stouter theory of democracy specifically to address their roles within democracies (109).

Curran observes, however, that the fourth estate theory of media oversimplifies notions of where power resides in a society, that is, the liberal theory assumes power is held solely by the state and not by other agents, such as capitalistic and paternalistic ones outside of government (Curran 1991: 29). He suggests, rather, that the media are sites of competing forces, in a struggle over keeping a balance of all interests in a democratic society, especially those interests that have less access to the public sphere (30). From the radical democratic perspective, the media are a “complex articulation of vertical, horizontal and diagonal channels of communication between individuals, groups and power structures” (31). According to the radical democratic theory the media are a network of exchanges over which competing messages representing pluralistic interests vie for recognition and acceptance. This theory is related to a trend of the past decade in promoting “civic” or “public journalism” or news reporting that involves advocacy on issues and encourages community participation in local issues. The claim of public journalism is that it provides a “voice to the voiceless” and this concept will be explored more in Chapter Eight.
journalism dovetails into another theory of journalism's role in a democracy, that journalism provides citizens with information necessary to formulate public opinions and make informed political decisions. Alexis de Tocqueville believed that both democracy and journalism were necessarily intertwined, that without newspapers unifying the activities and opinions of citizens in a democratic culture there could be no functioning democratic system. When he examined the role of newspapers in the burgeoning American democracy he found that the more numerous the local powers the more prolific the newspapers (de Tocqueville 1994: vol. 2, 111-114). Another example can be found in the relatively recent development of opinion pages in newspapers. In 1970 The New York Times published its first opinion-editorial (op-ed) page in decades, which had been unpopular (and virtually nonexistent) with most American newspapers, in order to reinvigorate the public political dialogue. The section's popularity quickly set a trend; it is unimaginable today that a newspaper would not have an op-ed page (Rosen 1996: 1). Journalism can, therefore, provide a forum where people can "consider their different, and potentially conflicting, interests" and enrich political democratic culture (Haas 2001: 127).

3.3 Media's reproduction of ideology: Laying the foundations for Babel

As I have already shown in Chapter Two, liberal democratic theory tends to determine the discussions over the nature of democracy, which pitches politics in a narrowly defined, dichotomist relationship between state institutions, namely government and private enterprise, and its citizens. In this model the media as it exists in the public sphere is a neutral space from which citizens check the state's power and which mediates between the two polar positions of "the rulers" and "the ruled".

This approach to power extends to the liberal democratic theory of journalism which is premised on notions of an objective truth, much like the Enlightenment notion of truth, existing "out there" and which only requires a journalist using a scientific methodology to uncover it for the benefit of the unknowing public. While many journalists argue that objectivity is fundamental to their practice and is what distinguishes their work from the work of propagandists, media critics and sociologists of journalism have roiled the rational waters of news reporting by questioning their notions of objectivity. While there is an extensive
body of sociological work on ideology and objectivity, as well as analytical work on ideology in the media, in the following discussion I will only focus on a few examples that are most relevant to the context of this thesis.

Employing what he calls a Bakhtinian critique, based on literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin’s work on discourse, Stuart Allan troubles the journalistic notion of “objectivity” and truth in reporting practice that claims to be “a factual translation of reality” (Allan 1998: 127, italics in the original). He contends that only voices that validate certain (hegemonic) truth-claims make it into the media and are heard, therefore a journalist’s position of being “value-free” by employing objectivity can really be seen as a “instance of definitional power” since any truth-claims that do not validate certain positions are bracketed and excluded (129). Gaye Tuchman demonstrates, furthermore, that the claims of professional objectivity employed by journalists, which are ritualised in practices such as only quoting newsworthy and trusted sources, are employed to protect themselves from blame, and have little to do with the “truth” or “objectivity reality” (Tuchman 1972). Radical democratic theory, on the other hand, does not even contend that there is a singular truth but rather there are contending interpretations of truth fighting one another for acknowledgment and recognition by the public.

While British media studies and the sociology of media are faulted sometimes for relying too heavily on a Marxist critique of the cultural reproduction of capitalist material conditions, they have been very effective in providing robust work on media production of ideology and power (Stevenson 2002). John Fiske, for example, in his examination of the British tabloid press observed that the media not only reproduce ideology but produce it:

“The problem with much of the cultural production of the power bloc is that it remains insufficiently polysemic and too concerned with the discovery of objective truth. The search for a final universal truth, which this position implies, is totalitarian rather than democratic. The result is the closing down of the plurality of truths that should be allowed expression under a democratic order. Arguments that the news should be more accurate and objective are actually supportive of the discursive practices of the power bloc” (cited in Stevenson 2002: 93).
In Stuart Hall's (et. al.) seminal work on British media and social control, *Policing the Crisis*, the authors defined the police, or news sources, the primary definers of an event, and by extension the truth of the event, and that the media are the secondary definers, that they act as filters of a news event (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, and Robert 1978). "The media, then, do not simply 'create' the news; nor do they simple transmit the ideology of the 'ruling classes' in a conspiratorial fashion. Indeed, we have suggested that, in a critical sense, the media are frequently not the 'primary definers' of news events at all; but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial secondary role in reproducing the definitions of those who have privileged access, as of right to the media as 'accredited sources'. From this point of view, in the moment of news production, the media stand in a position of structured subordination to the primary definers" (Hall et al. 1978: 59, quoted in Schlesinger 1990: 67). Hall argues that ideology of the dominant classes are replayed and dispersed through mass media, and while the media play a subordinate role within the process they are the main ideological institution of capitalistic, liberal democratic political system:

"...[T]he legitimacy of the continued leadership and authority of the dominant classes in capitalist society derives from their accountability to the opinions of the popular majority – "the sovereign will of the people". In the formal mechanisms of election and the universal franchise they are required to submit themselves at regular intervals to the will or consensus of the majority. One of the means by which the powerful can continue to rule with consent and legitimacy is, therefore, if the interests of a particular class or power bloc can be aligned with or made equivalent to the general interests of the majority. ...The consensus is the medium, the regulator, by means of which this necessary alignment (or equalisation) between power and consent is accomplished. But if the consensus of the majority can be so shaped that it squares with the will of the powerful, then particular (class) interests can be represented as identical with the will of the people. ...Now consider the media –the means of representation. To be impartial
and independent ... they cannot be seen to take directives from the powerful ... but they must be sensitive to, and can only survive legitimately by operating within, the general boundaries or framework of 'what everyone agrees' to: consensus" (Hall 1996: 86-87).

Hall shows that through the formation of a consensus, or a majority agreement to the frameworks of the discourse on a given issue, that the media are able to maintain that they are impartial at the same time that they maintain the frameworks through which they frame stories, and thus represent and reproduce the ideology of the powerful. This analysis, however, maintains a rather static understanding of how power and ideology operate within society.

The production of ideology through the media and its effects on audience has been a central area of concern and research for the Glasgow Media Group. One of the significant British research groups to study media effects, audience reception and media power, it has addressed media coverage of the 1984-85 miners' strike, HIV/AIDS in the media, science and health risk reporting, and popular media such as soap operas. The group (1993) show in their work on the media coverage of HIV/Aids in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in contradiction to Hall's contention that the media are subordinate to the definers of news events, that the news story (and its construction of truth) is a reflection of the contested relationship between a journalist and her source. "What appears in the news is the outcome of a process of negotiation between reporter and the source of information" (Miller and Williams 1993: 126, italics in original).

Furthermore, the group's research on media audiences has shown how audiences actively reinterpret and negotiate media messages. One of the criticisms of focusing on audience reception and media effects is the underlying assumption that audiences are culturally duped (Kitzinger 1999). The theory that audiences passively consume the ideology that is administered via the media is part of a larger mass culture critique which started with the Frankfurt School. Thinkers such as Adorno and Marcuse believed that mass popular culture, in which art and culture are industrialised and commercialised on a massive scale due to advances in productive technologies such as film, the press and broadcast, signalled the rise of fascism (Curran and Seaton 1985: 254-255). The determinist conclusion drawn
by the Frankfurt School was that through industrial standardisation, the individual was absorbed and dissolved by a mass media that vulgarises culture and serves not to empower but to enslave individuals (256). The Frankfurt School did not give much credit to audiences' ability to think for themselves, or their creativity or independence of thought and action, and rather believed that through the media we are marching on the road to totalitarianism, indeed that the sole reason for mass media's existence is totalitarianism (257). While Habermas was a later contributor to the Frankfurt School, his theory on the public sphere and media, much criticised as I have already mentioned, also squares with earlier Frankfurt members in regards to their critique of mass media, especially television. Although the Habermasian public sphere and media analysis is part of a larger deterministic critique that posits the contemporary media as a powerful force of social control, his theory opened up a space for critics like Foucault to suggest that where there is power there is resistance which was one of the foundations for Laclau and Mouffe to propose a radical democratic theory (Curran and Seaton 1985: 280). These critiques, from the Frankfurt School through to Marshall McLuhan's "the medium is the message", were rarely based in empirical research of media effects on and meaning making by audiences, however, and although based on meticulous historical research, rarely asked audiences what they think about the media that they watch, read and listen to. A landmark feminist media analysis of the night-time soap based on audience reception, for instance, Watching Dallas by len Ang (1985), did not rely on cultural theorists' interpretations of the cultural imperialism of media but interviewed female fans of Dallas to understand how audiences interpret popular media. Ang found that far from women being passive consumers of patriarchal ideology and cultural imperialism as portrayed by the women characters of Dallas, women actively interpreted and integrated the patriarchal stories of jealousy, frustration and lack of self-control, in ironic ways. As Nick Stevenson (2002) suggests audiences do not just blindly accept the media "truth" being sold to them, "[w]hen people consume media, they assimilate new information into their preexisting, perceptual frameworks. It is not so much that the information imposes meaning onto people but that people impose meaning onto texts" (30).

The field of media studies, especially as it has been pioneered in Britain, through evidence gleaned from research with audiences, show that audiences deserve to be given a different and less deterministic look at how they construct meaning and truth-claims from
mass media, and thus build political knowledge and opinions that contribute to democratic
culture. How does radical democratic theory conceptualise the media? If power is not
always situated in the state, and in fact, if power is something that shifts and mutates among
people, situations, relationships and it is seen in the everyday lives of people, then that
means the classical liberal model of journalism and media in a democracy can no longer be
described as a place where the press checks the power of the state and acts in the interest
of the citizenry. The radical democratic model, then, conceptualises the media as a site of
contention between pluralistic interests, a place where competing interests fight over
representations, meanings and recognition. These media struggles are also over who is
legitimised, and who is not, to become the "definers of truth" through the media. As we shall
see in the following chapter on e-democracy, the potentials of new media for audiences (or
users, as audiences are reconfigured as such online) to have more control over media
frameworks are complicated by their usage of online technologies.
4 A Fourth Way?: E-democracy

In this chapter on e-democracy, I review the recent history and the social science literature of the past three decades on e-democracy. In the review I focus primarily on the e-democracy literature that discusses online technologies and its usage in deliberative democracy. I also discuss how the examinations of online democracy have not adequately challenged liberal democracy and have taken the model as a given in online democratic culture. That is, the underlying assumption in discussions around e-democracy has primarily centred on institutional politics and political communication in regards to established politics, has not questioned or problematised discussions on the legitimacy of the nation-state, and considers hegemony as an instrument only utilised by the state and that the Internet has the potential to be a space free of state hegemony where (liberal) democracy can be strengthened. The social science literature on e-democracy has failed to consider sufficiently alternative meanings of democracy which have occupied the ongoing discussions over the last twenty years in other intellectual disciplines such as philosophy, political science, feminism and culture studies on the nature of hegemony and power, and the struggle for justice in societies.

4.1 Technology’s progress marches us towards Utopia (or dystopia?)

In the sociological thinking on technologies technological determinism and the social construction of technology are two of several theories that have emerged to explain technological usage in societies (Grint and Woolgar 1997; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999; Marcuse 1998; McLuhan 1964). I focus on the technological determinism and the social constructivism theories to help outline the key issues that arise in the e-democracy literature. In The Machine at Work (1997) Keith Grint and Steve Woolgar set out to define the contending theories of technology in order to present some new ways of thinking about
the relationships between technologies and societies. They define technological
determinism as a theory that "holds that humans (human behaviour and even the course of
history) are largely determined by, rather than having influence over, technology" (1997: 7).
For the last thirty years critiques of technological determinism have preoccupied, as well
have invigorated, sociological scholarship on technology.

According to technological essentialists or determinists the Internet is said to have
inherent qualities that will either fulfil the promises of democracy or be detrimental to the
democracy that already exists: transparency, equal access to unmediated information, direct
communication and direct involvement in the political process, freedom to express oneself,
or it will encourage undemocratic speech and systems since the technology allows users to
hide their identities, falsify information, and manipulate the truth (For some examples of this,
see: Bimber 2003; Howard 2003; McLuhan and Fiore 1967; Sunstein 2002). While on the
one hand the Internet has liberal democratic values embedded into the technology itself
those very same qualities allow for the technology to be misused and exploited for nefarious
ends. The technology embodies these qualities and determines how users of this
technology will employ it based on these inherent qualities. How the users construct the
technology through the meanings that they give it is generally not considered in the e-
democracy literature. What is more common is the assumption that there are prior systems
and values that are imposed onto the technology, such as the values of liberal democracy,
and users of the technology either validate or inhibit those values.

The social construction of technology, in contrast, theorises that "technology does
not have any influence which can be gauged independently of human interpretation. Instead
the influence of technology is constructed through human interpretation" (Grint and Woolgar
1997: 10). By looking at technology through a social constructivist lens, technologies are
understood to be subjective and open to "radically different interpretations that are
coextensive with social groups" (Kline and Pinch 1999: 114). The Internet then, according to
the social constructivists, is a result of the enmeshed meanings and uses that the people
using the Internet give it, and this is reflexive, the meanings reflecting back on how people
utilise the technology. The Internet has no prior values outside of "the nexus of social

8 While Marshall McLuhan was writing before the emergence of ARPANET and the Internet, technological and
media determinism is considered to have laid the groundwork for contemporary deterministic discussions about
the Internet, often labelled 'NeoMcLuhanism' (Robins and Webster, 1999: 72-75).
actions” of which it is a part (Grint and Woolgar 1997: 10). In the case of the development of
the Internet, for example, social actions may include the initial conception of a network of
distributed computers and its design and implementation by US universities and the military,
and its eventual commercialisation and global application. If the Internet is democratic, it is
for the reason that the users of the Internet endow that meaning to it and employ it in that
way, and not because the Internet possesses some intrinsic democratic quality. This is also
a mutual effect; the Internet becomes democratic since people say that its capacities are
democratic and this makes people behave democratically online, or, at least, this is how
they imagine they should behave.

The robust debates and the work that has been done on technological determinism,
essentialism and social constructivism in the sociological studies of science and technology
have unfortunately not seemed to have made much of an impact on the discussions of e-
democracy (Grint and Woolgar 1997; Robins and Webster 1999). As we will see in the
following review of the e-democracy literature most of the sociological inquiry into
democracy and communication technologies have implicitly made some deterministic
assumptions about what the technology, and specifically the Internet, can promise
democracy.

4.1.1 The beginnings of e-democracy

Journalism and information distribution underwent a transformation in nineteenth century
which we are still grappling with in the twenty-first century: the invention of the electronic
telegraph by Cooke and Wheatstone in 1840 (Winston 1998: 24). Not only did telegraphic
communication enable the more timely distribution of information, it also enabled one-to-one
communication and flattened hierarchies of information distribution. This flattening was most
evident in the creation of news wire services such as those developed in England that could
distribute news and information instantaneously to subscribers in regional news markets
and leapfrog over the political and centralising control of the postal service that, up until the
widespread deployment of the telegraph, was the sole distributor of news information
(McLuhan 1964: 277). Not only could news now be more “free” of state control through the
utilisation of this new communications technology, it also shifted the hierarchical dynamics
of information distribution and access from London to provincial newspapers (277).
Information and knowledge, furthermore, could be universally distributed from many-to-
many and this threatened the predominance of the hierarchical one-to-many distribution model (Blondheim 1994). Control over information was shifted, fragmented and decentralised from the centre to the margins but, as with the printing press before it, there were continuing power struggles over the technology. However for every analysis that configures a new communications technology as diffusing power and thus a technology that supports democracy, there is often another analysis that counters this and contends that the technology enables more consolidation of power. Consider for a moment how the telegraph transformed information control through the development of the wire news service, Reuters. In 1851 British banker Baron Paul Julius de Reuter founded Reuters News Service, using the new telegraphic technology. Based on concessions from several governments in Europe, the Middle East and North America he won the right to build and control railroads, street car lines, exports of oil and minerals, and of course, telegraphic cable (Mowlana 1992:42). Through both the cooperation of governments and its control of vital enterprises, such as transportation and communications in several markets, Reuters maintained a monopoly over information and news distribution in many parts of Europe well into the twentieth century. Furthermore, Stuart Ewen (1996: 52-54) shows that in the early twentieth century through the advancement of wire services, far from destroying information hierarchies, the widespread emergence of telegraphically distributed news destroyed small, locally owned newspapers that were prevalent at the time, which led to a reconfiguration of media ownership on a chain basis and a few very powerful families consolidated the nationwide newspaper industry. Considering these instances of monopolistic control over news information through the diffusion of the telegraph, new players were introduced into the field but the presence of the technology did not significantly alter hierarchal power relationships concerning news and information distribution. The technology alone did not change the informational political landscape and, rather, it was a confluence of several factors that altered dynamics but power over information still remained consolidated.

The notion of a decentralised fragmentation of political agency and power through technology in many ways endures in contemporary thinking on the nature of the Internet. Scholarly discussions continue to posit that the transformative power of online technology can change the shape of democratic political culture. "Technological innovations radically can alter the organisation of power in politics" is a claim heard quite often in the e-
democracy literature even though there is little empirical evidence to support it (Howard 2003: 213). The assertion is hardly surprising; virtually every communications medium developed during the twentieth century and before it was imbued with the hope that it would ultimately fulfill the promise of enhancing robust and universal democratic participation. Moreover, this hope willingly ignores the context that each technological innovation was developed in; somehow these innovations are tabula rasa that will revolutionize human existence. Hans Enzensberger declared in the pre-Internet days (or, at least, in the days before its wide usage) of the mid-seventies, for instance, that “[f]or the first time in history, the media are making possible mass participation in a social and socialized productive process, the practical means of which are in the hands of the masses themselves,” when he anointed the transistor radio as the liberating medium of the masses (Enzensberger 1976: 22). Ideas about popular empowerment and participatory democracy through technology are prevalent in the scholarly examinations of e-democracy or online technology’s role in democratic communication and politics. I employ the term as it has come to signify at the turn of this century: Internet-based technologies used popularly through personal computers that enable citizens within a democratic political system to interact with the political establishment and with each other. I will show in the next several pages that this idea has had several iterations and different monikers as each new communications technology has developed, such as the predecessor “teledemocracy”, when from the 1960s and well into the 1990s it was believed that cable television (and later, Web and interactive television) would transform democratic institutions and politics. For the purposes of my thesis, I will limit the scope to the current scholarship on the notions of a web-based e-democracy.

A theme emergent in the development of e-democracy is the prospect online technologies have for either deliberative or plebiscitary democracy. From its beginnings as a field of study, this dichotomy continues to overshadow the conversation, that is, either online technologies will strengthen political discourse between citizens within a democracy or online technologies will fortify the election process by making voting and communication within established political institutions easier. Both positions claim that through the Internet, political information and communication can finally be “liberated” and unmediated by the distorting effects of journalism and big media as well as government (Tsagarousianou, Tambini, and Bryan 1998; Tumber 2001). Moreover, e-democracy can somehow make
politics more transparent, and force politicians to be more honest because online
technologies, such as email or bulletin boards, cut out spin doctoring, allowing citizens to
communicate directly with politicians. The underlying assumptions are that there exists a
deep crisis in democracies, which suffer from widespread lethargy and alienation, and that
Internet-based communication technologies, by their very nature, will resolve this crisis. But
what is curious about the bulk of the e-democracy literature in this area is that while many
social researchers make claims that online democratic practices, especially deliberative
democracy, can exist outside of institutional politics, most of the e-democracy projects
studied in the 1980s and 1990s were based on municipal or government-sponsored projects
or on websites that in some way dovetailed into institutional politics.

As early as 1972 sociologist Amitai Etzioni envisioned a networked, real-time, digital
technology, which would enable citizens to have a dialogue with each other and to broaden
their perspectives on political issues by collating information from a plurality of sources
available through the network. He dubbed this imagined electronic network MINERVA. He
proposed that MINERVA would enhance democratic processes in a “modern, mass society”
and would ensure that “demagogic influences” would not sway a citizenry firmly engaged in
a democratic dialogue with itself and with politicians (Etzioni 1972). In his book Strong
Democracy (1984) Barber suggests a democracy can be strengthened with the help of
teledemocracy technologies. By the decade of the eighties, civil networking and
teledemocracy experiments were being conducted using interactive television and within his
book Barber reviews several of these early projects (261-311). He cites televised town hall
meetings in the early seventies and interactive television experiments (such as the US-
based, commercially funded Warner/American Express’s QUBE) as the forerunners of new
democratic communication and engagement. He envisions several initiatives that could
revitalise democracy including electronic voting, reforming referenda to include choices that
would register opinions beyond binary answers, and intensive civil education projects
including what he calls Civic Videotex Service, which would provide viewers with news,
information and interactive capabilities with other users to discuss issues all through a
nationally (in the US) networked system (278-279). During the decades of the seventies and
eighties, many European governments through state broadcasters and telecoms set up
broadcast, cable and telephone text-distribution systems accessed through television sets to
provide civic information. The British government supported the BBC’s development of Ceefax (first broadcast in 1974) and Teletext (which distributes textual information via the telephone to television sets) during the seventies; in France, the Minitel system employed similar technology in 1980; in Spain it was the Ibertex system in 1982; and another nine European countries developed similar technologies during the eighties (Carlson 2004). Most of these systems are still in use. Yet little over a decade later Barber was not as hopeful about the power of new media as he was in 1984. Writing in 1997, three years after the release of Mosaic, the first web browser technology to increase popular usage of the Internet, he was not convinced that information technologies could restore or strengthen democracies (Barber 1997). Media scholar John Street differs from Barber on this and argues that information technologies in a democracy do have the potential to change the nature of political communication. He suggests that political information and news are important only when given form and purpose to produce some action, and that this transforms mere information into knowledge. “The technical means employed in imparting knowledge actually changes the nature of the knowledge. The form of the technology can alter the kind of news reported” (Street 1992: 191). In his examinations of 13 teledemocracy projects in the United States, F. Christopher Arterton found that while participation in these projects informed users and improved their political engagement, information technologies are not a complete answer. However, they still have potential: “[t]eledemocracy offers us improvements in democracy, not a major transformation nor a final fulfilment” (Arterton 1987: 204).

4.1.2 Online plebiscites
The experiments that broadcast textual information or employed networked, interactive television to transmit town hall meetings led to what is now called online “civic networks”. These online initiatives, either set up by local governments and municipalities or by private organisations, were launched to provide political and civic information, to enable communication with constituents and between citizens, and to encourage broader participation in institutionalised democratic processes through the Web. It is fair to characterise most of these projects as government initiatives, with a few, such as Minnesota E-Democracy (e-democracy.org) or The Democracy Network (Dnet, originally developed by
the US-based Center for Governmental Studies, now maintained by the League of Women
Voters), being citizen or privately supported projects (Docter and Dutton 1999). One of the
first and oldest computer-based civic networking projects is in Santa Monica, California. The
Santa Monica city council first launched the Public Electronic Network (PEN) in 1989 to
provide public access to governmental information, contact agencies, departments and
officials as well as provide an electronic citizens’ forum. PEN is maintained by the city’s
information systems department and was accessible on public terminals within the council’s
building and in libraries until it was moved to the Internet (Docter and Dutton 1998: 126). It
was during the nineties, however, due to the combined effects of a “user-friendly” interface
developed for the Internet through browser technology, more widespread usage of cheaper
personal computers, and a growth in civic organisations, that civic networking projects
began to flourish (Tambini 1999). In 1993 Manchester hosted a conference on civil
networking attended by member cities of the “Eurocities” network (an association of cities
from European Union states), and was the first city in the United Kingdom to implement a
civil networking programme, called “Telecities” (Carter 1997: 147). By 1996 there were
several examples, by some estimates close to 300 worldwide, of government initiatives on
civil networking and e-democracy projects and, now, many local and national governments
have websites that enable citizens to interact with government through online technologies
as well as offering the possibility to “deliberate” through bulletin boards. Many of these
government initiatives declare that their mission is to bring every citizen online so that they
can “fully” participate in democracy. The next step in the evolution of plebiscitary democracy
is to move voting online and many governments and private organisations maintain that by
doing so, the problems with voting, namely low voter turnout and efforts to reform campaign
finance will be solved. Dick Morris (2001) proposes, for example, that the growing popular
usage of the Internet, which will soon outstrip television news consumption, will force more
political election campaigns online and will profoundly transform political systems that
currently rely on high-priced television campaigning to win elections. Morris suggests that
online campaigns are much cheaper than on-air ones, thus online voting and campaigning
could solve the dilemma of the spiralling costs (and the high bar of entry to third party
candidates) of political campaigns. An early example of online campaigning by a political
outsider comes from the United States. Minnesota’s former governor Jesse Ventura was a
professional wrestler and joined politics as a Reform Party (third party) candidate whose online campaign is credited for winning him the gubernatorial election in 1998. Another more recent American example is Howard Dean’s failed campaign in the 2004 Democratic Party’s presidential primary race. Despite the fact he failed to win the Democratic Party’s nomination, his astounding success in online fundraising, estimated at more than $40 million, is considered to be a significant challenge to the campaign finance machine (Cornfield 2003). While online voting is still not a reality, digital voting machines were deployed in both the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections in the United States to controversial effect.

Many Western governments have formalised plans to move political campaigns and voting online. For instance the British government has a directive from its E-Government Unit (EGU) within the Cabinet Office (formerly the Office of e-Envoy reorganised in July 2004 as the EGU) to have online voting ready for the 2006 elections. The fraud committed in Birmingham with postal ballots during the May 2005 elections has implications for how reliable the system will be when e-voting is made available (Laville and Muir 2005:5). The British government through the EGU, furthermore, declared its mission was to have all government services online by 2005. Some of these services include enabling online communication with representatives. However, at the time of writing many government services have yet to be made available online and assessment on whether citizens actually prefer to engage with government bureaucracy online is sketchy at best (Johnson and Cross 2005:12). In 1998 the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) was successful in placing its Resolution 73 which called for a United Nations World Summit on the Information Society on the UN General Assembly’s agenda. The UN held the first World Summit on the Information Society in December 2003 and as a result of Resolution 56/183, 9

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9 I worked as the content editor for a local borough council website during 2004-05. While some government personnel within the council were very keen to communicate with their constituency and tried to ensure that they made all of their documents and services available online and written in plain English, I experienced serious resistance most of the time when I asked that responsible departments make more information and services available on the council’s website. Furthermore there was no budget to conduct full-scale focus groups or surveys to include user input into the design and functionality of the site. In another example Kris Cohen, a researcher at INCITE (sociology, University of Surrey) conducted fieldwork on Internet usage in a homeless women’s shelter in west London. In a personal communication he told me that the women who were awaiting council housing used online government services available on the municipal website to check their cases and verify that they were allocated to correct points needed to obtain housing. The women often did not trust that their case workers were accurate with points allocation and used government websites to catch incompetence in the provision of government services, and not to ‘engage in the democratic process’.
linked its Charter on Human Rights with people having access to information and communication technologies. According to this resolution, one step that brings us closer to realising full human rights for all people is being online (Hamelink 2004: 76). What is prevalent in the literature on online plebiscites and civil networking is a willing acceptance of the assumption that simply being online will solve some of the problems of low voter turnout. The literature rarely confronts the assertion made by political institutions that low voter turnout is a question of convenience and has nothing to do with larger issues of voter contempt or a lack of political legitimacy or mistrust of established political institutions. A question scarcely raised in the literature is why are governments, municipalities, and official political institutions willing to invest so many resources towards the development of civic networking and e-democracy programmes in the first place? Could it be, for instance, that one of the motivations to invest in these initiatives is that the benefits are really for government or the political party in power, and not necessarily felt by citizens? Eileen Milner argues that it is governments that benefit since the technological enhancements are perceived to be a cost-savings and improve the governments' bottom-lines (Milner 1999: 67-69). These online efforts may also be a part of an overall image strategy to improve the legitimacy of governance in people's minds. A report by the Guardian on the millions of pounds spent on creating and maintaining government websites that are not utilised by constituents seems to contradict Milner's contention, at least in governments' motivations for cost-savings. In the article Sarah Teather, a Liberal Democrat MP for Brent East, opines on the chaotic multitude of government websites: "Instead of a clear and precise structure, government websites look like a ball of string with never-ending trails and threads seemingly leading to nowhere. ... At the moment, government websites look like they are specifically designed to make government more opaque, rather than more open and accessible" (Johnson and Cross 2005). A more cynical example of suspected nefarious motivations behind government enthusiasm for e-voting, as another example, can be found in the alleged fraud and misuse of electronic voting in the 2004 US presidential elections. Miliband shows that parliaments themselves enshrine a "division of labour" where professional politicians are left to attend to the business of governance and are "not be expected to suffer more interference than they themselves [think] appropriate until the next election" (Miliband 1982: 39). Critics of online politics cite email as a culprit in the debilitating
effects of two-way communication on politicians. In 2000 alone more than 6.5 million e-mail messages per month were received by members of the US Congress (Howard 2003: 217). In the context of Miliband’s critique of parliamentary democracy, more questions about e-government policies need to be asked, such as why would a politician earmark millions of pounds to develop and deploy tools for constituents to more easily communicate with them if, ultimately, politicians do not want two-way communication with their constituents in the first place?

4.1.3 Deliberative democracy online

As I have discussed earlier, many theorists maintain that voting is not the only feature that makes a society democratic and some argue it is the nature and quality of the deliberations among citizens that is more indicative of democratic societies. Many argue that while plebiscites can “quicken democracy” it is deliberation where reasoned judgements are made which enrich democracies (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren 1988). Others argue that while this may be true about deliberations, online technologies are not the best way to engage in democratic discourse, the Internet is good for registering preferences but not much else (Wilhelm 2000). A most striking omission in all of the research of online deliberative democracy is the fact that online “speech” is quite often spoken using “text”. Questions about what happens when deliberations are written and not spoken have never been asked in the literature on online deliberations. As we shall see later in this thesis, this is a significant dilemma for the Republican Brothers.

Stephen Coleman reminds us that deliberations, at least in Britain’s parliamentary democratic system, tend to be confined primarily to politicians, and citizens are spectators via the media (Coleman 1999: 196). This, he suggests, is why there is widespread civil disengagement in politics, voters are bystanders and not participants in the democracy. Coleman suggests that “[t]he question, therefore, is not whether such technologies can make democratic governance more accountable, but what kind of political channels need to be created to enable ICTs to become sources of public empowerment” (1999: 200). Indeed, providing ways for participation in political debates and communication with representatives can make or break a government’s online initiative. Take the example of the Bangalore City Corporation which when it attempted to communicate with citizens by developing a new
website drew heavy criticism for two reasons, it failed to provide any tools on the website to enable two-way communication with politicians and it failed to consider the information needs of the website's users, primarily the constituents (Madon and Sahay 2000: 184).

Outside of government-based initiatives to provide a forum for public deliberations, there is much debate among scholars about whether online deliberations can be inclusive and of high quality. These arguments about the quality of deliberation relate to the larger debates around political communication in the public sphere, such as those arguments discussed earlier in Chapter Two on pluralism and inclusiveness. As (US) constitutional law and free speech scholar Cass Sunstein contends, the preconditions of a (liberal) information-based democracy must include that citizens have unplanned exposure to information and media that they would not have necessarily chosen for themselves and that through mass media a society must share in a number of common experiences (Sunstein 2002: 8-9). If either of these conditions is missing Sunstein claims democracy suffers because society will fragment into extremist groupings that seek out only the opinions and viewpoints of like minded others. According to him, the Internet is an information technology extraordinarily conditioned to promote this type of fragmentation since users can filter out unwanted information and only read the information they want, including the opinions of adversaries. This also extends to online deliberations where "[a]fter deliberation, people are likely to move toward a more extreme point in the direction to which the [online discussion] group's members were originally inclined" (65: italics in original).

In her review of some of the literature that addresses information and communication technologies and democratisation, Anna Malina concludes that while these technologies can broaden and deepen the democratic process, certain social dependencies will determine how well online technologies actually fare. The main dependency is whether information is packaged as a "social good" or as a "costly consumer product" and this will determine whether the promise of online technologies to improve democracies will actually happen (Malina 1999: 38). When optimists envision how these technologies might enable a more robust democratic practice online, the unspoken assumption is that this ideal of democracy is already in place "offline" (1999: 33). In terms of whether online forums encourage inclusiveness and "reasoned" debate, Jennifer Stromer-Galley (2003) found, contrary to the previous and unempirical musings of scholars like Sunstein, most users
preferred a diverse range of arguments rather than finding people with similar opinions (Sunstein 2001; Sunstein 2002). Her findings, based on interviews with users of a public chat room, Usenet board and message board, show that users feel it is easier to find a more diverse set of opinions online rather than in face-to-face communication because people are less reluctant to share their honest opinions online (Stromer-Galley 2003). Interviewees revealed that if they have a different opinion from a neighbour that they may meet on the street, they would not voice that opinion face to face and find it easier to do so online. In a year-long study of online political discussion groups in the run-up to the 2000 US presidential elections organised as part of the Electronic Dialogue Project, Price, Cappella and Nir found a positive association between encountering and considering disagreement online and more deliberative opinions, which they define as “the ability to ground one’s viewpoints, not only in supportive arguments but also in an understanding of the kinds of arguments that others might make in taking an opposite stand” (Price, Cappella, and Nir 2002: 107). They point to the prevalence of deliberative opinions as evidence of “higher quality opinion” and “democracy”, and posit that exposure to disagreements which lead to deliberative opinions occur in “public”, including online (108).

Steffen Albrecht found in his research on deliberation on a bulletin board at a Hamburg municipal website that a posting gains legitimacy by the number of responses it receives and will receive more responses depending on three factors: originality, controversy, and personality. In his research findings, the data showed that posters self-regulated the board, the quality of the debate was higher than other studies have predicted, and that while the discourse was not a free-flowing debate “associated with the deliberative idea”, it was more often dominated by a few posters or that a small number of postings received enormous response (Albrecht 2003: 17; Albrecht 2006: 75). Self-regulation and high expectations for users’ argumentation styles was also found by Zizi Papacharissi in her study of 287 discussion threads on several political newsgroups, and contradicts expressed fears that online political discussions are uncivil and undemocratic (Papacharissi 2004). The findings in the Papacharissi study, where users often engaged in impolite but civil discussions, suggest that a reconsideration of what makes discourse democratic, is it civil debate or a robust and heated one, is important to understand how it exists online (279-281).
Through his examination of the success of Minnesota E-Democracy, Lincoln Dahlberg presents evidence that online technologies serve deliberative democracy very well. Since Minnesota E-Democracy set up several tools, including self-moderation, listservs and strict guidelines for discussion, users of the site were able to overcome the usual problems associated with online forums such as flaming and access (Dahlberg 2001b). He concludes by acknowledging that the Internet will not extend the rational-critical discourse alone but rather there must be a common will to expand and enrich participation in civil society. Testing Habermas’s theory that a robust democracy depends on the authentic argumentation and rational-critical discourse of non-state actors, and the results of that discourse influences policy, Anthony Wilhelm examines libertarian political bulletin boards on Usenet and AOL (Wilhelm 1999). His findings contradict what Stromer-Galley found that people utilise these bulletin boards to find diverse or heterophilic opinions. Wilhelm asserts, based on not what users said they do but by analysing their posts, that more than 70 percent of messages could be considered homophilic, either showing strong or moderate support for a position (no opposing responses) and that 90 percent of posts on a libertarian bulletin board were sympathetic to Libertarian tenets and confirmed theories that people reduce information costs by finding information to bolster opinions from other like-minded individuals (1999: 172). His conclusion that Metcalfe’s Law, which says that the value of a network increases by the square of its users, is not validated by his research for the reason that the bulletin boards seem to be more about talking and self-expression rather than about listening and therefore cannot support collective action, is perhaps nearsighted (1999: 174).

“This causal story of ubiquitous access to technology leading to an expanded interest in political matters on the part of the public is accepted, almost with blind faith, although there is scant empirical evidence to support such a lofty claim” (1999: 157). Indeed, Kevin Hill and John Hughes (1998: 182) found in their research of American left- and right-leaning Usenet groups, that rather than the Internet profoundly transforming politics, it is the politically active users of the Internet that will profoundly transform the technology.

There are growing examples of successful collective action using the Internet from the antiglobalisation movement, terrorist organizations, to the short-lived trend of flashmobbing and the media reform movement, to name a few. Whether these tactics are effective in influencing the desired policy, political and social changes on the part of these
groups is another matter altogether, but there is a growing body of evidence that collective action is occurring online with some effect (Bennett 2003; Cleaver 1998; Froehling 1999; McChesney and Nichols 2004; Scott and Street 2000). Most of this research, however, is occurring in the scholarly work on social movements and not within the e-democracy research.

4.2 Liberal and essentialist assumptions

As I have shown many scholars have argued that the Internet and e-democracy are firmly enmeshed in the binds of media and media technology history (Allen and Miller 2000; Blumler and Gurevitch 2001; Buchstein 1997; Carter 1997; Lessig 1999; McChesney 2000; Street 1999). That the Internet would not, and indeed could not, be controlled by government or by capitalist interests, that its very nature meant it would remain in the hands of "the people" is, despite of the evidence to the contrary, still given credence and is an implicit assumption made in much of the literature. Often there is a failure to recognise or acknowledge that the Internet was developed by the very state and capitalistic interests that optimists claim it to be in confrontation with, and that its development trajectory is deeply embedded in the previously existing media environment. It can easily be regulated and controlled by governments as well as commercial interests (as exemplified in the battles between the US communications company Verizon among other big media groups and American municipalities over community-based WiFi), and finally, it is following similar paths of coercion and cooption that all previous media and communication innovations have followed including print, radio and television (McChesney 1999; McChesney 2000; Neff 2005). As MacKenzie and Wajcman have argued about the social shaping of technologies, new technologies (and in this case the Internet) do not develop outside their technological, social and political contexts but are enmeshed within them, so the Internet's technologies were built upon previous innovations and all of the attendant social implications (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999: 9).

What seems to be a common thread in the literature on online democracy, and specifically those studies that focus on Internet-based deliberative tools such as bulletin boards or chat rooms, is a methodological choice to stay online and restrict analysis to
discussion threads only. There are a few exceptions, the work of Stromer-Galliley comes to mind, but for the most part analysis has relied solely on the textual remnants of online discussions without further investigations with the people who left those remnants. In many ways by remaining online the studies produced laboratory conditions out of bulletin boards and very few give consideration to the social contexts of online political discussions.

Furthermore as this review of the literature on e-democracy shows, most research and thinking around online democracy has been confined to Western democracies (and institutions like the European Union) and Western theories about democracy as well as being overwhelmingly limited to examinations of established political institutions, such as voting and communication between politicians and constituents. There is a growing body of research on the effects of “netactivism” on politics, especially work that focuses on the (primarily) Western antiglobalisation movement’s utilisation of the Internet as well as related environmental groups to organise activities (Coopman 2005; Pickerill 2004). I will examine this writing further in Chapter Eight but let me say here that the research on net activism, while growing as instances of netactivism increase, remains separate from the larger discussions on e-democracy. Not only is my goal in the subsequent chapters to shift the focus from Western conceptions and realities in regards to both on and offline democracy within Islamic and African frameworks, I also aim to broaden the discussion to include democratic political culture, in direct contrast to institutionalised politics, and to consider alternatives to the liberal democratic model. As Anand Mitra found, the Internet provides a space crystallised by deliberations in the Indian diaspora outside “a dominate world view” of Indian identity and politics (Mitra 2001: 45), it is often not at the centre but at the margins, or outside altogether, that interesting phenomena occur. To address political culture, my focus is on the margins of political power, such as in the case of the Republican Brothers who live in exile outside Sudan and independent, non-mainstream journalists working in the US media environment. If there still remains any credence to the assertion that this new technology can enable, even in small ways, political transformations to democratic culture, it becomes complicated by the meanings the technology is endowed with by the groups that I studied for this thesis and discuss in the following three chapters, the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now!
If I took away one lesson from my journalism training that I relied on heavily while conducting research for this thesis, it is this: don't write the story before you go to the interview. In other words when I asked my original research questions, is the Internet democratic and can a communications technology support democratic culture, I had consciously tried not to draw any conclusions on the questions. I did not develop any theories beforehand to "test" out in the field and I did not formulate "hypotheses" prior to conducting research about the Internet and democracy. I wanted to wait and hear what people had to say to me about their own experiences, doubts, thoughts, beliefs and ideals for how the technology functions in their lives. What I did was to read a lot of previous studies on e-democracy and I did read a lot (maybe too much) on the competing democratic theories that have preoccupied the social and political sciences of the last three decades, primarily in Europe and the United States, all of which were reviewed in Chapters Two, Three and Four. I approached the field with a "wait and see" attitude, I suspended the desire to analyse and categorise, but there is no doubt that the literature did influence me in how I conceived of what I was learning in the field. Regardless, I wanted to remain open to whatever was said to me, to be surprised by what I found and above all, I did not want to close down any possible interpretations because they did not fit into a pre-existing hypothesis or theory. As I proceeded with the research, I adapted interpretative, ethnographic methods to data collection and analysis as I thought this approach seemed the most intuitive to me and would produce the richest data possible within the research framework.

In this chapter on the methodologies used in the research, I first examine some of the definitions that help to frame the research. Next I describe the participants that helped to form the two case studies under examination and the field sites where the data was collected. I then discuss the ethnographic methods that I used to collect and analyse the
data, I discuss the data itself and the ethical issues that were considered or arose during the research. Finally I describe the processes that I used in analysing the data.

5.1 A study of discourses and frames

5.1.1 Framework of analysis

The literature reviewed in Chapters Three and Four was primarily focused on sociological understandings of democracy, information technologies and journalism. This literature, especially the previous social science research on "e-democracy", was predominantly centred on what theorists call "deliberative democracy" or how people debate and engage with one another through conversation and argumentation on issues, for example, of social and political significance, or the present conditions of society. Much of the literature on e-democracy and its application in regards to deliberative democracy has been framed around Jürgen Habermas’s conception of the public sphere, where participants engage in discussions that are said to be critical, rational and where subjectivity is suspended for the sake of the argument. Since a part of my task as a social researcher is to address the previous literature on e-democracy and determine where my own research fits into or fills in a gap in the previous work, I chose to look at how people talk and how through their talk they organise horizons of meaning. I decided, however, to depart from what had been done in previous research and shift the research frame to analyse how people talk about being online and not necessarily to confine my analysis solely to what is actually "said" online. Most work on e-democracy, for instance, has analysed online textual remnants of political deliberations, such as the text one finds on an online bulletin board, and submits this text to analysis to determine whether or not democracy can exist online based on this digital archaeological evidence alone (Stromer-Galley and Lebret 2005). What I believed was more significant to my specific research questions was to understand how people perceive online discursive behaviour, especially how it relates to their notions of "democracy", and what this behaviour means to them. I believed that it was more important to the integrity of the research for people to explain why they think the Internet is "democratic" or it is not, rather than me determining from how people “talk” online, whether it is or is not. Along a similar vein I was also interested in learning how journalists, as mediators and gatekeepers
of political information, conceive of their roles and how their discourse about what journalism is supposed to be constructs their roles.

5.1.2 A study of discourses, frames and ideologies

Within this context I was interested in how people make sense of ideologies, that is to say, how people organise a comprehensive vision of how society should operate and how is this vision constructed through their own discourse. Since I was looking at the political ideologies constructed by the discursive cultures of two groups, the Republican Brothers and journalists at Democracy Now!, I had to think critically about the definitions of "discourse" and "ideology". Discourse in the context of the research reported in this thesis can be defined as being the words (either spoken or written) used by participants to construct frameworks that they use to interpret their understanding of the world. In short I am interested in looking at how people talk about the social contexts in which they live and how this talk constructs those contexts. I was interested in understanding discourse as "a system of representation" that produces meaning and knowledge (Hall 2001: 72). In this sense it should be considered in the Volosinovian understanding of discourse, that it is "ideological in that it arises between socially organised individuals and cannot be understood outside its context" (Meinhof 2002: 165). Within this definition, ideology is intertwined with discourse, and can be seen as a system of ideas or beliefs that are organised by discourse. My approach to the ideologies used by the Republican Brothers and journalists at Democracy Now! was to understand them as systems of thinking about the world, of organising it and ultimately, of constructing through discourse the horizons of what "should be", their utopian visions of how society ought to be but which does not exist now.

In my analysis of the data I looked at how participants talked about (and what they did not talk about) and how they framed the topics under study: democracy, information technologies and journalism. I did not submit their discourses to a process of intensive discourse analysis such as has been suggested by Potter and Wetherell (1987); rather I used an interpretative ethnographic approach to analyse the discourse of the research participants, which I will explain in depth later in this chapter.
5.2 Participants: two case studies

5.2.1 The Republican Brothers
When I was considering how to approach my research, I knew that I wanted to study a social group that lived outside their home country and who were using web-based communications to participate in political discourse about politics happening “back home”. I also knew that I wanted to study a group of web-based journalists on how they constructed and construed meaning about their roles within a democratic culture. With both case studies opportunities seemed to stumble into my path rather than be organised neatly around my research questions.

For example I first approached the Republican Brothers, the progressive Sufi brother and sisterhood from Sudan that forms the first of my two case studies, because their story seemed to embody some of the issues that I was grappling with regard to liberal and radical democratic theory and new information technologies. I learned of the group when I moved to London to pursue my postgraduate studies. My sole friend in London at the time, who, despite knowing him for years, had never told me of his religious affiliation with the Republicans, one night mentioned as I was leaving his flat that he and his wife would be interviewed by the BBC’s World Service about their marriage the following day. Intrigued, I asked what was so extraordinary about their marriage that the BBC would be interested in talking with them. This is when he sat me down and told me about Republican Thought, the execution of Ustadh Taha and how the Republicans were exiled. One of the reasons for the Republicans’ exile, he said, was due to their progressive ideology and reformist theology in regards to Islam, human rights and democracy. This is why the BBC was interested in them; their marriage represented an alternative to some of the Western media stereotypes about gender roles in Islam, women’s and minority rights, and presented a liberal, progressive Islamic answer to religious fundamentalism.

There were several factors that made the Republicans interesting for a case study for the purposes of my research on democratic cultures and online discourse. The first reason was that the group was politically marginalised by exile and conducted their political discourse outside of the establishment politics of Sudan. The second factor of interest was that due to exile, many members engaged in political discourse with Sudanese people
outside of their own group, and that the majority of this engagement was online. My friend had told me that before exile the Republicans had become famous for their "speakers' corners", the daily discussion groups dubbed "al-rukun" established in various public spaces throughout Khartoum. He described how now in exile Republicans were continuing this project through online technologies. He also told me how the religion's leader, Ustadh Taha, held daily discussions with members in his "saloon", the sitting room in his Omdurman home. Because the Republicans were a politically marginalised group engaged in public, political discourse, both orally and through either paper-based or online media, about their visions of democratic justice in Sudan, they seemed to embody the counterpublics that I had been reading about in my review of the literature and I thought that their example may offer an interestingly alternative perspective on online democratic discourse and e-democracy.

From this one friend I was introduced to other Republicans who either lived in the United Kingdom or in the United States, or who were passing through London from a Gulf country (many Sudanese live in Dubai, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait) or Sudan on their way to a third country. For the Republican case study I interviewed 22 participants, 13 who were Republicans and nine who were non-Republican Sudanese exiles or Sudanese people living outside Sudan to work and to study, with the exception of two who lived in Khartoum. Of the Republicans interviewed all but one were exiled. Of the nine non-Republicans, most maintain friendships with individual Republican members while one non-Republican participant considered himself an adversary of the movement, but still maintained respectful but more formal friendships with individual Republicans. Most of the non-Republicans interviewed expressed a deep respect and admiration for the Republicans even though they did not necessarily agree with their theology. All of the Republicans and non-Republicans interviewed are professionals in the fields of psychiatry, medicine, computer engineering, human rights, linguistics, journalism, women's studies, communications, business administration, fine arts, and law. All participants hold advanced degrees in their prospective fields except for one participant who is currently studying medicine at university. Most started their studies at a university in Sudan and after leaving, pursued advanced degrees in the US and the UK. Many of the participants had worked in their professions in Sudan and continued to work in their fields in exile since most of the participants were in their forties and fifties, with the exception of second generation Republicans who were in their late teens.
and early twenties. Nearly all participants have been highly mobile since the two waves of exile, in 1985-86 and again in 1989-90, with many spending time in the Gulf states and moving between the US and the UK. It has only been possible for some of the participants to return to Sudan for short visits as recently as 2004.

5.2.2 Democracy Now!

It was during an interview with one of the Republican participants who lived in the United States that I learned about the group that formed the second case study in this thesis, Democracy Now! This participant mentioned that she watched the programme nearly daily on her local cable access station and since I had not heard of Democracy Now! until her mentioning it, I decided to look into them further. When I had originally decided that I should study both the Republicans and a group of journalists, my first choice was to study Voice of America (VOA) journalists and the Africa section of VOA's website. Very early on in my research, however, I had great difficulty in gaining access to the organisation and it became apparent that I would not be able to gain the level of access to individual journalists that I needed in order to collect enough data to serve as balance against all of the rich data I was collecting on the Republicans. It was around the time that I realised that I could not study VOA that I came across Democracy Now! and felt that there was a strong enough link between the Republicans and Democracy Now! in my research, especially since none of the Republican participants had mentioned VOA as a programme they followed. Democracy Now! was also attractive to me in several other ways; its title explicitly references my research topic, democracy, it is a multimedia news programme with a large web presence, and it is an alternative, independent media outlet. Similar to the Republicans, the programme stands outside of mainstream, establishment politics in the United States. However, the significant difference for Democracy Now! journalists is that this is an ideological and conscious choice and not a forced marginalisation. All of these factors helped me to settle on researching Democracy Now! for the second group. When I approached Democracy Now!, despite the enthusiasm employees expressed about my project, it quickly became obvious that given how small the organisation is and how busy producers are as a result, the best way for me to understand the organisation was to volunteer and observe it from the inside. Producers just did not have the time to sit down
with me to discuss their views and experiences at great length. In fact one producer who approached me was very interested in being interviewed but was always pressed for time. He recommended that we conduct the interview on his day off for otherwise we would be constantly interrupted, which we did.

For the Democracy Now! study, I interviewed four producers and conducted onsite fieldwork at the studio for an intensive period of two weeks, and then embarked on “virtual” fieldwork primarily by email with occasional visits to the studio when I was in New York City during the seven-month virtual fieldwork period. Much of the data for the Democracy Now! case was gleaned from the programme’s production work in broadcast, online and in print. The programme at present employs 31 people, most of whom are in their twenties or early thirties, with the exception of senior journalists Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez who are both in their mid- to late forties. All participants hold bachelors or masters degrees in journalism, history, archiving, fine art, international studies, video production, and literature. Most participants came to Democracy Now! after having some journalistic or human rights work experience in developing countries or after having previously worked for mainstream media in the United States, and in some cases, having worked for other alternative media groups and independent radio.

For the study of the Republicans, most of the data I analysed came from interviews and some from listserv and bulletin board postings, and website content. Some data from the Republicans also came from books and pamphlets. The Democracy Now! data was much more dependent on produced content, either content that was broadcast, distributed on DVD, posted to the website and printed in magazines, newspapers and books. Because of my more restricted access, I could not rely as much on interview data from Democracy Now! producers as I had with the Republicans’ case study.

5.3 Field sites and access

Although much of my time spent in the field was online, most of my fieldwork was conducted offline over a 24-month period, with about 17 months spent with the Republicans and 10 months with Democracy Now!. However there were plenty of overlapping moments when I was with both groups, especially during January 2005. A lot of my time in the field with
Republicans was spent on sofas in participant's sitting rooms, and involved watching television, talking and eating. Discussions would vary from the distinctions between tea ceremonies among different Sudanese ethnic groups, to the ongoing events in Iraq where some participants because of their human rights work had first-hand experience of conditions of post-invasion Iraq. In between bites of warm bread and baba ganoush, we talked about the history of the Republican Brothers, the discussion corners and all of the conflicts and discussions on assaloon.org (the Republican closed, online bulletin board discussed in Chapter Seven) and sudaneseonline.com (a non-Republican, Sudanese bulletin board also discussed later). I was careful to restrict myself to quietly observe, asking questions but not offering too many of my own opinions, which was easy since I am a novice when it comes to understanding the complexities of Sudanese politics. Most of these visits occurred in sitting rooms in North London and Hastings.

I made two trips to the United States in October 2004 and January 2005. The first was to meet the webmaster and another Republican family living in Charlotte, North Carolina and while I was there, the webmaster showed me the physical archive that he has (books, pamphlets and audio tapes), the server that houses the digital archive, all the iterations of the website and a listserv archive. He allowed me to go through the English-language listserv archive and gave me copies of postings that were relevant to my research. First, however, he removed identifying information from all postings, including email addresses, aliases and names of people within the body text of postings.

The second trip was to attend the commemoration ceremonies that marked the twentieth anniversary of Taha's death. I travelled to Iowa City, Iowa and spent three days in Republican and non-Republican homes. There I was able to interview several Republicans and non-Republican Sudanese and American people as well as to observe several performances of Inshad (sung, repetitive prayers or chants that are unique to the Republicans) and listen to lectures and presentations on Taha's life and the Republican movement.

From the beginning of my fieldwork with the Republicans it was decided by the webmaster that I should not have access to the closed bulletin board, assaloon.org. Rather I was registered with the public bulletin board on the Republican website alfikra.org and introduced to the board members by the webmaster, after I had provided him with a
summary of my research project, my contact information, my university’s name, address and department, and the names of my PhD supervisors. On the open board I was able to interview three participants who were interested in my project. Two were Republicans and one was a non-Republican Sudanese person living in Khartoum. For these interviews I used the private message function, which allows for total confidentiality, on the alfikra.org bulletin board to conduct the interviews. After each interview I copied and pasted the texts into Word documents and deleted the messages from my private portion of the bulletin board. Due to my limited abilities in Arabic, I was restricted to analysing the English-language postings and the English version of the website and I had to conduct interviews in English. English was a fluent, second language for virtually all participants except for second generation Republicans, for whom English was their first language.

At Democracy Now! I started volunteering at the studio in January 2005 and continued to volunteer at the studio periodically when I was in New York, mostly during the months of March, May and August 2005 or through email when I was in London, every week from February to May 2005. When I was in New York from May through August 2005, I volunteered weekly via email, with occasional visits to the studio. Before volunteering, I coordinated my presence as a researcher and as a volunteer with one of the outreach and community organisers and fully disclosed to him my research project. I then presented a summary of my research project to the volunteer coordinator and asked his permission to ask producers for interviews. He asked me to send emails to each producer to solicit interviews. Through this email and through personal contact with individual producers I was able to arrange four interviews. Before each interview I explained more about my research project and provided each interviewee with a statement of confidentiality. All supporting documents, including email invitations for interviews, copies of interview questions and confidentiality statements, appear in the Appendices.

During the observational period as a volunteer, I entered information on audience and supporter donations into a database, I put together orders of t-shirts, DVDs and coffee mugs for shipping, and I entered tape information into the archive database. My online volunteering participation was to edit show transcripts that were posted to the programme’s website, which I did once a week continuously for 30 weeks. This normally took one and half hours to complete and involved direct email communication with the volunteer coordinator.
every week. My other volunteer activities meant that I had direct interaction with the accountant, the archivist and the outreach coordinators. During January 2005 I spent two weeks, eight hours each working day (Monday through Friday) volunteering at the Democracy Now! studio. During this period of observation, I was invited by Amy Goodman to attend a web meeting with the producers and the web consultant hired to revamp the website. I was able to observe discussions around the programme's website and the constraints faced by producers in developing a robust and interactive site. I also spent one morning observing the production of a show in January and had many opportunities to observe how the back office work of the programme operates, from the type of music that was played in the office to the joking banter that occurred between volunteers and Democracy Now! employees. I decided to adopt this strategy with Democracy Now! due to several factors. The first priority was to guarantee access to the organisation itself. I wanted to observe first hand the daily operations of the programme and to see how journalists did their jobs. I needed to see for myself how the organisation is run on a day-to-day basis to appreciate how journalists produce news stories and the factors that influence the production of the website. Secondly, I wanted to have experience as a “virtual” volunteer since the programme at that time had just started recruiting volunteers to work offsite through the Internet. By volunteering both in the studio and “virtually” I developed a well rounded understanding of the organisation, at least from the perspective of a volunteer. During the web production meeting I was able to better understand why the website appears the way that it does. Most producers would love to have the website be more interactive but owing to a severe lack of time resources the website must remain less interactive. I would not have been able to gain this level of understanding without being an observer at meetings where these discussions were taking place. I also gained a much better understanding of just how thin resources are spread for the independent media organisation, most of the back-end work and even some production work (very light) is done by volunteers. I also gained valuable insight into the culture of the organisation, which helped to serve as a balance against all of the rich data that I had also gained by my time spent with the Republicans.

For both the Republicans and for Democracy Now! I maintained field notes and a journal that helped me to analyse data. For both groups I also collected digitised materials.
from their respective websites and I used archive.org extensively to analyse past iterations of both sites. In the case of Democracy Now! this proved to be particularly useful since the website has changed dramatically over the years, especially since September 2001 when the programme started its television broadcasts. After the beginning of television broadcasts, for instance, the website became more neutral in terms of partisan framing and the look and feel more professionalised and closer to the design standards used by mainstream news programmes. Through archive.org as well as the programme’s own archive on its current website I was also able to go back either to read transcripts or to watch programmes on significant stories, such as Democracy Now!’s breaking story on the ousting of President Aristide, and to include transcripts of shows in my coding and analysis of the data from the website. In terms of the Republicans I relied heavily on interview transcripts for my analysis and on one listserv thread that was particularly pertinent to my specific topic of online deliberative democracy, which is discussed at length in Chapter Seven.

5.4 A grounded ethnographic approach to data and analysis online and off

While my research does involve a relatively new information technology, the Internet, the methodologies that I relied on to collect and analyse data are grounded in methods that have now become traditional and even “old standards” for qualitative research; participant observation, open-ended, semi-structured interviews, and content analysis (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 1-2). I should also mention that these methods were chosen for me by my own limitations, rather than by making a conscious choice over one method or another, at least when I first began my research project. My limited abilities in Arabic, for instance, forced me to choose methods, such as semi-structured interviews, to supplement the content analysis of online forum postings. These methods helped to return the richest data possible despite the language barriers. I also chose methods that seemed more familiar to me based on my previous training and experience as a journalist, although my professional background did little to prepare me for the complexities of qualitative and interpretative analysis.
Most of the time that I spent in the field "researching the Internet" was actually not online at all but rather in peoples' living rooms talking about the Internet over hot tea, Sudanese style, with a piece of cinnamon and lots of sugar, or an overgenerous portion of Umm Ali (literally: Ali's mother), a delicious and very comforting warm dessert. When I approached participants for interviews, I often introduced myself as an "Internet researcher" and each time that I did, a pang of guilt would chill my veins. How could I call myself an Internet researcher? I spent most of my time in the "field" stuffing my face while sitting in front of, not a computer, but a turned-down television set airing satellite programmes from Dubai while someone talked about the latest argument blaring on sudaneseonline.com, an online bulletin board mostly in Arabic that I cannot read because I have only taken beginning Arabic and have very little chance of saying anything in Arabic beyond "Goodness, is it time to eat already?" and "Thanks for preparing such a wonderful meal" (Ebeling 2004). My lack of fluency in Arabic also meant that I could not analyse listserv and bulletin board postings written in Arabic on Sudanese sites using quantitative methods.

Regardless of my limited language abilities, I was not interested in pursuing, say, the frequency or breadth of online political discourse among Sudanese web users. I was far more interested in the "socially constructed nature of reality [online], the intimate relationship between [myself as] the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry" (Denzin and Lincoln 2003: 13). What was important to me, as Denzin and Lincoln point out about qualitative researchers more generally, was how the social experiences and contexts of participants is created and endowed with meaning by them and how my own "value-ladenness" influences the research process (2003:13).

There were many points during this project that I felt like an Internet impostor, especially since I had read so many previous studies where researchers chose to restrict their research to online settings only and did not venture offline. Sometimes it seemed to me I took the opposite strategy, rarely venturing online. I knew, however, that by conducting my research in multiple sites, both online and off, I would understand better the social contexts within which the participants who agreed to take part in my study constructed and construed meanings about the Internet, democracy and public political discourse. When I looked at a string of postings they seemed flat for the reason that I did not understand the context in which they were composed. This underlined for me the more fundamental factor that
influenced my application of ethnographic methods to the research; the ethnographic methods that I chose reflected my own political position towards social research. As Norman Denzin notes, the choice of one method over another is ultimately an intimately political one and my choice of qualitative methods meant that it was necessary for me to reengage "the promise of qualitative research and interpretative ethnography as forms of radical democratic practice" (2003: 459). As a social researcher I was very uncomfortable with the prospect of approaching the field and social settings with a preconceived theory about what I would find. I was far more interested in hearing how people construed meaning from their own social realities and suspend theorising about what it meant for e-democracy until I was out of the field. I had read several e-democracy studies before embarking on my own field research that had tried to quantify or to find evidence for theories about online democracy and to me these studies reflected a positivist attitude towards empirical evidence. I felt it was important to let the data unfold itself, to allow it to tell its own story and I did not set out on my research to prove my own or other previous theories right or wrong. Ultimately I did not want to shut down possibilities for interpretation by obscuring the stories that the data could tell us by imposing my own or other pre-existing theories about democratic discourse or online democracy onto the data that I collected.

It was out of this concern to maintain openness to interpretation of the data that the decision to use ethnographic methods for my research was made. Paul Atkinson and Martyn Hammersley define ethnography as having:

"a strong emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena, rather than setting out to test hypotheses about them; a tendency to work primarily with “unstructured” data, that is, data that have not been coded at the point of data collection in terms of a closed set of analytic categories; investigation of a small number of cases; analysis of data that involves explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions, the product of which mainly takes the form of verbal descriptions and explanations, with quantification and statistical analysis playing a subordinate role at most" (Atkinson and Hammersley 1994: 248).
The integration of ethnographic research with a grounded approach to data collection and analysis as proposed by Kathy Charmaz and Richard Mitchell seemed to be the best methodological decision to help me achieve my research goals (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). While suggesting that a social researcher should use an array of methodological tools available to her, they point to an integrated grounded ethnographic approach as providing the best of both methods. For ethnography a grounded approach can "sharpen the analytical edge and theoretical sophistication of ethnography" and ethnography "connect[s] theory with realities, not just with research" and thus helps researchers to delve deeper into social phenomena "to understand experience as their subjects live it, not simply talk about it" (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001: 161).

Throughout the research process I was interested in understanding the social contexts of both groups, as they exist through the entire spectrum of the media environment, not just the online environment. I am not the first one to question the false categories and dichotomies of online and offline, real and virtual. In fact recently many social scientists have been showing through their research that the early enthusiasms or alarmist speculations around the Internet that created these dichotomies just do not hold up in the face of the growing empirical evidence, gleaned both on and offline (Ebeling 2004; Jordan 1999, 2001; Miller and Slater 2000; Sundén 2003; Woolgar 2002). Christine Hine, for instance, recognised in her recent review of online research methodologies that social scientists who study the Internet have thankfully moved away from the expectation that there is a distinct social life online separate from other social realities and are more apt to view the Internet as "simply another context where social life is lived" (Hine 2004: section 1.4). She also emphasises by pointing to recent ethnographic studies of online phenomena that use more conventional methods such as in-depth interviews, that "each localised study has its areas of selective attention, and that by focusing too far on online settings in their own right we may be forgetting factors which shape the availability and nature of those settings" (section 4.4). Citing a study by Pleace et al. (2000) she notes that the use of ethnographic methods offline are important in explaining how participants make sense of online interactions, something that cannot be gleaned from solely observing online interactions. Nina Wakeford, for instance, produced some of her richest ethnographic data
about the Internet not by sitting in front of a computer screen but by sitting in telecentres and Internet cafes in North London (Wakeford 2003).

Perhaps more crucially, however, the use of offline ethnography helps social scientists “to explore the embedding of online interactions in other aspects of social life” (Hine 2004: section 2.3). So more sociological attention is being paid to understanding how the larger social contexts impact online culture and interaction, and vice versa.

Ethnographers such as Hine or Daniel Miller and Don Slater with their work on Trinidadians and the Internet, as another example, have challenged the assumptions of the split between real and virtual and have shown that to understand social realities lived online, a researcher must abandon the notion of collecting data from a single, unified online field site and spend time in one or several "offline" sites (Hine 2000; Miller and Slater 2000). As Miller and Slater advise “…if you want to get to the Internet, don’t start from there”, and in terms of my own research I could second that with “if you want to get to online democracy, don’t start from either” (Miller and Slater 2000: 5). In fact Miller and Slater turn the very notion of virtual on its head and claim it to be a completely inappropriate term when describing Trinidadians online, that their experience is part of a larger material culture. I would contend that is true for any group, not that being online is experienced in a universal way for every user but that going online is part of a larger material culture and pre-existing social context, much like as Steve Woolgar (2002) notes that online experience exists in parallel with other media and social experiences and it is through the study of the particularities and multiplicities of online and offline experience that online cultures can be better understood. My guilt about being an Internet impostor was the key to understanding what is happening online with the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now!. While I was sitting around, looking at photo albums, newspaper clippings, listening to members reminisce about how things used to be before the execution and ruminations on how things are different now, packing boxes or watching a show production, watching Al-Arabiyya television, and talking about the Internet but not spending time on the Internet, I was learning about the social context that Republicans and Democracy Now! use to engage in and make sense of online political discourse.

In their work Opening Pandora's Box, a book about discursive strategies used by scientists, G. Nigel Gilbert and Michael Mulkay defend their use of discourse analysis over
observational techniques solely by arguing that "it seems best, then, to conceive of the meaning of social action, not as a unitary characteristic of acts which can be observed as they occur, but as a diverse potentiality of acts which can be realised in different ways through participants' production of different interpretations in different social contexts" (Gilbert and Mulkay 1984:9). In the methodologies that I chose in my research, I too focused on the discourse of my participants but my analysis was strengthened by the use of observational ethnography to gain deeper insights into the social contexts of participants. So in a similar way to Gilbert and Mulkay, I found that to get to the bottom of democratic discourse online, I would not be able to determine what makes discourse democratic simply by observing discussion strings or bulletin board postings threads and declaring that due to the presence of x or y, a particular line of online political discourse denoted or did not democratic speech. The analytical framework for understanding the discourse of participants was strengthened due to my experience with participants offline. In this way I could understand the meanings and interpretations that the participants themselves make of political opinion or discourse and of how they make sense of their experience of "being online". If I remained online solely to observe these social interactions, I may have interpreted one posting that accuses the Republicans of being kaffirs (in English: nonbelievers; a very insulting word) as being undemocratic and missed the fact the Republicans themselves interpret these speech acts, what they call "violent", democratic within their own interpretative framework. Observing "violent speech" online out of the social context of Republican sense-making and interpretation of that speech would provide me no deep insights and could lead to the false conclusion that Republican political discourse is nondemocratic. Additionally, by placing myself in offline field sites, I have a better understanding of the sense of loss and longing that comes with being in exile, something that is not readily apparent in Republican online culture.

I approached the Internet then through a side door. I used it as a talking point or springboard to discuss other issues such as the nature of democratic pluralism; the complexities, contradictions and painful realities of Sudanese identity or the alienation of American politics, and how these are the discussions on sites such as sudaneseonline.com or among American alternative media, and what exactly are the qualities of deliberations that make them "democratic". I have collected data from multiple field sites, most of them
not even remotely online but I have been emboldened by Nicola Green's suggestion in her work about virtual reality and research methods, that we need to "disrupt the field" and shatter the illusion of a neat and tidy, bounded field site (Green 1999).

5.5 Ethical considerations

While I followed the ethical guidelines of both the British Sociological Association and the Association of Internet Researchers\(^{10}\) closely to guide my conduct during the research project, several ethical implications arose which caused me to reassess how to handle particularly thorny ethical issues. The most complicated ethical issues arose in my research with the Republican Brothers. Since I was being introduced to other Republicans by one member who was also a friend of mine, anonymity was a specific problem to be addressed early on. Obviously I could not promise this to any participants. What I could and did promise was confidentiality for anything they told me in interviews or anything they wrote to me, either in letters, online or through email. I changed all the names of participants, spoke of their occupations and where they live in general terms or changed their location altogether. Most participants, both Republicans and producers at Democracy Now!, however, wanted me to use their actual names in my final report. Some social scientists, especially feminists ethnographers such as Barbara Heyl (2001: 373), have argued that when requested by informants, a researcher should use real names as a way of empowering interviewees and giving them more control over the process. Given the political context for most participants I interviewed, however, I was not comfortable with using informants' real names or identifying information. I had heard too many stories during interviews of Sudanese government informants watching and reporting on exile communities to the authorities and, as a result, the physical dangers that people faced. Even though I was fairly confident that no government informants would actually read my thesis, I felt compelled to protect informants' identities as best as I could. I explained to those who asked me to use their real names, that as a social researcher, I did not feel comfortable to do this and all names and significant biographical data have been changed.

\(^{10}\) The guidelines can be downloaded from britsoc.co.uk and aoir.org respectively.
I did not discuss the content of previous interviews with participants and I avoided raising information that was disclosed to me in one interview with other participants. There were occasions where this was unavoidable. For example, I learned in one interview that Republican members were no longer using the online meeting facilities on their website to conduct prayer meetings. This was a significant finding since it had been an erstwhile popular activity for Republicans. Once I learned of this phenomenon, in subsequent interviews I would specifically ask if the interviewee was participating in the online prayer meetings and why they chose to or not to. I was careful, however, not to explain how I learned about the drop in participation levels.

Some of my interviews were conducted with two or more Republicans together in one sitting. This was by the agreement of all those interviewed and members were quite candid during our conversations despite the presence of other Republicans. For those interviews that were conducted online through the private message function of the public bulletin board on alfikra.org, I copied all the messages to a Word file, changed the name of the interviewee and deleted the private messages immediately from the private message function. I provided each participant with a written statement of confidentiality as well as information about access to the transcripts of their interviews. Before starting each interview, I reiterated to the interviewee what my PhD thesis was about, the purpose of the interview, what I would do with the data collected from the interview, and how I would guarantee the interviewee's confidentiality. I also reminded them that they could stop the interview at any time and if they changed their mind at a later date about what they told me, they could ask me not to use their interview data in my analysis. All data was kept on a secured laptop or paper files, with some data (larger photo and audio files) moved to CDs and kept in my sole possession. At no time did I share any original data with anyone, not even my supervisors.

Only one interviewee asked to see her transcript after I had transcribed the interview. I gave her a copy on which she added or clarified key comments she had made during the original interview. It was more important to me that she felt comfortable with what she had said than for me to have the original transcript unaltered. It was also important that she was assured that I had understood her intended meaning after she had amended the transcript. As with any other social situation, there are times that most of us look back on
them and think, “Oh if only I had said this or that, I would have made myself clearer”. I did not want to deny her the opportunity to clarify herself. I believe that by having given her the transcript to amend it not only helped to clarify her intended meanings, but more importantly, it reinforced the bond of trust and respect that we had shared during the research process. In the end I decided not to include her transcript in my final analysis because of other factors that I will explain shortly.

The development of trust between me and my informants was essential in my approach to the Republicans. Because my friend was willing to introduce me to others, through this relationship I had an “in” to the group as well as a certain level of trust since my friend was a well respected and trusted member of the group. Yet because of this friendship, I had to be extra vigilant that this relationship would not compromise confidentiality or personal boundaries of other participants. Most participants, however, were very excited and happy that I was interested in them as a group as well as individuals, and trusted me to respect their boundaries of privacy and to protect their identities, especially given the politically sensitive nature of our discussions. Many of the Republican participants were academics who had their own PhDs and were familiar with the qualitative research methods that I was using to collect data; some had used similar methods in their own research. Despite this I could not assume that just because they had also used similar research methods, that they would automatically agree to my use of these methods in regards to their participation. Before each interview I explained how I would use the data for my research, how I would transcribe the interviews, analyse what was said and develop findings from these data to apply to the larger issues of e-democracy under study.

Towards the end of my field research something occurred that devastated me personally, underlined the gravity of the reality faced by the research participants, and forced me to rethink how to handle confidentiality. One of the participants I interviewed was an oppositional political leader of great significance, and had returned to Sudan for a short visit months after our meeting. When this person arrived at Khartoum airport, they were separated from their family, who was also travelling with them, and “kidnapped” for a brief period by the authorities to prevent this person from participating in a rally of thousands of
people planned to coincide with their arrival. The news of this happening devastated me and it deeply frightened me to understand exactly what the participants face even in the relative safety of exile. The helplessness and anger that I felt cannot begin to describe what exiled Sudanese people must feel and it underlined for me the real dangers that the participants who agreed to speak to me face and the risks that they took to share their stories. It deepened my respect for all those interviewees who participated but it also underlined my own privileges as an outsider and as a researcher; it was unlikely that I or my family would face similar dangers. Even though I was fairly confident that my thesis would not fall into the wrong hands (let's face it, only four people are reading my thesis right now), I did have to consider how harm could come to those who agreed to participate. As John and Lyn Lofland warn, when engaging in social research, consideration to avoid harm to participants must be the first ethical priority (Lofland and Lofland 1984: 158).

The kidnapping incident made me much more cautious about protecting the identities of participants, and soon after I went back to notes and transcripts and replaced the pseudonyms that I had given participants with a numerical code. I could not guarantee that I protected the names of Republican participants from other Republicans because of the closeness (and openness) of the community, it was inevitable that one member might mention that I interviewed them to another member, but I was extremely careful not to disclose to other participants whom I had spoken with or any information on what was said during interviews. I also removed from my analysis this particular participant's interview data. A less clear-cut issue in regards to harm also arose around some internal conflicts within the Republican Brotherhood and how to describe these with sensitivity. While I explore these conflicts at length in Chapter Seven, the issue posed some ethical problems for me. In my interviews, participants were very candid about the sources of the conflict but they were also careful not to name the particular individuals that they felt had caused the most serious rifts. Despite their judiciousness most Republicans were unequivocal about which members, even if left unnamed, were causing the biggest misunderstandings and it was relatively easy for me after a few interviews to deduce who those members were. Regardless of participants' carefulness not to name names and my own prudence in

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11 I have significantly changed the identifying details of this story to protect the participant and the participant's family, but I have kept true to the main facts of the story; a participant was kidnapped by authorities to prevent them from appearing at a rally in Khartoum.
generalising information and using pseudonyms, if Republicans read this thesis, it is likely that they will know who I am talking about, even if I never learned the name of this person myself and despite the great care that I took to protect identities. Non-Republicans who read this thesis, however, will not likely be able to identify anyone from the analysed data.

While I had to apply the same ethical codes and practices to my research with Democracy Now!, fewer ethical dilemmas arose during the process due to the analytical reliance on primarily published, web-based and broadcast materials that formed the bulk of the data and my lesser reliance on interview data from participants. I felt that since the materials I was analysing about Democracy Now! were primarily the published work of public figures in the public domain and not the private discourse of individual interviewees, the very publicness of the materials posed fewer ethical issues than the interview data of the Republicans. All of the same precautions that I used for the Republican case study, such as using a numerical code and not disclosing who I had spoken to or what was said in previous interviews, I also used with interviewees for the Democracy Now! study.

5.6 Data collections and analysis

5.6.1 The process of analysis

How does a researcher explain how her thoughts work in the process of analysis? How do I describe where the fine line between the end of coding and the beginning of analysis lies? Is it possible to map the intimate networks of my thoughts and make explicit all the ways that I arrived at a particular insight? Claire Haggett notes in her response to Potter and Wetherell's (1987: 168) own dilemma with this issue, that for most researchers “describing the process … is difficult, especially because the movement between coding and analysis makes it hard to explicitly state when analysis takes place” (2004: 57). In my own experience analysis begins well before a researcher sits down in front of her computer, in front of piles of notes, transcripts, print outs of websites and photographs to “code the data”. Sometimes it happens when you're sitting down and talking with participants, or when you are surfing links through websites. Other times it can happen in unexpected contexts—riding a train, watching a film, looking at graffiti, reading poetry—all of these activities contain potential space for inspiration to occur, for insights to strike you, for analysis. Many social
researchers who use qualitative methods to carry out research projects have remarked extensively on just how intuitive and amorphous the qualitative analytical process can be. Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln have observed that interpretative, qualitative analysis often "comes from the gut" and is largely intuitive (Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

While I was in the field and for the duration of the data collection phase I was already analysing the data, whether this was a deliberate act through the jotting down of notes or something that I was processing through my thoughts and never made explicit (until much later) on paper. As I conducted interviews, for instance, I was integrating and categorising new information based on what had been previously told to me in other interviews or what I had gleaned from websites or online texts. During this process I created a correspondence between the experiences of being "in the field", my experiences with informants, the data that I collected (and what I went through collecting it) and what previous sociological work had to say about it (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001:165). Charmaz and Mitchell advise that when social researchers use a grounded ethnographic approach to coding, they should:

"...begin with open or initial coding and then try to code everything they see in the data. In contrast to Miles and Huberman's (1994) advice to plan a set of codes beforehand, grounded theorists adhere to the basic premise of developing the codes directly from the data through an emergent process. Never force data into pre-existing codes" (165).

As I had observed in my review of the social science literature, much of the research seemed to work from the premise of forcing data taken from political websites and discussion boards into categories developed from pre-existing theories about communication or politics. In their paper on election websites in a number of Asian countries, Nicholas Jankowski and Randolph Kluver, for example, place the Tamil Tigers into the predefined category that they created for "NGOs" because as they note, they did not have a category for "terrorists" (Jankowski and Kluver 2005). In developing codes I wanted to avoid such analytical pitfalls that could distort or obscure the stories that had been told to me and the story that I wanted to tell. While the purpose of my analysis was not to build a
theory of online democracy but rather to make sense of the experiences with democratic culture through the two groups in my study, I used an ethnographic method of analysis to interpret my research data in order to remain close to the data content. When I finally sat down to “analyse the data”, my experiences in the field coupled with what I already had learned from the literature did influence how I categorised bits of data, how I organised it, how I built codes and how those codes linked to larger themes but to build the codes and themes I continually referred back to the actual words and phrases used by participants.

One of the most significant themes to emerge from my coding of interview data with Republicans, for instance, was the split between spoken and written deliberation and how this split was alienating Republicans from engaging with each other online. This theme was built around what was told to me in interviews themselves, and the subsequent transcripts that resulted from those interviews as well as text from listserv postings. The theme grew, however, from earlier codes that I developed from the participants’ own words:

“Even in the vocal forum that same Brother would remain very calm, very easy, very respectful of others but when he writes he is violent and I think I am right to use that word” (Abdalla M., interview transcript, October 2004).

So one code that grew out of Abdalla’s discussion of Republican online behaviour was “violent text”, even though Abdalla did not use the word “text”, he was describing online writing which results in a textual artefact. Once I created that particular code, I found many instances of it in other interview transcripts of participants discussing the same phenomenon, even if they used different words to describe what was happening:

“[W]hen you talk to someone directly, face to face, he may use sometimes tough language but sometimes when people write, I don’t know what happens, they write things they would not say face to face” (Abdel O., interview transcript, October 2004).

Although Abdel did not specifically use the words “violent text” to describe the difference in language usage among members when they speak as opposed to when they write online, I
could see a direct link to the code, not only from the transcript itself but from my own memories of our conversation and what I had learned from my years of spending time with Republicans. Once I developed the code "violent text", I expanded my gaze to the broader contextual data of online Republicans and was able to link the code of "violent text" to the larger themes of the discursive split between written and spoken thought and online silences and how all of this related to Republicans' own sense of their discursive culture and its perceived loss in exile.

By choosing to build codes from the ground up to the themes that emerged from the data, and by not forcing the data into predefined codes, I believe that the analysis remained close to the data that I collected and intimate with the subjects themselves.

5.6.2 Interview design and analysis

The research started with the Republicans and my first set of interview questions were designed open-endedly, that is, I designed questions that would capture essential data from each participant on the topic but allowed space for conversations to meander along courses that were unanticipated but potentially very interesting. Herbert and Irene Rubin describe the purpose of open-ended, qualitative interviewing as a research opportunity to develop "a solid, deep understanding of what is being studied, rather than breadth. Depth is achieved by going after context; dealing with complexity of multiple, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting themes...to get to depth, the researcher has to follow up, ask more questions ... [and] research design and questioning must remain flexible to accommodate new information, to adapt to the actual experiences that people have had, and to adjust to unexpected situations" (2005: 35). As I conducted more interviews and learned more about Republicans and their online activities, I redesigned questions to follow certain paths that arose in previous interviews. For example it was not until I interviewed Abdalla M. that I learned about the phenomenon of violent text occurring on the Republican closed online forums, although before this interview I had already interviewed six people. After speaking at length with him about the phenomenon, I pursued a similar line of questioning in successive interviews with other Republicans. Each interview was designed for the specific purpose of obtaining contextual information from a participant at the very beginning and then to provide room for a conversation to evolve. I would ask the same questions pertaining to the participant's level of education, the decision to become a Republican,
participation levels, but if the participant offered new information that I had not heard previously, such as was the case with Abdalla, we would focus the rest of the conversation on that topic.

During one interview, however, I learned how important it was to most of the Republicans I interviewed to tell their own stories. As one informant and I sat on the floor talking and drinking tea, he tore the neatly printed question sheet from my lap, and said that if I wanted to understand the real story of the Republicans I should not follow a format, and then he said, “Put the questions aside and let me talk”. It was a big lesson for me. I was so worried about appearing “scientific” in my use of qualitative methods because I was new to sociology and felt I had to quantify my qualitative methods in order for my data to be “scientifically valid” that the method, at times, became more important than the data outcomes: the stories that people wanted me to hear. Due to my own worries and insecurities I was not able to see how the act of speaking about one’s own life and experiences could be an empowering and cathartic act for some of my informants and not only did I have something to gain from the research process, so did they. They wanted to share with me, they wanted to tell me their stories and they wanted their stories heard. Heyl (2001) notes in her review of ethnographic interviewing techniques the importance of letting the informant “name the world in their own terms” and allowing a collaboration to occur between oneself and the informant during the interview so that the researcher is “respectful of interviewees’ desire to control the telling of their stories” (375-376). Her suggestions underlined my own experience with this one informant. From that point forward in the research process I loosened the reins on my interview style and learned to let those whom I was interviewing guide the conversation, after having first set a few parameters. Most interviews lasted between one and two hours, with some interviews lasting over three hours. Sometimes, questions were broken up during an extended visit at a participant’s home, usually over a period of eight hours or more. Democracy Now! interviews were conducted within a similar framework. Interviews with Democracy Now! employees were considerably shorter but designed to capture consistent data across all interviews, and to be open-ended and semi-structured. Interviews were also conducted iteratively as I analysed data. While I was analysing older versions of the Democracy Now! website, for instance, new questions arose about objectivity and bias, and I included questions that addressed these issues in
subsequent interviews. Interviews with Democracy Now! producers and employees averaged a half hour to 40 minutes in length, with the exception of one that lasted more than two hours. Two of the Democracy Now! interviews occurred in secluded areas of the studio (a storage room) and two occurred offsite. As with the Republicans, I could not guarantee total anonymity with Democracy Now! participants but I could guarantee confidentiality in anything they told me. I changed the names of all Democracy Now! interviewees in my data collection, analysis and reporting. Since I had promised this to the Republicans I felt that I needed to do this for Democracy Now! producers even though the political context within which they operate is less dangerous than for Republicans. Before I started every interview I asked permission to record the interview, to which all participants agreed. I did turn off my recorder during times when interviewees became very emotional and I wanted to be respectful of their emotions.

I coded interview transcripts following the guidance of a grounded ethnographic approach. I created codes based on words and phrases used in the discourse of participants and created themes from those codes. When I looked at the data, either onscreen or in print, I used the interviewees’ own words to construct codes and themes. I also analysed some data iteratively; as I collected and analysed it, I redesigned interview questions based on information emerging from the early analysis. Details on both sets of open-ended interview questions appear at the end of the thesis in the Appendices.

5.6.3 Listserv and bulletin board postings and analysis
I collected a string of postings in English from the assaloon listserv archive from a one month period in 1998 and a two month period in 1999. These postings were given to me by the webmaster and were anonymised by him before I received them. I also collected all English postings from the alfikra.org bulletin board. Both collections were analysed. During the entire research period, I was subscribed to two English language listservs, Sudanese-L and Sudan List. Both listservs are administered by universities based in the United States. I did not include postings from these lists in my analysis since I subscribed to them solely to stay abreast of current events in Sudan and to gain more background information on Sudanese politics. In addition to these two listservs, I was registered to sudanesonline.com by the owner of the bulletin board and he posted a message about me and my research
5.6.4 Website iterations and analysis
Through the use of the online archive, archive.org, I was able to collect and analyse several previous iterations of alfikra.org and democracynow.org. While it was interesting to see through the past iterations of alfikra.org small incremental changes to the site over the years, the most productive analysis came from understanding how the Republicans framed their descriptions of Ustadh Taha and downplayed descriptions of the movement. The analysis of past iterations of Democracy Now! revealed much greater changes and provided more insights. The most significant changes were apparent in how stories were ideologically framed by images and headlines. I was able to build codes and themes out the analysis of older website iterations and the analysis was based on news framing, the use of practices to ensure "balance" as well as finding evidence of professional biases. This analysis helped me understand better how changes in the larger political environment in the United States coupled with the programme’s growth of influence on mainstream media shaped the way Democracy Now! ideologically framed their web productions.

5.6.5 News archives
The selected stories from the news archives on both the present iteration of democracynow.org as well older archives available through archive.org were collected and analysed. I did not analyse these selected stories to the same depth as other Democracy Now! material, but I did use them for verification of Democracy Now! breaking coverage and to get a sense of how the programme covered controversial stories. I also used the Lexis-Nexis news archive database to examine how other media outlets covered the same stories that Democracy Now! broke.

5.6.6 Books and printed materials
I collected and examined several books and printed materials for both groups studied for analysis. For the Republicans I collected their primary text The Second Message of Islam
as well as pamphlets and flyers that were available at the commemoration ceremony. I relied heavily on the Second Message to learn about Republican Thought that serves as the ideological base of the movement. The pamphlets and flyers were not analysed but helped to provide more of a context of the print culture of the movement. For Democracy Now! I collected Amy Goodman's book, Exception to the Rulers, and analysed the text in depth to develop key codes and themes based on Goodman's discourse concerning media politics in a democracy. I also collected promotional flyers from Democracy Now! but did not analyse these.

5.6.7 DVDs and CDs
I collected the DVD Independent media in the time of war from Democracy Now!. The DVD is a coproduction of Democracy Now! and Indymedia (Mohawk), and is sold through the website to help raise funds for the programme. The DVD features extensive coverage of Amy Goodman's public addresses at peace rallies and an antiwar march in New York City. I analysed the transcript of this DVD in depth, especially Goodman's discourse on mainstream and alternative media. From the Republicans I collected a self-produced music CD of Inshads. A collection of music CDs are for sale from the webmaster to cover the costs of production and are used to promote the spiritual music of the movement. While this CD was not included in the analysis, it was thoroughly enjoyed for its aesthetic qualities.

5.6.8 News clippings of Amy Goodman and Democracy Now!
I collected and analysed news clippings from other media outlets mentioned Amy Goodman and Democracy Now! or featured interviews with Amy Goodman. The clippings were found and downloaded from the Democracy Now! website section on media coverage of Amy Goodman and the programme, or were found from Lexis-Nexis and Academic Resource Primer. In all I downloaded and analysed 12 clippings and show transcripts that appeared in newspapers, periodicals and from news talk shows that Goodman was interviewed on. Again, I analysed Goodman's discourse on media politics in all the clippings and transcripts.
5.6.9 Field notes and research journals
I collected field notes each time I visited a participant or volunteered at the Democracy Now! studio. I also maintained a research journal during the entire process. Although field notes and the journals did not undergo the analytical process of coding and theme building that other data did, nevertheless I relied heavily on both to remind me of impressions, thoughts, insights that occurred to me at the time of the field experience and important details to help me reinforce and verify the analysis of other data.

5.6.10 Raw video footage in archives
While I was volunteering in the studio, I had access to several tapes of raw footage taken at various peace rallies and fundraising events where Amy Goodman spoke. I was not able to collect or analyse these tapes but viewing them did help to familiarise me with Goodman’s discourse on media and antiwar politics.

5.6.11 Computer-assisted analysis
Since I chose to collect and analyse research data using a qualitative, ethnographic and grounded-approach methodology, I used Nvivo, analytical software that enables the analysis of qualitative data and supports discourse analysis. Nvivo was used to develop codes and themes based on the words and phrases used by participants or appearing in the collected data, thus I developed codes in vivo or based in the language that the informants used themselves (Charmaz and Mitchell 2001; Strauss and Corbin 1998). From these codes and themes I was able to make connections between them to develop insights about what was happening through the participants’ discourses. I also used the software more generally to help organise my data and keep all my notes and thoughts in one place. In order to use Nvivo, I had to save all transcripts and textual data as Rich Text Format (.rtf) files. The program does not allow users to analyse images, audio or websites. For the analysis of these data, I relied on pen and paper or analysed directly onscreen and kept notes in my field notebook on findings.
5.7 Conclusions

The following three chapters are the results of the analytical processes I used and which were described in this chapter. The analysis should be considered within the context of what Denzin and Lincoln call "the art and politics of interpretation" (2003). They remarked on how "qualitative interpretations are constructed" iteratively out of the field notes, transcripts and other bits of data in an attempt to document how the researcher makes sense of what she has learned and that there is no one "interpretative truth" (2003: 26). The following chapters, then, should be considered as constructions, organised to tell a story of the Republican Brothers and of Democracy Now!. There are many other stories that could be told of both groups: the following are mine.
It is Iowa's bitterest month, January, and I am shocked at how much cold a body can bear in the crisp, icy winds that whip across the Midwestern plains. Over night all of Iowa City's ranch-style houses and bare trees have been coated with a layer of ice that now shimmers in the weak winter sun. It is so cold that the few wispy clouds floating in the sky sputter and, finally, resigned to evaporate into invisible ice crystals, dissolve. It is in this unlikely landscape, on the campus of University of Iowa, that more than 50 Republicans and many more Sudanese, American and British people have gathered to commemorate Mahmoud Mohamed Taha's execution which occurred 20 years ago on 18 January 1985.

Some Republicans have driven from their homes in Charlotte, North Carolina, Athens, Ohio, Detroit, Michigan, or Washington DC, risking a long-haul road trip in unpredictable January weather. Others have flown in from New York and London to celebrate the life of the movement's revered leader. Those Brothers and Sisters who live in Iowa City have made sure that all visitors, including myself, have a place to sleep, food to eat and a ride across the sprawling suburbs to the campus. One Republican who lives in Germany and who was not granted a travel visa by the US government, along with another Brother who was unable to leave Oman, have been attending via the Internet and are able to participate at most of the weekend's events despite the distance. There are photo exhibits depicting the movement, especially from the early 1980s, and a display of Taha's personal items among them a shaving kit, a suitcase filled with his neatly folded white robe, and a Qur'an. So much of the exhibit reveals more than maybe it is intended to, a social movement frozen in time at the moment of its leader's execution. There are lectures and
seminars on Republican Thought and the history of the movement, the multimedia culture of Republicanism, and how Republican ideology fits into the current political and human rights situation in Sudan. The highlight of the weekend for most attendees is Saturday evening’s planned performance—and then the spontaneous one after most of the audience had gone home—of the Inshads, the repetitive chanting songs which praise the name of Allah, and are central to Republican Sufi practice. During the breaks between sessions warm, affectionate hugs are exchanged, as are reminiscences of a youth and life lost, and finally the relief of laughter comes after bitter tears are shared among Brothers and Sisters reunited following so many years of living separately.

How did this once very cohesive, religiously based, oppositional movement that started in the dusty streets of Khartoum, end up here gathered for a brief time in this American Midwestern city only to disperse again across the globe to their separate lives? Any attempt to describe and to provide an understanding of what exactly the Republican Brotherhood faced before and after exile can only be made clear after a very brief description of the historical social, religious, and political contexts of Sudan. In this chapter I present some background on the Sufi traditions that the Republicans form a part of, the ongoing social crisis over identity and sectarianism in Sudan which underlies virtually all of the conflicts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and the military regimes that have made life as a Republican (or any Sudanese person for that matter) particularly difficult. I also describe some of the unique discursive and media cultures that the Republicans developed, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, in spite of the numerous bans on their public and media activities. Understanding how this discursive culture existed before exile is important to understanding the context of how it exists now in exile and online which we will explore in depth in Chapter Seven.

Since all ideologies, whether they are religious or political, are self-contained within their own intimate logics, it is necessary to provide a small but essential key to navigate Republican Thought. Therefore the chapter closes with some explanation of the core Republican democratic and religious ideology developed by Ustadh12 Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, the spiritual leader of the Republicans.

12 ‘Ustadh’ is a title often used by the Republicans for members of the leadership and it means ‘revered teacher’. There are several different transliteral ways to spell Arabic words with the English alphabet. In this case, the letter چ can be spelled sometimes with ‘th’ or ‘dh’ but is pronounced with a sound close to the English
6.1 The Republicans in Sudan

6.1.1 Sudan in brief
Sudan is Africa's largest country with a diverse landscape that spans an area of 2.5 million square kilometres, and is situated south of Egypt and west of the Red Sea, Eritrea and Ethiopia. Sudan shares its borders with those three countries and with Libya, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda and Kenya. The contemporary nation-state borders of Sudan were formed when the Turco-Egyptians invaded the country in 1820 and established the colonial borders of the Ottoman Empire that are in roughly the same area that exist today. While there was wrangling over the country between the British and the Ottoman Empire when the British occupied Egypt in 1882, it was not until 1898, when the British won Omdurman (a suburb of the capital Khartoum) from the Mahdiyya state (the brief period of independence for Sudan), that the British colonised Sudan and they stayed until 1956 (Woodward 1990:13). As of 2004 the country has a population in excess of 27.5 million people who speak a variety of languages, with some estimates putting the number of languages at over 130. Seventy percent of the population practice Islam and close to 30 percent are either Christian or practice a traditional African religion that is customary among the diverse ethnic groups throughout the country (Home Office 2004).

The exiled Sudanese sociologist Mahgoub el-Tigani Mahmoud (2003) describes Sudan as being “gifted with a great diversity of cultures” which comprise multiple ethnicities including people who identify as Arab, Beja, Dinka, Nubian, Nuer and Nilotic (among almost 500 others), and he points to the country's Sufi traditions as being particularly open and tolerant of cultural differences (1, 10-11; Home Office 2004: 7). Sudan is a multicultural, multilingual and multireligious state despite the ongoing ideological struggles over Sudanese identity that continue largely to dictate the country's politics, with the most recent and poignant evidence of this volatility being the genocide in Darfur. The issue of identity is so sensitive and divisive that it can turn a polite conversation among friends into a heated and hurtful argument and occupies a central position in the political discourse of both the

'z'. I use the transliteral spelling 'Ustadh' because it is more often used on the Republican website, only changing the spelling to 'Ustaz' when directly quoting a member's post or text (especially in Chapter Seven).
ruling elite and oppositional groups. The issue over a contested Sudanese identity has fundamentally fuelled the world’s longest, contemporary civil war. Sudan’s ongoing conflicts are an extreme example of the dilemmas produced by developing a democratic culture and nationhood within a multicultural society fraught with incompatible interests.

The country is divided into several geographical (and ethnic) regions but the most obvious divide is between Northern and Southern Sudan, with the North encompassing the area where the Nile splits into the Blue and White Niles (around the capital Khartoum). Khartoum is the seat of political and social power, with many Northern elites entrenched in what is called “Northern Sudanese identity”. Northerners who identify as “Northerners” maintain they are Arab: they speak Arabic, they are Muslim and lastly, they are non-African Sudanese. The Northern identity does not recognise itself as being a part of Africa or as being black but rather sees itself as part of the larger Arab world east of the Red Sea and identifies as “Arab”. There are, of course, Northerners who refuse to identify themselves in this way and seek to align with an identity based on Sudanese nationhood rather than on Arab ethnicity and are generally those who are in the progressive intelligentsia and support the post-civil war “New Sudan”13 (Hale 2001: 25). The Republican Brothers, for example, are comprised mostly of Northerners who reject the traditional Northern identity and opt to see themselves firstly as Sudanese rather than to align with ethnically based and sectarian factions, and to sympathise with Southerners.

The South encompasses the region starting just south of the Nuba Mountains and eventually reaches the Upper Nile. Within the South the majority of people are either Christian or practice one of the traditional African religions (although there are some who are Muslim); they do not speak Arabic as their first language, and identify themselves as both African and black. Al-Baqir al-Aff Mukhtar, a scholar who focuses on this cleavage within Sudanese identity, characterises it as a crisis, where “the North, feeling that it is Arab and Muslim, has always sought to define the whole country in these terms. It did not only resist any attempts by the non-Arab segment of the country to identify Sudan with black

13 Sondra Hale (2001) explains that there is debate over the term “New Sudan” which was originally coined by the Southern Sudan liberation movement the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A). The SPLM/A argue that the term should only refer to the southern areas controlled by the group and that any use of the term should include acknowledgement of the group. However, the term has entered into the Sudanese political parlance (and was used often by interviewees) and is used by progressives to describe a post-Islamist, democratic and multicultural Sudan based on statehood rather than on ethnically based sectarian politics.
Africa, but also tried relentlessly to assimilate the South through Arabisation and Islamisation policies, and to turn the Southern identity into a distorted image of the Northern self (Mukhtar 1999: 2). While the purpose of this thesis is not to detail all of the nuances, complexities and historical precedents that contribute to the construction of Sudanese identity, such as its role in Darfur (Darfurians are Muslim, non-Arab and black) or in the just ended 40-year civil war between the North and the South, it is important to the context of this thesis to emphasise that it is due to the conflicted Sudanese identity that the issue of imposing Shari’a is so fraught and is one of the fundamental issues for the Republican Brothers. Indeed, it is the main reason why the leader of the Republicans, Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, was executed.

6.1.2 Sudan’s Sufi traditions and the Republicans: The complexity of religious political engagement

During both colonial occupations a complex of religious-political alliances were established. When the Turco-Egyptians invaded Sudan, Sufism, the mystical and ascetic branch of Islam, had been well established in the country for more than 300 years after its introduction there by the Funj Sultanate beginning in the fifteenth century (Chittick 2000: 3-5; Warburg 2003: 1). By the time of the invasion Sufism as both a religious and political force had fundamentally shaped Sudan’s society. Sufism flourished in Sudan during the sixteenth century when a number of Sufi turuq (in English: orders, brotherhoods) spread across Sudan, fuelled by a larger wave of Sufism that was breaking across the Muslim world and precipitated by the decline of the Arab empire which had spurred a growth in religious mysticism. These new Sufi orders found a willing receptiveness among the Sudanese population due in part, perhaps, because local people were already familiar with itinerate holy men (in Arabic: sing. faqih, pl. fuquha) from Arabia and Egypt who travelled with nomadic groups and preached Islam by integrating local customs into Muslim religious practice (2003: 22). The new Sufi orders were headed by charismatic leaders, or shaykhs, who also integrated local customs into their already flexible and inclusive religious practices,

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14 Sing. ‘tariqa’, literally means ‘path’.

15 Leaders of Sufi orders are called ‘shaykhs’. The blessedness that they receive from God is called ‘baraka’. The shaykh’s baraka produces in him (rarely but sometimes her) saintliness and this is a unique and defining characteristic of Sufism.
and offered something more than the fuqaha had; a direct path to God through a process of
intensive prayer and meditation. From the eighteenth century onwards, a new wave of
Sufism (often called “neoSufism”) developed that featured even more doctrinal openness,
greater internal organisation within turuq and better adaptability to outside political and
social forces. Sufism was more relevant to people’s lives and experiences, especially in the
rural areas, than the mainstream Islam associated with the Turkish colonisers. Sufi orders
and their blessed leaders guided people on their personal spiritual paths and private
relationships with Allah. The turuq in general were unconcerned with the state and were
more involved with expanding their sphere of spiritual influence than with political revolt
(Woodward 1990: 34). Since the Turco-Egyptians were ruled by the Ottoman sultan, who
was also the Caliph of Islam and the guardian of the more traditional practice, the occupiers
disapproved of the turuq, except for one, the Khatmiyya tariqa, since the order collaborated
closely with the occupiers. Most other turuq were either openly hostile to the Turco-
Egyptians or indifferent, more interested in people’s spiritual salvation than liberating them
from their colonisers (22). One tariqa to rise against both the Turco-Egyptian and the
Egyptian-British colonisers, however, were the Madhiyya.

During the brief period between the fall of the Turco-Egyptian occupation in 1885
and British colonisation in 1899, Sudan was an independent state and Islamic caliphate led
by Ahmed al-Mahdi and his successor the Khalifa Abdallahi. The revolt that forced the
Turco-Egyptians out and established the Madhist state was led by the messianic al-Mahdi
(mahdi means “the Expected One” and it is believed that the Mahdi will cleanse and save
the Muslim world) and his followers the Ansar, who, despite their own Sufi origins, were also
anti-turuq in the sense that the Mahdist state sought to neutralise the power of Sufi shaykhs
and to reintegrate Islam under the Ansar (El-Affendi 2002: 1; Mahmoud 2003: 18-19;
Woodward 1990: 22). The Mahdist state had fought the British and resisted their
colonisation for years until the Ansar troops were utterly crushed at the battle of Omdurman
in 1898. When the British-Egyptian Condominium state was established in 1899 the
resistance against the new colonisers was simply a continuation of the insurgency project
started against the country’s previous foreign rulers (25). During the twentieth century and
post-independence, the Mahdist and their Umma Party maintained a central position in
Sudanese politics, especially during the three brief democratic periods (1956-1958, 1965-
1969 and 1986-1989). The Khatmiyya tariqa went on to form the Democratic Unionist Party, DUP, which along with the Umma, were the two most influential political parties in independent Sudan, especially after 1968. In general, and with the exception of those parties that are Marxist or socialist, all of the influential parties (and those less so) in Sudan are also formidable religious groups. As we will see later in this chapter, Sudanese politics, at least among Northerners, are inextricably linked to Sufi orders or to Islamist movements.

6.1.3 The Republicans before and after independence

It was within this century-old continuum of resistance to colonial occupation as well as the much older Sufi political heritage that the beginnings of the Republican Brotherhood were forged. During the late 1930s and early 1940s Mahmoud Mohamed Taha, then an engineer with a thriving private practice, was active in the anticolonial struggle against the British. Taha established the Republican Party in 1945 with other like-minded intellectuals out of a sense of frustration with the existing, sectarian political groups, primarily the Ansar and the Khatmiyya, that were resisting British colonialism but at the same time were still willing to compromise with the colonisers (Warburg 2003: 161). Taha's ideology for the party was of total independence based on republicanism and he believed that any compromise with the colonisers would jeopardise all potential for Sudanese independence. While the Republican Party was secular in its early days, an inchoate version of Republican Thought based on a modernist and revisionist interpretation of Islam was already evident in the party's pamphlets and publications (An-Na'im 1987a: 2-3). Most of the party's members had advanced degrees and originated from lower-middle and middle-class urban families. From its earliest beginnings as an anticolonial political party, the Republicans forced a direct engagement with the public by distributing leaflets and books as well as addressing people in the streets, mosques and cafés of cities throughout Sudan (Mahmoud 2001: 71, 84). This open public engagement was to become the hallmark of the movement.

In 1946 Taha was sentenced twice to prison, in the first instance for organising against the colonial administration for which he spent fifty days in jail. Once released he organised a mass protest in his home town of Rufa'a where a woman had been imprisoned for submitting her daughter to a circumcision which was in direct violation of a colonial penal code outlawing the practice. While Taha and the Republican Party were firmly against all
forms of female circumcision, they believed that the law, instead of protecting women, was counterproductive because the practice was so culturally embedded that it would continue despite a law banning it. Taha challenged the British by saying that if the administration was truly concerned with women's welfare they would spend money on educating girls and women, who would then be empowered enough to abandon the practice voluntarily. The Republicans believed that the law was really a way for the colonial administration to delegitimise indigenous claims for independence and to justify their own administration by contending that the Sudanese population was too backward to govern themselves as evidenced by their treatment of women. Taha led a group of men to the prison where the woman was held, broke in and freed her (An-Na'im 1987a: 3-4). In 1951 after serving a two-year term of imprisonment for his political activities in Rufa'a, Taha embarked on a self-imposed, three-year retreat (in Arabic: khalwa), a period during which he perfected his Sufi religious practice of intensive prayer, meditation, and fasting. It was at this time also that Taha formulated the foundations of Republican Thought: his theory of prayer and the Second Message of Islam (Mahmoud 1998:105). Taha emerged back into the public with a new vision for the Republican Party and he converted its mission from an anticolonial revolutionary party to a Sufi brotherhood, and changed the party's name to the Republican Brothers (in Arabic: al-jumhuriyya) (1998: 106). This transformation to a religiously focused order, however, retained the political engagement of the party, and became a fusion of the two through its ideology. Taha's vision of democracy, solidly rooted in republicanism through a revitalisation of Islam, was to deepen over the years as he and the Republicans publicly proselytised Republican Thought.

For the life of the Brotherhood, membership was small compared to other influential religious orders or political groups. At the movement's height during the 1980s, membership never exceeded 1,000 people. The Brotherhood's sympathisers and supporters, however, numbered in the tens of thousands (An-Na'im 1987b: 41). Thirty-eight percent of members were university graduates and who had a high literacy rate with only about eight percent considered illiterate. The group was overwhelmingly male, with the highest number of Sisters never exceeding 30 members. Yet even this small presence of women should be considered revolutionary in the context of Sudanese politics: the only other groups to successfully recruit women were the Sudan Communist Party (SCP) and National Islamic
Front (NIF), with the latter only accepting women who wore full Islamic dress (Hale 1996: 193). Most members, 75 percent, were from central (or Northern) Sudan and were from lower middle or middle middle-class urban families. Due to these demographic factors, including an overwhelmingly young membership (85 percent were aged between 15-40 years), the movement posed significant challenges, despite its size, to other political groups engaged in turf wars over which group would have more influence with the Northern urban elite (Mahmoud 1998: 125-126, citing Sadig 1990).

The Republicans have been operating in an environment of extreme political and social repression since, at least, the group’s founding in 1945. After independence during the second brief period of civilian and democratic rule from 1964-1968, the Umma Party formed a coalition with the Islamic fundamentalists led by legal scholar Dr. Hasan al-Turabi. The move to bring the NIF into the mainstream political fold served to only intensify the marginalisation of smaller, progressive or radical groups such as the Republicans. Although the Republicans commanded a deep respect among most Sudanese, they were considered outside of the Islamic mainstream and though highly influential intellectually, the Brotherhood was not powerful politically. Within an increasingly volatile political environment, the Republicans maintained their vision of a non-sectarian and non-ethnically based statehood for Sudan and were steadfastly opposed to Shari’ah being implemented in the multicultural country; a legal system they said explicitly discriminated against non-Muslims and all women. During the second brief period of democracy Turabi’s Islamic Charter Front (eventually to become the National Islamic Front, NIF) gained considerable power through its close ties with al-Sadiq and was an influential force behind the adoption of Shari’ah (Warburg 2003: 161). Since independence in 1956 Sudan had no constitution, the Permanent Constitution was not passed until 1973, leaving the nation without a codified instrument to ensure certain rights, protections and a governmental system for close to 20 years. The lack of a constitution created a vacuum perfect for opportunistic fundamentalist groups to impose Shari’ah on the religiously diverse population. The Republican’s anti-Shari’ah position and their very public criticisms of fundamentalists created political tensions between the Republicans and the ruling Umma Party-led coalition government. In 1967, a year after Taha published his most famous book The Second Message of Islam he was sentenced in abstensia for apostasy and condemned to death. The court also dissolved his
marriage. Taha refused to recognise the court's authority since he believed that one could not be tried for his or her personal beliefs. His life was spared for the time being because the prevailing political instability of the period could not allow the sentence to be carried out (2003: 160-162).

When the military dictatorship of General Ja'far Numeiri banned the Brotherhood's public activities in 1973 (along with a general ban against all political parties), Taha was still at serious physical risk in spite of the continued, official tacit tolerance for Republican activities (An-Na'im 1987a: 9). Taha no longer spoke publicly but relied on other Republicans to spread the message of Republican Thought. Under the Numeiri regime, installed in 1969 when Numeiri led the Free Officers in May of that year (dubbed the May Revolution) through a coup that ousted the democratically elected government of Prime Minister Muhammed Ahmed Mahjoub, Sudan's economy slumped downward and the population was terrorised by violent retributions against those opposing his regime. During the 1970s, al-Turabi as head of the NIF consciously groomed an alliance with the Numeiri regime, knowing that such an alliance could protect and grow the fundamentalist movement (Woodward 1990: 153). When Numeiri suddenly announced the implementation of Shari'a in 1983 through the September Laws, making public spectacles of hudud laws (the more draconian sentences contained within Shari'a such as lashings, amputations, and beheadings for personal aberrations) were encouraged and were a strong indication of just how influential the NIF had become (Simone 1994: 26). Soon after the implementation of the September Laws, 150 men were publicly executed or had their limbs amputated (Woodward 1990: 157). The faithful were invited to attend public trials and the imposition of sentences, and for those who refused to accept the invitation, nightly radio and television broadcasts reported the amputations and executions (1990: 157). Some saw the September Laws as the last ditch effort of a dictator to hold onto his dwindling power after many years in control, others saw it as a continuation of a path towards Islamisation that Numeiri had always envisioned. A more cynical view saw the laws as a short-term solution for Numeiri to control dissent and opposition, especially in the climate of economic decline and social unrest.

Until 1983 Numeiri tolerated the public activities of the Republicans, despite the Republicans posing a potentially serious threat to the NIF for control over the Northern
Sudanese intelligentsia. Sadiq al-Madhi, the leader of the Umma Party and the democratically elected president after the fall of the Numeiri regime, reversed his own position and supported Taha and the Republicans in their opposition to the September Laws on the grounds that a just society is a prerequisite of Shari'a and that Sudan had not yet achieved this status (1990: 157). Of course, al-Madhi had more political legitimacy within the realm of Sudanese politics as the leader of the more Islamic-centrist Umma Party as well as being a direct descendant of the Madhi, and his support only served to strengthen Taha's and the Republicans' stance against the September Laws.

6.2 Discussion corners, book distribution and multimedia: The public Republican discursive identity

At a time when most oppositional groups in Sudan would distribute their pamphlets secretly, forced to do so by the Numeiri regime, the Republicans openly defied the regime and distributed their books and pamphlets at their daily discussion corners (in Arabic: al-rukun). The first al-rukun was held in 1975 on the campus of the University of Khartoum, and as the al-rukun grew in popularity they were spread to the open-air markets of Khartoum and to strategic street corners, such as the one in front of the Ministry of Defence (Mahmoud 2001: 84). Many of the Republicans were students at the University of Khartoum and became Republican followers after listening to Khatim A.¹⁶, the most famous and erudite conductor of the discussion corners. Even if people were not convinced by everything that Khatim said, his corners were the most popularly attended. While most sectarian or fundamentalist groups relied on the ethnic allegiance of their followers to make their appeal, or addressed their audiences in the closed spaces of mosques to gain influence over the Northern intelligentsia, the Republicans chose to conduct the al-rukun in the open, public spaces of Khartoum. The al-rukun and the arguments conducted within them appealed particularly to the young, highly educated urban elite who valued the Republicans' emphasis on independent thought. As the al-rukun grew, small groups of Republicans formed wavd

¹⁶ All the names of current and past members have been changed except for Ustadh Mahmoud Mohamed Taha.
(travelling groups) to go to towns and villages outside Khartoum to distribute books and conduct al-rukun to broaden their appeal in the more remote areas of Sudan.

The discussion corners lasted for a decade until the death of Taha and were organised primarily to force a public engagement on Islam and modernity, Republican ideology and the Republican position on political issues such as the implementation of Shari'a by the Numeiri regime, the ongoing Sudanese civil war, gender in Islam, and the politics of the Middle East. The al-rukun became the central and defining vehicle for Republicans' discursive identity and the space within which they conceptualised and formed their counterpublic. The discussion corners were used to distribute and proselytize their ideology, and it was through them that the Republicans perfected the discursive culture based in critical, interactive argumentation for which they became famous. Holding discussions in a public forum was fundamental to Republican ideology—they believed that their discourse should be publicly interrogated—and demonstrates a characteristic that Warner says goes into the construction of a counterpublic: the public circulation of discourse seeks to extend the sphere of influence of a counterpublic (Warner 2002: 90-91).

One Republican, Mustafa B. now in exile, described the argumentational culture of the al-rukun to me:

"...[W]e were so proud of it because we established a culture. And it is still going on despite the fact that we are no longer doing it. ... [N]ow it is an established culture at the universities and everybody knows that this was created by the Republican Brothers. So when everybody started to have their own platforms, we were very, very happy actually because one of our aims [wa]s to establish this kind of culture: [a] culture of debate, [a] culture of engaging the people, informing them, you know you find many, many people challenging your ideas and you have to respond and this will inform the public as a result, and it will make you more sharp. In a place which was not actually accustomed to such kind of a debate, in a place where the political culture was based on a political leader who would come, make a speech like a preacher and go, nobody would challenge him, nobody would say "wait let us ask you these
questions, you said this and it contradicts with that". But we came there, we stayed and we asked people to challenge us, we asked people to point out the weaknesses in our debate. So then others when they saw that we actually gained more membership, gained wider support, became respected by people, then they wanted to become like us so they established their own platforms. And the culture of debate, the culture that deplores and rejects violence, started to flourish at the universities. ... It was important because we felt that that was a component that is absent in the political, religious culture of not only Sudan but the rest of the Islamic world. Because preachers at mosques, what do they do? They try to arouse the emotions of people and they send their minds to sleep. They will speak about the enemies of Islam, how Muslims are badly treated here and there, how they are despised, how they are wronged by the superpowers...they will bring up the misery of Muslims but they will not mention what the Muslims d[o] to others. And at the same time they will call on the emotions about Islam and make people angry. The preachers in these mosques are not exposed, even their understanding of Islam is not adequate, they are spreading ignorance. ... So this is why we thought that we have an interest in combating this kind of [discourse] and injecting rationale and reason ... into the debate, and we succeed in that, absolutely. We have an interest in making people use their minds and think rather than arousing their emotions” (Mustafa B., interview transcript, August 2003).

Many non-Republicans that I spoke to who were young students at the University of Khartoum during the late seventies and early eighties remembered the al-rukun on the campus well and recalled that not only did the Republicans develop this unique discursive culture but that the movement's members seemed to physically embody their ideology. One non-Republican woman, Zeinab H., who was not a student at the university until 1987 but who nonetheless listened to the al-rukun and who had also attended Taha's execution recalled that she could always tell the difference between a Republican and a Muslim
Brother by the corporality of their ideology. Republican Thought seemed to her to be embodied in the way Brothers and Sisters walked, the way they carried themselves, the way they interacted with others, the way, she said, they lived the pacifist philosophy of the movement in how they spoke and listened. She recalled that this contrasted sharply with the embodied ideology of the Muslim Brothers, who seemed to her to be hard, rigid and severe in the way they walked, talked and even in the way they wore their beards.

Another non-Republican, Abubakr E., at the University of Khartoum from 1978 to 1980 and the leader of the Islamic Trend, the student branch of Turabi’s NIF, recalled his complex engagement with the Republicans and their discussion corners. By the time Abubakr arrived on campus he had already heard of the al-rukun and supported Mustafa’s claim that it was the Republicans who started a new trend in the political culture of Khartoum with the al-rukun. Abubakr founded the NIF’s discussion corners largely inspired by and in direct response to the Republican al-rukun. He felt that the presence of the Republican al-rukun enriched the intellectual environment of the campus. While political expression and intellectual engagements under Numeiri were being stifled in other sectors of Sudanese society, students enjoyed relative freedom on campus. Due to the influence of this openness, many other political student organisations, such as the Marxists and other Islamic groups, began to found their own corners in the early 1980s following the successes of the Republican al-rukun.

Abubakr would observe the daily al-rukun, paying close attention to their discursive strategies to learn more about the qualities that he would use or reject for his own discussion corners. Some advantages of the Republican al-rukun were, he noted, that they were persistent, quick to respond to current politics, and conducted by highly trained speakers, who would be apprenticed for two years before being allowed to speak in their own al-rukun. He recalled that during one campus speaking engagement for Turabi, one of the Republican Sisters challenged Turabi on the NIF’s position towards women and their human rights. Abubakr felt that Turabi rose to her challenge quite well and carefully addressed all of her complaints. Despite this, the next day a Republican pamphlet condemning Turabi’s speech and his position on women was already circulating on campus. While Abubakr fundamentally disagreed with the pamphlet, he did admire the persistence of the Republican methodology of constant verification of their discourse with Taha which
resulted in a quickly produced book explaining their own positions on current politics. But he also noted several disadvantages in the al-rukun, some that he considered to be very serious weaknesses. The most serious problem for him was the Republicans' focus on politics, their special attacks reserved for Turabi and the NIF, and the lack of discussion or self-interrogation of their own ideology, which he believed was fundamentally flawed. He believed that they were strategically silent on this issue since if they did speak on it in an open forum, it would not hold up under scrutiny and the public would certainly reject it. He recalled that:

"The fundamental disadvantage of the Republican corners is that they never discussed the fundamental tenets of their ideology, which is very controversial. I think that if they had publicly discussed their ideology with the students it would have provoked a lot of shock. It was difficult for them to say that Taha worships God to the point that he had special rights to interpret the text of Qur'an, or that he could have a new interpretation or even a better interpretation of Islam than God's Prophet. There was a sort of collection of ideas and tools of analysis not familiar to the students, so mostly in their discussion corners they [resorted to] targeting us. ... You would find that they would discuss the current issues of politics and not their ideology. I challenged them several times on this" (Abubakr E., interview transcript, July 2005).

He said the NIF discussion corners differed greatly from the Republican al-rukun. Firstly they were held on Friday evenings only in the park of the Faculty of Medicine, and not in any other public areas, so they were relatively secluded and resulted in attendees participating by word-of-mouth instead of by simply being passer-bys. Secondly, they featured invited speakers who were not necessarily NIF members, discussing a variety of topics rather than having one NIF member conduct the discussion week in and out. But he credited the initial inspiration and impetus to have a NIF corner to the innovativeness and popularity of the Republicans' al-rukun.
“Publicness” was one fundamental quality of the Republican discursive culture that differed from the political culture of Khartoum that was prevalent at the time. Each night Republicans would gather in Taha’s Omdurman home after the evening zikr (prayers and chanting, usually chanting the name of Allah) and conduct a jalsa, a meeting that usually included prayers and discussions. The zikr is fundamental to Sufi mystical practice, where adherents repetitively chant Allah’s name (usually in seclusion with each other) to reach a higher level of consciousness. As William Chittick (2000) explains the zikr’s (literally: remembrance) purpose is to fill the mind with only God, and by doing so lead to a union (or reunion really) with God, the ultimate goal of the Sufi path (16). Taha’s practice diverged from the traditional Sufi one because he opened the Republican zikr to the public by holding them in the courtyard and street in front of his house.

Another cut with traditional Sufism, Islam, and indeed Sudan’s sectarian politics, was Taha’s refusal to play the shaykh role as the head of the Brotherhood, and rather to empower individual Republican members to have a direct relationship with God. As I explain more fully in Chapter Seven, however, Taha’s role as the leader of the Brotherhood was derived from an implicit authority bestowed upon him by the other Republican members who viewed Taha as the only legitimate source of Republican ideology. Taha’s legitimacy as the leader was derived from his Baraka, his charisma, by the perception that he seemed to embody his own ideology in a mystically derived way. Taha faithfully practiced until his death his own intensive daily prayer regime that he asked all of his followers to practice, he lived modestly despite having the means to live quite comfortably, he was an ardent vegetarian in a culture of meat eaters, and he conducted jalsas in openness where all opinions were considered in his own conclusions. He gained his legitimacy not through a democratic process of legitimisation but through his Baraka—blessings bestowed by God, the ultimate authority.

So even though he made no direct claims of leadership, it was understood by all, including the Numeiri regime, that Taha was head of the Republican Brothers. This produced a direct conflict with the ideals of republicanism where the goal is to remove legitimacy from hierarchical power structures and individuals who occupy those power positions (Warner 1990: 73). This incongruity on the one hand between Taha’s charismatic leadership (a fact whether he was comfortable with it or not) and the way that the
membership made decisions contingent upon his final approval, and on the other, his socially just democratic theory that was publicly enacted by Republicans, has been problematic for the group, especially in exile as we will see in Chapter Seven.

It was during these evening jalsas in Taha's sitting room, which he called "The Saloon", that the topic of the next day's discussion corner would be decided upon and discussed. Members were free to suggest and argue for a topic but Taha would make the final decision and would guide them on how the discussion corner should be conducted within the teachings of Republican ideology. It was also during these nightly meetings that new books would be decided upon, and at times, books would be written and printed by members who would stay up through the night to complete the publication for distribution at the next day's discussion corner. In my interviews with Republicans, all recalled and described the jalsas as having the same discursive culture as the al-rukun, that is, the jalsas were conducted with a way of talking and interacting that was based on a mutual respect, rational argumentation, critical inquiry, and affection. Although Taha had shirked the traditional shaykh role and encouraged independent thought and debate to occur during the jalsas, any final decisions resulting from the meetings were usually not arrived at by consensus alone and were verified with the movement's elders and ultimately with Taha.

It was the popularity of the discussion corners that enabled the relatively wide circulation of Republican ideology and the Republicans to develop as a "counterpublic" with opinions that could exert some influence in the opposition to Numeiri and the fundamentalists. Some of Warner's criteria for the social construction of publics and counterpublics were (and continue to be) put to use by Republicans in the constructing of their counterpublic: publics are discursive; they self-organise through discourse; they entreat their discourse to strangers; there is ambiguity in who is being addressed (the discourse addresses a particular and a universal at the same time); and inclusiveness in it occurs simply by paying attention (2002: 89). It was the ingenious way of holding these discussions in the open that set the Republicans apart from other religious groups, who kept their discussions closed to outsiders. It was important that the Republican dialogue be inclusive and diverse since it was through confrontations with those who disagreed with them or had outright hostility towards their message that they were able to refine, expatiate and solidify their arguments. It was through conflict that the Republicans shaped their progressive
message and ideas for Sudan and the larger Muslim community (in Arabic: umma). There was significant resistance to the Republicans' message from the largely conservative society which put individual members at risk of violence, but the Republicans handled potential problems with sensitivity and above all with a pacifist's principles of nonviolence. By holding discussions in public, audience members also ensured that the violence of a few would not be allowed to spiral out of control. One member recalled that the Muslim Brothers (NIF) were particularly violent in their opposition towards the al-rukun, after the NIF's initial strategy to ignore the discussion corners failed. NIF members would beat audience members and speakers alike. Khatim A. was specifically targeted and beaten close to death at one al-rukun. He was taken away by audience members to a doctor for treatment and two hours later returned to the al-rukun in bandages, physically supported by other Republicans, and continued his speech. After several attacks on the al-rukun, the NIF abandoned their strategy of violence and started their own discussion corners to compete with the Republicans, as Abubakr described earlier in this chapter.

The presence of women speakers at the al-rukun was particularly provocative and challenged the fundamentalist edicts governing women's public behaviour that were increasingly enforced violently under Numeiri. One Republican that I interviewed recalled an incident involving a Sister who was conducting an al-rukun as part of a waqf in a rural area. While the Sister was speaking, an elderly man slammed his walking stick down onto the podium and closely missed hitting her face. She did not flinch and continued to speak without interruption. Her composure and her refusal to respond to hostility helped to legitimise her presence as a public woman speaker among the crowd gathered to listen. An-Na'im illustrates another way the Brotherhood practiced their religious beliefs while maintaining respect for Sudanese customs and mainstream Islamic religious practice, specifically through their progressive marriage practices. When a Republican couple married, the groom paid only one Sudanese pound as the bride-price, which satisfied the stipulation for a payment within Shari'a but also symbolised that a wife cannot be purchased (An-Na'im 1987a: 7). The Republicans combined this sensitive subversion of "traditional" cultural practices with a reformist ideology that consistently referenced and reinterpreted the Qur'an to build their legitimacy within the social context of Sudan.
The Republicans also left a printed legacy. During its years in both legal and illegal existence, the Brotherhood produced over 270 books and pamphlets, on topics including core Republican ideology, commentary on Sudanese politics and politics of the Middle East, critiques of fundamentalist ideology especially on gender, fatwa on Shari'a and other issues concerning Islamic doctrine. Some of the most famous Jumhuri publications are *A Treatise on Prayer* (1966), *The Second Message of Islam* (1967), *The Problem of the Middle East* (1967), *The Path of Muhammad* (undated), *Marxism in a Balance* (1973), and *Either This or the Flood* (1984). *The Second Message of Islam* is Taha’s most important work and serves as the primary text of Republican Thought. When these works were first produced they were all self-published. *The Second Message* was republished in 1987 by Syracuse University Press. Most of the publications that were described to me as books are actually pamphlets, single sheet flyers or small, staple-bound booklets of around 10 pages.

Books and pamphlets were published in response to current political events in Sudan or internationally, or to explain (and sometimes defend) a fundamental belief in Republicanism. They were produced by a collective of members who would contribute the different skills that each member possessed. To remain relevant to the political milieu, a swift Republican response to a given event was required and most books were published within a 24-hour period. The longest time a book took in production was two days, but most were put out within a day; from the book’s conception, to writing, printing, collating and boxing for distribution. The topic and content would be decided by all members. Then an individual or a committee consisting of two to five members, depending on the complexity, size and scope of the book’s subject, would be given the task of writing the book. When the text was complete, it would be given to Taha, who would approve and sign-off what was written. Then the book would be typed on the sole typewriter owned by the Brotherhood by the one efficient and accurate typist among the members. If he was busy, the book would be handwritten in a fine calligraphy and another Brother talented in art would design the jacket, with the whole book printed out on a hand-cranked mimeograph, collated by 20 to 30 members working in an assembly line, and packaged for distribution at the next day’s discussion corners. All of the print production was conducted in one of the four group homes where some of the movement's young, unmarried men lived in Omdurman, the same Khartoum suburb where Taha lived. Young Sisters lived either with their parents or, if they...
were married, lived with their husbands but would assemble in the male group houses for book production. The Republicans’ print culture interacted with the culture of the al-rukun and the wavd, and became fundamental to the overall discursive identity of the movement.

6.3 The execution of Taha and the Republican exile

Under the Numeiri regime’s “Islamisation” process, human rights were rolled back in the guise of the September Laws and in compliance with the version of an Islamic state advocated by the NIF, the real power behind the Numeiri regime (O’Sullivan 2001: 48-52). Retribution for opposing the regime was severe, and in April 1984, when a state of emergency was declared, public floggings and amputations increased dramatically (Mahmoud 2001: 80). It was within this repressive environment that Taha was charged again with apostasy on January 8, 1985 for his small pamphlet *Hadha...aw al-Tufan* (in English: *Either this ...or the Flood*) in which he criticised the September Laws and the imposition of Shari’a (Warburg 2003: 163). A Supreme Court law suit against Taha’s sentence was considered by a special court of appeal, which upheld the original sentence on 15 January. President Numeiri confirmed the sentence on 17 January, ordering Taha’s execution to be carried out the following day (An-Na’im 1987a: 14-16). Taha was executed by hanging on 18 January (Mahmoud 2001; Taha 1985). While there is some debate about whether his execution precipitated the popular revolt that forced Numeiri out in April 1985, most agree that the execution of the 76-year-old pacifist was repugnant and caused global outrage against the Numeiri regime (Mahmoud 2001: 81; Miller 1985).

Political pressure was mounting against the Numeiri regime after the September Laws, as the economy nosedived causing a harsh famine, and as the stakes in the civil war with the South increased. The Sudanese Peoples’ Liberation Army (SPLA) was formed in Ethiopia in 1983 by ex-Anyaa Nya (Southern-based guerrilla units that attacked the national army during the 1960s and 1970s) officer John Garang and mounted a formidable Southern front in the civil war. The SPLA’s political wing, the Sudanese Peoples’ Liberation Movement (SPLM) was formed later in 1984 and included both Southerners and Northerners alike, most of whom were living in exile (Woodward 1990: 162). The SPLA/SPLM was more radical than the Sudanese socialist party and the Sudanese Communist Party (SCP), yet
they were not secessionist, rather they sought to build one Sudanese state with either federal or devolved regional governments. On 6 April 1985, Numeiri was deposed by several senior army commanders after massive, popular demonstrations. Elections were held in March 1986 which brought back an Umma Party–led coalition under Sadiq al-Madhi. The elections marked a return to liberal, multiparty democracy, embodied not only in the elections themselves but also in the return to social practices that harkened back to the pre-Islamic fundamentalist days of the 1960s (1990: 206). However, the strength of the NIF was now obvious when the party beat several rivals for the country's intelligentsia, including the Communists (1990: 207). The election results revealed that Sudanese politics had reverted to its "old ways"; to patron-client loyalties of the traditional parties with the NIF being the only exception: a relative newcomer winning in the elections (1990: 208). It is widely believed that the NIF was the behind-the-scenes backer of the 30 June Revolution of 1989, the military coup that placed General Umar al-Bashir, who remains the current president, in power and heralded the end of the third period of short-lived democratic governance in Sudan.

The horrible shock and disbelief surrounding Taha's death forced the Republicans to halt immediately all public activities. Some members chose to go into exile during 1985 and 1986, either fleeing to neighbouring Gulf countries, Egypt or further afield to the United States and the United Kingdom. The second and largest wave of Republican exile came during 1989 and 1990 just after al-Bashir's military coup and the NIF victory, when most Sudanese people sensed what was bound to come in a society yoked by the violent repression of a religious fundamentalist-backed dictatorship. One Republican explained to me why most Brothers and Sisters chose to leave Sudan in 1990 although they remained after Taha's execution. The Numeiri regime had been threatened by Taha as an individual political force, and the regime had not been necessarily threatened by Republican ideology. In the year following the coup, the NIF set up a programme to cleanse the government as well as the universities of all of its ideological and political enemies: communists, socialists, feminists, Islamic sectarian parties, and anyone not sympathetic to the NIF's fundamentalist vision. With the NIF's growing political and ideological control of all branches of government between June 1989 and June 1990, the largest threat to them was from competing ideologies, especially Islamically rooted ones. With Taha now dead and no longer a threat to
the NIF as an individual, the Republicans knew that it was only a matter of time before the NIF's wrath would focus on the Brotherhood as a group, and fearing this, large numbers of Brothers and Sisters left before the end of June 1990. After that month it was impossible for any Sudanese person with a dissenting ideology to leave the country. Those in exile have secured asylum status from their host countries and due to this, most have permanently settled in these countries. Many exiled members have pursued their PhDs, or continued their careers in medicine, psychiatry, public health, Arabic language instruction and translation, journalism, computer science or human rights work. Most exiled members have not been able to return to Sudan for even short visits until very recently, as late as 2004.

It is at this juncture that I wish to return to the Republican past that is always within reach through the movement's printed (and online) legacy and discuss the ideology, Republican Thought, as developed by Taha, that is enjoying a renaissance in exile as Republicans engage online with each other and with non-Republican Sudanese. Republican Thought is also being revisited by Sudanese moderates who, after living for more than 10 years in a fundamentalist Islamic state, are looking for not only a progressive version of Islam but also a new vision of democracy.

6.4 Republican ideology: Islam is the science of knowing God and humanity's organising principal

6.4.1 Reformation of Islam and democracy: "Freedom for Us and Others"

After the transformation from a political party to a Sufi Brotherhood, the Republicans theorised and advocated for a democratic political system rooted in the recognition of full and universal human rights, equity and socialist economic values, not derived from Western liberal democracies, but based in Islam. The word Islam literally means "submission" and Muslim means "one who has submitted", what both words mean to most Muslims and certainly to Taha is that the submission is to God's will, that all of creation, everything contained within the infinite universe, including humanity, submits to God. At the core of Republican Thought, however, as Mohamed Mahmoud, the pre-eminent scholar on the Republicans has shown, is a fundamentalist theology in the sense that Taha proposes a return to the original, fundamental (and inherent) sources of Islam, primarily God's word revealed to the Prophet at Mecca to reform Islam.
While Taha criticised Western democracies in his book *The Second Message* and appeared to propose what he called "social democracy" in opposition to a liberal democratic model, his democratic theory really should be understood within the context of Sudanese sectarian politics of the 1960s to 1980s. That is, Taha's model was developed in a cauldron of ideological struggles over the building of a postindependent and multicultural state in Sudan, where many Northern political parties were either against a federal system or were steadfast on building an Islamic state under Shari'a (Mahmoud 2001: 74-75). Taha and the Republicans first theorised this reformation in their pamphlet: *Usus Dustur al-Sudan* (Foundations of the Constitution of the Sudan, 1955). Based on the Qur'an, the pamphlet advocated a federally based, democratic-socialist republic be established in Sudan. In this publication the Republicans contended that the conflicting interests between the individual and society are reconciled through Islam enacted in a democratic-socialist political system (2001: 74). This Islamic base is what made Republican ideology legitimate in Sudan (and the larger Muslim world); it was through a constant referral to and reinterpretation of verses of the Qur'an, and a close and "conscious imitation" (in Arabic: *taqlid*) of practices of the Prophet as stipulated in the Sunnah, that Taha formulated the ideology not only of revitalising Islam but of finally fulfilling the promises of democracy (Mahmoud 2001: 85).

The core Republican criticism of the Western, liberal democratic model is that it is based predominately on capitalist economics, and as so, the values of a materialistic individualism and the accumulation of private wealth are so deeply entrenched within it that it can only produce an unjust society. Due to this "confusion of values", in Taha's opinion, all modern democratic states have failed miserably to realise democracy and rather have produced societies that are alienated from politics, highly individualistic and materialistic, and grossly unbalanced in their distribution of wealth and the basic necessities to live a "dignified human existence" (Mahmoud 1998: 108; Taha 1987: 155).

While the Republicans critiqued the West's material individualism, the basis of their democratic ideology was centred on human rights and social justice that is only possible through the recognition of the absolute freedom for the individual. This "absoluteness" is in the Sufi sense of the individual's pursuit of God and through it, her realisation of moral perfection through God's absoluteness. This perfection is significant because within it is contained a reunification of the individual and society where a perfectly moral individual
(who is absolutely liberated by her morality) fulfils her obligations to the greater good of society. It was the reunification of the individual and society—the core of Republican Though—Taha believed it possible to reconcile Islam with "modernity". For Taha and the Republicans, the final goal is always the individual, and that individuals should not be used by ideology as a means to an end, rather all ideology and especially “the Qur'an, the religion of Islam itself, is a means to that end” (Taha 1987: 62).

Taha believed that democracy is enacted culturally; a living system where individuals have “the right to make mistakes” (Mahmoud 1998: 119). This focus on the individual underpinned Republican socialist-democratic theory where the individual’s freedom to make mistakes and her “ability and responsibility to take an active part in shaping [her] history” is vital to their theory of social justice within Islam (1998: 122-123). The Brotherhood’s main goal, then and now, is to reform Islam and reconcile the religion with modernity through the recognition of full human rights for all people, Muslims and non-Muslims, women and men, and this is achieved through the individual. One of their most quoted slogans: “Freedom for Us and Others” embodied the equity through republicanism that they advocated for. This is a revolutionary proposal in a country torn by a decades-long civil war in which close to two million died, and that fuelled a pernicious slave trade in non-Muslim Southerners. Those in power endeavoured to remake the diverse country in their own distorted image of Islam, yet the Republicans envisioned a united Sudan with no distinctions made between the North and South, an ideological reunification of all Sudanese people into one nation (Mahmoud 2001; Mukhtar 1996).

6.4.2 Reconciling Islam with Modernity and Democracy: The “Second Message” and the ill-fitting jalabiya

Taha and the Republicans claimed that a reinterpretation of Islam would solve what they saw as the problems of democracy as well as resolve the dichotomy between Islam and modernity; the conflict between an individual's need for “absolute individual freedom” and society’s need for “complete social justice” (Taha 1987: 52-53, 63-112). The Republicans claimed that these could be unified under a reformation of Islam, primarily based on Taha's contribution through his Second Message philosophy: that God's message for Muslims, and indeed all of humanity, was handed by Him to the Prophet Muhammad at Mecca. The message given by God to the Prophet at Mecca was forgotten when he moved his
community of Muslims to Medina. The revelations at Medina became the foundation on which Islam was built. God's first message at Mecca, revelations Taha called the "Second Message", preached the universality of humanity and the mutability of Shari'a through a return to the eternal laws of the Sunnah, laws considered by the Republicans to be more equitable and inclusive. Taha proposed that the Meccan revelations were God's true message for humanity but that, until the twentieth century, humanity was not ready to hear it.

Part of Taha's Second Message theology revolved around Shari'a, God's laws enacted on earth. Shari'a, being a system of laws and edicts developed in the seventh century had to adapt and change as societies do. A Republican recalled that Taha had an example that he often used to explain his point about Shari'a. Taha would ask listeners to imagine a jalabiya (the long shirt and trouser suit worn by Sudanese men) that is perfectly tailored for a 7-year-old boy. It is comfortable on his small frame, protects him from the elements and serves him well. Now imagine this same boy, grown into a man at 21, trying to fit his matured body into this 7-year-old's suit. It will not fit no matter how hard he tries to stretch and pull the fabric over his frame. In a similar way, Shari'a's laws were perfectly tailored for seventh-century Islam but in the twenty-first century, with matured and advanced Muslim civilisations, these laws have to be stretched and distorted to make sense. The Republicans and Taha believed what God had truly intended for all of humanity through Islam was His first (and now Second) Meccan message (Mahmoud 2001:74; Mukhtar 1996: 342). The Islamic religion as it developed when the Prophet settled in Medina and established the community of Muslims, the umma, was specialised and particular to the necessities of that historic moment in seventh-century Arabia. Humanity had moved on since then, and Taha believed that in the twentieth (and twenty-first) century humanity was ready to hear and fulfil God's true Meccan intentions of universality, equality, and absolute, individual freedom to produce a just society.

The return to God's true (second) message is the basis for the Republican, Islamically rooted democratic model. Since Islam is God's perfect system within which the entirety of the universe is contained, the Republican's socialist-democratic model would be understood as existing within the larger Islamic system.
6.4.3 “The science of knowing Allah”

The organising principle of Taha’s Republican Thought was based on a belief in a methodical and critical self-interrogation and analysis—through the use of this method, a direct path to God is opened. This belief is rooted in the very Sufi tradition of methodological self-knowledge; that in order to know God, you must know yourself. In the case of Sufism, the self is equivalent to the soul. The Qur’an says: “You, o God, know what is in myself but I do not know what is in Yourself” (5:116) and it is through knowing God’s omnipotent knowledge of your own soul that you can know God; this is the Sufi (as well as the Republican) path, one that ultimately leads to a (re)union with God. In his book Al-Deen wa al-Tanmiya al-ljtima'iya (Religion and Social Development) Taha explains how Shari’a, or God’s absolute Will, is enacted through independent thought and self-interrogation: “This [sacred order that God created for man] is the cause of all causes, for man cannot sublime to the higher degree of dignity without thought. Religion [Islam] came to scrutinise thought, that it may not deviate from righteousness” (Taha 1974: 50, cited in Mahmoud 2003: 187).

Taha employed what he called a scientific methodology to practice this self knowledge and believed empiricism to be a substructure of religion (Islam). “Scientific investigation into the nature of things does not stand solely on the methods advocated by empirical science. Rather, it conjoins materialism and metaphysics. It is the science of knowing Allah, a science founded on every letter and word of the Qur’anic verse: ‘Soon will We show them Our Signs in the (furthest) Regions (of the earth) and in their souls’” (Taha 1974: 8, cited in Mahmoud 2003: 87). He did not use the same methodology, however, to prove or disprove the existence of God. The explicit assumption is that all of human thought and all of existence is preceded by God’s existence and His perfection as realised in the absolutism of Islam. He demonstrated Islam’s (and God’s) absoluteness in his critique of Marxism and its denial of an antecedent Mind, when he says that “evolution, i.e., the fact that existence evolves in a continuous movement since it never rests, does not exist outside the facts of religion. Islam, indeed, is a total sum of all forms of activity in existence. Our Lord says in the Qur’an about Islam: “What other than the religion of Allah do they claim?” So, Marx, and whatever being is brought by Marx, is contained in the general Islam” (Taha 1973: 6, cited in Mahmoud 2003: 76-77). The Republican religious ideology says that, ultimately, Islam is political in the sense that in Islam, through the application of God’s laws,
all of society is organised into a perfect metaphysical and earthly system, and in the twentieth (and twenty-first) century is the perfect science to cleanse the earth of injustice. It is within this perfect and just system too that the Republican “Second Message” democratic model can finally be enacted.

6.5 Conclusions

This detailed account of the history of the Republican Brothers helps to explain how the movement fits into the larger context of the Sudanese tradition of Sufism as well as the sectarian nature of the country’s politics. This recounting of the Republican movement before exile demonstrates the societal context that forged Republican ideology and political culture, and helps to make sense of the pressures that forced many its members into exile. The Republicans’ influence in Sudanese politics was not as significant as those of the larger Umma, the DUP or the post-1989 NIF parties but their reformist ideas were well received by progressives and respected by mainstream Muslims. Their democratic visions for Islam, however, were so threatening to the Islamic political establishment and the fundamentalist power behind it, that Taha was executed.

In spite of the numerous, official bans on the public activities of the movement from the mid-1960s onwards, the Republicans developed a rich and unique discursive and print culture that is still considered to be the first of its kind in Sudan. Through the al-rukun (discussion corners), wavd (travelling book distribution groups), zikrs (public chanting prayers) and the jalsas (closed meetings for prayers and discussion), the Republicans honed a distinct, discursive identity of critical debate based on logical and dispassionate argumentation, that developed into the expected behaviour of the movement.

Through Taha’s theory about the Second Message of Islam, where he contended God’s true message for humanity is one of equality, pluralism and universality, the Republicans built their model of democracy to rectify the cleavages they saw between the individual and society, Islam and modernity, and democracy and social justice.

In Taha’s absence maintaining a unified Republican discursive identity has become problematic for the movement. It is in the suspended twilight of exile that many Republicans attempt to continue with the modernist, revisionist project started by Taha but as we will
explore more in the next chapter on online Republicanism, this continuation is not without its complications.
In this chapter I analyse the Republican Brotherhood's online presence and activities through its website, its open and closed bulletin boards, and the non-Republican website sudaneseonline.com. As I have mentioned in Chapter Five on the research methods relied upon in this study, all of the analysed data that forms the basis of this chapter comes from interviews with Republican members about the activities occurring on the closed bulletin board assaloon.org and their participation in sudaneseonline.com. I have also analysed the postings in English on the open bulletin board on the Republican website alfikra.org, English postings by Republicans in the closed listserv as-saloon, and an analysis of the alfikra.org website itself. The first three sections of this chapter are detailed descriptions of the Republican websites and the ways that the Republicans enact discursive identity online. The last four sections are the analysis of recurrent themes that emerged from the interview and textual data. In these sections I attempt to document the strategic ambivalence over engaging in political activity in exile, especially online, the splits between the oral and written argumentational styles, and the way that arguments are validated by referencing the primary sources of Taha and the Qur'an.
7.1 The development of Al-Fikra and As-Saloon

The Republican’s online presence through its website, alfikra.org, bulletin boards, both on alfikra.org and the movement’s closed site assaloon.org, and members’ postings to other bulletin boards is rooted in the Republicans’ established discursive culture that emerged from Sudan’s Sufi tradition, and one described at length in Chapter Six. As was demonstrated earlier, this discursive identity precedes the Republican usage of the Internet.

The alfikra.org website, the Republicans’ official, publicly accessible site, is itself an iteration of earlier online efforts to expand this discursive culture beyond the geographical limitations of exile as well as the time and participation constraints of a one-to-one telephone call. The current webmaster of alfikra.org, Abdel O., a United States-based IT professional, started a listserv for members in 1995 and continues to work on the alfikra.org and assaloon.org sites in his spare time. Before the listserv was built, many members exchanged letters on political philosophy, theology and Republican Thought as a way of maintaining the dialogue that had been ongoing for decades and almost silenced by exile. In its beginnings, the listen/ functioned similarly to how Woolgar (2002: 16-17) describes online technologies functioning in his rules of virtuality, that “virtual technologies supplement, [and do] not supplant real activities”. After the listserv was started, members continued to communicate with one another through letter writing and telephone calls in addition to posting to the listserv.

Until 1997 listserv postings were primarily in English or sometimes written transliterally in Arabic using an English alphabet, and the list was built without the use of a listserv program. To participate in the list, members kept a digital list of all the listserv’s email addresses and responses to posts were made by hitting the “reply all” button. When a listserv member wanted to write in Arabic, he or she did so by writing it in a word processing program that had an Arabic alphabet or language feature and emailed it to Abdel, who then converted the file to a .gif, or image file, and once converted, posted the file to the list as an attachment. It was not until reliable, web-based Arabic language programs became widely

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17 The Republicans spell al-Saloon phonetically with the English alphabet as as-Saloon. Letters pronounced with the tongue at the front of the mouth, such as “s” or “n”, are called “sun letters”. With words starting with sun letters, the definite article “al” is pronounced with the sound of the first letter of the word that it modifies, so “al-saloon” is pronounced “as-saloon”, “al-noor” is pronounced “an-noor”, etc.
available with the release of Windows XP and Internet Explorer 5.0 that members were able
to communicate online or in emails directly written in Arabic.

The idea to have a website for the Brotherhood was sparked when one member, a
computer science postgraduate student living in the United Kingdom, Tariq M., started a
small website about the movement with the free server space allocated to him on his
university's server. Before building the website he was cautious of two things: the existence
of the Sudanese government's official ban of the Republican Brotherhood and the
movement's decision that after Taha's execution all "external activities" conducted by
members were suspended. The external activities were explicitly political, and indeed, quite
often in our interviews many members emphasised that the external activities were the
political activities of the Brotherhood, while the "internal activities" were characterised as
more spiritual in nature. Before the ban external activities included the discussion corners
(al-rukun), book distribution (wavd), releasing official announcements (fatwa, or Islamic
scholarly opinions) on positions the Brotherhood held in response to current political or
religious issues and events, especially Shari'a, and proselytising either religious or political
ideology in general and especially through the publicly held prayer meetings (jalsa) and
chants (zikr) (An-Na'im 1987a; Mahmoud 2003: 128). This decision was made to protect
members in exile, but more so, to shield those who remained in Sudan from further
violence. The unstated and considerably more significant reason for the suspension of
political activities may be for the reason that the movement lost its only legitimate voice
when Taha died. I discuss this loss of the authority and legitimacy to speak at length later in
this chapter, however, at this point I would like to emphasise that many of the individual
members that I spoke with say they were and continue to be very uncomfortable with taking
on the responsibility of continuing the public project of proselytising the ideology started by
Taha.

In spite of the official ban, the present version of the alfikra.org website (figures 7.1 -
7.3) continues to be stored on a server in the United States and therefore, stymies—in a
way—the ban. Republicans take little comfort in this and in fact, being online heightens their
awareness that their actions in exile are under constant surveillance by authorities,
monitored remotely through government informants living within exile communities and
through the Web. Evidence of political opinions or activities that is perceived to be
Figure 7.1 Entry page, www.alfikra.org, 2003

Figure 7.2 Main navigation page (English), www.alfikra.org, 2003
threatening by the authorities or informants that watch exiles online could have very serious consequences for members still living in Sudan. Before going ahead with the building and publishing of the site, Tariq sought and was granted permission to build it from one of the movement’s surviving elders, a founding member and, after Taha’s death, an unofficial leader, Ustadh Salam.18 Emboldened by Tariq’s online efforts, Abdel pitched in and built the first iteration of the current website in 1999.

Alfikra.org (al-fikra, in English: “thought”), the publicly accessible website, is the online public face of the Republican Brothers, the one that describes the history of the

18 When asked in interviews most Republicans told me that there is no longer any leadership and no hierarchy for decision making after Taha’s execution. However, in my analysis of listserv postings and interview transcripts, there are members who are considered to be leaders of the movement and who are referred to for making decisions for the entire movement. Some decisions, such as the one to stop all political activities, have been the source of intense hostility from some members and the leadership at times have been called cowards for the decisions they have made.
movement, makes available some key writings of Taha and the Brotherhood, recordings of Taha’s public speeches as well as the Inshads and the public bulletin board. Throughout the site Abdel was careful not to make too many references to the Republicans as a movement or as a Brotherhood. The official name of the site is *The Republican Thought* and throughout the content, Taha and his life is emphasised while the history of the movement is downplayed. The private face of the movement and the reserve of the internal activities is the closed site assaloon.org.

**Figure 7.4** Entry page, www.assaloon.org, 2005

Assaloon.org19 (figure 7.4) was built by Abdel in August 2002 using the freeware bulletin board software phpBB. The forum derives its name from the living room in Taha’s Omdurman house, which he called the “saloon”; a name that evokes reference to the salon cultures of Europe that are said to have incubated the nascent foundations of modern democracy based in deliberation (Habermas 1989). It was in Taha’s “saloon” that all of the

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19 In the Sudanese context as-Saloon is in general the name for a room where men gather for discussion and to socialise. Barbershops are also called “saloons” and again these places are restricted to men only. Women are banned from all such spaces. A Republican Sister explained that she had made several postings on the bulletin board challenging the use of as-saloon as the name for the Republican website. She argued that since for most Sudanese the word “saloon” conjures up a space only open to men, the name implicitly excludes women even if the Republican use of the word referred to Taha’s living room where all Republicans, men and women, sat together for deliberation. Interestingly, this one mention from the Sister was the only time the contention over the name came up in my interviews with Republican members.
jalsas and zikrs were held. The Republicans held their spiritual meetings in the “saloon” within his home, where men and women prayed together, as opposed to in a mosque, where they would be forced to pray separately. Before assaloon.org was built with phpBB, Abdel used Impact, an audio bulletin board program, where members could record and post their messages.

The closed site (figure 7.5), which consists solely of the phpBB bulletin board, is divided into two sections: the text-based forum and the archive. The forum, which has more than 270 registered members, contains a general discussion forum, community news where members post wedding, birth and death announcements and other types of personal news, an audio and video archive where recordings of Inshads, speeches, jalsas and public gatherings are stored, an archive of digitised photographs from various personal collections, the “children’s corner” or information for Republican children, and a general news section including links to news articles on other websites. In the second, separate section Abdel has created an ever-expanding archive that contains digitised books that were originally published during the open period of the movement, mainly from 1964 to 1985. The books are either completely digitally transcribed or in the process of transcription. Some books are scanned completely to preserve the original calligraphy and artwork of the book. The archive also contains over 170 hours of digitised recordings.

Figure 7.5 Entry page of locked forum, www.assaloon.org, 2005
7.2 Zikr: Remembrance and archiving the movement

It is through the slow and laborious process of collaboratively typing and digitising the remaining copies of the movement's books and pamphlets that the archive is being built. Efforts to collect, transcribe, and digitise the Republicans' printed material started as early as 1995. The archiving process has gone through several iterations as more affordable and better archiving technology has become available. At all stages in its present development, the archive makes ample utilisation of bulletin board technology.

During the 1983 arrests and imprisonment of 50 Republicans, including Taha, the Numeiri regime confiscated and publicly burnt the movement's many books. The books were collected from the group houses occupied by young, unmarried male members as well as Taha's home when the houses were raided and the Brothers arrested (An-Na'im 1987a: 7-9; Mahmoud 2001: 81). The personal libraries of Republicans who lived in campus housing at the University of Khartoum were left untouched as were the books belonging to Republicans who did not live in the same Omdurman neighbourhood as Taha. It was from these secretly preserved libraries that the Republicans quickly cobbled together a book of Taha's quotations to refute government propaganda that sought to justify the apostasy charge for which he was executed by discrediting Republican ideology. Global news coverage of the execution as well was collected from members and nonmembers living outside of Sudan and collated into a small pamphlet that was distributed throughout Khartoum.

Members fleeing Sudan during 1985 and 1986, and again in 1989 after the coup d'état that brought Umar al-Bashir and the National Islamic Front to power, did not take the risk of being caught with Republican books in their possession as they crossed borders or left through the airport. As a result, many of the exiled Republicans have only a few books that they managed to smuggle out of Sudan and the archive has been growing piecemeal from the scattered remains of the Republican library. Members who still live in Sudan have access to recordings of some of Taha's early public lectures stored in the archives at the University of Khartoum, and from those recordings are able to make digital copies available for the online archive.
Figure 7.6 Analogue archive in webmaster’s home office, October 2004

Figure 7.7 Digital archive, alfikra.org, April 2006
The digitising of the books (figures 7.6 and 7.7) is a collaborative process with several members contributing transcription work to a single book. A small handful of volunteers, as of October 2004, no more than six members, type up a book or edit the transcript of a book in a word processing program and post it or repost it to the bulletin board. Since a good number of Republican books were written in longhand, and often decorated with elaborate and complicated calligraphy, these books are scanned and saved as image files to digitally preserve their look. Once posted, others are free to download the file to add to or correct the digitised version. As a book is completed, it is moved to alfikra.org and made publicly available.

The online archiving project echoes a core feature of the Republican discursive identity: zikr, or remembrance, which is explicit in the practice of a continuous reference to the past to renew the present. The word zikr refers not only to the Sufi chanting practice but also to the Republican concept that when one chants the name of God, one is remembering what one already knows. You are remembering what has already been implanted in one's memory by God: God's eternal absoluteness and your own divineness because God made you through His omnipotence. By chanting in a zikr, you are remembering what you already know.

This referral to the past is also, in a way, a poignant reminder of the sense of trauma that Taha's death has imprinted on and permeates the movement. This return to the past also validates Taha's message for the Republicans. Members believe that decades ago before he died, Taha predicted the current conditions of politics in Sudan and the Middle East, and they substantiate this by referring to his past writing and their own recollections of what he said. Through this online renewal, where a new generation of Sudanese and non-Sudanese Muslims who came of age after the banning and who have no direct or first-hand experience of the discussion corners or the Republican books, is discovering Republican Thought. One Republican told me, for example, that she had recently met some young people, Sudanese and Egyptian, who said in their search for a progressive, alternative Islam, they stumbled upon Republican Thought through alfikra.org. She had heard of other cases where people living in Sudan's rural areas, that tend to be very isolated with few media resources or technologies, have relied on urban relatives for access to alfikra.org and online Republicanism. Urban relatives download archived books
from alfikra.org, photocopy them and distribute them in the rural areas, where people read the copied books by candle light. In this way, making the content of the Internet a physical artefact, people with low or nonexistent access to the Internet are able to get “online”. In these ways, this one Sister believes, the online presence of the Republicans is very powerful for the movement as a whole.

7.3 As-saloon al-kitabi wa as-saloon al-sawti: Written forums and online jalsas

“One Brother remembered that Ustadh said, “One day everyone will participate in the jalsas from his own house.” So that was a prophecy. It was unthinkable at that time [when he said it]” (Abdel, interview transcript, October 2004).

At the end of August 2001, the first online jalsa—often referred to as the “audio forum” in interviews—used the shareware conferencing and chat program PalTalk (paltalk.com) and was organised by Abdel. This is not to say that technologically mediated jalsas did not occur before that year. Before implementing PalTalk for online jalsas, members would make conference telephone calls to participate in jalsas and Abdel documented these by recording them onto analogue tapes. When asked if the online jalsas resemble the jalsas before 1985, many Republicans mentioned that part of the appeal of the audio forum was the ability to hear each others’ voices after not hearing them for so long due to the conditions of exile. For many members, this helped to reinforce the sense that they are a religious community and at first, because of this, participation was high. Recently, however, regular involvement has dropped off significantly.

Abdel describes the move to PalTalk as both a blessing and a curse in terms of accessibility. Obviously the availability of this technology means that more members can participate at the same time in a jalsa, and helps to recreate, in some small way, the togetherness that was felt during the jalsas before exile. But while most Republicans in Sudan have access to telephones, they do not have access to computers or the Internet in

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20 In Arabic words are built from one similar root: so, for example al-kitab means “book”, so al-kitabi means “writing”. Al-sawti means “sound” or “voice”.

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the same way that exiled members do, now that the jalsas are online many Sudan-based members are excluded. The software itself also limits participation since only 10 terminals can be connected at a time, forcing many members to share connections by going to each others' houses to participate as a group. For those Republicans who are the lone member in a town, or even in a country, it is much more difficult for them to participate online, again restrained by the limited number of connections that have to be shared.

In several senses alfikra.org and assaloon.org serves the double functions of internal and external activities of the movement, in spite of most members' continued insistence that after the execution, the external activities have ceased. Many members explained to me, moreover, that even the "movement" per se no longer exists. All that remains is simply a loose affiliation of people who believe in and share in the Republican ideology and who also happen to have the shared experiences of being Republican during the height of the movement in the 1970s and 1980s. As I have already pointed out, this is reiterated in how the Republicans textually construct the (non)movement on alfikra.org. One member who was particularly emphatic about the nonexistence of the movement and its political activities quite clearly said that:

"After the tragic execution of Alustaz, the leading Republicans have preferred to dissolve the political and organizational movement rather than carry [on with] a meaningless confrontation with the authorities. That step was opposed by some Republicans, but no[1] one of them took an active role in opposing the authority confrontationally, or was able to give a logical explanation why it was wise to defy an authority that succeeded in killing Alustaz. Most leading figures of the Republicans who advocated quiescence, were able to win the love and confidence of the rest of Republicans who began to gradually appreciate their wisdom in protecting the individuals and families from the wrath of the fanatic fundamentalists who were behind the conspiracy that lead to the execution of Alustaz Mahmoud. Since the military coup that was led by the Islamic fundamentalist Muslim Brothers in Sudan in 1989, until now, 2004, there seems to be no chance for spreading the Republican
Thought publicly in Sudan without facing serious consequences" (Karim E., online interview, April 2004).

During our online interview, Karim was careful to emphasise that this suspension of all external organisational and political activities, including distribution of Republican materials, is in full force despite having a public website, when he copied and pasted a caveat posted to the alfikra.org public forum, where he serves as its moderator:

"Dear visitors and members of the Forum
Assalamu Alaikum
Welcome to this open and free board attached to the Alfikra.org, the web site that contains the heritage of Alustaz Mahmoud Mohammed Taha and his Republican Thought.
The administrator and moderators of this Forum neither represent an Organization of the Republicans nor do they speak on behalf of the Republicans.
This board is meant to be a forum that enables Republican individuals to write about their own understanding of the Republican Thought or answer the questions raised by visitors or members"
(Karim E., online interview, April 2004).

Yet while it may be true that the external activities as they were enacted before Taha's execution are suspended in Sudan—there are no more discussion corners or book distribution trips—through the availability of these materials (or at least some of them) online as well as individual Republicans' deliberative engagements on bulletin boards with a larger Sudanese public, the suspension of the political becomes ambiguous. In a sense it is as if by not calling the online activities "external" as such abdicates any responsibility for the fact that the activities are political for the very reason that they are public. Indeed one of the ongoing, contentious and highly charged debates on both the audio and text-based closed forums is whether or not the movement should start again with the external activities. This issue is so fundamental to the frustrations felt by some members from the self-imposed ban
that a few have chosen to leave the Brotherhood altogether and some have founded new, independent political parties in exile alongside other disillusioned non-Republican ex-members of the Sudan Communist Party and exiled Sudanese.\textsuperscript{21} Other members have chosen to quietly continue with the external activities in their own small ways through presenting conference papers, writing articles or PhD theses, and publicly speaking about Republican Thought and the movement. Others told me that while they employ the framework of Republican Thought to develop opinions publicly held and expressed, they are always careful to qualify their opinions as personal beliefs and that their opinions are not necessarily shared by the Republican Brotherhood as a group. Part of the issue is the fear of death, because of the accusation of apostasy and the execution of Taha, the fear of violence and death remain the core reason for the suspension of all external activities. Furthermore many members believe there is a very real danger for Republicans in using the Internet over any other medium due to its ability to transmit information across geographical and political borders so efficiently. As one Republican told me, the Internet has a unique tendency to “amplify opinions”. No one has forgotten that Taha’s death was due to a single sheet of paper and they are not willing to risk their lives and the lives of others in a similar way (An-Na‘im 1987a: 18). To underline what Karim said in the previous quote, there is a palpable sense of profound trauma among Republicans that has not dissipated over 20 years after the execution.

Yet the ambiguity that surrounds the self-imposed ban is more complicated than mourning the loss of Taha and the movement. The debates that are focused on the ban sustain a delicate tension between making a conclusive decision by consensus (but enforced by the leadership) and supporting a contingent, inconclusive openness. This is strategic. It is a strategy of ambivalence, a necessary strategy that guarantees the survival of the movement that is not a movement. If, as one member told me, the government comes after them, who will they go after? There is only one website, one webmaster; they can only

\textsuperscript{21} The New Democratic Forces (or HAQ, the party’s Arabic acronym; the word for “truth” in Arabic is “al-haqq”, thus the acronym serves a double meaning). The first meeting to form the party was held in London in 1995 with one UK-based Republican member in attendance among several other Sudanese exiles. In the same year another Republican, based in the United States, also founded a new political party that was separate from HAQ. The second international HAQ meeting was held in Cairo in 2000. These political activities are not directly linked to the Republican Brotherhood in any way. The Republicans who are participating in these political parties and activities do so as individuals and do not claim to represent publicly the Republican Brotherhood.
go after one person because there is no "group". But this strategy also has repercussions for how Republicans interact with one another, bitter argument over the very raison d'etre of the movement has produced more than hurt feelings, it has caused fractious divisions pitting those for the resumption of the political activities against those who side with the leadership. While this issue produces the most divisive debates among members, the ambivalence of the debate surrounding it due to its inconclusiveness—making a decision by not making one—is just as strategic. As I hope to demonstrate in the remainder of this chapter, this strategic ambivalence threads throughout their interactions with each other and outsiders.

7.4 Digitising al-rukun, (re)opening the dialogue: the Republican bulletin board and sudaneseonline.com

Clicking into the Photo Album section, a visitor to alfikra.org will find close to two dozen digital images of fading photographs. Sudanese women and men, wrapped in the long, white fabric of the Republicans, wearing Afros and thick, black-framed eye glasses that were fashionable in the mid-1970s, with smiling, fresh faces that shine out from the past to the present through an amber-tinged photo. One image is of six young people, two women and four men, all clutching books in their arms, stopped as they walked down a street in the main shopping district of Khartoum and asked to pose for the picture by a seventh, anonymous member of the group who photographed them. Another image depicts a lone man, again wrapped in the long white Republican fabric and wearing a loose turban to cover his head, who addresses a crowd of over 100 men and women sitting in a semicircle around him on grass sheltered by shady trees from the stark Sudanese sun. This is the legendary Khatim A., the famous Republican orator of the al-rukun, who, through his logically constructed, incisive and persuasive arguments, convinced many young students to declare themselves Republicans.

As I described the al-rukun in Chapter Six, the Republicans knew that it was important to hold discussions about the Republican ideology in the open spaces of street corners or markets of Khartoum as opposed to the closed spaces of mosques or even Taha’s home, because they believed that it was in public spaces that dialogue becomes inclusive and diverse, and is safer for the speakers. Members were confident that the crowd would defend them against the violence of a few radicals. This strategy worked. People like
Khatim A. and the discussion corners themselves were preceded by their reputations in urban centres like Khartoum. As described in the previous chapter, even presently, the Republicans are reputed to have forged a new culture of public speaking in Khartoum; many groups, both religious and political, followed the Republicans out of the mosques and into the streets, a public culture that continues to thrive today. One exiled Republican told me that on his return to Khartoum after a 10 year absence, he witnessed several public Sufi revival meetings conducted and attended by young people in the city streets. He pointed to this trend as evidence of how effective the Republican discussion corners were in the shaping of the public discursive culture in Khartoum.

With the advent of cheaper (and quite often free) web-based communication software and technology, Republicans have moved the project they started in the streets of Khartoum to the bulletin boards and listservs frequented by Sudanese people, both those who are exiled and to a lesser extent, those living in Sudan. For many of the Republicans that I spoke with, they reenact and reinscribe the al-rukun through their participation on these non-Republican Sudanese online forums and are circulating their discourse to a wider and more diverse audience than they were able to in Sudan. In my interview with Fatima A., a sympathetic non-Republican22 living in the United States, she described her view of the online discussions:

"I am now on the Sudanese discussion boards...I open sudaneseonline...but then again it resembles those discussion circles that [the Republicans] had in public. In a way where there are people with different opinions, there are people who will call them names, call them kaffirs23, ... and now it is online. So you have this huge [audience], the Internet made it possible for something like 2,000 people to either listen or participate whereas the discussion circle, the physical thing,

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22 At the beginning of our interview Fatima wanted to be clear that the only reason she chooses not to call herself a Republican is because she does not sit in the Inshads or pray regularly and she felt that to call herself a full member of the Brother/Sisterhood without engaging in the intensive prayer regime practiced by the Republicans would be unfair to the other members.

23 In English "non-believer". This is a very insulting word, for a Muslim to be called a kaffir the charge of apostasy or an accusation of leaving Islam can be implicitly understood and that accusation is not far behind the insult; under the current system of Shari'a in Sudan both charges are punishable by death. In this way, the use of the word kaffir is a threat of violence.
would have 100 people. So I think the Internet had brought in more and more people to listen to these ideas. And [the Republicans have] kept the [al-rukun the] same way, it doesn't matter that people are calling them names; they don't call names back to people. They usually start from a very cordial, friendly basis which usually embarrasses the other party and attracts the other people who are on the board, reading and listening. And you find so many, hundreds and hundreds of people who are not Republicans, who are not even going to join, who have these encouraging messages that are being sent to the board (in defence of those Republicans being textually attacked). Sayings like: ‘You son of a bitch get off the board you should be embarrassed by your post!’ (The effect is) [t]hen even for those people who were calling them names last year, this year they’re coming to a sort of to an (apology or different position). ‘So you know we’ve been at odds but you know I respect you’. And you see this happening a lot” (Fatima H., interview transcript, January 2005).

While Fatima is discussing sudaneseonline.com, a bulletin board extremely popular with Sudanese people and often the topic of many offline discussions that take place in exiled Republicans' living rooms, she does not discuss the public board on alfikra.org. By focusing solely on sudaneseonline.com where the forum is populated with people with a wide range of political opinions, she is emphasising the fundamental characteristic of the al-rukun, that despite the threat of violence, and in fact because of it, discussions should take place in open, non-Republican forums. Ahmed F. an exiled Republican living in the United States describes not only an expansion of the al-rukun in non-Republican online forums, but implies that there may be, possibly, a new definition for democracy, or at least democratic discourse that is grown from the contentious, combative, and rude discourse occurring on Sudanese bulletin boards:

"It's a new era and this kind of freedom, maybe people might abuse freedom, maybe it will look very extreme. But the cure for mishandling
freedom is more freedom, not censorship or control. Because people are so suppressed they are going to go to extremes but then they'll become back to the middle and become moderates. Now on sudaneseonline there are very rude people, they write really irresponsible kind of language. There is a public opinion that is growing to [counteract] these. People will come to the middle and become more responsible. ... I think it's a good experience in democratisation because we are not democratic. Everyone wants everyone else to see their point of view and agree with it. And sometimes you get angry because people don't agree with you. People get angry and do character assassination and this is happening right now. But I think it will get better. Let people practice and then reflect on what they say and then create a public opinion that rejects bad things and accepts good things. I think these online forums are changing the world. I can't say that all these online things are nice things, sometimes people just talk nonsense. But on the other side people who are serious about social issues and politics, this is a new avenue, it is a reshaping" (Ahmed F., interview transcript, January 2005).

What Ahmed is suggesting differs greatly from previous studies of online deliberations; that unless deliberations appear to be democratically conducted (defined in these studies as possessing a rational, objective argumentational style, allowing others to speak, politeness, etc.), online deliberations are not democratic (Albrecht 2003; Albrecht 2006; Papacharissi 2004). Most definitions of online or e-democracy that emerged from the literature I reviewed in Chapter Four were framed by “already” existing institutionalised, liberal democratic systems and suggests that democratic culture (even if it is anaemic and needs to be revitalised) precedes online democracy. What is also argued in the literature is that democratic discourse should be (mostly) rational and fair, anything less than that is not democratic. What Ahmed argues is the exact opposite; for people who have no democratic culture (as he describes Sudanese people lacking in this quality), an online forum is the perfect place to experiment with and to develop democracy. Online deliberations allow Sudanese people to shape their own models of democracy. Furthermore, his description of
what is happening on sudaneseonline.com suggests that a new kind of democratic discourse that accommodates “bad” speech with “good” speech is endogenous to online forums, or at least to online forums populated with Sudanese users. Given enough time and practice, Sudanese online forum users who are “new” to democratic deliberative practice will weed out the bad opinions from the good and settle somewhere in the middle. As I will show in the following section, however, a very different dynamic is occurring on the closed Republican forums, especially the assaloon.org’s al-kitabi (written) forum.

7.5 “Silence is a statement”

A curious and, at first glance, disappointing event occurred during my research with the Republicans. It was near the start of my fieldwork that I learned, much to my delight, that the Republicans had moved their jalsas online and close to 50 members regularly met on Saturdays (evenings London time) to sing Inshads and discuss Republican Thought, much like the morning and evening jalsas Taha conducted in his living room during the 1970s and 1980s. I was told by one informant that once he had a broadband connection installed at home, he would invite me over to his house so that I too could participate. As these things often go, a few months turned into a year before he had broadband installed and in that time, participation in the online jalsas dramatically dropped from a high of 50 people to less than 10. As a result of this lower participation, the jalsas were meeting irregularly, down to less than once a month. Imagine the terror that I experienced on learning this. Not only would I not be able to observe an actual online jalsa, they in fact no longer exist to a large extent; a central element of my research topic and a site of data collection vaporised in an instant. As I progressed with interviews my sense of terror deepened as many Republicans told me they no longer post to the written forum on assaloon.org or that often they simply lurk online only to read postings but that they never, ever write anything themselves.

I was doomed. I thought that since there was “nothing going on” that there was nothing to research. I was wrong. Studying why people choose not to do something can be just as interesting, valid and rewarding as studying when they choose to act. Once I learned to ask the right questions I discovered that the reasons for the lack of participation were far more interesting than the reasons to participate. While the interview data show that
problems emerged in both spoken and written forums, it was with the written forum that conflicts were the most pronounced and the most disconcerting for members, because, they said they had higher expectations for the level of written discourse. In light of this I will purposefully focus on the written forum.

Not long after the as-saloon listserv was implemented, member subscribers noticed a disturbing trend in the postings on more controversial topics: the tendency to forget Republican discursive identity and behaviour through the employment of highly emotive and aggressive language. Discussions about the very purpose of the listserv and if it should be allowed to continue were precipitated by a particularly alarming thread which featured vitriolic posts that accused the Brotherhood’s leadership of being cowardly for not renewing public political engagements. Abdel, as the list’s moderator, sent out a message asking the list’s members if a vote was needed to determine and enforce some writing guidelines that would regulate what was acceptable or unacceptable written behaviour for the list. He also asked if the listserv was no longer serving its purpose and was in fact causing harm and fractious debate, and if so, should the listserv be abandoned. While the resulting messages showed that a majority of members felt the listserv was doing much more good than harm, all members except one voted in favour of creating guidelines to help maintain the established Republican discursive culture on the listserv. Due to the one dissenting vote, however, the writing guidelines were never implemented and the debate was left in a state of suspension. The vote was called a little over 18 months after the listserv started and since then there has been one more vote conducted with similar results. Since the issue remains unresolved, members have been strategically silent online, opting only to read postings or not to log-on at all. “Silence is a statement” is how Abdel characterised members’ refusal to participate in the online forums. I address this phenomenon in the next section but here I would like to emphasise that the Republicans here are using this strategy of ambivalence in regards to the issue of emotive postings. Before I address the online silences, however, I would like to first explore what happens when deliberations become text.
7.5.1 Purity of spoken thought and violent text

In my interviews with Republicans I was told that when arguments which begin in the written forum get "out-of-hand" (quite literally) they migrate to the audio forum. Members indicated that there is a certain amount of distrust around what is written as opposed to what is said. For Republicans when there are misunderstandings textually discussions are moved to the audio forum for clarification and for the true meaning and intention to be discerned. Why is it that what is written is more dubious than what is said? What happens to an opinion or an idea that is uttered when it is written down? Does the act of writing violently impose structure onto thought or does it force the thinker to be more self-reflective and interrogate their thoughts more diligently (Derrida 1976)? Is spoken argument more open to contingencies, revision and clarification; is it closer to "truth"? Why does there exist, either in perception or in practice, a split between the two? If we accept Chilton and Schäffner's (2002: 2-3) assertion that politics is language, how do the politics differ when the language is spoken or when it is written, both online?

There exists an analytical lacuna in the literature on online deliberative democracy that I reviewed in Chapter Four in regards to the phenomenon of writing online. Within the e-democracy scholarship there are no examples that explicitly address what happens when deliberations—or people sitting around talking about politics—are moved online and become people sitting around writing about politics (For some examples of this neglect see Dahlberg 2001b; Hill and Hughes 1998; Papacharissi 2004; Stromer-Galley 2003; Wilhelm 1999). The literature fails to acknowledge that most online deliberations are written not spoken, nor does it grapple with the implications of this.

There is more focus on this dynamic between online writing and orality in other literatures, such as those within the fields of literary criticism or communication studies. For example, Jenny Sundén, in her excellent examination of online textual embodiment, argues that online discourse exist in the "rarely acknowledged borderland between talk and text, where the ephemerality of talk is tied down by the textual practices of inscription" (2003: 44). This tying down of speech is what is said, by more deterministic historians and critics, to have plagued human thought since the invention of writing. Plato postulated through the Socratic dialogues with Phaedrus that the complexity of speech is simplified and deaden by writing and can only be "brought to life again by an encounter with its reader" (Burger 1980:
But the reader must be in possession of a "complex soul" whose awareness of "the deceptive clarity and firmness of the written word is to recognise ... its unacknowledged dependence [on the spoken word]" (96). According to this logic writing mediates thought and alienates the thinker from thought. The act of writing becomes a reductive and violent act, which chisels away at thought, and codifies it into black and white, into absolutes. The irony to all of this lies in the fact that the ancients were not able to formalise these ideas without writing them down (Ong 1982: 79-83). According to this line of reasoning, writing is a contrivance with its own pre-existing logic that impinges on human consciousness (Warner 1990: 6-7).

Although this dichotomy between what is said and what is written, where orality affords a more pure and direct link to thought, is reductive and deterministic, how do we account for the Republican perception of this split, a split they say is real (Sundén 2003: 47; Warner 2002: 84)? One source may be the Sufi tradition of orality and poetics rooted in the ancients' distrust of writing, who were loathe to calcify spirituality, and believed that writing codifies the spoken word, and by extension the divine, mystical ideas that are transmitted orally, into dogma. Where the written word is in the realm of the 'ulama (Islamic jurists) who bicker over the nuances of Islamic law, the songs and spoken literature of the Sufis exist in the realm of spiritual devotional practice (Chittick 2000: 27). William Chittick explains that within Sufism, the knowledge of God is revealed through what Sufis call "unveiling" and that this is achieved through poetry that is often sung (2000: 34). Indeed poetry is considered "the ideal medium for expressing the truths of the most intimate and mysterious relationship that humans beings can achieve with God, that is, loving Him and being loved by Him" (2000: 34). Another reason may be not that particular to the Republicans' Sufi traditions or spirituality at all but rather a commonly held perception of online text held by many groups. Katja Cronauer (2004) found in her research on antiglobalisation groups using listservs for political mobilisation, most users felt that listserv postings, above all other ways to communicate, were most prone to be misunderstood or to be perceived as being hostile. The perception of hostile text was a self-fulfilling prophesy for many participants who said they would respond to posts they perceived as hostile with an equally hostile post. The overwhelming consequence of hostile posts in her study, however, was silence or a withdrawal from the listserv altogether (2004: 122).
While it is true that the Internet can accommodate audio (and video) as well as text, within the context of the specific online technologies that the Republicans utilise the most, bulletin boards and email listservs, it is still, for them, primarily a textually based medium. This imbalance between writing and speaking online has produced some dilemmas for the overall Republican discursive identity as well as their identity as online Republicans.

I have already described Republican media culture as enacted both textually and orally; in text through its expansive book publishing and distribution, and through spoken word in the al-rukuns, zikrs and through the daily jalsas where Taha spoke on Republican ideology. Despite the different ways to deliver the message, the message was the same. In all the media, a uniform Republican ideology or opinion was repeated by members both textually and orally, and which was, ultimately, the result of constant verification with, clarification and refinement by Ustadh Taha. No book was written or speech delivered without Taha's guidance on the finer or subtler details of Republican Thought and his final approval of the resulting text or speech. When a Republican spoke at a discussion corner or engaged in a public debate on a given day, in the evening jalsa they would report to Taha on what was said. Through Taha's absence, the movement's discursive touchstone is lost. In exile the Republicans have moved this culture online and through the technological choices they've made (either due to the expense, convenience or the lack of adequate technology), preference has been given to written deliberations over spoken ones. As a result, Republicans have textualised their discursive culture.

To discuss what happens when speech is written online, at this point let us return to Sundén. She suggests that online, text-based conversations exist in the moment that they are written—as if they were spoken—and are not primarily written as a recording of the interaction. Online texts should be seen as performative in the present in which they are written (44). Consider the next statement with Sundén's proposal in mind:

"Regarding the so called FITNA, I want to say AL-SALOON is the most important mechanism to kill it, regardless of who is now right or [who] is wrong, for instance, I think those who believe that [AL-QEYADYEEN]^[24

24 Translates as "leaders" and written transliterally as al-qiadyyin. There are two transliteral alphabets to write Arabic with the English alphabet, but often Arabic speakers (at least when writing quickly online) will write Arabic phonetically using the English alphabet which results in several different spellings for words."
are no longer the ones I knew, I think they are in a real trouble, and I have to talk to them, and the best way to do that is through AL-SALOON, on the other hand I believe some of my brothers will think I need to be helped by changing my mind regarding some of my belief[s], and they can't find [a] better[way] than AL-SALOON. Actually, expressing our opinion by [wri]ting will help the others to read it many times and to think about it carefully, before deciding anything and by this way we ensure that the emotional reactions are eliminated or at least reduced" (Listserv posting, 26/01/1999).

Within this posting the author contends the opposite, that writing is not “as if spoken”, and it functions in an entirely different way. What this listserv author suggests is that the very nature of writing and of text, especially in the context of a listserv, lends itself to consideration and revision, and most importantly, will force the reader to think logically about the opinion expounded and not react emotionally. By referring to the disagreement as the “so-called fitna”, the author is showing his or her exception to the use of the word fitna (in English: sedition) 25 to describe those who disagree with the leadership over the self-imposed ban on political activities.

In my interview with Abdel about the differences between writing and speaking he placed the onus of writing directly on the author rather than on the reader:

“I've notice this ... when you talk to someone directly, face to face, he may use sometimes tough language but sometimes when people write, I don’t know what happens, they write things they would not say face to face” (Abdel O., interview transcript, October 2004).

Abdel was speaking in regards to a particular Republican who managed to alienate (forsaken was the word used) many members through his writing style, which was described

\[25\] Fitna can mean sedition or affliction. In the context of this listserv posting it means a serious disagreement or a splitting into opposing camps on the issue of whether or not to resume political activities. It seems however throughout this thread the use of the word fitna was highly contentious itself.
by another study participant, Abdalla M., as "violent". This Brother, Mahgoub I., explained Abdalla, presented his "spoken" self in a completely different manner, one of kindness and patience, and argued that this incongruity was direct evidence that there is something in the nature of writing, especially online, that produces a dissonance between the spoken and written selves. Abdalla, however, intuits this split; he cannot place a finger on precisely what it is but can only point to its effects:

"Even in the vocal forum that same Brother would remain very calm, very easy, very respectful of others but when he writes he is violent and I think I am right to use that word. It happens to all of us in some respect but he is well known for being a little bit aggressive" (Abdalla M., interview transcript, October 2004).

According to the Republicans writing should enable the writer and the reader to think more critically, rationally and carefully yet at the same time can produce in the author a violent "written self", where text appears not to have the same consequences as speech does. In my analysis of the data one specific quality seems essential to the production of "violent" text: pointing fingers, or a text's argument disintegrating into personal accusations and attacks. This quality is often described by Republicans as "emotional", "subjective", and "a failure to separate the issues from the person". These descriptors are antithetical to how members perceive the Republican spoken behaviour as being one of detachment, objectivity and rationality (and even ethical). It is this perceived split that is most worrying to them. A Sudan-based Republican, Khalid S., described his personal encounter with "violent text" and explains what he thinks might be a reason why it seems prevalent in the online forum:

"I was forced to leave the closed bulletin as it failed to comply with [a] minimum-level ethics of the Republican Thought and one of the board

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26 Before my interview with Abdalla, I had interviewed Mahgoub, who made no mention of the ongoing arguments on assaloon.org but did express dismay over the fact that I was researching the Republicans in the first place. He questioned and challenged the validity of my choice and suggested that there were many other groups online that serve as better examples for e-democracy.
members, a Republican, entered into defaming me by leaking [a] message from my previous wife accusing me of adultery and many things. So, I calmly withdrew as the opposition to the main current inside the Republican group started immorally to deal with me and may be others. ... In jalsas before and after banning, all brothers and sisters [we]re existing physically in one place. The Ustadh, and senior brothers after him, keep the highest code of ethical beliefs ordained by Islam. No brother can assault another impolitely let alone defamations and personal backlashes. In the online discussion or activity, there is no close physical watch. Many brothers and sisters started for long time ago to forget much about these ethics and our highest brother after Al Ustadh was subject to defamation only for differences of opinion. I don't say that this is only peculiar to the online practice due to the fact that even some brothers and sisters here in Sudan have deviated from this ethical code but under strong public opinion, they quickly withdraw from such activities but online, there is no feeling of embarrassment as there is no physical contact" (Khalid S., online interview, June 2004).

During her examination of anti-hate speech legislation in her book *Excitable Speech*, Judith Butler relocates the state's power to do harm directly back onto its citizenry; the "private" citizens who are "figured as sovereigns whose speech now carries a power that operates like state power to deprive other 'sovereigns' of fundamental rights and liberties" including, sometimes, the right of an individual to continue living (1997a: 48). What she exposes in her book is how hate speech operates with its own agency, that is, the word itself is enough to enact violence (and a social death) on another. Let me give an example27: a young Jewish Viennese woman was riding a bus and when she arose from her seat to get off, she inadvertently but without an apology stepped on the toe of an older (non-Jewish) woman who was sitting with an equally older and non-Jewish female companion. As the young woman stepped down from the bus she overheard the injured (but perhaps really more

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27 This story was told to me by a friend who had witnessed the exchange on a bus in Vienna, Austria.
insulted) women say in a voice loud enough for her to hear, "That was one that the ovens missed". In one simple but very deliberate speech act the old woman enacted the genocide of the Holocaust on this young woman. The spoken act performed bodily violence; it was not only a threat of violence but a violent act in of itself.

In a similar way to what Butler suggests with the performance of power through the use of hate speech, this accusation against Khalid operated not only to silence him (after all it was effective, Khalid left the board) but also functioned as an enforcement of a power that is greater than an individual Republican, the power of the state to impose a violent sentence. Aside from the obvious embarrassment and helplessness that certainly one must feel when a false accusation of marital impropriety is spread, within the social and political context of Sudan where Khalid lives, with the government's imposition of hudud (for the offence of adultery an accused person, whether a man or a woman, can receive punishments that range in severity from 100 lashings if unmarried to death by stoning if married), the accusation itself becomes an act of violence (Mahmoud 2001: 79-80; Mukhtar 1996; Sidahmed 2001: 188)²⁸. What is so disconcerting for Khalid and other Republicans about such a violent statement made by a Brother or Sister is that this violence is anathema to Republican pacifism and discursive identity.

What Khalid suggests here is that Taha was the warden of what he calls "Republican ethical behaviour" and in Taha's absence the Republicans have strayed away from it. Other study participants mentioned the phenomenon in similar terms; it is through the loss of the unifying presence of Taha's leadership that is causing this behaviour. Khalid speculated that it is the lack of physical proximity to one another that may account for the reduction in Republican ethical behaviour, and that while it is not solely occurring online it may be exasperated there. While previous social science research in online flaming suggests that this behaviour is social-contextually dependent, that is violent textual behaviour is less prevalent among online groups that have well established social bonds either on or offline, it is unclear exactly what is precipitating this behaviour among Republicans online given that the forum is conducted among strongly connected people with a long-established discursive identity (Kayany 1998: 1137, 1141).

²⁸ Sidahmed also shows, however, that there is a violent penalty for the perpetrator of a false accusation of adultery. If the slanderer is found guilty, the offender can receive up to 80 lashings for the offence (188).
I do not want make the reductive suggestion that by virtue of being online Republicans are losing their discursive identity but rather I would suggest that their online presence deepens the ambivalence that the Republicans already feel as a group because, for them, the lack of physical contact reinforces the sense of alienation. By losing Taha, their one unifying source, this alienation has been compounded and exasperated, especially in exile, and is re-enacted online in the assaloon.org al-kitabi forum.

It is this "weighing down of speech" and performing text violently which is so problematic about "being online" for Republicans, and they position themselves towards it paradoxically. In my interviews and analysis of forum postings most respondents maintained a fragile conundrum, where the act of writing should force the writer to be more self-reflexive and to develop more carefully considered arguments but, at the same time, the very act of writing is violent and produces a "written self" that is hostile and incongruent with the "aural self". It is the "written self" that flies in the face of the Republican discursive cultural identity of rational, civil and reasoned argumentation. Many Republicans at the same time esteem and reject written thought. According to Republicans the writer does not feel the same level of responsibility towards one another when she or he is speaking. This may be true in the closed forum, however, this position changes when Republicans are "speaking" on non-Republican forums, such as sudaneseonline.com, as I will discuss at length in the section on who has the authority to speak.

7.5.2 Silence on the audio and written forums

"The essence of what Ustadh said was never [to] think that there is a final word on anything. Interpretation is open, you have to reinterpret your ideas and be vigilant. You need to observe the reality and try to always to understand and to develop your discourse and adapt to the new things that are coming. So we have some people who are more open minded and others who are becoming fanatics and dogmatic with regard to our writings and literature. This has been going on until now. For some time I stopped writing in the as-Saloon because for me it had become ... a bad place, because people were pointing fingers and
Ahmed F. describes his reasons for silence on the closed forum asaloon.org. His statement about the incentives for his silence is packed tightly because of the several dynamics taking place within the forum that he describes. The most significant issue he has is that some Republican members were closing down the dialogue by making Republican Thought dogmatic, absolute, even cultish, and antithetical to what Ahmed believes to be the core, discursive identity of Republicanism. He describes the main lesson passed on to Republicans by Taha: interpretation is open and it must be continuously interrogated and revised, especially when new information or new circumstances arise. He believes a trend exists among Republicans towards shutting down interpretative practices on asaloon.org and that due to this, some members had forgotten the lessons that Taha had given them. One way these members are truncating and silencing debate, says Ahmed, is by quoting the Qur'an, the final word in Islam—instead of analysing it—and by so doing, making their arguments the final word too. Another way that these members are invoking silence is, as they say, to point fingers, and by so doing they make their arguments personal attacks on the characters of those who oppose them. But he suggests that the best way to test the validity of your argument and to maintain vigilance over dogmatic thought is to move the
debate to an open rather than a closed forum. This is why he consciously decided to move his Republican dialogues to sudaneseonline.com to engage with non-Republicans, and this is significant since it is the essence of Republican Thought as he says but is also validates what critics theorising democracy have also said is the ideal (radical democratic) deliberative situation (Benhabib 1996; Fraser 1997; Habermas 1988; Taylor 1995; Young 1996). What Ahmed is also suggesting in this statement, which should be read in context of his earlier statement on how online discourse is producing an endogenous democratic culture.

7.5.3 Fluidity, contingency and gravity
While I have shown the contradictory positions held towards writing and speaking, another problem Republicans have with online "weighed-down" text is what Sunden calls the fluidity of online text (2004: 46). Even though it may be a truism, as she notes, that you cannot unsay something said; for Republicans it is the written word, one that is distributed digitally, which takes on such gravity itself that it becomes a responsibility most members find too substantial to shoulder by themselves. Online texts are a recording of and the transmission of, quite often, a countervailing and dangerous political position that bears a serious responsibility for the writer of those texts. Furthermore as I have shown online writing for the Republicans is not performed as if they were spoken, online texts in the case of Republican online practice perform intertextually, where texts are "weighed-down" by the ongoing ideological struggles over the meaning of words and members, as a group, are loathe to implicate themselves in those struggles textually (Allen 2000: 36).

I have already argued in Chapter Six that to believe and espouse a religious ideology that challenges the fundamentalist foundations of Islam held and enforced by the present regime—the al-Bashir government and its ideologue al-Turabi through the National Islamic Front—is political, and can be dangerous in Sudan. While on the one hand Republicans are emboldened and strengthened by Republican ideology, especially in the context of Sudanese politics, it is safer to hold such viewpoints and positions privately, and to discuss them only with trusted others, far away from government informants. It is quite another thing to re-enter the current online public sphere of Sudanese politics, to publicly commit and record them in a text forum, and thereby possibly influence others in the current
political environment. Any evidence of a point of view that challenges the present regime can be employed to do harm against the person that holds that view and others that are perceived to support that view. As Sundén claims, online texts are, at once, contingent and fixed (in the sense that they are typed), what she calls textual fluidity, where online texts are always open to clarification and argumentation, and have the ability to “move” (2004: 47). From a Republican perspective, however, it is precisely because online words are both digitally printed (“fixed”) and mobile at the same time, with the ability to move from one computer screen to thousands instantaneously, thereby becoming “solid evidence” of a writer’s opinion. This distinctive characteristic of online text runs the risk of being used against someone and for Republicans it is this quality, specifically, which makes online texts dangerous. While the literature on web journalism and publishing debate whether the medium fits into a publishing or broadcast model29 (Boczkowski 1999), for Republicans writing online (at least in an open forum like sudaneseonline.com) is much like broadcasting your opinion on radio or television, which can have an unnecessary and dangerous influence on others. Things that can be said in the audio forum are never written in the text-based one precisely due to the (online) written word’s mobility. Printed text acts as a constant reminder of Taha’s death and for Republicans the politics of the printed word, regardless if they are printed in pixels or ink, become that much more powerful online.

7.6 Legitimacy of argumentation

Part of the way that an argument is bolstered and becomes legitimate, as Gilbert (1977: 116) has shown, is in the validity of its references to other sources. An argument is more persuasive and leads to a consensus on its truth if it includes reference to prior and authoritative knowledge. The Republicans reference their primary, legitimate source, Taha, for any argument or clarification made about Republican Thought as well as to justify their own opinion or position on an issue. Taha built his own arguments and ideology on the solid bedrock of the Qur’an and the Hadith. But as Ahmed described his reasons for leaving the

29 In the early years of the commercialisation of the Internet, newspapers resisted expansion online in part since it belied the established print model for the industry, for a good example of this dilemma in determining which model—either print or broadcast—that the news industry thinks the Internet should follow, see Boczkowski (1999).
al-kitabi forum, due to a dogmatic reliance on Taha’s sayings and the failure to recall (and the enactment) of one of his main teachings: that there is no final word. Other members have also noticed the worrying trend, which compelled one member to post this reminder to the listserv:

"It is alright to use al-Ustadh in support of our arguments and positions but I think we need to give it a little more thought before we embark on that. We have to use al-Ustadh’s methods of analysis and modes of thought more than his literal words and deeds. Otherwise we will not grow up and will not realize our own potential. If we want to look for every single act within our lives [for] a precedent from al-Ustadh, we will end up like al-Hadith; whenever we’re met with a problem they did not [look] into the skies nor into themselves in search of wisdom, but into the books of al-Hadith and when they did not find exactly what they wanted, they used a remotely relevant one, and if even a remotely relevant one was not available, they made one. Frankly, I can see the beginnings of such a phenomenon growing steadily among ourselves. So let us be more careful about that" (Listserv posting 21/02/1998).

What is interesting about this member’s post is that he cites Taha’s “methods of analysis and modes of thought” as what Republicans should be referring to and modelling their own argumentational style after, and abandoning or at least limiting the reliance of solely referring to Taha’s sayings and writings to validate an opinion or position. Taha’s religious methodology, as I explored in Chapter Six, is based in a scientific method of analysis, one rooted in a Cartesian rationality and one of independent thought and inquiry. It is through a rigorous and methodologically sound inquiry and analysis that the path to God is open. This member is reminding other Republicans to remember and use the most important lesson that Taha left for them, to critically think for themselves.

Another posting to the listserv compels members to remember the core of the political identity of the Republicans, tolerance of diversity, by quoting Taha and the Qur’an simultaneously:
"I think, as we claim Democracy and one of our definitions that 'it's the right to listen to others', that being that, we should not deny issues raised for discussion here and give it names like 'Fitna'. Let us recall the example of the Prophet (Peace and Prayers be upon him) when he was listening to that mad woman. Of course she was talking nonsense but still [H]e was listening. So we should expect that not all issues in Assaloon are acceptable. And I think it is our responsibility to argue in an effort to correct the wrong thinking whenever [it] appear[s]. The contributor has every right to be listen[ed to] by others, and the others depending on the standards should elaborate to convince him with the right thing... I think we should mind our feeling[s] towards our brothers who come with strange or wrong ideas (due to stress, frustration, depression, fear, etc.) through th[is] arena that is [like] the prayer rug..."

(Listserv posting 29/01/1999).

This posting reminds members also of their shared intellectual, political and spiritual heritage by quoting Taha ("the right to listen to others") and the Prophet. Further down in the post, the author unveils the implicit meaning in Taha's quote that democracy is the right to be heard ("The contributor has every right to be listen[ed to] by others"). The author also reminds members that all opinions and arguments are valid in a Republican forum as long as they are conducted as if they were in a sacred place, like on a prayer rug. Again, this posting's author echoes the previous posting by making reference to a method of analysing discourse as opposed to saying that only certain discourses are acceptable.

This posting takes a slightly different position in regards to legitimate argumentational styles by using similar statements attributed to Taha:

"No doubt that everyone is free to say, write whatever he/she may think. However we all have a duty to protect and regulate this freedom. As a community we have to endure, tolerate and respect the different attitudes and opinions "almujtama allathiy la yadeego bi annat alsulook almukhtalifa". This is our legacy. I would like to translate that quote from
Al-Ustadh: "the society that [is] tolerant of various kinds of behaviour ". And as individuals, we have to remember "Alhadeeth fi aldeen sair fe alwady almugdus, twkhlaui fihi alnalain wa twasulu fihi at-talbia". That translates: "Speaking in religion is walking in a sacred valley in which shoes should be taken off and the "talbia" should be continued". ...... This is rather a lousy translation of al-Ustadh's quotations but I hope it will give you the feeling of the idea" (Listserv posting, 01/02/1999, my emphasis).

This author, while reminding the list members of the Republican legacy of tolerance by quoting Taha, she or he amends this legacy with his or her own opinion by saying that it is an individual member's duty to protect and regulate the freedom of speech, in the sentence with my emphasis. By choosing another quote from Taha about the respectful behaviour an individual should display when speaking on religion to justify this personal opinion, the author still leaves it as a contingency ("this is a lousy translation") and presumably it is open to some interpretation if another member can translate the quote more accurately.

7.7 Who has the authority to speak? Uncertainty without leadership

"[The external activities] seemed to have stopped, you know, when what happened happened (the execution). And that was the one (Taha) who had permission, there wasn't much else for us ...you know he had the permission from all of us to talk and that stopped. Whatever he wanted to say he said it. As he said in the last time that we saw him he said, "Whatever you want to say, we've said it in our books"" (Hanan M., interview transcript, July 2004).

Taha's death shattered those members left behind and symbolically killed the Brotherhood and literally halted all of the Brotherhoods external activities. What Hanan M., a Republican who is also the daughter of one of the founders of the movement and is currently living in
exile in the United Kingdom, describes is that before he died, Taha confirmed the tacit agreement that he should speak for the movement solely, and that the development and expansion of Republican Thought died with him, by his statement “whatever you want to say, we’ve said it in our books”. His statement quite clearly gives the authority to speak to individual Republicans as long as what they say remains faithful to what has been already written by Taha himself. Republican Thought is final in this sense. But for the Republicans that Taha left behind, they lost not only their leader but their only legitimate, public voice despite that voice's accessibility in the books for any Republican to speak on. It was Taha who was solely given permission to speak for the others and to determine the Republicans' ideology, an authority bestowed upon him by the Brotherhood's members. In this sense the circularity of the authority to speak acts as an interpellative power, where Taha's authority comes from the members, the Republican ideology's authority comes from Taha and back again to his authority comes from the others (Althusser 1971: 170-171). Taha's authority to speak also came from his baraka (divine blessing) and as the founder and leader of the Republicans. Like the Sudanese Sufi orders of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a leader of tariqa was made legitimate by his followers since he was perceived to have the mystical and blessed qualities of a holy man, a blessing that is bestowed by God upon but only a few saintly people. The claims of baraka by any brotherhood's shaykh are circular; strengthened by his followers' belief in and testimony to his baraka (Warburg 2003: 6-11).

In my interview with Shafie M., a Republican living in the United States, he reiterates the loss of the movement's one legitimate voice and describes it as something particular to Republican culture:

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30 Interpellation, originally coined by Louis Althusser (1971) in the chapter "Ideology and ideological state apparatus," in Lenin and Philosophy, has been used by many theorists to describe how subjective power is "hailed" into being by ideology that is enacted by others, and how it drives particular outcomes (see for some examples, Verran [2001], Butler [1997], and Warner [1990], among others).

31 In two interviews, however, participants expressed to me a strong sense of frustration with the predominate position of other Republicans, that there is a lack of authority to speak. These participants explained that this was in direct contradiction to Taha's legacy for the movement. One participant said to me that it was for this reason that she discontinued her participation on as-saloon.org, since Taha had taught the Republicans to think for themselves, and to expand on and grow the religious and political ideology that was developed while he was alive. Her opinion appears to reflect one of the two camps within the movement more generally as to how the movement should continue after Taha's death, either as a politically engaged movement or as an insular, non-political one.
"Yeah, you know I don’t respond [to postings on web bulletin boards] and that is also maybe one of the culture, the Republican culture. Some of us Republicans are very active in these forums but most of the Republicans don’t because it is an authority. I don’t feel that I have the [authority] and I don’t want to distort things and I hope I didn’t distort anything from what I said in this interview. So yeah, it is a big responsibility to talk. And even the Brothers and Sisters who write in these forums always indicate that this is their own point of view, it is not the Republican point of view, because they don’t have to, because they don’t know if it is the right thing to say or not. In the past when Ustadh was between us physically there was a reference and people go back, even the people who talk in universities or write things, go through validation, either through Ustadh or a group that Ustadh asked to do things. I remember that Khatim would go to Khartoum University and he would speak in the university and he would come back or Faisal would talk someplace and she would come back and report on what she said. She would be given guidance on ‘ok that is ok’ and ‘that needs to be more verified’. But this is not available right now for somebody to go outside to speak" (Shafie M., interview transcript, February 2005, my emphasis).

What Shafie is explaining and as I have also described is that the movement lost its ideological author and touchstone. This loss and the responsibility around “talk” are compounded when “talk” happens online. Consider the following sentiments from another Brother. During an interview with a member living in exile in the United Kingdom, Saeed M., described to me his reasons for his steadfast refusal to ever commit his opinions textually online since when one is online:

“... [Y]ou in fact present yourself in a bigger image than what you actually are. Because the Internet is the louder voice than any other means of communicating your ideas. ...I feel that I am not actually as big as that. I think that speaking and talking to people in private about what
we think is more comfortable because of this. Not because you are
hiding or you have something to tell people. ...The idea of talking to
people is basically you are used for your place [your status as a
speaker], a place that is very difficult to earn and you better earn it rather
than to claim it without an agreement. It is not only what you have got an
idea it is in what condition [do you hold that idea]. ... [On the Internet]
you simply put yourself into the position of a leader when you are not a
leader” (Saeed M., interview transcript, July 2004).

Saeed’s position towards online deliberation functions in two ways. He views the Internet
primarily as a broadcast medium, and during our interview he made the analogy between
online and broadcast has having similar responsibilities, the onus for online “speakers” is
similar for those who chose to broadcast their opinions on radio or television. As such,
broadcast technologies and their usage is the reserve of leaders, people who have earned
the right to speak, since he believes that he has not earned or been endowed with that
power, he refuses to utilise this medium to express his points of view. But these broadcast
media enact power dually; either the person who uses broadcast already has the power to
speak or presumes to possess that power. What Saeed does not trust about the Internet as
compared with radio or television, is the Internet’s wide accessibility for production, that is
not only is what you say widely accessible, but so too, the very fact that you can get front of
the metaphoric microphone (or a computer screen) to speak is so easy. The Internet is an
exasperating medium for Saeed. Unlike the more utopian opinions which argue that online
technologies empower and give voice to “ordinary” people, Saeed views that the
responsibility of the productive power of the Internet is too great (see for example Howard
2003). Anyone without the genuine power to speak, but who presuposes to have the power to
speak, can broadcast across geographical and political borders to reach untold thousands,
all without the authority to do so. Saeed explained that in regards to a topic as serious as
religious or Republican ideology he did not believe he has the right to speak online because
he refuses to presume that power. For Saeed the Internet is not a medium that lends itself
easily to democratic culture and practice, and if the power of the Internet, which in his
definition is the ability to broadcast your opinion without authority, falls in the wrong hands, it can be detrimental.

7.8 Conclusions

In this chapter I have described Republican online engagement through an examination of their websites alfikra.org and assaloon.org, their audio and written forums as-saloon al-sawti (the online jalsas) and al-kitabi, their listserv as well as their participation in other non-Republican Sudanese forums, namely sudaneseonline.com. In exile and under an official ban, the Republicans are continuing the movement's multimedia efforts to engage Sudanese people in a public dialogue about Republican Thought, and the social and political change they believe is necessary in Sudan. Through the meticulous archiving of Republican materials, both printed and recorded media through digitisation, the Republicans are able to continuously refer back through their intellectual and political lineage directly to Taha, despite the fact that his unifying presence is gone. This seems to have impacted on two areas of Republican practice: how they make opinions legitimate by referencing Taha digitally and proselytising Republican Thought through reprinted digital media.

While the Republicans make the unequivocal public claim that all political activities have ceased since Taha's execution, Republican online activities complicate this claim. I have shown that through a strategic ambivalence towards external activities employed by the movement, both explicitly and implicitly, the movement is able to maintain a certain level of safety and continue the movement as a single entity, all the while claiming not to be a movement.

The Republicans contravene the Sudanese government's and their own ban on political activities by promoting Republican Thought through the alfikra.org website and through participating in non-Republican forums such as sudaneseonline.com, Republicans are able to engage politically as individuals without (too much) risk to the movement. They enact a strategic ambivalence implicitly by remaining silent in the closed forums and thereby deciding to act by not acting. While this has caused fractions to develop in the movement, the survival of the movement is secured.
One of the most intriguing issues to arise from the data is evidence of the Republicans' anxiety over a perceived split between the audio and written forums. This anxiety is perceived as an evacuation of the Republican discursive identity of rational, critical and self-interrogative engagement and further complicates the ambivalence that some Republicans feel towards online deliberations with other Republicans. The anxiety over this split may have larger implications for social research into online normative behaviour of intimate groups (Watt, Lea, and Spears 2002).

A most striking result to emerge from the data is the suggestion that a new, endogenous model of democracy is developing online at least among Sudanese exiles. In the context of online Sudanese forums, the pre-existing, liberal and Western (i.e. secular) models of democracy cannot be superimposed online and counterpublic (Warner 2002) models of democratic culture are emerging from a volatile and chaotic written deliberative atmosphere where online forums must go through iterations of extreme and violent deliberations to swing back and settle on a moderate position that is accommodating to all political opinions. The experience of Sudanese deliberative democratic culture on discussion forums like sudaneseonline.com also seem to indicate towards radical democratic theory's contention that difference—in terms of conflicts of interest, political affiliation, religious practice, regional, ethnic and linguistic identities—is not bracketed online and is essential to the robustness of the debate.
“Contrary to the illusion that media only ‘mediate’ what goes on in the rest of society, the media’s representational power is one of society’s main forces in its own right. From this perspective, media power (direct control over the means of media production) is an increasingly central dimension of power in contemporary societies. It follows that, as with most forms of power, media power is not generally made explicit by those who benefit from it: the media. No wonder it is rarely the direct subject of public debate”.


It is 7:43 on a typical New York City morning in January: the jagged teeth of skyscrapers smile on a cloudless cobalt sky, pedestrians dart to the clear spaces in the street between black, sloshy puddles and veering cars, and the combined acrid smell of exhaust fumes, roasted nuts and garbage fill the chilly air. From the crowded Chinatown corner of Lafayette and Canal, looking down the street you can just make out the red doors of the old firehouse where the Democracy Now! studio is housed. It is little more than 15 minutes to air time and at 8 am another day’s almost simultaneous television, radio and Web broadcast will cover any number of issues forgotten by America’s mainstream media. Today’s topic is the latest media scandal—government propaganda in prepackaged video releases aired as news by
several commercial outlets. Walking through the station house's red door, the front office—after 9 am will be full of Democracy Now! employees and even more volunteers—is now abandoned except for the voices drifting in from the chaos of the studio upstairs. The office's walls are plastered with woodblock and stencilled images printed on large sheets of newsprint, political posters announcing rallies or underground music happenings, with an aesthetic made popular by those who inhabit the "alternative" youth subcultures in virtually any large city, from London to Chicago to Tokyo. The desks and tables are piled with papers, boxes, t-shirts emblazoned the Democracy Now! logo—the Statue of Liberty holding a microphone—and several coffee mugs filled with pens or yesterday's half-finished coffee.

Up the short set of stairs leading to the show's production space, at only five minutes to airtime, the already cramped studio appears smaller with seven people buzzing around each other, the video equipment, and the half-dozen monitors and laptops. One producer yells at another, "Where the fuck is my tape?" which prompts her to frantically sift through a small pile of digital video cassettes until she finds the right one and hands it over to her colleague. Any tension between the producers quickly dissipates; it is understood that this is part of what it takes to make a broadcast on time and well produced, and it's nothing personal. A debate ensues with only two minutes before broadcast whether or not to change the order of the tapes, it's decided that yes the change will be made and a producer quickly re-edits the sequence of images with a few seconds to spare before they are broadcast.

While the producers are busy in front of the video monitors, today's guest, a senior analyst from the media reform organisation Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), lets himself into the recording studio and shakes hands with the cameraman.

Behind the glass that looks onto the relative calm of the recording studio, Amy Goodman, the programme's founder, host and executive producer, sits at a round, polished table going through the day's headlines and stories. With the camera and microphone in

32 Air and webpost date 11 January 2005. Democracy Now! shows typically spend the first ten minutes covering the headline news, with the remaining 50 minutes dedicated to three topics. This day's show placed a spotlight on commercial media and featured four stories including coverage of the recent firings of four journalists at CBS's 60 Minutes for their story on President Bush's military record; a story on the Bush Administration's distribution of prepackaged video releases sent to the news media as news; a conservative journalist's move from CNN to MSNBC; and the release of the four British detainees from the Guantanamo Bay US military prison. The show can be downloaded as an MP3 or the transcript read at: www.democracynow.org by searching the archive for January 11, 2005.
place, the guest now comfortably seated opposite her, the show’s theme music is cued,
Amy looks up to the camera and says "From Pacifica Radio, this is Democracy Now!".

In this chapter on the second group under study, I introduce the short history of
Democracy Now!, the New York City-based independent\textsuperscript{33}, multimedia news programme
and how the programme fits into a larger movement of media reform and activism in the
United States precipitated by both the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and the 1999 "Battle
for Seattle" antiglobalisation protests against the World Trade Organization that spawned a
new movement of web-based, do-it-yourself (DIY) journalism. The purpose of this chapter is
to demonstrate and analyse Democracy Now!’s ideological framing of journalism’s role in
American democracy in the discourse of Amy Goodman and other Democracy Now!
producers, and the online and offline strategies that the programme utilises to do this.
Democracy Now! has taken a strategic position in regards to online journalism and e-
democracy, where they are building alliances with online activist groups and bloggers to
create their own iteration of online news while still maintaining broadcast as their core
medium.

I cannot exhaustively explain the current, complex and very fraught media
environment in the United States, but I will attempt to present in brief the commercialisation
of American media, which has spurred the recent and rapid trend of media conglomeration
of the past 10 years in order to provide a better understanding of the current media reform
movement that Democracy Now! is a part of. Within this brief description, I focus
consciously on the commercialisation of broadcast media for two reasons: Democracy Now!
is primarily a radio and television programme and, as I will show, they are ambivalent about
their online presence and because Goodman’s own critique of corporate media is centred
primarily on broadcast. In the second half of the chapter, through an analysis of its website,

\textsuperscript{33} The term “independent media” is problematic and cannot be assumed. Although I do not have the room to go
into all of the debates over the meaning of the word, I can provide a bit of context for it within the American
media system and how it is used by Amy Goodman and others at Democracy Now!. Generally independent
media means that a given media organisation or programme is non-commercial, does not generate its
revenues from advertising, and is not part of a larger media conglomerate or group. Within the US context, and
especially how it is used by Goodman, it is believed that such types of non-commercial media are more
concerned with producing media that serves a public interest rather than following a corporate agenda because
they are not beholden to shareholders or advertisers. It does not necessarily mean that the productions of
independent media are, therefore, unbiased or independent of a particular viewpoint. As I will show later in this
chapter, however, Goodman endows the term to mean both non-commercial and “independent” of bias towards
the government and corporate America, and she conflates her own Left ideology with independence from bias.
www.democracynow.org, its employment of online distribution technologies, as well as interviews with Amy Goodman and her recent, best selling book that critiques American commercial media, I aim to demonstrate how Democracy Now! maintains a liberal democratic model for news journalism rather than the more radical model that they espouse. I also hope to show some of the issues that arise for the news programme that is rooted in a broadcast model when it becomes a multimedia organisation, especially online. Finally I aim to connect the ideology for journalism that Democracy Now! holds, primarily the idea that media should be a space for a diversity of voices and political positions, and how this relates to its struggle to identify itself online.

8.1 Independent media in the age of conglomeration

8.1.1 Beginnings

It is often in the crucible of a catastrophic event, such as a war, or a significant political situation, like an historic election, that a news organisation can make its mark. The US-based Cable News Network (CNN), for instance, was in business for almost 10 years before it gained considerable credibility (and revenues) with its coverage of Tiananmen Square in 1989, and most significantly for its round-the-clock coverage over two months from Baghdad during the First Gulf War in 1991—unprecedented at the time—which pushed the news organisation into a central position as a news source of record (Flourney and Stewart 1997: 1-7; Vincent 1992: 181). The Independent Media Centers (IMC) and the website Indymedia (www.indymedia.org), a grouping of autonomous, decentralised, volunteer media outlets, got their start in November 1999 when antiglobalisation activists, frustrated with previous media coverage of their movement, developed the website to provide alternative coverage of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meetings held in Seattle. Since its founding, Indymedia has mushroomed in the (global) antiglobalisation foment to cover similar events, particularly from dissenting, anarchist and grassroots points of view.

34 While IMC and Indymedia were referred to interchangeably during interviews, for simplicity’s sake in this chapter I will refer to the organisation as Indymedia.
Indymedia\textsuperscript{35} is now considered on the vanguard of the media reform and media DIY movements, at least in the United States (Downing 2003: 243, 246).

In many respects the American independent news organisation Democracy Now! has had a similar naissance. Founded to cover the run-up to the 1996 American Presidential elections (during which Bill Clinton won his second term) by veteran independent radio and print journalists Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez\textsuperscript{36}, Democracy Now! began its life on independent Pacifica Radio’s New York City affiliate WBAI. From its beginnings as the only daily election show in the United States, the programme has touted itself as an independent, progressive and advocacy news programme. Democracy Now! says it covers stories that the corporate and mainstream media will not cover from a perspective rarely encountered in mainstream media by using “ordinary” people and unofficial or Left-leaning experts who are rarely or never heard in most broadcast media (Goodman and Goodman 2004: 6-7).

The morning of 11 September 2001 became one of the defining moments for the small programme. The firehouse studios are close to the Twin Towers site in Lower Manhattan and just after a few minutes into the show’s broadcast at eight that morning the news broke in the station that one of the towers had been hit by a commercial airliner. Goodman interrupted the regular programming to cover the breaking news. When the second tower was hit, she remained on air for eight hours that day, expanding coverage from the programme’s regular one hour show (Ratner 2005: 27). After the collapse of the towers, the police cordoned off the lower region of Manhattan, which forced Goodman and the small crew to sleep in the studio for three days to cover events. Democracy Now! became one of the only regularly broadcast shows within the quarantined area surrounding the disaster and its feeds were picked up by other Pacifica stations across the US, which instantly expanded their listenership. Within that same week, on 14 September, Democracy Now! technicians positioned a television camera focused on Goodman’s broadcasting desk and debuted its transition to a multimedia news organisation. Throughout its coverage of the 11 September disaster and its aftermath, the show interviewed survivors, family members of...

\textsuperscript{35} Within the context of this thesis I do not have the room to critically analyse Indymedia, its production model, the ideological framing of its stories or the dynamics that influence which Indymedia stories take precedence on its umbrella website. These issues most certainly need to be addressed and some scholars who are examining Indymedia more critically are Jenny Pickerill (2004), Vinita Agarwal (2005), and Ted Coopman (2005).

\textsuperscript{36} All the names of Democracy Now! employees have been changed except for those journalists that report on the show (and thus their names are publicly accessible), such as Amy Goodman and Juan Gonzalez.
the deceased, and rescue and military personnel who were opposed to the calls for military retaliation in Afghanistan. These voices of dissent were not covered in the mainstream media during the hysteria immediately following the attack (Goodman and Goodman 2004: 16; Ratner 2005: 27).

In the nine years since its beginnings, the radio programme has grown from a four-person operation broadcasting from a small studio to 25 Pacifica affiliates, to a media organisation that employs 27 full- and part-time producers, outreach and volunteer coordinators, an archivist, an accountant and a fundraiser, and broadcasts on television, radio and the Web to over 420 affiliates in the United States, Canada and Europe. Its website, www.democracynow.org, contains a searchable and free archive of the show's broadcasts (television and radio) that date back to January 2002, as well as show transcripts, and as of August 2005, logged 50,000 hits per day and was ranked among the top 20 podcasts on iTunes (Ratner 2005: 27, itunes.com). A new blog, counterrecruiter.org, from the New York chapter of Indymedia on the emerging anti-recruitment movement was developed by one of the producers, Steve R. in May 2005 and is linked from the Democracy Now! homepage. I will discuss the blog in detail later in this chapter. Also featured on the home page are Democracy Now! exclusive interviews with big names in the Left academic and media world including Noam Chomsky and Robert Fisk.

The website (figure 8.1) contains an online store and an online donation facility and serves as a significant fundraising vehicle for the programme. Democracy Now! says one of the ways it maintains its independence is by refusing any corporate or government sponsorship, declining advertising of any kind and solely relying on donations from its audience, or by receiving foundation grants to meet its $1.8 million annual operating budget. In addition to raising operational funds, Amy Goodman and the programme help to raise another $2 million annually that goes to support the Pacifica network through quarterly fundraising drives and through tours to promote her book Exception to the Rulers (Ratner 2005: 30). One of the programme's most successful audience-supported funding drives was the 2004 Christmas campaign which was spurred primarily by the November 2004 Presidential election results that gave President Bush his second term and motivated

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37 As of October 2005 the blog was removed from the Democracy Now! homepage but the blog is still in operation.
Democracy Now! supporters to help fund independent Left media. One Democracy Now! employee told me that for days after the election, some distraught viewers phoned in and through tears asked Democracy Now! staff what viewers can do to change things. Others emboldened by the election results phoned in an unprecedented level of donations to the programme.

8.1.2 The Federal Communications Commission and media monopolies

During the decade that Democracy Now! has grown, the American media and political landscape has changed dramatically. In the same year that Democracy Now! got its start in radio, the 1996 Telecommunications Act was passed that superseded the Communications Act of 1934, which had regulated media ownership and enforced rules for some public
service provision by commercial media that use the publicly owned broadcast spectrum. Due to the Act, coupled with the corporate-friendly Clinton and Bush Administrations' media deregulation policies, mainstream corporate media has significantly tightened its grip on markets across the United States (and overseas markets, as corporate media conglomerates are globalised) and have commodified news media to such a degree that audiences and media reform activists describe the media system being in a crisis.

Media analyst Robert McChesney contends that this crisis has been fuelled by the pro-corporate media Federal Communications Commission (FCC)'s easing of the anti-monopoly legislation under the 1996 Act which has led to a rapid, corporate consolidation of mainstream media (McChesney 1999: 74 - 77). The scarce and narrow broadcast spectrum is a public commodity, regulated by the US government through the FCC. Under the 1934 Act the FCC was originally established. All users of the spectrum access it free of charge and in exchange for its free use, users are required to dedicate a certain length of air time to public service programming as well as being regulated in terms of ownership, such as how many stations one network can own or limits on cross-media ownership.

In his exhaustive examination of the history of corporate control of the American media system, of which he is specifically concerned with the broadcast media, McChesney (1999) shows that during most of the twentieth century the present shape of US media has resulted from a complex of corporate interests influencing government policy through its control of the government's media regulatory bodies. He argues that this has led to a media system controlled by monopolies and corporate conglomerates that are able to maintain their power, due to a mutual collusion with government at the expense of any democratic public engagement with how communications resources, namely the publicly owned broadcast spectrum, should be regulated. Politicians know that their control of news through a compliant media that is susceptible to its spin, through which they gain access to (and influence on) public opinion, is far more influential than the money that media corporations splash out to politicians (65). This is hardly the fourth estate watchdog model American mainstream media purports itself to be. It is also through the intensely commercial media that the American media model differs from, say, the British media model of public service. While the British public service model has significantly changed with its own deregulation and commercialisation, there is still apparent a semblance of serving the
public interest in the quality of programming content. A good example of a key difference between the commercial and the public service models can be seen in how media regulation is discussed in the media in both countries. In the US commercial model there is virtually no discussion about media regulation in the media outlets that are most affected by government regulation (or really deregulation), yet in the British public service model, debates about the license fee, the BBC Charter and other media regulations continue to be visible issues that are covered by the British news media, including the BBC itself. Often in the American mainstream media, media critics such as McChesney note, content is solely determined by the market and bottom line pressures, and not by a higher philosophical purpose of democratic civic engagement or education. The role of the media in American society or how it should be regulated is rarely ever discussed by the American mainstream news media. Through his description of the history of the Communications Act of 1934 and the wrangles over the deployment of early radio between American educators and corporate broadcasters, McChesney shows that the model of advertising-led media won out to the public service model (see Chapter 4: “Educators and the battle for control of US broadcasting, 1928-35” in McChesney 1999). Any early democratic potential of radio or television was squandered long ago in 1934, when educators lost their battle with the commercialisation of radio under the 1934 Act (17).

Over the past decade there has been a rapid concentration of media ownership into a few corporations that through the grace of deregulation, have bought up properties across media in most markets. Media deregulation has relaxed ownership rules and eliminated the mandate that broadcasters devote 5 percent of their programming time to news and public service (Hallin 1996: 249). The relaxation of ownership rules has driven the rapid growth of media conglomerates since 1996, as corporations that are always looking to improve returns for shareholders see corporate conglomerations as a way to ameliorate risk by absorbing the competition, to save large amounts of revenue by streamlining and downsizing operations, and to maximise returns on investment by cross-branding in the production of content. McChesney notes that due to the 1996 media deregulations, six firms now own 80 percent of the cable networks and seven companies control 75 percent of the individual channels and programming (18). In radio the change was even more dramatic after the 1996 Act, where in each of the top 30 radio markets a single firm owned 40 percent...
of radio revenues (75). Ben Bagdikian, in *The New Media Monopoly*, an almost completely revamped 2004 version of his classic *The Media Monopoly* (1984) shows that after 1996 the five media behemoths operating in the United States are now ranked among the world’s 500 largest corporations (2004: 10). McChesney contends (as do many other media critics, see for a few of many examples: McNair (2000), Bagdikian (1996, 2004), Schiller (1996), Blumler and Gurevitch (1995), and Curran and Seaton (1985)) that conglomerate media control makes competition, media diversity, and any public service element to media, or even the prospect of public debate, impossible.

During the last few years, this trend of conglomeration and market control has accelerated under the FCC leadership of Michael K. Powell, son of former US Secretary of State Colin Powell, and who subsequently resigned in March 2005 after failing to pass hotly contested FCC legislation. If it had been successful, his proposed controversial legislation would have been the most favourable to corporate media in the history of the FCC, but it was ultimately struck down in January 2005. The draft legislation allowed a single broadcasting network to own stations that reached 45 percent of American households, and would have changed ownership rules to allow a single media company to own a newspaper, up to three television and up to eight radio stations, and a cable system within a single market (McChesney and Nichols 2003: 11; McChesney and Nichols 2004: 370). Since the early days of broadcasting in the United States, lobbyists working for the corporate broadcasters have exerted their influence and control over public debates concerning broadcast and media policy (regulated by the FCC) to such an extent that until recently there has been virtually no public deliberations on the issues at all; debates on policy occurred within Congress and were rarely covered in the mainstream media. One exception to this may be a series of "unofficial" FCC public hearings in 2003, organised by two dissenting FCC commissioners, Jonathan Adelstein and Michael Copps, with the help of grassroots media activists around the country who provided venues and publicity for the events. The three hearings were held New York, Phoenix and Atlanta in the run-up to the FCC vote on the new rules and allowed members of the public the rare chance to testify against the proposed changes. As a result of the hearings (and their coverage by alternative media) Congress members and the FCC received over 3 million phone calls, letters and emails against the proposals. Despite the overwhelming public response against further
media deregulation, the remaining three FCC commissioners voted in the changes in June 2003, only for some of the changes to be overruled by Congress that July, and a Supreme Court stay put against their implementation in September (Goodman and Goodman 2004: 304-309). During most of 2004 the issue was debated in Congress and appeals to have the stay lifted were eventually withdrawn by FCC in late January 2005 (Ahrens 2005).

This monopoly of the airwaves (and virtually all other media) has had a detrimental effect on the quality of media content and knock-on effects on the state of democracy in the United States, according to media reform advocates such as McChesney and Democracy Now!'s Amy Goodman. Media sociologist Brian McNair while describing the crisis of commercialised media in Britain could have easily been describing the well-established American media crisis where intense commercial pressures have caused journalists to compromise information for entertainment ("infotainment") in the ever-demanding drive to capture ratings (McNair 2000: 2-8). The force behind this ratings drive is the reliance on advertising revenues for media companies to make profits and has compromised content so that it is light, inoffensive, uncontroversial fare with a mass appeal. Indeed he even summons the pejorative adjective "Americanised" to describe the current political news content in Britain. Back in the United States, the pressures to produce high returns for shareholders means that mainstream media corporations are loathe to produce diverse and controversial content for multiple (as opposed to "mass") audiences because this would splinter the large marketing bases sold to advertisers (Bagdikian 2004: 260).

This crisis around anaemic or blatantly biased news content has led to a distrust of mainstream media among some American audiences, and they are turning to online alternative or foreign media for news information since it is perceived to be less biased (or in the case of alternative media, biased in the direction of the audience), more accurate and fairer to all sides. Alternative media within the context of the American media system are generally considered to be media that is non-commercial, "oppositional (counter-hegemonic) in intent, having social change at their heart", and are increasingly dominated by blogs that have come to be sources of reference (Atton 2002: 19). Many scholarly examinations of alternative media have struggled to develop an accurate and adequate definition of "alternative media". For describing Democracy Now! and other Left American media, I will use John Downing's definition where alternative media should be considered as "politically
dissident media that offer radical alternatives to mainstream media" (1995: 240; quoted in Meikle 2002: 60). While foreign media are not necessarily "alternative" strictly according to Downing’s definition, when considered within the context of American media, they are an alternative to a media system that is considered increasingly to be biased towards the American government and corporations. The Guardian's website The Guardian Unlimited (guardian.co.uk), for example, clocked its most unique visitors, at 1.3 million, ever in its history during January 2003, in the lead up to the American and British invasion of Iraq, with close to half of the hits, or 49 percent, originating from the United States (Kahney 2003). A poll taken after the 2004 Presidential elections cited that reforming the media was the second most important issue for progressives to address in 2005, after reforming the electoral system and before pulling troops out of Iraq (McChesney, Nichols, and Scott 2005). Another recent poll report on American attitudes on the state of the media conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press showed that trust in American media is at an all time low since the mid-1980s. The poll reported that more than 70 percent of respondents say that the media favour one side over another and do not treat all sides fairly, and 60 percent of respondents said the media are politically biased (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2005). Among American heavy broadband users, furthermore, 71 percent go online to gather news information on a daily basis, and 18 percent of those users visit the websites of non-traditional, online news sources every day (Horrigan 2006: 9-13).

The widespread mistrust and frustration with mainstream media has not only coincided with the corporate media tightening of news content but also has been shaped and accelerated in large part by a dearth of news coverage that depicts dissenting perspectives on the wars on terror and in Iraq, and the abysmal mainstream coverage of the Presidential elections of 2000 and 2004. Both elections were considered (and shown) to be permeated with widespread corruption resulting in mass disenfranchisement of voters in key states and the mainstream media have been criticised, especially in the 2004 elections, for not investigating the claims of fraud (Conyers 2005; Miller 2005). Since Democracy Now!’s broadcast programmes and website are often framed by the larger American discourse on the wars, in the following I will focus on war reporting of the Iraq War and the occupation of Iraq by American and British forces.
While the plagiarism and falsified news reports scandals have rocked reputable media outlets such as the *New York Times* and *The New Republic* to the core of their journalistic practice, the most damaging scandal to their reputations has been their coverage of the Iraq War. In 2004 both publications printed apologies to their readers for what they described as their uncritical and unbalanced war coverage, and admitted that they had relied solely on official White House and military sources as well as US military troop-embedded media dispatches to report stories on the war. A critical and public self-reflection on the failures of their journalistic practices, especially in their coverage of the events leading up to the Iraq War, and the acknowledgement that the work published by them was little more than "access journalism" was unprecedented. In fact both publications admitted they had been "duped" by the White House's spinning of the issue of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq and that their failure to recognise how they were manipulated came down to wanting to continue their access to official sources. These apologies followed earlier ones made by the *Washington Post* and CNN in October 2003 (Kurtz 2004). The Iraq War has been such a unifying issue for media critics and disaffected audiences alike that Ben Bagdikian wrote a new chapter dedicated to US media coverage of the Iraq War in the 2004 revised edition of the *Media Monopoly* (see Chapter Four: "(Not) All the News That's Fit to Print") and Todd Gitlin discusses the media coverage of the Iraq War in the rewritten preface of the 2003 edition of his classic research on mass media and the American New Left, *The Whole World is Watching* (2003).

Members of the public who have grown increasingly frustrated by mainstream media and who are not necessarily trained journalists themselves have turned to DIY media, especially online, which has been made easier and more possible in the past few years with Web technologies such as blogging software (Moveable Type, Slash) or free sites (blogger.com, livejournal.com). There are strong alliances being built between media reform activists, antiglobalisation and antiwar activists such as Indymedia, the women's peace movement Code Pink and Moveon.org that are all converging through the space opened by alternative media outlets. At the same time this sense of frustration has also enabled independent media organisations, such as Democracy Now!, to gain more strength and momentum because those who are not producing their own media are turning to alternative media to either supplement or replace news information from the mainstream media.
Democracy Now! is also taking part, through key alliances with media activists, grassroots media groups and the antiwar movement, in a larger trend of dissention which is, as one Democracy Now! employee described to me helping to build a "parallel media system" (Phil H., interview transcript, March 2005). In 2003, for example, Democracy Now! hired an organiser who worked for local community organisations to lobby National Public Radio and local community radio and television stations to pick up the programme, this activist strategy has worked, having picked up 200 additional stations since being hired (Ratner 2005: 30). Democracy Now!'s accelerated success in recruiting new stations has been possible in large part by adopting an activist model of collaboration. It is through the activist model too that Democracy Now! produces news media with one of the programme's most important allies, Indymedia.

8.1.3 “The biggest independent media collaboration”

While there has long existed an independent media in the United States on radio, in video and in print, it has been primarily underground due to limited resources and has remained largely "ghettoised" with small audiences and readership (Downing 1984). Through the rise of online DIY media groups, the blogosphere and Open Source Internet technology, however, alternative media now has unprecedented reach and is beginning to influence public opinion. The most obvious influence on public opinion has been the growing criticism of mainstream media which was started by groups like Indymedia and has forced (some) commercial media to re-examine its own values. In its May 2004 apology to its readers, the New York Times listed a blow-by-blow account of all of the stories where it "got it wrong" and the apology was seen as a direct response to the criticisms of its coverage in alternative media.

Online alternative media, greatly strengthened by its growing acceptance and legitimisation by web users, are also positioned to scrutinise mainstream media and are breaking stories on the media industry itself (Wall 2005). Bloggers on both the Left and the Right have broken many stories on media corruption in the last few years. Left-leaning bloggers, for instance, broke the story of the White House reporter, Jeff Gannon (his real name is James Guckert), whose journalism credentials were falsified, whose pay cheque came from the Republican Party and, who, as a Republican plant at the White House press
briefings, asked the Bush Administration soft-ball questions on the Iraq War. Conservative bloggers scrutinised mainstream news reports by CBS’ Dan Rather on his unsubstantiated story of Bush’s unfulfilled National Guard service and CNN’s Eason Jordan’s unverified report on American troops targeting journalists in Iraq. The exposures by Right-wing bloggers forced both Rather and Jordan to resign their posts (Harris 2005).

What is most significant about this online trend of DIY journalism and its alliance with other alternative media is that it is challenging the mainstream media’s claims to professionalism and propriety over the production of news information. Democracy Now! is breaking news stories that are being picked up by mainstream media news outlets. One producer explained that Democracy Now! was the first programme to expose a link between White House officials and the outing of CIA operative Valerie Plame when they broadcast a speech by her husband, ex-US Ambassador to Iraq Joseph Wilson, alleging that Vice-President Dick Cheney and Karl Rove had leaked his wife’s name to reporters. This story was picked up by mainstream journalists on the same day that Democracy Now! aired it.

One of the most significant examples of Democracy Now! breaking a story that becomes national news happened in March 2004, with the ousting of the Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide during the coup supported by the US Marines and his alleged kidnap (along with his wife Mildred and his brother-in-law) by US forces to the Central African Republic.

Through its collaborations with other independent media organisations, and its alliances with progressive and dissenting political movements, such as the antiwar and antiglobalisation movements, Democracy Now! claims to be the largest independent media collaboration presently working in the United States. It describes its collaborations in terms of cooperatively providing content, cross-linking or coproductions with public access cable television activists Free Speech TV and Deep Dish TV, and Pacifica Radio. Online the collaborations are not as apparent as they are through broadcast since coordination

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38 The broadcast, aired 16 September 2003, can be downloaded from the Democracy Now! archive at www.democracynow.org/index.pl?issue=20030916. At a White House press briefing the same day of the Democracy Now! broadcast, a reporter asked spokesman Scott McClellan about the connection, which he flatly denied. This can be viewed in the Democracy Now! archive for 17 September 2003, at http://www.democracynow.org/index.pl?issue=20030917.

39 As of August 2005, a record of Democracy Now!’s reporting of this story can be found in a link on the front page of democracynow.org or by searching the site’s archives.
between groups tends to be through the utilisation of Open Source software or archiving technologies. The cooperative relationships, for instance, with Real Networks (makers of Real Audio), archive.org, and BitTorrent\(^{40}\) have fundamentally helped the online distribution capabilities of democracynow.org.

The programme’s most significant collaboration with an online media group is with Indymedia. The relationship between the two groups started at the beginning of Indymedia, in Seattle during the WTO protests, when Democracy Now! broadcast live from the scene and produced coverage for its website. Of the seven producers that have been hired in the past few years, four come from Indymedia. In her book *Exception to the Rulers* Goodman dedicates close to an entire chapter ("Conclusion: Free the Media") to the collaboration between Indymedia and Democracy Now!, indicating that this alliance has been most productive for Democracy Now! and represents a crossover for the programme from “advocacy” to “grassroots” journalism through the relationship. In fact Goodman claims that true advocacy journalism can only be possible with the DIY journalism model perfected by Indymedia (Goodman and Goodman 2004: 314). It is also through these strategic alliances with media activists, and especially with Indymedia, that Democracy Now! is able to have a more definitive online presence because they are able to exploit the collective resources of the entire movement to have a much broader reach than through their programme, either on radio, television or the website, alone.

Phil H., a Web and network administrator for Democracy Now! came to the programme from Indymedia, where he still volunteers his technical labour. He explained the organisational differences between the two groups:

“I guess the fundamental difference is that Democracy Now! is a nonprofit with a head and employees and it pays my rent and in exchange for that I work for them. Whereas Indymedia no one makes me do anything if I’m not interested. I have a lot more freedom to poke my nose into the editorial side of the organisation if I feel like it. But it’s a no-budget operation basically. But on the other hand what Indymedia’s been able to create with

\(^{40}\) BitTorrent is available for download at: www.bittorrent.com. On the website’s ‘Introduction’ page, the authors explain that BitTorrent ‘is a free speech tool’.
no budget is really quite amazing. We're almost building parallel systems of media. So even if the New York Times never notices, I think large numbers of people are noticing. Which is what we want, we don't want to be the Times” (Phil H., interview transcript March 2005).

While both organisations are independent, Democracy Now! benefits from the collaborative relationship with Indymedia (especially the New York City group) not only by its broadened resources but also by its radicalism. Democracy Now! editorial decisions are made only by the programme's producers and while audience input may influence some of those decisions, audience members themselves cannot produce or edit Democracy Now! programmes or website content. This is in contrast with grassroots groups such as Indymedia where audience members can and do produce their own stories. Through collaborations with more radical media groups, however, Democracy Now! can stake a claim in that radicalism while actually engaging in more traditional media practices for their own programme. Through this collaborative effort both groups form two sides of one coin. This is for practical reasons, in order to produce the quality of work and to maintain stability, Democracy Now! must adopt a less radical model of organisation. But it does flow both ways, through productive relationships with less radical media, Indymedia is also able to reach more traditional audiences and break out of its own “alternative ghetto” (Atton 2002: 33-35).

These very recent trends of the past five years in alternative media is reshaping the American media environment into polarised, splintered and partisan media spheres which are giving rise and legitimacy to “advocacy journalism”. Democracy Now! claims to be a pioneer of this new journalism trend but as I will show in the following section the programme's website, this claim only extends to its broadcast productions.

8.2 Broadcast media online: Democracy Now!'s website

So what does all of this have to do with online journalism and e-democracy? In the following sections I aim to show that within the context of alternative media in a commercialised environment, Democracy Now! maintains a liberal democratic model for journalism in
broadcast but is able to radicalise its model online through strategic alliances with online media activists and through online distribution methods. By building online networks Democracy Now! is able to engage in grassroots journalism and this is achieved not through its website but through productive relationships with more radical media groups such as Indymedia, its collaborations with the open source communities, and by using bloggers and activists as sources for perspectives on news stories.

8.2.1 Deciding whether to be a news site or a site about a television show

The first iteration of the Democracy Now! website went live in September 1999 as a spin-out site independent of the Pacifica Radio (pacific.org) website, though it was linked from the Pacifica homepage. Before the launch the programme had its own web channel on pacifica.org.

![Figure 8.2 Entry page, www.democracynow.org, 2000 (Source: archive.org)](image-url)
Through the years democracynow.org (figure 8.2) has grown along with the programme itself, and as more financial and labour resources have become available, more features have been added and the site’s software backbone has been made more robust incrementally. Through all of these iterations, too, the programme has also changed the way in which it frames itself ideologically online. These changes occurred quite abruptly and coincided with the addition of television broadcasts.

In this way, Democracy Now! played down its own biases as the programme gained a much larger audience base through its television broadcasts and its increased listenership after September 2001, and as the programme’s credibility increased as a daily news source. The website itself has had to reflect this legitimacy and to take the programme out of its own “alternative ghetto” (Atton 2002).

Until September 2001, for instance, the programme’s website carried Photoshopped images of Bush, Cheney and Gore sporting crowns that were linked to special reports on the politicians’ intimate ties with oil wealth (figure 8.3). Soon after September 2001, these types of images were removed from the website and a less ideologically framed visual design was created for the site. These changes coincide with the programme’s move to include television broadcasting in the same month.

![Figure 8.3](image.png)

Figure 8.3  Detail from entry page, 2001. .gif image linked to in-depth story on politicians’ personal financial links to oil corporations. (Source: archive.org)

Steve R., a Democracy Now! producer and an Indymedia media activist was surprised to learn how the Democracy Now! website has changed its framing since 2001 and said:

“For me I just think that we should let the journalism and the stories speak for themselves. I feel you don’t need to make fun of the President in that way and there are far more effective ways of offering critiques of his policies. I think for the website [as] I think with the show as a whole, we
don't want to turn off listeners before they have a chance to listen to us. So I think we do...I mean the show is structured in a way that a listener of NPR [National Public Radio] would feel somewhat familiar with our format, with the headlines at the top of the show and broken into segments. So I think we do run a creative model that brings in new listeners that might not traditionally, that might not go to Indymedia site or not pick up the Indypendent" (Steve R., interview transcript, August 2005).

Democracynow.org is not, however, a separate media venture into online journalism for the programme and functions primarily as a digital archive and as an outreach tool for the organisation. The website's lack of interaction on all levels—there are no bulletin boards for viewer or listener comments, no visible interaction between producers and audience members or between audience members themselves—is said by most Democracy Now! producers to be due to a lack of labour resources. Meeting the demands of maintaining and monitoring a fully interactive news site is beyond the scope of their primary productive work in broadcast. Steve R., however, explained that there are other reasons why democracynow.org lacks audience interaction:

“I think when people go to the Democracy Now! website their main goal is to just get the programme. ... Well we don't use the website to communicate back and forth with listeners. But we do have on the website areas where listeners can give a story idea or volunteer or email us about the show, I mean I check the listener email several times a day. So I'll communicate with listeners that way but we've never had a public forum on the site, a bulletin board or a way that listeners could ...I don't think it really fits into the ...I don't think it's appropriate for Democracy Now!” (Steve R., interview transcript, August 2005).

The lack of this level of interactivity on democracynow.org reaffirms the editorial productive model that Democracy Now! follows which are the same practices of traditional, mainstream media, where media acts a "representative" or mediator, and do not employ the grassroots
or radical online production models of other alternative media. Furthermore, their use of Internet technologies is closely linked to the broadcast model, a model that reflects a one-to-many, one-way distribution system. They disrupt this model in a less visible way, however, by using online, Open Source distribution technologies, such as BitTorrent, to widely distribute their programming and to encourage other independent stations to download and broadcast their programme at no charge to those who reuse the programmes.

The programme producers have realised very keenly the importance and relevance of their online presence and it is becoming more central to reaching audiences beyond what even broadcast media can reach and their website is seen to be tied to the programme's growth. Democracy Now! has hired a part-time consultant with a strong background in site development for media organisations and while work on changes have been slow, some new features have been added to keep up with newer technologies that other outlets in the mainstream are using, such as blogs, podcasting and as well as making some stories (the headline stories) available in Spanish, the second language spoken in the United States.

8.2.2 Blogging

Democracy Now! has worked around some of this lack in interactivity by linking to blogs that provide interaction and feedback, and are independent pet projects of individual Democracy Now! producers. One in particular which is linked on the entry page of democracy.org is counterrecruiter.net, a blog developed and maintained by Steve R., who is also an Indymedia activist. Steve and Francesca E., another Democracy Now! producer, both came to Democracy Now! from Indymedia and in their free time continue to work with the media activist organisation by publishing a newspaper, The Indypendent, that is distributed throughout New York City (and available online), and by continuing to work in online production. The blog itself is an Indymedia (New York City) project, started in May 2005 and was founded to document the burgeoning anti-military recruitment movement in the United States that forms part of the larger antiwar movement. The highlighting of this blog on the front page helps to further contextualise democracynow.org within the politics of the Iraq War as well as to link with American grassroots movements.

The reliance on bloggers as a central news source is another way that Democracy Now! gives voice to unconventional news sources and contrasts sharply against mainstream
media's reliance on “official” sources. Its almost daily use of bloggers, especially bloggers who have gained legitimacy among the online political Left, as sources for stories or who provide commentary and background on issues differs from the mainstream media’s dependence on established news sources. In an August 2005 broadcast on the death of Saudi King Fahd, for instance, As’ad Abu Khalil, a political science professor and the blogger of Angry Arab Media Service (angryarab.blogspot.com) featured as the only source to comment on King Fahd’s death and its impact on Saudi politics. In another story, this one on the controversial appointment of John Bolton as the US’ Ambassador to the United Nations, Democracy Now! featured Steven Clemons a journalist and blogger who runs thewashingtonnote.com, to comment on Bolton’s career. In addition to independent bloggers, other alternative or Left news websites, such as Raw Story (rawstory.com) and Salon (salon.com) are frequently quoted along with more traditionally mainstream media outlets, both national and international, such as the Wall Street Journal, the New Yorker magazine, Israel’s Ha’aretz, the UK’s The Guardian and The Independent.

8.2.3 Special reports and context
One of the ways that democracynow.org is able to provide deeper context to the stories that they report in broadcast is through the special online features and interviews linked on the website’s entry page. These stories also reaffirm the advocacy journalism that Amy Goodman and the programme practices. Interviews with Left academics and journalists such as Noam Chomsky and Robert Fisk are prominently featured on the home page and a 30-minute interview with an Iraqi-American, Sami Rasouli, who returned to Iraq after the start of the present war, help to provide a forum for Left viewpoints on the American occupation of Iraq. It is through its extensive, rich and no-charge archive, however, that the website is able to provide context and broadcast historical documents of the programme and of the underreported perspectives that Democracy Now! features.

8.2.4 Online distribution and archiving
Another innovation started by bloggers that has been adopted by both mainstream and alternative media is podcasting. Podcasting’s young roots date back to November 2004 and democracynow.org started offering podcasts from its website in July 2005. In a possible
expansion of the online distribution of audio files between community radio stations enabled by Open Source online software development, like BitTorrent, which is utilised by groups such as the A-Infos Radio Project (www.radio4all.net) described by Meikle (2002: 74). Democracy Now! is expanding into new markets, including European ones, by providing free content over the Internet both directly to individual audience members through podcasting and to other progressive, alternative satellite stations and pirate radio.

Democracy Now! podcasts have been so popular that they have ranked in the top 20 podcasts on the itunes.com for several weeks at the end of August 2005. Caution should be used when trying to interpret podcast rankings, which have been challenged as easily skewed and manipulated, and the rankings could be simply evidence that Democracy Now! audiences already form a demographic that adopts newer online technologies more quickly than audience members of more mainstream media. I think it is a fact worth noting, however, since one of the Democracy Now! producers pointed it out to me and he said that he keeps a daily tally of the programme’s progress up the podcast charts. This is one of the informal ways that Democracy Now! uses an online technology as a barometer of audience support.

The divergent distribution model is one of the most significant differences between commercial media and independent, advocacy media like Democracy Now!. Whereas commercial media charges for distribution rights and archives, Democracy Now!, through its online distribution, seek to have their productions circulated as widely as possible. From the earliest beginnings of the programme, Democracy Now! has supported (by building alliances) the radical idea that communities of media workers and computer programmers should collaborate in the development of free online distribution software. They want other media providers, such as pirate radio stations, to freely use Democracy Now! broadcasts for programming content. The most direct way of doing this is by making content available for free to both consumers and to affiliates, and to employ distribution technologies that are relatively inexpensive and that retain the broadcast quality of digital files. This enables affiliates with minimal or no budgets to rebroadcast shows on their own stations for virtually no cost. Democracy Now! has also utilised the online archiving software made available

41 See the archived debates (August 2005) about itunes.com podcast ranking system at: www.podcastingnews.com.
through Open Source development communities to digitally archive programmes and to make files accessible for download for no cost to the web user. Tim S., Democracy Now!’s archivist believes that archiving the news coverage by independent media is vital to preserving a historical record of dissenting and alternative viewpoints:

“A lot of news media will archive their materials for their financial resource value so that they can attract more people to their newspaper websites or to their video collections. The networks do a lot of licensing among one another and make a lot of profit off of their materials. So the worry is that a lot of the independent media places that I’ve found haven’t had the resources or the abilities to hire an archivist although some are able to get some preservation grants once in a while. But I’m not sure about how much of a long-term ability they have to preserve their own work. Democracy Now started in 96 but the collection goes back to the late 80s, mostly following Amy Goodman’s career. But I would say because more funding is available to the major network media that it becomes more accessible to historians. So a historian will more likely be able to find a New York Times article from today in 90 years than they’ll find material from an Independent Media Center. And I think it is likely that a CNN programme will be found in 40 years than a Democracy Now! programme because CNN can afford to record onto Betacam tape and have really nice climate controlled storage and have a preservation and migration policy where as our collection is kept on metal evaporated DV tape and Minicam DVD which are not nearly as stable. We’re working on a project right now where we’re sending MP2s to Archive.org because Archive.org has a really nice preservation strategy through their digital media. So even though it’s a very compressed copy the information is there. Archive.org is a way of disseminating public domain material and material the copyholder doesn’t mind archive.org freely distributing the material” (Tim S., interview transcript, March 2005).
Large media conglomerates have the capital necessary to maintain state-of-the-art archives and can be guaranteed a significant revenue stream well into the future solely on the basis of their archives (Bagdikian 1996: 10). Independent media on the other hand have been slow to archive, mostly due to the intensive capital needed to properly archive media, and since most independent media subsist on shoestring budgets, priority is given to covering the news and not necessarily to archiving it. Democracy Now!'s online alliances with archive.org and Real Networks help the programme strategically to document, preserve and distribute their point of view.

8.3 "Going to where the silence is": Amy Goodman's and Democracy Now!'s democratic theory of media

8.3.1 Advocacy journalism

"...I do expect the news media to examine thoroughly the most important issues of the day. Instead, most of the journalists who reach thousands—and in some cases millions—of readers and viewers do nothing but parrot the government line. These are the same people who like to accuse me of being an advocacy journalist. I answer by saying that they are my model" (Amy Goodman in Goodman and Goodman 2004 p. 283).42

One of the sharpest criticisms levelled against Democracy Now! by mainstream journalists is that it practices "advocacy journalism", the sting of the accusation is in that by advocating a certain perspective, a journalist cannot be objective. In this section I will explore the notion of journalistic objectivity, and how it is constructed by Democracy Now!. First I would like to address the issue of advocacy journalism and how it is a response to the mainstream media's practice of "objectivity".

In his book Alternative Media, Chris Atton (2002) makes a careful distinction between what he calls "advocacy journalism" and "grassroots journalism". Relying heavily on definitions originally developed by Traber (1985) Atton explains that while both models

42 In all direct quotes to print resources I use American spelling. When quoting from interviews I use the British spelling.
develop "very different news values from mass media", such as reporting on stories that are important to those people that are regularly marginalised by mainstream media, advocacy journalism maintains editorial control over content and applies the "grassroots" perspective and sources to produce news content. Grassroots journalism, on the other hand, is solely produced by community members themselves, who are often not professionally trained journalists and who report on local or community issues (2002: 16). In his comparison between the British publications The Big Issue and Squall, Atton shows that while both claim to practice grassroots journalism, the former was written by journalists and the latter was written by homeless and squatter activists. In a similar way to the advocacy journalism practiced by The Big Issue, Democracy Now!’s content is not produced by community activists on any given issue but coverage is often framed from an advocacy perspective. This is achieved by the producers’ choices of sources for shows and by allowing sources to speak at length on issues. Since Democracy Now! produces broadcast media, sources speak largely uninterrupted (but still framed and filtered) by a journalist’s narrative and represents a significant difference when compared with shorter news programmes or with print where sources are quoted in small bits of text or in sound bites (33). Given, however, that Amy Goodman as well as most producers at Democracy Now! are activists in the antiwar movement, when producing stories that address the Iraq War especially, it could be said in these instances they are producing "grassroots" journalism. The cross-production and collaborative work with Indymedia is another way that Democracy Now! ensures that the content they produce fulfils both Atton’s definitions for advocacy and grassroots journalism. It is through a continued and sustained collaboration with Indymedia that Democracy Now! can make the claim that they are grassroots, with them, they are media activists who are reporting on issues that are affecting their communities, in this case, communities of dissent, without them they are simply advocacy journalists.

A key feature of advocacy journalism should be added to Atton’s definition. While advocacy media share similar journalistic practices and values with mainstream journalism, such as aiming to provide balance in news reports by including two or more sources an issue, they still reproduce ideology through the application of news frames. Alternative and advocacy media distinguishes itself in its transparency around this fact. In other words, journalists working in alternative media make no bones about their own ideology seeping
into the media they produce or their partisanship on certain issues. It is this qualitative difference that helps to make them more legitimate and trusted by their audiences and readers in contrast to mainstream media.

In a story posted to the web on 1 November 2005 by Democracy Now! (figure 8.4), for example, the title of the story, “Cheney Taps Torture Memo Author to Replace Scooter Libby” gives away Democracy Now!’s antiwar position and reframes the story of a governmental appointment as a significant manoeuvre by the White House increasingly under pressure due to its ongoing political crisis around the Iraq War. The lead into the broadcast of the story did not have the headline that appeared on the website. While the entire broadcast could be said to be ideologically framed by show identifiers such as “The War and Peace Report”, the addition of web headlines to stories helps to further ideologically frame Democracy Now! reports.

Figure 8.4 Entry page on 1 November 2005 with the top story (circled).
The same story appeared a day later on the New York Times website (figure 8.5), not on the front page but within the Washington section, and was titled with a heading more difficult to neatly pin down into war politics. This does not mean that the New York Times story is unbiased but it is more carefully framed within the staid politics of Washington, and not of the Iraq War.

In Cheney's New Chief, a Bureaucratic Master

By DOUGLAS JEMI
Published: November 2, 2005

Correction Appended

WASHINGTON, Nov. 1— Shortly after he became defense secretary in 1999, Dick Cheney installed as the office next door to his own suite a young special assistant named David S. Addington. That move displaced a uniformed officer and rankled the military, but it did not slow Mr. Addington's path to power.

Smart, secretive and direct, Mr. Addington is a man very much in Mr. Cheney's image. Now, at 45, he is at Mr. Cheney's right hand again, succeeding Lewis Libby as the vice president's chief of staff. But while Mr. Addington has spent much of his career in proximity to Mr. Cheney, his admirers and detractors alike say his success is rooted in his mastery of the skills of bureaucratic combat.

While mainstream media steadfastly deny their own reproduction of ideology by pointing to the fact that they are “objective”, they are often silent on how they make journalistic choices, such as the editorial process employed to choose what stories are newsworthy, how stories are chosen to lead a broadcast or to appear above the fold, how words are chosen for framing and how they are covered. As I described in Chapter Three, John Fiske points out that utilisation of the word “objectivity” within media politics operates as “totalitarian rather than democratic. The result is the closing down of the plurality of truths that should be allowed expression under a democratic order”, and supports the ideology of the status quo.
Raymond Williams, in his book *What I came to say* (1989), contends that until the early eighteenth century, novelists (a relatively new category itself as a reading public was still forming during the century) were also considered "newsmongers" and that as novelists became reporters later in that century and the next, this had effects on "news journalism" and its professional claim to objectivity by hiding behind the use of "facts" to tell a story:

"The fact that certain events have undoubtedly occurred—have happened to people, have been observed, have been reliably reported, have been tested from the evidence of participants and witnesses—has been used to conceal or override the equally evident fact that as they move from events to news they are being narrated, and that certain long-standing problems of narration—the identity of the narrator, his authority, his point of view, his assumed relationship with his readers or hearers, his possible wider purposes in selecting and narrating these events in this way—come inevitably into question" (1989: 115).

The professional journalistic practice of "objectivity" in the United States arose in the 1920s in response to the sensationalist and jingoistic reportage during World War I, and reporting on events from a non-subjective point of view was originally espoused as being democratic by journalists, as well as democratic theorists such as Walter Lippmann and John Dewey (Johnson-Cartee 2005: 112). What arose over the intervening years was a belief that if only the same methods that are employed in science could be applied to journalism that an objective reality would be revealed in news reporting. Gaye Tuchman in her classic *Making News* (1978) demonstrates the methods that journalists employ to construct "objectivity", or what she calls "the web of facticity":

"By stressing methods—gathering supplementary evidence, presenting conflicting truth-claims, imputing facts through familiarity with police procedures, and using quotation marks, to name some techniques ... — newsworkers produced a full-blown version of the web of facticity. ..."
Just as scientists discovered facts about nature by using normatively established objective methods, so, too, the news media and the news professionals would use their methods to reveal social reality to the news consumer" (Tuchman 1978: 160-161).

The belief that objective reporting strengthens democracy was questioned in the 1970s by scholars such as Stuart Hall and Fiske, who found that the practice of objectivity functions as a mask for supporting hegemonic ideologies (Hall et al. 1978).

Democracy Now! does not make the same claim to objectivity that its mainstream media critics do. When asked how Democracy Now!'s reporting practices are the same or different as compared with mainstream media's practices, all of the producers named two qualities that are shared but practiced differently: fairness and balance. While these qualities form part of traditional journalistic practice too, Democracy Now! producers consider that their practice is distinguishable from practices of mainstream media:

"I think more of our goal is to be fair and accurate. I think that objectivity is sort of this trap that you set yourself up for. ... That is not the way a lot of traditional journalism outfits view it. Where, I mean especially at the place that I used to work at (a local newspaper in Amherst, Massachusetts) there were definitely sources, there were corporate sources of information and then there is everyone else. So there were the city officials, there were the local experts; there were the pre-approved sources that generally advocate the status quo to some degree. Or there [are] the very well known critics; you end up having the same critics as sources all the time. There is a limited...it limits the debate and the public discourse tremendously. I think at Democracy Now! we try to expand that, to go beyond the traditional talking head. I mean we have them on as well but we also try to have people themselves speak. There is one time I remember well when it was my first year there ... we were looking at the whole issue of post-911 detentions and we had a spokesperson from the Justice Department on and we also managed to have a detainee on call-in from jail. We were able
to have a detainee gauge the Justice Department on air, on national broadcast. That's a discussion you don't often hear" (Steve R., interview transcript, August 2005).

Steve explains that part of this key difference is in Democracy Now!'s openness in how they chose sources and stories. Democracy Now!'s choice of non-traditional sources makes them advocates for their own ideology. For those news journalists, like Amy Goodman, working in alternative media, there is no contradiction in the advocacy label and maintaining balance. She often turns the accusation back onto her accusers by saying, "the establishment reporters are my model" since they too advocate for one side, the side of power. By agreeing to be embedded with American and British troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, and by not being embedded with, say, Iraqi families or antiwar protesters, mainstream media have traded their principals of independence and objectivity fundamental to their practice so that they can maintain access to sources established as legitimate when reporting stories. Journalists cannot be credentialed to work in Iraq without being embedded with troops. Independent journalists who have dared to work without being embedded have been explicitly warned that they will not be "protected", and in the case of the Hotel Palestine, they were attacked and killed by US forces. What is more, Goodman points out, for all of the combat stories that these embedded journalists report, not one has depicted non-combatants hit by weapons (Goodman and Goodman 2004: 198). For Goodman and other advocacy journalists, one side is advocating for power and the other side is advocating for "the rest of us", it is only when all sides are heard that we can approach the truth" (Amy Goodman, Independent media in a time of war [DVD], chapter "Unheard Voices").

Francesca E. explained that the fact that more listeners and viewers on the political Right are turning to Democracy Now! is evidence of the quality of the journalism that they do, that it is fair and balanced:

"Obviously we have a large following on the Left because there isn't much Left media in this country and we're kind of held up as the beacon. Everyone kind of relies on us to hear their own perspectives reiterated but
a growing number of people on the Right are also listening and watching. Just yesterday for an example I was talking to one of the Minutemen, who are the so-called vigilantes on the border making sure that Mexicans don’t cross over. They’re taking the law into their own hands. So we called them to have them on as part of a debate, you know we aim to have debates whenever possible so that all of the issues can get flushed out, and all the myths and all the accusations on either side can get flushed out. And people love to hear that, you don’t hear that on CNN. Most of the time you don’t hear that, it’s usually a military man and another military man debating which plane is better to fight with, not whether the war is right or wrong. So we like to have debates. So he called … and he said: ‘I watch you guys all the time. I think you are a great show, all the Right-wing programmes have been calling me non-stop but I called you back first because I think it is so important that you guys have debates all the time’” (Francesca E. interview transcript, March 2005).

Democracy Now! journalists told me that it is by giving equal time to multiple interpretations on a news story, and by not restricting how stories are told by featuring one “military man debating another military man”, ensures that balance is maintained while reporting as well as introduces diverse perspectives on an issue. This is something that, Francesca says, rarely occurs in mainstream media. It is here too that Democracy Now! journalists can claim that they are both fair and balanced reporters, as well as advocates for marginalised voices. While they do engage in sound journalistic practices, they also provide a space for “all voices to be heard”. By providing that space to those voices that are rarely, if ever, heard, such as antiwar voices, they can also advocate for those causes simply by letting those positions speak in a public forum. Furthermore Francesca says that the proof that Democracy Now! is balanced and fair is evidenced by those voices on the Right, such as the Minutemen representative that she spoke about, that are given equal time within the Democracy Now! forum and who tell Democracy Now! journalists that the work they are doing is important owing to its impartiality and providing a space for debate. Simply by providing a space where a balanced debate can occur and inviting those guests to speak
who are not normally asked to act as sources for mainstream media, Democracy Now! says that they are advocates for perspectives that are consistently marginalised.

8.3.2 The unheard are heard

Amy Goodman brings up a little known statistic consistently in her book, speeches and interviews. The datum comes from the media watch-dog organisation Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR), a frequent guest on Democracy Now!, which reviewed the mainstream media's coverage of the American government's case for invasion in the months leading up to the beginning of the Iraq War. In the analysis of 400 interviews conducted in the mainstream news coverage on the lead-up to war, only three interviewees were either antiwar activists or peace advocates. By pointing to this underreported information, Amy Goodman is able to reveal the corporate media's own ideological bias towards the government's prowar position and its blatant subjective reporting practices. But by doing this, she does not deny her or Democracy Now!'s own ideological reproduction. The entire programme, in fact, is ideologically positioned. In the opening sequence to every Democracy Now! show, for example, there is a montage of newspaper headlines that read “The War on Terror”, “Peace”, “Protest”, and finishing the sequence by ending with another newspaper headline that reads “Amy Goodman” as a camera shot enters into the red doors of the programme’s firehouse studios. Between each story Amy Goodman reminds viewers of the show's website by saying: “democracynow.org, The War and Peace Report” and the website's banner is also so titled. The website and broadcast was renamed the “War and Peace Report” on 21 September 2001 when the US was preparing to invade Afghanistan. By introducing each broadcast and story in this way, even though not all of the stories it reports have to do with the war or the antiwar movement, is to frame the entirety of the programme and its stories within the political context of the Iraq War and within the broader American counterpublic of dissention that is rarely represented by the US mainstream media.

In another instance, in the DVD “Independent Media in a Time of War”43, a coproduction of Democracy Now! and Indymedia (Hudson-Mohawk), Amy Goodman spends 29 minutes analysing the American mainstream media’s coverage of the Iraq War and its

43 Available for purchase from democracynow.org or for free to volunteers.
silences on the dissenting voices against the war. In one scene she is positioned in a chair with two other journalists (one of them the late actor and civil rights activist Ossie Davis) on the edge of a crowd at the antiwar march in New York City in an ironic format that is familiar to anyone who has watched the televised Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade (television journalists seated next to the crowd of the parade). From this vantage point as well as from the point of view of the video journalists “embedded” in the crowd, the viewer is given the perspective of the march from the protesters’ points of view, from the “subjective” inside. In between scenes of protesters’ anger and confusion over the New York City police’s splitting up the crowd, quick interviews are conducted with individual protesters on why they chose to come to the march. In this way the documentary depicts an overwhelming dissenting viewpoint that at that point had been severely underreported by the mainstream media (at least in the United States). This protest footage closes with a news report on the same protest from ABC News that shows the reporter, Chris Cuomo, in front of the night time lights of Times Square, well after all the protesters were forced to go home. He gives his summary of the protesters’ viewpoints that he had interviewed earlier in the day:

“Well they have these signs that say ‘no blood for oil’ but when you ask them what that means they seem very confused. I don’t think they know why they’re out here” (Clip 11:20-11:36, “Independent media in a time of war” [DVD]).

The significant difference between the two ways that the protests were reported is that by denying the protesters to speak for themselves and to give to the viewing public, in their own words, why they were protesting, the mainstream news reporter relied on his news organisation’s power and legitimacy with its audience, and acted as an ideological interpreter of the events without acknowledging his role. As their views are filtered through his interpretation, he speaks for the protesters and makes up his mind on their opinions—without allowing the audience to make up their own minds on what the protesters think because he never presents the protesters’ opinions for the audience to actually hear. Amy Goodman’s coverage, on the other hand, lays bare her ideological interpretative role by reporting the protests within the context of the protest itself and not as an outside
observer. By simply allowing the protesters to speak for themselves is to ideologically position herself as a journalist, she moves from merely representing their viewpoints to providing a forum to protesters and frames the protesters’ discourse within a larger antiwar discussion. As Goodman says: “That is the role of journalism in a democratic society: to provide a forum for ... discourse” (2004: 282). This is how Democracy Now! advocates for the antiwar movement by giving a forum to the protesters and by doing so, by allowing for unconventional sources to be heard, she makes the claim that she is fulfilling the “true” purpose of journalism in a “democratic society”. The irony here is that by providing more than one perspective for a story, in this case, it is the bigger story of the Iraq War and American dissent against it, Democracy Now! is closer to achieving a less biased stance than the mainstream media’s coverage of the war. In other words, since Democracy Now! represents dissenting viewpoints which they also happen to sympathise with and that are continually marginalised by the mainstream media, they are able to achieve more balanced reporting on the antiwar movement simply because no one else is covering dissenting viewpoints. It is in this way that Democracy Now!’s reports are more balanced than the mainstream media’s coverage; at least as far as the antiwar movement story is concerned.

8.3.3 How things look from down here: Democracy Now!’s take on democratic journalism

“Journalism is the only profession explicitly protected by the US Constitution, because journalists are supposed to be the check and balance on government” (Amy Goodman interview in Yes! Magazine 2005).

“I see the media as a huge kitchen table that stretches across this country, that we all sit around and debate and discuss the most important issues of the day: life and death, war and peace... Anything less than that is a disservice to a democratic society” (Amy Goodman in Ratner 2005: 31).

When Goodman speaks about the role of journalism in a democracy, she often frames her opinions in broad and unfulfilled ideals: “we (journalists) are supposed to be holding those in
power accountable". She also sees the media as a (domestic) space for discourse: "the media as a huge kitchen table ... that we all sit around and debate and discuss the most important issues of the day" (my emphasis). What is interesting about this last Goodman quote is how it functions to situate news media as both a public and private space for discourse between Americans, where all of us Americans can discuss our most significant issues that affect us all (life and death after all!), this purposeful blurring of the private and the public in the construction of "a public", the public that the American media is supposed to serve. One of the ways she does this is by often employing the first person or first person plural to emphasise who she is speaking for (the "us" of the dissenting public or the "us" of professional journalists) and underlines Warner's (2002: 76-77) point that in the construction of counterpublics, the addressee is both personal and plural at the same time:

"Journalism was a respectable profession. Journalists are supposed to expand our understanding, taking risks to provide an independent view of the world. We trust reporters to speak truth to power, to ask uncomfortable questions" (Goodman and Goodman 2004: 174, my emphasis).

As Warner also theorises, counterpublics are constructed through discourse: "a public is a space of discourse organised by nothing other than discourse itself" (67). It is through Goodman's own discourse about her ideals for democratic media that she constructs a counterpublic of dissent, especially dissent against the Iraq War, and of media and democratic reformation. It is within her ideology of advocacy journalism that she emphasises the socially transformative power of democratic media:

"Media should not be the tool only of the powerful. The media can be a platform for the most important debates of our day: war and peace, freedom and tyranny. The debate must be wide-ranging—not just a narrow discussion between Democrats and Republicans embedded in the establishment. We need to break open the box, tear down the boundaries that currently define acceptable discussion. We need a democratic media.

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A democratic media gives us hope. It chronicles the movements and organizations that are making history today. When people hear their neighbors given a voice, see their struggles in what they watch and read, spirits are lifted. People feel like they can make a difference. Social change does not spring forth from the minds of generals or presidents—in fact, change is often blocked by the powerful. Change starts with ordinary people working in their communities. And that's where media should start as well. The role of the media isn't to agree with any person or group—or with the government or the powerful. But the media does have a responsibility to include all voices in the discourse. Then let the people decide. This is a new kind of power politics. Instead of backroom deals, it's open-air rallies, public, transparent, and full of lively debate. That's what democracy looks like" (Goodman and Goodman 2004: 310-311, my emphasis).

Goodman not only describes the role of journalism in a democracy but how journalists too can advocate for a democratic media and a media of dissention:

“Our mission is to make dissent commonplace in America so you're not surprised when you're at work, someone walks over to the water cooler and makes a comment and someone isn't shocked and says, ‘what's that all about?’ but that it comes out of the finest tradition that built this country. People engaged in dissent. We have parallel worlds in this country. For some it's the greatest democracy on earth. There is no question about that. But for others, immigrants now in detention facilities, they have no rights, not even to a lawyer. And we have to be there and we have to watch and we have to listen. We have to tell their stories until they can tell their own. ... Dissent is what makes this country healthy. And the media has to fight for that and we have to fight for an independent media’ (Clip 26:29-27:58, Amy Goodman, Independent media in a time of war [DVD], my emphasis).
Again she emphasises two models of independent journalism, advocacy ("we have to tell their stories") and grassroots ("until they can tell their own"). Goodman's statement reveals perhaps more than what was intended. By emphasising that Democracy Now! must tell the stories for those who cannot speak, the real journalism model Democracy Now! is following is not a radical democratic one but rather the one James Curran (1991: 29-30) defined as the liberal democratic model, a representative one. Media should be in the hands of "the people" or at the very least, represent "the people". In this way Goodman's ideology (and that of Democracy Now! since she acts as the programme’s spokeswoman) is rooted deeply in the American liberal tradition and less so in the parallel tradition of American radicalism. This is the same liberal democratic model that mainstream media are also founded on. Journalism’s role in a democracy is Goodman’s (and our goal as radical, independent journalists and/or a dissenting public committed to democracy) goal: social change through dissent. This dissent is constructed out of the dissemination of represented "alternative" viewpoints and the “truth”.

8.3.4 “Speaking truth to power”
As Stuart Hall et al. (1978) have shown the media construct social realities by organising “what is widespread and free floating” into the “truth” (cited in Curran and Seaton 1985: 281). In Hall et al.’s case, a generalised anxiety around a perceived increase of violent crime but not, in fact, an actual rise in crime rates, led the press to hone in on that anxiety and create a moral panic around a phenomenon they called “mugging”. Thus a social phenomenon, “mugging”, was created by the media which led to the implementation of social policy legislating against “mugging”.

What Hall’s study was able to demonstrate is that the media organise disparate facts to tell stories and construct a version of truth, a truth which functions to influence policy making, encompassing almost all forms of policy from policing certain areas (and communities) to military recruitment. This construction, at its core, is ideological since, depending on where one stands in relation to the facts, those same facts can be used to construct multiple and contradictory versions of the truth by different storytellers. Democracy Now! also claims to be able to get at the “truer truth” and in the process constructs a truth that is very different from mainstream media’s “truth”:
"We're supposed to be holding those in power accountable. We're not supposed to be their megaphone. That's what the corporate media have become. When those in power both Democrats and Republicans continually alleged that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction, Democracy Now! was reporting on all the voices that said there were no such weapons. When I've been on shows like Hardball and Scarborough Country, representatives of the corporate media have said to me, 'How were we supposed to know those claims were false, since the administration officials said they were true?' But it's not journalism's role to pass on opinions. It's journalism's role to get to the truth. Those in power are an increasingly small elite. That elite doesn't represent the mainstream view of people in this country or the world. Even if all those in power are in agreement, reporters should ask, is this true what they're saying?' (Amy Goodman, interview in Yes! Magazine 2005).

It is through trying to represent all sides of the story ("Democracy Now! was reporting on all the voices that said there were no such weapons") and by the doggedly scrutinising of facts presented by the power elite ("reporters should ask, 'is this true what they are saying?'") that the truth is revealed and revealing the truth is journalism's ultimate goal. Since the mainstream media are a part of the power elite ("representatives of corporate media"), according to Goodman, it is impossible for commercial media to ever report the truth. In many ways, Goodman's model for journalism is the same model developed in the beginning of the twentieth century by the American muckraking journalists that reported on stories to bring down the dominance of the powerful corporations that were determining, to detrimental affect, the daily miseries of a large portion of Americans (Ewen 1996).

8.3.5 The Fifth Estate: The Watchdog's watchdog
A final role for independent journalists working in advocacy journalism, according to Goodman, is to advocate for a democratic media by not only holding those in government power accountable, but so too, by holding those in media power accountable:
“This has to be changed, this has to be challenged. We are not the only ones that are using the public airwaves, they are too. And they have to provide the diversity of opinion that fully expresses the debate and the anguish and the discussions that are going on all over this country. That is media serving a democratic society” (Clip 26:29-27:58, Amy Goodman, *Independent media in a time of war* [DVD]).

By reclaiming the public airwaves and by making those who use those airwaves more accountable to “the public”, says Goodman, the original function of journalism in democracy can be realised. Democracy Now! does hold mainstream media accountable not only in Goodman’s criticism of it in her book and speeches but also by inviting representatives from media watchdog groups, such as FAIR, on as regular guests to discuss media issues. Mainstream media journalists also speak at length on Democracy Now! shows about those news stories that have become controversial because of how mainstream media has reported them.

8.4 Conclusions

I have demonstrated through an examination of Democracy Now!’s website, Democracy Now!’s production model follows closely those of other mainstream media outlets, in which is there is an editorial hierarchy that acts a gatekeeper that controls broadcast and online content. As an independent media organisation, Democracy Now! can only make the claim of practicing advocacy and grassroots journalism through its key alliances with more radical media organisations such as Indymedia and media activists who have flattened editorial hierarchies. Without an alternative and parallel media system, one that is equally biased and ideological in its practice (but is also relatively transparent about this) as mainstream media, any evidence of a counterpublic would not exist due to the dominance of the commercial media’s representational power. If all of the voices heard in mainstream media are those of consensus and agreement, we as a viewing and reading public would not know that there are dissenting voices among us was it not for alternative media. Amy Goodman
and Democracy Now! journalists constructed this as a failure to live up to the ideals of a democratic media by mainstream journalism. The counterpublic that Democracy Now! is constructing is explicitly described in the public discourses of Amy Goodman, when she illustrates how a democratic journalism should be and how American mainstream media consistently fall short of accomplishing all of the shoulds that make media democratic. By doing so she also positions herself and the work of American independent media in direct opposition to the mainstream and to the power elite. Within her discourse, however, there is little or no critical engagement with independent media's own ideological reproduction. This counterpublic is further strengthened and publicised by using online technologies and building alliances with other online media activists.

Unlike previous media reform movements of the past, the emergent online media activism movements have a new breadth of influence since unlike print, the size of reach and the ability to coordinate action is unprecedented. Combine this with the explosion of the blogosphere, where media criticism has been profound in its ability to act as a watchdog of mainstream media, there are changes that are no doubt occurring to how the mainstream media interact with criticism and competition from non-commercial media, but it is hard to see that these responses indicate deeper changes to the configurations of the American media landscape. As long as the powerful influences of corporate sponsorship, political patronage and public opinion shape mainstream media's practice, a sea-change to the media environment is unlikely in the near future.
9 Democracy's Contested Imaginaries

"I have come to believe that genuine democracy cannot exist without the freedom to imagine and the right to use imaginative works without any restrictions. To have a whole life, one must have the possibility of publicly expressing and shaping private worlds, dreams, thoughts and desires, of constantly having access to a dialogue between the public and the private worlds."

In this final chapter I summarise the core findings that resulted from the research conducted for this thesis. The chapter begins with an exploration of the ways in which the discursive practices of the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now! journalists are connected, namely through the democratic imaginaries of both groups (Taylor 2004). I follow this with a recapitulation of the research questions and I reconnect some of the literature reviewed in Chapters Two, Three and Four to the two groups studied to further demonstrate some of the conclusions drawn out in this thesis. I then explore the implications those results may have for the theories of liberal and radical democracy, as well as for e-democracy.

9.1 Unrealisable Utopias

"There will always be competing interpretations of the principles of liberty and equality, the type of social relations where they should apply, and their mode of institutionalisation. This is why a common good can never be actualised; it must remain as a kind of vanishing point to which we
constantly refer, but which cannot have a real existence" (Mouffe 1996: 24).

Through the findings of this thesis I have shown how the discourses of two groups, the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now!, construct horizons of democratic possibilities; horizons that discourse drives towards but which will always remain horizons and will never materialise as destinations. By positioning discourse relationally to horizons of possibilities, we are afforded a vision of not only what is near to us but also that which is far away, and by being in relation to both, both are synthesised (Gadamer 2004: 301-306). It is in this way that the distant vision of democracy could be considered as a piece of imaginary work, a dream dreamt conspiratorially by how people talk about what a democratic society could be. The Republicans and Democracy Now! construct their democratic horizons as well as their present that fails to reach those horizons through their discursive strategies, as I have demonstrated through Chapters Six, Seven and Eight.

At the beginning of this thesis Homi Bhabha proposed to us that: "...we have no choice but to place, in full view of our buildings, the vision of the Unbuilt—"the foundation of possible things", other foundations, other alternative worlds. Perhaps, then, we will not forget to measure Progress from the ground, from other perspectives, other possible foundations, even when we vainly believe that we are, ourselves, standing at the top of the tower" (2003: 34). It is somewhere between the "actually existing" democratic social institutions and structures, including the injustices produced by those institutions, and the ideals of what should be, that groups which advocate for social change, which both the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now! do, forge foundations for their own Unbuilt realities (Fraser 1992). The reality of democracy happens in the grey, shadowy spaces between what we imagine democracy to be and its failure to live up to those ideals. Or what democratic theorist Charles Taylor might call "democratic imaginaries". In Taylor's definition of "social imaginaries", he describes the concept as the "way people imagine their social existence" and "incorporates a sense of normal expectations that we have of one another...and it is a sense of how things usually go but this is interwoven with an idea about how they ought to go" (Taylor 2002: 106). These democratic imaginaries are expressed,
refined and explicated through discourses that are spoken, written, printed, broadcast and posted online.

Through the examinations of the several forms of discourse produced by the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now!, I set out to demonstrate how democracy lives a double life as an imaginary work, an idea collectively dreamt and conspiratorially conceived of, and how it exists in the present as "deidealised". For both groups, part of its double life lies in the hope of its revitalisation found in the promise of new communication technologies or in more traditional uses of journalism, and its other life is lived and imagined in the everyday conditions of an imperfect democratic culture. These imaginaries often construct oppositions to the dominant consensus on what democracy is and who should be defining it. This is not a nihilistic position, however, it is, as Bhabha proposes, a necessary reality to help us realise through a constant reiteration and comparison of how things should be and that helps to bring us closer to an approximation of our visions. Without our Unbuilt democracies overshadowing our actually existing political and social realities, we would never be able to achieve social change and some semblance of justice, which both groups continue to strive for. While their versions of democracy may remain a dream for members of the Republican Brotherhood or for journalists at Democracy Now!, they nevertheless continue to build their democratic imaginaries and by doing so construct themselves as counterpublics.

The project of public deliberation for the Republicans, this attempt to talk the Unbuilt into existence, was started by members in the streets and markets of Khartoum, and continues online and in exile. In the Republican Brothers example, their Unbuilt is two-fold. The first one is characterised by the reclamation of the democratic values that they see embodied in Sufism as well as contained within Sudanese society's traditions of tolerance and pluralism; traditions which have been co-opted by years of totalitarianism and fundamentalist doctrinaire visions. The second one is exemplified by members' attempts to salvage what they see as the Brotherhood's own democratic values. Here the Internet is placed in a central position, where new democratic values are incubated and nurtured in the online engagements with a digitised Sudanese public. In both repossessions the Republicans envision and construct their model of democracy through a revitalisation not only of Islam but also of what they see as the strengths of Sudan's progressive and tolerant
heritage. A reinvigoration of the past through its *rhetorical* reclamation is achieved through their discursive culture spoken and textual, often online, and provides the framework for the Republican version of democracy. Through the process of discursive repossession, there is an emergence of what could be called a “Sudanese model of democracy” through online *public* deliberations, where Sudanese publics are “experimenting with democratisation”, as Ahmed described it in Chapter Seven. With a publicly enacted and engaged discourse, Republicans are building an approximation of their vision for democratic culture, online together with other Sudanese people.

The Republican democratic imaginary, however, has been disrupted by the emergent behavioural norms contained in the online “written” deliberations on their closed bulletin board. This disruption has produced deep anxiety and ambivalence for many members, and the centrality of the Internet in revitalising their discursive identity is seriously jeopardised. In the listserv postings and interview data analysed, Republicans said such things as:

“by expressing our opinions by writing [it] will help others help the others to read it many times and to think about it carefully, before deciding anything and by this way we ensure that the emotional reactions are eliminated or at least reduced”

“I think, as we claim Democracy and one of our definition[s] that ‘It’s the right to listen to others’, that being that, we should not deny issues raised for discussion here. The contributor has every right to be listen[ed to] by others, and the others depending on the standards should elaborate to convince him with the right thing…”

“As a community we have to endure, tolerate and respect the different attitudes and opinions”.

In the Republican descriptions of an idealised online deliberative democracy, they reference their own Republican discursive identity to describe the deliberative norms that they *should*
be following, such as "eliminating emotions" and "encouraging tolerance", and when online, somehow, they fail to implement them. These strategies help to remind Republicans both of how they should be enacting Republican democracy as well as pointing to the fact that, at least for the present, they are failing to live up to that imaginary. Yet these emergent online norms also could be indicative of the counterpublic the Republicans built through their offline "spoken" discursive culture. Because the online "written" norms contrast so sharply with how Republicans perceive themselves, the split between the two seems to underline the distinctiveness of the discursive identity of the movement. The online written norms contradict and obliterate the Republican discursive identity that developed over several decades. It is through the current discourses about this disruption that Republicans innovate on their democratic horizons. The Republican Unbuilt is constructed through a discursive reinscription of their identity.

The examples from the discourses of Democracy Now! journalists demonstrate that they primarily construct their Unbuilt democratic model with the raw material of critique of the American mainstream media system. By utilising this building material, Democracy Now! opens a discursive space within a larger mediated *enclosure* that tends to be overshadowed by a prior framing of what the rules of discursive engagement are on several contemporary and highly contested issues, such as the Iraq War and dissention against it in the United States. Not only do the Democracy Now! journalists construct the role of journalists in democracies in general through their discourse, they also position themselves using their identities as radical journalists, in direct opposition to the existing media system. Through these oppositions, their own identities are reinforced since they say that it is only through their own journalistic practices that Democracy Now! is fulfilling those ideal roles – "exposing the truth, providing a forum for all voices, supporting an independent view of the world" – while the mainstream media, due to their practices, are not:

"We’re supposed to be holding those in power accountable. We’re not supposed to be their megaphone. That’s what the corporate media have become. It’s not journalism’s role to pass on opinions. It’s journalism’s role to get to the truth"
"And [mainstream media] have to provide the diversity of opinion that fully expresses the debate and the anguish and the discussions that are going on all over this country. That is media serving a democratic society"

"Media should not be the tool only of the powerful. ... We need to break open the box, tear down the boundaries that currently define acceptable discussion. We need a democratic media"

"The role of the media isn't to agree with any person or group—or with the government or the powerful. But the media does have a responsibility to include all voices in the discourse. Then let the people decide. This is a new kind of power politics. Instead of backroom deals, it's open-air rallies, public, transparent, and full of lively debate. That's what democracy looks like."

"Journalists are supposed to expand our understanding, taking risks to provide an independent view of the world."

For Democracy Now!, as is similar with the Republicans, the Internet and its democratic promise is centrally featured in their democratic imaginary. Emphasis is continually placed on the possibilities that Internet tools could provide for a return to "democratic media": through new collaborations with other radical media groups as well as enabling distribution models that were not possible before the emergence of the technology. Yet rhetoric about radical democratic politics online is only as good as radical democratic actions online (Pickerill 2006: 6). While Democracy Now! journalists often emphasise that the key to making media democratic is the empowerment of "ordinary" people to speak publicly, Democracy Now!'s online practices do not quite match their discourse about the shape of empowered media. Without providing more ways to allow their audience to engage and to interact online with the programme's day-to-day production, Democracy Now!'s journalism remains advocacy journalism as opposed to the grassroots journalism that they claim the programme to be. There exists no critical awareness within their discourses on democratic
media of how their discursively constructed roles as “radical journalists who are empowering others” disrupts their own democratic imaginary because the very presumption is that through their productive process they speak for others; it is their power to speak that they give to the rest of us.

Both groups are also continually disappointed by the realities in which they live, including the realities they themselves build, since those realities rarely live up to their Unbuilt visions of what their societies should be. But by enacting their ideals through discourse, be it through the online al-rukun reconstructed on sudaneseonline.com or through producing media that directly confronts mainstream American media, both groups endeavour to realise their unfulfilled Utopias, incompletely and iteratively. That is, it is through re-enacting and reinscribing the practice of their Unbuilt visions for society through talking about it (in digital/printed text or through speaking), they are able to clarify their visions and reinforce their differences in contrast to what actually exists. What is also demonstrated by my research is that democratic models exist in parallel publics that abut one another but rarely overlap. While a radical democratic culture may be enacted online, say, such as on the bulletin boards of sudaneseonline.com or through the advocacy journalism of Democracy Now!, that democratic model does not necessarily extend to other publics. So if Sudanese people are engaging in democratic discourse online, it does not necessarily mean that a democratic culture is being extended to the institutionalised and sectarian politics in Sudan that are controlling the conditions of life for Sudanese people. If Democracy Now! is reaching more people through using new online distribution channels and forming online networks with other radical media, they may be in small ways reclaiming the discourse around democracy, but the larger American media context remains for the most part unchanged, especially in terms of the politics over ownership and consolidation.

Much like how Phil described the work of Democracy Now! in Chapter Eight, in several ways both groups are building “parallel media (or parallel deliberative democratic) systems”.

Both groups construct their discourses through the media they produce—in how they frame and contextualise their arguments in print (online and on paper), in broadcast, and at antiwar rally speeches—I was particularly interested in how their democratic ideologies are constituted through digital media. They use their discourses as a foil to contrast their imaginaries with those who they consider to be in opposition with. A surprising
finding shows that the Republicans in exile and online are experiencing a disruption to their long established discursive culture, a cherished culture that defined them as a spiritual and interpretative community. Concerned by this disruption online, Republicans tried to lay down some ground rules for argumentation that would harmonise online written discourse with their discursive identity but these efforts have failed. What has happened online is the emergence of violent text setting the tone for online discourse and a subsequent withdrawal from online engagement. Rather than continue to engage in this way with other Republicans, many members have moved to open forums such as sudaneseonline.com to discuss Republicanism. Due to the openness of the forum and the possibility to engage with people who do not agree with Republican ideology, many members have found a reinforcement of their discursive identity in these open forums for the reason that their identity tends to be in opposition to the dominant Sudanese ideologies circulating on these forums.

While issues of an online disrupted imaginary in regards to Democracy Now! are not as poignant for journalists working there, evidence of a disruption none the less exists. Steve R., a Democracy Now! producer summed up this disruption when he noted in Chapter Eight that an interactive, more "grassroots" model for their online production is not appropriate for the overall production model of the programme.

9.2 Research questions

The aim of this thesis was to provide a critical reflection on the existing sociological understanding of online democracy and how the insights gained from the qualitative explorations on the discursive practices of the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now! contribute to a much more complicated and nuanced story of e-democracy than what has been previously told.

My investigation into how people construct meanings of democracy was made through an examination into how they perceive the roles played by communication technologies and journalism within their own interpretative communities as well as in a broader social context. This led me to approach notions of e-democracy through a social constructivist framework which helped to expand on the existing sociological discussions
about online technologies and deliberative practices, where previous work on e-democracy primarily has been concerned with establishment politics, communicative interaction between government and citizens, or the textual remnants of online discussions to extrapolate meanings without considering the larger social contexts that these discussions exist in.

When I started this research process three years ago I wanted to understand how people "do" democratic culture online and I approached the field with three questions in mind: "Is the Internet democratic? Can a communication technology support democracy? Is it possible for a technology to be the "killer app" for democracy?" In the past three and a half decades there has been much speculation on what kind of promise new communication technologies, especially the Internet with its rapid diffusion in the last decade and a half, can hold for democracy. The prevalent, normative claim made by academics and activists alike is that due to some inherent quality of the technology, the Internet would finally give "ordinary people" a voice, that information would finally be freely (and digitally) available to all people, especially in an age of commodified information, to enable them to make informed political choices, and that this, in turn, would make politics transparent which would no longer alienate people from the political process. The Internet could finally fulfil the promise of a full participatory democracy, and by so doing people would want to participate in democracy. What seems to be a much more productive account of online democracy based on the findings of this thesis may be one that demonstrates how what Nik Brown (2003: 17) calls "communities of promise", or groups who engage in collectively imagining the past, present and future promise of a technology, synthesise expectations with what actually is.

While I did consider three possible models for democracy: liberal, Islamic (mainly confined to Republican Thought) and radical, to frame my own thinking about e-democracy, a reliance on radical democracy, with its insistence that meanings are contingent and the interpretations of truth diverse and open, seemed the best way (for now) to describe what I found in my research with the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now!. I chose the Republican Brothers and Democracy Now! as two groups that could present to us different perspectives on how interpretative communities reconfigure and constitute the democratic expectations of communication technologies. The distinctive narratives that I have
presented in the thesis provide us with alternative readings of online political culture that are different to the ones found in much of the e-democracy literature.

The thesis, for instance, demonstrates that the groups in my study are not using the Internet in the "liberating" ways that have been expected by previous sociological thinking on e-democracy. This finding shows that the meaning of communication technologies in democracies is socially specific and constructed by the groups or individuals that employ them—there is no inherent quality of the technology that makes it democratic nor are its expectations inherent. This is not to say, however, that the technology is neutral. The politics of the technology are constructed by the meanings that people give it, by how they conceptualise it and imagine it (Taylor 2004: 23).

The Republicans and Democracy Now! are not seeking a further institutionalisation of democratic politics through their uses of the Internet, but rather they endeavour to deininstitutionalise democracy, to radicalise it through the construction of a democratic culture based on pluralistic, discursive engagements where they seek to insert their own discourse. These engagements do not necessarily have consensus as a goal (as consensus is the goal in liberal theory), but aim to develop fresher and deeper understandings of contending interpretations. These interpretations are contingent and change: democracy is a dynamic, lived process, not a fixed system.

9.3 Implications for e-democracy: Liberal publics and radical counterpublics

In the literature reviewed in the earlier chapters of this thesis, I demonstrated how information technologies and democratic models, and especially the values embedded in liberal democracy, have been conflated and mutually assumed since the emergence of print and the construction of a reading public (Habermas 1989; Warner 1990). Warner notes in his book Letters of the Republic (1990), through his example of the emergent reading public in the American colonies, for instance, that the development of print was "seen as having a logic internal to itself, a logic which then exerts causative force in human affairs. The invention of printing, for example, is said to have encouraged rationalization and democratization" (1990: 5). He makes explicit how technological determinism organises theories about liberal democracy and information. Warner's example of the early American
print industry and republicanism can be used to show how successive technological transformations in communications have been similarly subjected to deterministic analyses where virtually all communication technologies are endowed with essentialist, politically liberating or empowering qualities for users (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren 1988; Coleman 1999; Dahlberg 2001b). In the review of some of the literature on deliberative democracy, I focused on Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the bourgeois public sphere and its critics (1989). Habermas proposes that it was through the utilisation of printed media, such as newspapers, and the construction of a reading public, which helped private citizens to be educated on political issues, to discuss these issues in a disinterested way and to transform institutionalised politics. The aspect of his theory to come under intense scrutiny and critique is his argument that within the bourgeois public sphere participants often bracket their own special interests to discuss matters “rationally” and that this shifted the control of public discourse from the hands of the state to a negotiated power between the state and the public. It was through the employment of “public reason” and discourse that the public held state power accountable and that this utilisation of public reason represents the pinnacle of deliberative democracy. The second transformation of the public sphere, according to Habermas, occurred in the twentieth century with the rise of mass media that replaced horizontal communication between citizens with vertical (and one-way) communication between mass media and the public (Downey and Fenton 2003: 186). It is this theoretical framework—that a democratic public sphere engages in rational-critical discourse to reach a consensus—that has dominated the theories of e-democracy for the last three decades and which underpins a liberal democratic model of information’s role in societies. Unfortunately, the e-democracy literature has rarely addressed the criticisms of the Habermasian public sphere.

Theorists of radical democracy on the other hand, critically reconceptualise the public sphere, and what happens within it discursively. These theorists propose a radicalisation of liberal democracy through the reunification of socialism and democratic principals. For scholars Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau all of social life is mediated and constructed through discourse, “every social practice is ... articulatory”, and the public sphere is a space where contending discourses of pluralistic publics struggle to make their interests and interpretations of social justice hegemonic (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 2001: 228).
Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of radical democracy focussed primarily on the political utilisation of discourse by social groups. In other words different groups—neoliberals, church leaders, gay, lesbian, bi, transgender (GLBT) rights groups, feminist and workers groups, environmentalists, gun owners, conservatives—recognise and emphasise their own subject positions through discourse. With competing interpretations of what they think is fair and just groups struggle publicly primarily through the media, to make their ideas the ones that become the popular definition of what is fair and just. It is only through agonistic (for Mouffe [2002: 9] this means the struggle between adversaries, as opposed to the word “antagonism”, which she conceives of as a struggle between enemies), contentious struggle to make one’s interpretation the hegemonic interpretation of what is socially just can democracy remain pluralistic, fulfil its promise of equity and inclusion, and not tip over into totalitarianism. “A radical pluralist approach [to democratic politics], informed as it is by a nonessentialist view of politics [that is that social agents—people—are constructed from multiple subject positions], acknowledges the impossibility of a fully realised democracy, and of the total elimination of antagonisms” (Mouffe 1996b: 24). As modernity heralded the end of absolute certainty with the rise of liberal democracies, the radical democratic model pushes the liberal envelope further; there exists no objective, absolute truth, only the diverse interpretations of multiple truths (Nash 2000: 245).

What then are the radical democratic implications for publics and counterpublics? If the goal of discourse in a liberal democratic model is to achieve consensus and a unified public opinion on what is just, in the radical democratic model the discourse is the goal. In radical democracy discourse maintains a contingent struggle over meanings and interpretations, a plurality of opinion and a fractured, agonisitic public sphere. The radical democratic public sphere is the discursive politics of “dissensus” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, 2001; Ziarek 2001: 1). As Warner theorised, counterpublics are built through discourse just as publics are but they are publics of dissent, of resistance to hegemony (even though they too are hegemonic), of counters to the mainstream (Warner 2002). It is this theory of radical democracy, a reconceptualisation of the public sphere as a site of dissensus and counterpublics constructed through discourse that I relied on as a framework to understand the online discursive activities of both groups under study in this thesis.
As I showed through my examination of the e-democracy literature the liberal
democratic model was implicitly applied to the analysis of online democracy. With the
possible exception of Curran’s proposal to employ a radical democratic model for analysis of
online technologies, most researchers focus on establishment politics, rational-critical
discourses and the goal of consensus in political discourse within their analyses of online
democratic politics. A recurrent theme in many studies is to link the deliberative,
Habermasian public sphere with the application of new communication technologies, such
as the Internet, to reclaim the discursive public sphere that is said to have been lost through
the rise of mass media during the twentieth century (Albrecht 2003; Albrecht 2006; Dahlberg
2001a; Dahlberg 2001b). In those studies the focus is on institutionalised politics (and not
on the politics of democratic culture), where researchers look for evidence of rational-critical
argumentational styles, citizen participation and consensus building online (Coleman 1999;
Hale, Musso, and Weare 1999, 2002; Malina 1999; Wilhelm 1999). Due to the predominant
liberal assumptions of the studies, when online discourse did not appear to be rational or
critical or to lead to an agreement, it was assumed to be undemocratic (Buchstein 1997;
Dean 2003). In several previous studies, such as Kevin Hill and John Hughes’s study of
Usenet political groups, researchers coded online text with predetermined categories, such
as “right”, “left”, “democrat” and “republican”, to determine whether or not a text could be
considered “democratic” or not (Hill and Hughes 1998). No consideration was made about
what other possible meanings or categorisations the authors of those online textual
remnants might have given the text if they actually had the chance to tell their own stories to
researchers. Imagine the story that could be told if the authors of those analysed online
discursive texts were asked to explain how those texts function within their own definitions
of online democracy. The aim of this thesis then was to let some of those stories be told.

My analysis departed from most of the sociological work on e-democracy
significantly since I did not set out to analyse whether or not a piece of online text was
“democratic” or “rational” or “biased”. I was concerned with what the two groups in the study
think constitute democratic discourse and what makes online deliberations democratic, and I
underlined throughout the thesis that it is not for me to determine it for them. I wanted them
to tell me. By approaching online democratic phenomena in this way, I aimed to present
some alternative accounts of online political discourse and media production.
9.3.1 Emergence of discursive norms online: When deliberations are typed

Throughout the thesis I was interested in how online democracy is perceived by the respondents in my study and how or whether they think they enact democratic culture online. As I have already stated, many respondents expressed ambivalence towards e-democracy. Depending on the social context of the online engagement, they believe democracy online is possible, however, in other contexts it is not possible for democratic culture to thrive. Many people in my study developed strategies to manage their ambivalences.

With the Republicans that I interviewed and in the analysis of their listerv postings, they described an emergence of discursive norms within the written forums, especially the emergence of what they call “violent text”. When Republicans first engaged textually with each other online, they approached online written deliberations with their prior and well established discursive identity as well as with a conception of how the act of writing functions with thought: that writing enables the thinker to think better; whether the thinker is the writer or the reader of a text. Both their discursive identity and their conceptions about writing has been disrupted by the emergence of online norms that directly contradict these notions. In online Republican forums, these norms contradict and challenge the previously established Republican discursive identity and their expectations for written text. The development of these unexpected (and in many ways for most Republicans disappointing) norms have been handled with several strategies that are contingent and depend on the social context of the different online forums that they use.

Strategies: Silences

For the Republicans a strategy of silence is one response to this emergence of discursive norms that contradict their established discursive identity. Different members employ the strategy of silence in various ways, some choose to silently observe online deliberations and to never post responses, others choose to speak on other online forums and to not engage on assaloon.org. The use of silence is significant and explicit since the message that it sends to those who chose to make use of violent text is that making the choice not to engage with violent text underlines the disapproval of online behaviour that contravenes established “offline” norms. Behind the strategic employment of silence, also, is the constant
reminder of Taha's absence through death. The negative space created by this silence serves to emphasise what has been lost by the movement and by individual members—the right and authority to speak.

The evidence of online silences is a significant finding in the research with the Republicans because it contrasts so sharply with the theories that frame online deliberative democracy and the rhetoric of advocacy journalism employed by the other group studied in this thesis, Democracy Now!. The Internet is not necessarily giving a "voice to the voiceless", in the case of the Republicans. Many members explicitly said that they do not want a voice online, despite knowing that if they wanted to speak they could. It is a choice not to speak especially online and by doing so, it relieves them of the responsibility for speaking. These silences on the Internet indicate, at least in the Republicans' case, that not all people buy into those liberating and empowering qualities said to make the Internet uniquely suited to support democracy, such as having a voice and expressing an opinion in public. For some online Republicans the Internet is a technology of coercion and not one of liberation, a technology that unduly endows speakers with an unearned and illegitimate authority to speak as well as giving evidence of that speech—digital text—a weightiness that to them is too dangerous to risk losing control over it (Sundén 2003). As Warner (1990) shows, the logic of print is contingent in spite of multiple attempts to configure it as a technology of enlightenment and rationality. So too does the Republican ambivalence towards online discourse underline the contingent, contextual and unstable democratic logic of the Internet.

Moving to other forums and contextual democracy

In the interviews with Republican members many expressed a belief that online deliberative democracy is socially contextual: in one context the same discourse is not considered democratic, in another online forum it is. They did not immediately make the ontological connection between the technology and an essential democratic quality, but rather many suggested that it is how the technology is utilised and in what social context that makes it a democratic medium or not. The nature of the discourse and its role in constructing an online democratic culture is dependent on the structural social context of the online forum. Ahmed
F. discussed the discursive norms that developed on the closed assaloon.org forum that he felt were un-Republican and undemocratic:

"And I some point I thought the rhetoric in as-Saloon is the rhetoric of a cult rather than the rhetoric of open-minded people. I intentionally went to sudaneseonline. If there is any one person who wants to debate me it is better that they debate me where other Sudanese people can access. So when he says everything, he doesn't think that he's talking to this closed circle, to those who share views with you. You better expose those ideas with people who don't share those views with you" (pg. 165, Chapter Seven).

I have already discussed the early hope many Republicans had for online technologies uniquely supporting and reinforcing their discursive identity they felt was under threat of extinction in exile as well as holding higher expectations for written opinions over spoken ones, which they saw online technologies especially conducive for. Their experiences with what they call "violent text" have belied these hopes and have produced both a perceived rupture to this identity through a textual self that is often dogmatic and violent, and online silences, and have forced many to seek more open and diverse forums to engage in political discussions. So by changing the social context—in this case the online forum where discussions are being held—Republicans were able to find and reinforce the discursive identity. Ironically it was not reinforced by their own social context of assaloon.org but was found only when they left their closed forum and went to the non-Republican social context of sudaneseonline.com. In the relatively diverse and public context of sudaneseonline.com, where equally violent and hostile posts also occur, Republicans re-enact their discursive culture of the al-rukun despite, and in many regards because of, the presence of violent text.

My findings echo Papacharissi's that hostile online discourse cannot easily be written off as undemocratic (Papacharissi 2004). Robust and even violent discourse can function democratically, where this type of deliberation can help adversaries on an issue solidify their arguments and observers of a debate decide their own positions. Chantal Mouffe's analysis of radical democracy further underlines my findings that for Republicans
when "speaking" publicly online with other Sudanese, prefer a debate that is contentious and antagonistic, and one that is not determined only by hegemonic interpretations of Republican Thought (Mouffe 2002: 9). The experience and thoughts of Ahmed were most interesting since he seemed to articulate so clearly (online) radical democracy as Mouffe theorises it:

"It's a new era and this kind of freedom, maybe people might abuse freedom, maybe it will look very extreme. But the cure for mishandling freedom is more freedom, not censorship or control. ... Now on sudaneseonline there are very rude people, they write really irresponsible kind of language. There is a public opinion that is growing to [counteract] these. ... Let people practice and then reflect on what they say and then create a public opinion that rejects bad things and accepts good things" (pg. 155 in Chapter Seven).

His perception of sudaneseonline.com, which was also expressed in similar terms by Fatima H. in the same chapter, mirrors Mouffe's theorisation of radical democracy as an "agonistic struggle" of interpretations contending to become hegemonic which never reaches a consensus (2002).

The radicalism of Republican ideology and its proposal for Islamic democracy lies in the contingencies of interpretations, the openness of the interpretation itself, and the possibility that anyone has it within herself to interpret the texts fundamental to Muslim thought, the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Recall Ahmed F.'s description of Republican discursive identity:

"The essence of what Ustadh said was never [to] think that there is a final word on anything. Interpretation is open, you have to reinterpret your ideas and be vigilant. You need to observe the reality and try to always to understand and to develop your discourse and adapt to the new things that are coming" (pg. 165 in Chapter Seven).
Laclau and Mouffe (1985, 2001) propose, on the one hand, the radicalism of discursive strategies is in their resistance to domination and on the other, these strategies seek to make their own interpretations hegemonic. In a similar way the Republicans employ discursive strategies to resist and dominate at the same time. Both in the al-rukun and in online forums, Republicans seek to upturn the hegemonic power of the established discourses of the government and of the Muslim Brotherhood, and to convince others that their interpretations of Islam, the Second Message and more broadly Sudanese politics are the *true* interpretations. At the same time, Republicans also say that their interpretations are contingent and this contingency is reinforced only by a discourse that is publicly engaged. For them if discourse remains insular and closed it will calcify, become brittle, and be drained of its vitality.

Laclau and Mouffe (1985) also noted that all identity is relational and for Republican discursive identity this is demonstrated in how it is constructed through discursive engagements with non-Republicans. In other words their identity is construed from how their discursive engagements are *different* from non-Republican ones, as explained by Fatima H. in Chapter Seven when she described how Republicans maintain a non-emotional discursive position in the face of violent text from other Sudanese people in online forums.

At the same time my findings are also similar to other studies (Cronauer 2004) that show online hostility on some forums populated by people who are familiar with one another can have a silencing effect and can alienate participants, that the experience of online silence is not necessarily unique to the Republicans but nevertheless it reinforces and underscores for them the alienation and trauma of exile. This has been a surprise to them since they believed that online technologies would help them bridge the geographical distances between them and recreate and reinforce their sense of being a community. This has not necessarily been the case for many Republicans.

*Strategic ambivalence*

As there is no clear and definable line between the online and offline, so too there is no bright line separating the public and the private (Pateman 1989; Warner 2002; Woolgar 2002). The Republicans employ a strategic ambivalence towards their own definitions as to what constitutes public (political) activities and which activities should remain internal
(spiritual) and private, which blurs the distinctions often made between the public and the private. By being ambivalent they are able to suspend not only a final decision on political activity indefinitely but also they deny the Sudanese government any opportunity to persecute them for the political activities that they still conduct, both online and offline. This ambivalence complicates too the claims made so often in the sociological work on e-democracy that the political happens in the "public sphere".

9.3.2 Authority to speak

In the two studies of the Republicans and of Democracy Now!, the issue of the authority to speak arose and is in many ways intertwined with the notion of silence. In the Republicans’ case, many members said that they did not have the authority to speak for the Republicans as a group or to speak on serious issues such as religion and Republican Thought. The right to speak departed with Taha’s death, and the refusal to speak serves to constantly underline his absence. This question of the right to speak has been compounded online and complicates the optimistic claim that the Internet endows a voice to the voiceless; in some cases people simply do not want an online voice.

At the same time that the Republicans chafe at the prospect of that authority, Democracy Now! assume this authority to speak for others: "we have to tell their stories until they can tell their own". This presumption to speak on the behalf of others is directly related to the American media context where only a small elite of voices are given a forum through the media’s reliance on official sources from government, the military, corporations (leaders, rarely ever lower level workers) and academics. Democracy Now! presumes to speak for those whom they call the “silenced majority”—the rest of us—and while the Democracy Now! journalists say they provide a forum on the show to let these voices be heard, they do not provide a similar forum on their website. While they point to time and budget factors that impact on their decision not to have a bulletin board or forum on the website, it may be because an online forum would be disruptive to their hierarchical production model where Democracy Now! journalists represent these voices and speak for them rather than letting them speak for themselves. With Democracy Now! there appeared to be no questioning about who has the authority to speak; journalists do—on behalf of those who cannot, their audience. There seems to be no self-interrogation by producers on how journalists endow
themselves with this authority in terms of Democracy Now!'s production model. The authority was taken as an implicit given. Producers have this authority reaffirmed, however, in the emails, letters and phone calls that they receive from their audience members who thank them for the work that they do.

Similarly, I explored how information and journalism organise discourse in democratic societies in Chapter Three and showed that American news media are deeply entrenched in a liberal democratic model where it acts a fourth estate to state power, representing the interests of the "people" in opposition to the state, and mediating information between the state and the ruled. Liberal democratic journalism is practiced by professional journalists, in a similar way to how politics are practiced by professional politicians. Radical journalism, on the other hand, is not practiced by professionals. The tools for news production are in the hands of "ordinary" people who live and work in the communities on which they report. James Curran's (1991) analysis of the fourth estate model for journalism exposes it as an oversimplification of how power operates in societies. It is not just simply a dichotomous relationship between the state and everyone else but rather that power is enacted through different subject positions, including those of the journalists themselves, and diffuse power relationships are reproduced through the media.

A visibly public engagement with Democracy Now! listeners and viewers is not apparent on democracynow.org, even though producers do interact with their audiences through email. This production model in many ways contradicts the rhetoric Democracy Now! employs to promote itself as the media that gives a "voice to the voiceless". The programme producers and Amy Goodman assert that the purpose of its journalistic practice is to expose silences and give a voice to those who cannot access the megaphone of mainstream media through the practice of what they call grassroots or advocacy journalism. Yet the programme follows a traditional liberal democratic model for media production, editorial control remains with the producers of the programme and is not turned over to the community even when this is made easier with online media. Democracy Now! does not exploit the full interactive potential of the Internet and it configures its website as a broadcast medium. As a result Democracy Now! is unable to overturn the traditionally liberal model of democratic media, the vertical communication framework as opposed to the horizontal one that is said to be possible online. However, it is through the use of non-
traditional sources for news stories and reporting on stories that commercial media are often late on coming to (such as the antiwar movement), that Democracy Now! radicalises its practice. They are able to be closer to the grassroots in their media distribution model and utilise Internet technologies in ways that are closer to their own idea of radical media. It is through building production and distribution networks with other media groups and activists, both online and through the airwaves, that Democracy Now! is able to radicalise its media production and in some ways synthesises its democratic imaginaries with its actual practice.

What the data in this thesis show and what I have already argued is that the democratic logic of the Internet is not inevitable. While many Republicans have an idea of what is supposed to happen online, their experience of actually being online contradicts this. Because of this split many Republicans expressed a deep sense of disappointment with the democratic potentials the Internet is said to have. Democracy Now! journalists point to all of the democratic potential of the Internet to emphasise their own hopes for a new era of democratic media but they chose not to integrate those elements into their online production model.

9.4 Imaginings and reclamations

What connects the online activities of the Republican Brothers and the online and on-air activities of Democracy Now!? The analysis of the data that I collected on both groups indicates that the strongest connection is in their mutual constructions of counterpublics through public discourse. The Republicans build their counterpublic in a place where a discursive public did not exist, and Democracy Now! reclaims a discursive public that they say existed once and needs to be taken back in order to build a just society in the United States and beyond where its policies affect other societies.

The people studied in the thesis seem to be involved in discursive reclamations, as demonstrated by the discourses on democracy by both groups. Democracy Now! is trying to take back the diverse, discursive public sphere that they say existed (even if it has only existed in the mythical, timelessness of American democratic ideology) and the Republican Brothers say they are trying to carve one out. Both groups through how they talk about democracy are attempting to reclaim something that never really existed in the first place;
they are in fact reclaiming a utopian vision of democracy rather than its reality since the reality always falls short of the vision. Through how they talk about democracy they also attempt to reclaim the discourse of democracy, taking back the rhetoric that has been usurped by the right-wing (in the US) and by Islamic radicals (in Sudan) and reapplying it to what they think is its true meaning (Smith 1998: 178).

So in terms of the Internet being a tool of liberation and finally fulfilling the promises of democracy the answer is maybe, not quite and sometimes. Part of the issue is to confront and disrupt the unspoken assumptions about e-democracy; that when e-democracy is discussed it is assumed that the “democracy” in question is a liberal model of democracy. Furthermore, much of the e-democracy research has been obscured by its own expectations of finding democratic cultures confined to the literature’s certain prescribed and normative theories, much as Hine (2004) found that when some social researchers went online they expected to find a distinct online social life. There are several competing models of democracy and these should also be considered when studying democracy online. What was suggested by one Republican may hold true not only for online Sudanese but for larger counterpublics, that we need to observe how people are experimenting online with “democracy” and wait before we draw any conclusions, since what is happening online could mean that a new model of democracy is emerging and previous definitions no longer apply.

We need to start imagining new and more complicated models. It is my hope that the results presented in this thesis should be considered as a small contribution to the bigger story of online democracy and not as a definitive statement. I hope that my research will encourage others who are also interested in the complexity of technological meanings and ambivalences as well as diversity of political cultures, to pick up on some of the questions raised in this thesis and continue to collect and tell alternative stories of democracy and the Internet.
References


McConnell, Carolyn. 2005. "Going to where the silence is: Interview with Amy Goodman." Yes.


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Appendices

A Statements of research and confidentiality, requests for participation

i. A research statement I gave to Republican participants, a different one was given to Democracy Now! (however, most of this was explained face to face or over the phone).

mary ebeling
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university of surrey
e-mail: m.ebeling@surrey.ac.uk
telephone: 020-7687-2434

Research Statement

I am a PhD student in the sociology department at the University of Surrey, United Kingdom. My research is focused on issues of online democracy, new media and technologies, primarily Internet technologies such as Web sites, chat rooms, bulletin boards, online meeting software and e-mail, online journalism, Islamic democracy, Islamic modernity, and political discourse online.

I am especially interested in examining these issues by making a case study of the Republican Brothers who live in the United Kingdom and in the United States and who use Internet technologies to continue the dialogue on reforming Islam in Sudan and bigger issues about democracy in Islam started by Ustadh Taha with the discussion corners and the jalsas, I am interested in learning more about how Republicans are using online technologies to engage in religious and political issues within the Brotherhood and outside of it with other Sudanese as well as non-Sudanese people.

Therefore, I would like to learn more about your own story of being a Republican and how you use new computer technologies such as bulletin boards, online conferencing software (like Pal Talk), listserver, Web sites, and chat rooms to communicate with other Republicans as well as to formulate and explain the Republican position to non-members. I am especially interested in learning more about the online jalsas and the bulletin board. Of great interest to me would be your viewpoints on democracy, insaniyya, shura and Republican Thought. What kind of engagement did you have with Republican members in Sudan, how about now?

As part of my research I am also examining all of the Republicans’ material, especially online media, that the group produces, observe online meetings, and conduct interviews with members, online newspapers from Sudan, third-party sources (i.e. bulletin boards such as sudaneseonline) as well as papers created by members in exile to learn more about current political situation in Sudan. I
am also interested in observing and interviewing non-brotherhood members from Sudan (in the UK and/or US) who are also living abroad to gain perspective on how the brotherhood is perceived by others and how their message is being received.
ii. A sample of the confidentiality statement given to all participants

mary ebeling  
sociology  
university of surrey  
e-mail: m.ebeling@surrey.ac.uk  
telephone: 011-917-733-0008 (m)

Statement of confidentiality

All of this research is towards the completion of my PhD only and the data will be used to write the PhD thesis and related articles or other publications. Anything you tell me will not be attributed to you directly. Rather I will use a pseudonym. I will also give you the opportunity to correct or clarify anything that I quote as well as clarify or correct anything that I have not understood, upon your request. I will provide you with transcripts of recordings and digital copies of photographs upon your request. I will NOT share any original documentation (i.e. notes and recordings) with anyone and all of this material will remain in my sole and secured possession. I am also strictly following the ethical guidelines for research as outlined by the Association of Internet Researchers (http://www.aoir.org/ethics.html) as well as the British Sociological Association (www.britsoc.org.uk).

Thank you very much for spending the time to talk to me.
iii. An example of a posting on alfikra.org's open bulletin board. A similar post was placed on sudaneseonline.com

**mebeling**

Posted: Fri Jan 16, 2004 10:31 am

Subject: Research on online democracy and Republican Thought

Hello Everyone!

I recently joined this forum and would like to introduce myself. My name is Mary and I am a PhD student in the sociology department at the University of Surrey, United Kingdom. I have a couple of friends who are Republicans and through them, have developed a strong interest in Republican Thought.

My research is focused the issues of online democracy and Internet technologies such as Web sites, chat rooms, bulletin boards, online meeting software and e-mail. I am interested in learning how these technologies help people to engage in deliberations around key issues. Related themes in my research include online journalism, Islamic democracy, Islamic modernity, and political discourse online.

For my PhD thesis I am examining these issues by making a case study of Republican Brotherhood members who use Internet technologies to continue the dialogue on Islamic reform and bigger issues about Islamic democracy started by Ustadh Taha. I am interested in learning more about how Republicans are using online technologies to engage in religious and political issues within the Brotherhood and outside of it with other Sudanese (like on sudaneseonline.com) as well as with non-Sudanese people (like me!).
Therefore, I would like to learn more about your own stories of being a Republican and how you use new computer technologies such as this (and other) bulletin boards, online conferencing software (like Pal Talk), listservs, Web sites, and chat rooms to communicate with other Republicans as well as to formulate and explain the Republican position to non-members. Of great interest to me would be your viewpoints on democracy, insaniyya, shura, ijma and ijtihad and Republican Thought.

Also, I am just now starting to learn Arabic, and inshallah, will develop it further soon...but for now, I have to write in English!

Please contact me at my school address <m.ebeling@surrey.ac.uk> or through this board.

Salaams to everyone, Mary
iv. An example of email requests made to Democracy Now! producers

Hi XXX,

I spoke with you yesterday at Democracy Now! about interviewing you (and possibly other producers). As you know I am a DN! volunteer as well as a full time student (U of Surrey, UK) working on my PhD. I am also a journalist. I was hoping that I could speak to you (and others) about the work that you do at DN!, your thoughts on how the DN! website reaches audiences (as well as your thoughts on the new website), and how independent media like DN! fits into the American political culture and media landscape.

My PhD is focused on online journalism, political discourse and media opinion shaping, and democratic theories, there is more information on the project, my PhD supervisors as well as more info on me at: www.tresfort.me.uk. Your input as a journalist is really important to my project. I will be volunteering next week (Monday and Tuesday) if you are interested and have 15 minutes to talk I would greatly appreciate it.

Very kindly yours,

Mary
B Interview questions

i. Republicans

Interview questions: Please answer as many as you can and write as much as you want.

Name:
Age:
Marital status:
Children:
Occupation:
Education:
City or town where you lived in Sudan:
City or town, country that you live in now:
Why did you leave Sudan?
How did you leave? (ie. Did you find a job in another country, were you forcibly exiled, did you voluntarily leave? Did you move to a few places before settling in where you live now?):

When did you become a Republican?

Why?

How did you join?

How did you participate in Sudan? How does this compare to your participation now?

How many Republicans do you see during a given week, month, year? How has this changed since moving from Sudan?

Are other family members also Republicans (ie spouse, parents, children, aunts, uncles)?

What is your status in the Brotherhood (are you a member or part of the leadership)?
What is the structure of the Brotherhood? How are decisions made and how are they implemented?

How many members are there?

What kind of digital equipment (computers, WebTV, web-enabled mobile phone, etc.) do you have or have access to?

Where do you use it...at home, at work, at a public facility?

How often do you use it?
What kinds of reasons do you use it for ... to send e-mails to family, friends, colleagues; to look at Web sites; to post messages to bulletin boards, etc.?

What kind of Republican activities do you do online, do you participate in the jalsas every Saturday, how often do you use the Republican’s Web site?

Do you post to the public bulletin board?

Do you post to the closed bulletin board?

What prompts you to respond to certain posts ... e.g. are you more likely to respond to a post if you have a strong opinion about it?

How do these activities differ for you from the jalsas, discussions corners and developing Republican publications that you may have participated in before you started to participate online?

Do you post to non-Republican, Sudanese bulletin boards such as sudaneseonline. If yes, which ones?

Do you read online newspapers and magazines? Which ones, how often? Why?

Do you read print newspapers and magazines? Which ones, how often? Why?
Do you listen to the radio...online, broadcast? Which ones, how often? Why?

Do you watch TV? Do you have digital or satellite TV? Which stations do you subscribe to, watch? How often? Why?

With all of the media that you read, listen to or watch, does any of the information or opinions that you gather influence what you post on the bulletin board or discuss during the online jalsa?

Can you describe to me the online jalsa? Are decisions made during online jalsas?

How are they made...what is the process?

What are your viewpoints on democracy, insaniyya, shura, ijma and ijtihad and Republican Thought?

What are your thoughts about democracy in Sudan?

What are your thoughts on democracy in your new home country?

Do you think there are ways that democracy can exist through using the Internet?

Are you continuing to spread the word on Republican Thought in the US? How are you doing it and to whom are you talking? Who would you not talk to about Republican Thought?
ii. Non-Republican questions

Name:
Age:
Marital status:
Children:
Occupation:
Education:
City or town where you lived in Sudan:
City or town that you live in now:
Why did you leave Sudan?

How did you leave? (ie. Did you find a job in another country, were you forcibly exiled, did you voluntarily leave? Did you move to a few places before settling in where you live now)?

When did you first hear or learn about the Republican Brotherhood? How?

Did you participate in discussion corners or jalsas in Sudan? How does this compare to your participation now?

Do you have friends or family members who are Republicans (ie spouse, parents, children, aunts, uncles)?

Do you ever see these Republicans that you know "offline" or is your relationship online only?

What kind of digital equipment do you have or have access to?

Where do you use it...at home, at work, at a public facility?

How often do you use it?

What kinds of reasons do you use it for ... to send e-mails to family, friends, colleagues; to look at Web sites; to post messages to bulletin boards, etc.?
What kind of activities do you do online and how often?

Do you post to the public bulletin board?

Do you post to the closed bulletin board?

How do these activities differ for you from the jalsas, discussions corners and Republican publications that you may have participated before you started to participate online?

Do you post to Sudanese bulletin boards such as sudaneseonline?

Do you read online newspapers and magazines? Which ones, how often? Why?

Do you read print newspapers and magazines? Which ones, how often? Why?

Do you listen to the radio...online, broadcast? Which ones, how often? Why?

Do you watch TV? Do you have digital or satellite TV? Which stations do you subscribe to, watch? How often? Why?

With all of the media that you read, listen to or watch, does any of the information or opinions that you gather influence what you post on the bulletin board? If yes, can you describe how this works?

Do you ever use other online sources (links to news sites, etc.) to validate opinions or thoughts that you post to the bulletin board (i.e. do you ever paste links to articles from other sources in your posts)?

What do you think about the Republican ideas on Islamic democracy, insaniyya, shura, ijma and ijtihad?
iii. Democracy Now! producers' questions

Name:
Age:
Job role at Democracy Now!:
Education:
How long have you been working in journalism or media production?

What role do you think journalism plays in a democracy?

How does Democracy Now!'s role differ or is it similar?

What do you think about objectivity in reporting?

What do you think is meant by Amy Goodman’s term 'trickle-up media'?

How does the Democracy Now!'s production process support democratic media or independent grassroots media?

How does what you do differ from American mainstream media?

How does the Democracy Now! website fit into the overall programme of the show?

Do you think the Internet is changing the media politics of the country? How about politics overall?
C Programme from the 20th Anniversary Celebrations

Human Rights Week
The 20th Conference of the Institute

Programme

Friday, January 14th, 2005

11:30 AM - 1:00 PM
Public Discussion on the Human Rights in the USA
Speaker: Dr. Esraa Hidajat, Professor, International Relations, National University of Eastern Washington
Place: The City, Public Library, Noon A

1:00 PM - 2:00 PM
Panel Discussion on the Human Rights and the Challenge of Modernity

Saturday, January 15th, 2005

10:00 AM - 1:00 PM
Public Discussion on the Life and Works of Mahmoud Mohamed Taha
Place: Rector's Room, High Arabic University, Cairo

2:00 PM - 3:00 PM
Panel Discussion on the Human Rights and the Challenge of Modernity

Sunday, January 16th, 2005

11:30 AM - 2:00 PM
Public Discussion on the Human Rights and the Challenge of Modernity
Place: Rector's Room, High Arabic University, Cairo

September 14th and the Islamic Reform: The Failure to ask the Right Questions in the Right Time

Dr. Alaa Abd El-Majid

Panel and National Songs from the Arabic Songs and Musician's Culture

Dr. Alaa Abd El-Majid

Dr. Alaa Abd El-Majid, President of the Arabic University

Monday, January 17th, 2005

11:30 AM - 1:30 PM
Opening Session: Discussion on Education

Dr. Alaa Abd El-Majid, President of the Arabic University

Panel Discussion on the Human Rights and the Challenge of Modernity

Dr. Alaa Abd El-Majid