

# Mediating the Web as a Public Space

## *A Local Experiment in the Creation of Online Civic Genres*

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### **Abstract**

Amidst the commercial hype that has come to surround the internet in recent years, there has been much excitement about the democratic promise of the net and a growing wave of various e-democracy projects. It is thought that the ICTs and the world wide web in particular will enable more direct forms of citizen participation, especially at the local level, foster reciprocal interaction between citizens and decision-makers and create new spaces for public discussion and debate.

Despite the claims of interactivity, the agenda for most online democracy projects has been set and their purposes of communication defined by institutionalized and powerful actors. The disparity between the rhetoric and the reality of web-assisted democracy is bound to persist unless the compartmentalized and hierarchic practices of public communication are challenged both theoretically and in practice.

This article suggests that in order to tap the democratic potential of the web, we need to address the question of genre. As genres offer the cultural interfaces through which people make sense of and use the web, like other media, bottom-up alternatives to dominant online genres are needed in order to create more citizen-oriented spaces of public communication on the web.

By drawing upon an experimental project where academic research co-operated with local grassroots citizen groups and actively mediated interaction on the web across social boundaries and power hierarchies, the article aims to demonstrate the socio-cultural significance of civic web genres.

**Keywords:** world wide web, e-democracy, locality, public communication, public space, genre, citizen activism, civic web genres, civic publicness

### **Introduction**

Amidst the commercial hype that has come to surround the internet in recent years, there has also been a recognition of the democratic promise and potential of especially the world wide web, with large numbers of publicly sponsored projects putting that promise and potential to the test (for examples, see e.g. Aikens 1997; Tsagarousianou et al.

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1998; Hague & Loader 1999; Tambini 1999). These e-democracy projects have stressed that through their two-way technical features, ICTs will pave the way to more direct citizen participation in government, especially at the local level, and open up reciprocal channels of public communication between citizens and decision-makers. The implication oftentimes is that technology could in itself provide a solution to the notorious crisis of representative democracy with its 'twin trend of increasing citizen apathy and citizen protest' (Tsagarousianou 1999, 204).

Despite claims of interactivity, most government initiated and many other online democracy projects have in fact been exercises in top-down, one-way dissemination of information, with official actors setting the agenda, framing the options and deciding upon the definition of the problem (Tsagarousianou 1999, 202; Hague & Loader 1999, 13). Given this discrepancy between the reality and the rhetoric of electronic democracy, Tsagarousianou (*ibid.*, 198) gloomily concludes that there is an 'inability or unwillingness to explore the potential of interactivity inherent to new technologies to the full'.

As long as the democratic potential of ICTs is approached as a technical issue, within the narrow frame of existing structures and practices of public communication, this discrepancy will no doubt continue to persist. As Davis (1999, 178) remarks in the US context, 'interactivity on the Internet is primarily an illusion'. As business organizations, government agencies and other official institutions, parties and politicians, traditional interest groups and the media are busily adapting their offline activities to the characteristics of the internet, this development, instead of creating something socially and culturally new, will strengthen the symbiotic relationships of already dominant forces and bolster their power. Hague and Loader (1999, 6), for their part, refer to evidence from e-democracy projects and maintain that 'ICTs are often used to augment existing practice rather than revolutionise institutions'.

If we want to see reality live up to the rhetoric, we will need not only to get rid of the material and skills-based digital divide, but also to pull down the barriers that are standing in the way of more open and horizontal public interaction between different stakeholders of social life. From this perspective, the success of digital democracy depends crucially on reforming the closed and hierarchic practices of public communication. Or, as Tsagarousianou (1998a, 52-53; 1998b, 175) puts it, the key thing is 'to support and enable the introduction of new forms of "publicness" within a public sphere partly dominated by privately owned and controlled media and the state'.

The focus in this article, is precisely upon the 'new forms of online publicness' and, above all, their communicative preconditions in the local context. By focusing upon genres of public communication the article tackles both the conceptual and the empirical challenges of redefining existing and creating new socio-cultural forms for the realization of more democratic online practices.

The question of genre is pertinent in this connection because it is genres that offer the cultural interfaces through which the internet, like other media, is interpreted, made sense of and used (cf. Agre 1998; Crowston & Williams 2000). The importance of genre is highlighted by the development where the online cultural forms that are evolving will provide ready models for those areas and groups that will be connected to the net at a later stage.

As generic forms are deeply imbricated with the established communicative practices which they sustain at the same time, it is hardly very surprising that the formation of the web as a realm of communication and representation follows the familiar, centralized and power-related offline patterns, imitating the traditional mass-mediated version of the public sphere. Thus the introduction of new forms of publicness on the web, as called for by Tsagarousianou, requires not only that the established patterns of public commu-

nication are exposed and rendered problematic at the level of theory, but also that bottom-up alternatives are created to the dominant genres, professionally (re)produced by commercial actors, the machinery of institutionalized politics and administration as well as mainstream media.

In order to demonstrate the significance of alternative online generic forms, the article draws upon a local experiment where academic research worked closely with local grassroots groups and also mediated actively public interaction on the web across social boundaries and power hierarchies. The embryos of civic web genres that were initiated and experimented with during the project offer one example of the kind of communicative structures and processes that are needed to create more citizen-oriented public spaces – the sphere of civic publicness – on the web.

### **The Mediatedness of Local Public Life**

The experimental project in question, *Locality in the Global Net* (hereinafter the Locality project)<sup>1</sup>, started out from the observation that the two dominant institutions of local public life, i.e. public administration and the media, especially journalism, lack in their practices any notion of citizens as publicly discussing and participating agents. Instead they are positioned into the role of private customers or individual audience members.

Another starting point for the Locality project was provided by results from earlier e-democracy projects, above all their experiences that political and other power-holders are reluctant to interact openly and on an equal footing with citizens on public web forums. An important lesson to be learned from earlier projects is that those in political (and economic) power tend systematically to avoid entering digital forums together with citizens (see e.g. Schuler 1996, 124; Jankowski et al. 1997, 11; Tambini 1998, 97-98; Coleman 1999, 200) and when they do, they mostly communicate with each other or other institutional actors rather than exchange views with citizens or answer their questions (see e.g. Jankowski & van Selm 2001, 158; Pietilä 2002). It is plain from these results that online communication does not in itself solve any problems of local democracy. Quite simply, it is useless to even speak of democratic – open, dialogical and deliberative – public communication online if a significant fraction of stakeholders are not taking part in the discussion in the first place (cf. Fishkin 1995, 40-41). And this, of course, is a major reason behind the 'apparent irrelevance to the "real" world of policy and politics of much online discussion', as Coleman (2001, 120) points out.

The Locality project started from the assumption that the technical features of ICTs may open up entirely new opportunities and even have a transformative effect upon the processes of public communication. For instance, they might give access to a wealth of information that has previously been beyond the reach of the general public and in this way enable citizens to engage on a more equal footing with political and other authorities (see Coleman 2001, 118). However, it seems far too simplistic to claim that new technologies are 'developing spaces for unmediated public deliberation in which citizens can interact with one another, with other communities and with elites that were once less vulnerable to such direct engagement' (ibid.). Equally premature and naïve is the statement that 'access to network tools, which is rapidly widening, is beginning to create public spaces in which new forms of information and relationship-building can circulate' (Friedland 1996, 207).

The evidence emerging from internet discussion groups and other web forums is in fact rather disillusioning: clearly, the mere existence of new 'public spaces' on the web

will not lead to increased horizontality and interactivity of public communication – at least not automatically. In other words, the Locality project found that the presence of public online arenas was not in itself enough to generate and maintain horizontal interaction and qualitatively developing debate on issues (cf. Malina & Jankowski 1998, 44-47). Starting from this view, the crucial question does not have to do with online immediacy but rather with how public interaction on the web could be actively *mediated* in a way that links 'online discussion to recognized channels of power' (Coleman 2001, 120; cf. Coleman & Götze 2001; Edwards 2003).

The importance of mediation is further highlighted by the tendency for mainstream media and journalism in particular to steer clear of dialogue in their capacity as the professional (re)producers of the public sphere in present-day societies. As critical research has painstakingly and repeatedly documented, rather than enabling and encouraging two-way relations between differently positioned social actors, the media tend to replicate in their spaces of publicness the compartmentalized and one-way patterns of public communication. In addition, the Locality project took seriously the observation by Hague and Loader (1999, 13) and others, that the push towards developing and using ICTs for open and meaningful dialogue with the citizenry is unlikely ever to come from politicians or administration themselves.

From the results of earlier e-democracy projects and the thoroughly mass-mediated nature of local public life, the Locality project also drew methodological conclusions. Rather than taking a quantitative or discursive approach to communication on existing web sites, it was decided that this would require more participatory and experimental research methods. In the spirit of participatory action research, the Locality project started out by creating a web forum and contacting active residents and grassroots civic groups who might be interested in taking part. The citizen-oriented web forum, which was named Manse Forum, was maintained in close co-operation with three local citizen groups. This co-operation led to the start-up of several further experimental citizen-oriented forms. These embryos of civic web genres tie in with the goal of creating bottom-up alternatives to the institutionalized patterns of public communication on the web.

As regards mediating public interaction on the civic web forum, the project's researchers – including the author of this article – adopted an active and even an interventionist stance in two important senses. First of all, they made available their time and skills to the three civic groups that wanted to use ICTs for purposes of raising public discussion on issues that group members regarded as locally important. Second, the researchers assumed a role as facilitators of online public discussion by attempting to organize interactive encounters on the issues raised by civic actors between local stakeholders that rarely meet in the mass-mediated spaces of public communication.

Underlying this dual strategy was the more far-reaching goal of experimenting with the web as a space of publicness that would afford grassroots actors a legitimate role as equal and active stakeholders and participants in local public life. Moreover, by taking onboard the priorities of already active groups, the project also wanted to challenge other local residents to see the public actor within themselves. In this way the experiment aimed at problematizing the privatized mode of social agency, which is increasingly pervasive in locally oriented web sites as well. In addition, by encouraging web-mediated public discussion and debate across social boundaries and power hierarchies, the project wanted to go beyond the limits of narrow partisanship and single-issue grassroots advocacy and make visible the broader potential of the web as an open and dialogical public space.

## **Civic Publicness and the Journalistic Public Sphere**

### *The Notion of Publicness*

From a civic point of view, a central aspect of public communication at the local level is not only that it acknowledges the expertise of grassroots actors in matters concerning their living environment and incorporates grassroots preferences into its processes, but also that local publicness enables and challenges different parties to take into account each others' views and values in the context of specific, concrete issues (see Ridell, 1999). Most importantly, local practices of public communication should provide an opportunity for an open and constructive treatment of differences in opinion and conflicts, yet at the same time allow for 'fair public disagreement'. Rather than taking differences in opinion as a subject of public communication or as a presentational frame, as journalism typically does, 'fair disagreement' can be conceived as a communicative method of dealing publicly with problematic and disputed issues. It is particularly noteworthy – and this also underscores the importance of active mediation beyond facilitation – that in order for stakeholders to be able truly to 'meet' and negotiate their views in such dialogical encounters, it is necessary to expose the power relations and the differences in social positions that lie behind the conflicts (cf. Tsagarousianou 1998a, 155).

The development of Manse Forum as a local public space started out from the ideal notion of citizen-oriented publicness. Civic publicness was defined as an open and collective process of interaction in which the actors engage in public dialogue on locally important, often disputed issues, trying to find a solution that would be acceptable to as many different parties as possible. This is exactly what active residents in particular expect journalism to do as the prime (re)producer of the local public sphere: to provide an open arena for public exchange between local residents and the people in power, above all political decision-makers and administrators. However, this is the area where the performance of mainstream journalism leaves perhaps the most to be desired (see Ridell 1999 and 2003).

Behind the dual emphasis of civic publicness on issues identified as important at the grassroots level, on the one hand, and their open and dialogical public treatment, on the other, one can detect two more general, analytically separate but closely interwoven dimensions of publicness as a material and spatial structure that conditions, frames and enables public interaction and that at the same is a dynamically (re)produced result of the very processes of communicative action. In some senses the idea of the simultaneously structural and dynamic nature of publicness resonates with the broader 'Giddensian' view of the constitution of society in the processes of structuration (see Giddens 1984).

In analytical terms, the structural and dynamic dimensions of publicness can be illustrated with the following diagram (cf. Wilhelm 1999, 156) (Figure 1). The diagram conveys the structural and dynamic aspects of publicness at two closely interrelated levels: that of production, on the one hand, and that of representation, on the other. The whole notion of publicness can be summarized by asking, first, who has access to the ownership and control of the resources that are necessary for the production of public communication, and how open or closed a process is involved here in terms of technical as well as communicative and skills-based access (level of production). Second, what is the architecture of the discursive spaces of publicness and how diverse is the range of issues represented in and actors that had been given access to these spaces? Moreover, how contextualized – historically and otherwise – are the topics represented in and what are the communicative relationships between the actors with access to the discursive spaces of publicness (level of representation)? At the level of

**Figure 1.**

Publicness	Structural dimension	Dynamic dimension
Level of production	– ownership and control of and access to the infrastructure (e.g. physical localities, equipment) and other material resources necessary for the production of publicness	– technical, expressive and communicative skills required in the production of publicness – opportunities and motive to participate
Level of representation	– the architecture of discursive spaces of publicness (open – closed) – diversity of topics represented in and actors given access to the discursive spaces of publicness – diversity of discursive forms available for public communication	– contextualization of topics and articulation of accessed actors' interests – communicative relationships between accessed actors (one-way – reciprocal; hierarchic – horizontal) – mode of mediation (monological vs. dialogical)
	-> genre-related addressivity ~ the implied social actor role	

representation, the dynamic aspect boils down to the mode of mediation, for in the discursive spaces of publicness it is the intermediary narrating instance that has the power to choose, define and frame the topics, to grant access to the actors, to formulate and contextualize what they are saying as well as to organize their relationships. By analysing the mediating activities, it is possible to determine how monological or dialogical a form of public communication we are talking about.<sup>2</sup>

Analysis of the structural and dynamic dimensions both at the level of production and representation will help us, first, gain a clearer picture of how public communication is mediated in different genres – including journalistic ones. Second, we can grasp the ways in which different genres structure and enable social agency. For instance, we can ask how interaction is conditioned, framed and organized in the production and discursive practices of the news genre and in what kind of social actor roles does the genre-related mediation posit people: are they approached and addressed as an audience observing social reality from the sidelines, or as a public agent, potentially interested in taking an active part in shaping that reality?

### *Production of Journalistic Publicness*

From a civic perspective, the way that mainstream journalism produces publicness is fraught with problems that have to do with both structure and dynamics. News journalism in particular effectively denies access to its production resources and processes. Both are restricted to professional and institutionalized actors. In terms of representation, too, the news genre is very limited, allowing privileged access to people in power and giving priority to topics and points of view defined as important by the elite or by the professional class of journalists themselves. Grassroots actors are visible in the discursive spaces of journalistic publicness mostly in the role of victims, troublemakers or *vox populi*. Indeed the argument of critical journalism research is that the professional production of journalistic publicness is a closed social practice which reflects and sup-

ports the prevailing hierarchic structures of power relations in society, not only in terms of its exclusivity with regard to issues and actors that are granted entry to the mass-mediated spaces of publicness, but also in terms of its methods of data collection and established modes of presentation (see Ridell 1998, 81-101). In this way the news genre posits its audience in a narrow social actor role as bystanders, reduced to observing from their spheres of privacy what is happening publicly in society.

In practice, however, especially at the local level, there is quite a lot diversity about the journalistic production of publicness. In Finland, for instance, local and regional newspapers in particular have consciously tried to reform their practices and even joined various experiments in civic or public journalism. A phenomenon most particularly in the United States, these kinds of projects are motivated by a shared commitment of researchers and publishing houses to resolve the problems of mainstream journalism and in this way to reinvigorate local public life. Advocates of public journalism wish to do this by bringing citizens' concerns to the forefront of the journalistic agenda and by incorporating these concerns as an integral part of journalistic work. One method often employed in public journalism projects is that of a citizen jury. (See, for instance, Charity 1995; Lambeth et al. 1998; Rosen 1999, Glasser 1999; Heikkilä 2000; Sirianni & Friedland 2001; Nichols & Friedland 2002.)

So far the efforts to reform local journalism with the help of public journalism projects or by otherwise promoting an audience-orientation have had quite limited success in bringing about a more permanent change in the way that local journalism tends to segregate political and economic decision-makers from local residents, both in the production of journalistic representations and in the discursive spaces of journalism. Nor have there been any more profound changes in the way that the local field of important issues is prioritized according to the definitions of institutionalized and other powerful actors. True, residents are often given the opportunity to speak their mind in the mass-mediated local public sphere, to defend their living environment and voice their demands. However, in these cases the traditional journalistic genres typically reduce residents to the role of an 'angry local minority' whose concerns, claims and questions are only rarely conveyed by journalism to the authorities and which therefore remain without public answers. Moreover, journalism's established strategies of presentation routinely denounce residents' attempts to raise their voice as NIMBYism, without showing how the particular problems relate to and can be explained by reference to broader issues concerning the quality of the environment or the possibilities of citizen participation in local government, for instance.

In contrast to the traditional journalistic practices of production and representation, Manse Forum's focus was on how new communications technology could respond to citizens' communicative needs and how the web could serve as a space for raising public awareness of issues recognized as important and/or problematic at the grassroots level. On the other side of the coin of civic publicness, special attention was given to using the potential of ICTs for purposes of encouraging more open and more interactive public exchange between local decision-makers and residents. Here, my own role as facilitator with a background in practical journalism was central. It is noteworthy in this connection that by actively organizing discussion across social boundaries and power-related role positions, the civic web forum challenged not only the segregationist strategies of local journalism, but also the hierarchic and one-way communicative practices of local government.

## **Experimenting with Civic Web Genres**

### *Groups of Local Residents as Public Actors*

In the production and development of Manse Forum, the research project had particularly close collaboration with three groups of local residents: a group of town forum activists (Tampere Forum group), a group of local residents involved in a process organized by the city's department of environment to create a local sustainable development programme (Tampere 21 group), and activists of a grassroots movement that was opposed to plans to build a new bridge for motor vehicles across the rapids that cut through the town centre (Mältinranta group). In each group the number of people who actively attended group meetings and who took part in planning group activities was around 15, and remained more or less the same throughout the project.<sup>3</sup> The project's researcher and her assistant were involved in the group's activities and meetings and made available their time and competence.

All three groups represent a new kind of citizen activity that has been gaining ground in recent years in a number of countries (cf. Fenton & Downey 2003, 20-23; Sirianni & Friedland 2001, 234). Rather than organizing themselves in the traditional association format, the people involved are keen to take more direct action at the grassroots level to intervene in issues that concern them. Citizen or resident activism of this kind is typically aimed at challenging plans that are considered to present a threat to the immediate living environment, but in the background one can often find a more general and even a globally oriented concern over the quality of the environment (cf. Castells 1997, 115-116). Another distinctive feature of grassroots citizen activity is a skeptical, critical or even cynical attitude towards institutionalized party politics. Furthermore, as far as the representative machinery is concerned, resident activists' campaigns tend to start 'too late', i.e. once local administration is already in full swing putting officially approved decisions into effect.

In an urban context grassroots activism is often motivated by differences in opinion concerning town planning and the underlying conflicts of interest. In these cases local residents may have very different views from local administration or building contractors as to how the urban space should be planned and used. In contrast to the residents' concern about the shared environment, the interests of the latter will often revolve around financial gains and questions of private land ownership. In the Finnish context, grassroots activism has grown up not only around issues of land use, but also health care services, schools and day care. Town forum activity differs from the issue-centred type of citizen activity in the sense that it is focused on the rules for the public treatment of problems and on the related administrative and communications practices.

The three grassroots partners of Manse Forum differed from one another in terms of their radicalism. In spite of some underlying tensions, both the Tampere Forum group and the Tampere 21 group had good cooperation with the local authorities, at least the city's environment department. The Mältinranta group, by contrast, challenged the administrative machinery head on, by openly questioning the legitimacy of the planning process that as far as city officials and politicians were concerned had already been wrapped up. This is not to say that the movement was uninterested in a constructive dialogue with representatives of local administration and established politics. Indeed the one overriding concern that all these groups shared in common was their commitment to increasing open and public interaction between local residents and decision-makers.

The production and maintenance of Manse Forum were closely linked with the activities of these three grassroots groups, trying to find ways in which to integrate new communications technology into their operation in as meaningful a way as possible so

as to support their communicative and participatory needs. Interested group members were taught the necessary online skills and given access to the facilities and tools in the project room at the university. An integral aspect of the groups' online activities was that both the local media and decision-makers and civil servants were all the time kept informed about what was going on. This was largely done via e-mail, with active links attached to messages. As regards mass-mediated local and even national visibility, it was – not surprisingly – the 'trouble-making' Mältinranta movement that attracted the widest and certainly the largest volume of attention during the project.

The people who took the most consistent and active part in creating citizen-oriented forms on Manse Forum were the members of the local town forum's planning group. For Tampere Forum activists, the cooperation with the Locality project provided an important complement to their other public exercises, such as hosting different kinds of public discussions and debates, the publication of the group's own newsletter as well as maintaining a mailing list.

All in all, participation in Manse Forum provided all the partner groups with a public presence, a visibility and a continuity they would not otherwise have had. Furthermore, the civic web site allowed the groups to bring to the public attention such issues that they considered important or problematic and to try and get powerful actors involved in public discussion.

### *Producing Genres of Civic Publicness on Manse Forum*

Several citizen-oriented forms were produced on Manse Forum in a joint effort with the activists of these three grassroots groups. These embryos of alternative online genres are illuminating and may provide useful insights in terms of the actualization and the further development of web-mediated civic publicness.<sup>4</sup>

Among the embryonic civic genres created on Manse Forum were *Civic queries*, *Citizens' initiatives*, *Civic monitoring* and *Civic visualisations*. Many of these embryonic genres were meaningfully combined as well.

Separate mention should also be made of the thematic discussion arenas which differ from newsgroups and many web forums in that they provide visitors with background information on how the processes concerned have unfolded. Importantly, a link to discussion arenas was included as an option in the other sections of the civic web forum. Each discussion group has one or two facilitators who actively encourage debate. In order to engage the silent parties as well, to draw in ever larger numbers of participants and to take the discussion in new directions, the facilitators have frequently relied upon online queries. In one of these queries, more than one hundred business owners were asked what they thought about traffic arrangements in the high street. The online query was also related to a citizen initiative by the local university students' organization for a bicycle lane in the high street.

Apart from the co-operation that the Locality project had with citizen groups, an extensive *Participant's Handbook* was compiled on the Forum web site. The Handbook can be seen to represent an embryonic genre called *Citizens' advice*. Among other things, it provides information on recent reforms in Finnish land use legislation with a view to encouraging more direct grassroots participation, and it also offers practical advice for people who are interested in public participation in the role of both citizen and consumer. Moreover, the Handbook gives users the opportunity to raise problems, to report on their own experiences, discuss them further and give advice to others.

*Civic queries* are public questions put to decision-makers and other people in power to find out what they think about locally important and/or controversial issues. In contrast

to opinion polling and other Gallup-like surveys that are reported and also conducted by mainstream media and that are often seen on municipal web sites, the questions in *Civic queries* are defined, formulated and asked by grassroots actors. The Mältinranta movement, for instance, conducted several surveys among city councillors and members of the committee for technical services in relation to the movement's referendum initiative. For these queries, decision-makers who did not have an e-mail address were contacted by phone by the movement activists, while those who did received e-mails from the researcher or her assistant. All answers were published on Manse Forum's *Civic queries* page, and the discussion was continued on the forum's discussion arenas.

A *Citizens' initiatives* web form was created so that grassroots actors could bring forward their own ideas, collectively elaborate upon these ideas and then go on to submit these ideas to the city administration and political decision-makers.<sup>5</sup> The aim of the Locality project was to link Manse Forum's *Citizens' initiatives* page to the city's online registration system so that citizens could submit their initiatives electronically from the civic web forum without having to print out the form, sign it and send it by mail to the registrar's office. However, the city of Tampere was not willing to engage in this kind of cooperation, which meant that the linking of one civic online practice to actual channels and practices of local power was never completed.<sup>6</sup>

Closely linked to *Citizens' initiatives*, two different embryos of monitoring genres were created on Manse Forum. First, there was the *monitoring of initiatives*, through which the reception of citizen initiatives and the handling of those initiatives in the administrative machinery were reported. A second form was *participatory monitoring*, where a town forum activist involved in the preparatory planning process of a specific area in the city centre (called Ranta-Tampella) reported back with information to which residents otherwise did not have access. In addition, during the planning process a public assessment was prepared by the town forum activists in response to the technical committee's reply to the citizen initiative concerning the planning of the area. This kind of public grassroots assessment could in itself form an embryo of a civic-oriented genre, i.e. a collectively produced *Citizen evaluation*.

In addition to facilitating more open public interaction between decision-makers and local residents and to making it easier for citizens to monitor local public administration, and in principle the workings of power more generally, Manse Forum provided a public outlet for citizens' imagination and creativity. This assumed endless different expressions, ranging from the articulation of immediate observations of the living environment to complex verbal and visual statements of opinion. On the civic web forum, examples of citizen creativity include poems and pictures inspired by the disputed bridge project, a picture exhibition by children from a day care centre, critical poems and exhibitions of nature photographs by a local resident activist. These often polemical and down-to-earth representations challenge the distant bird's-eye view that is the standard perspective of urban planning and that often simply gets mirrored in the mainstream media.

Apart from experimenting with citizen-oriented web forms, some mainstream online genres were redefined during the Locality project. *The Sustainable development electoral machine* that was set up on Manse Forum ahead of the municipal elections in 2000 provides one example of this redefinition. The questions for the machine were collected in a public discussion organized by the town forum activists as well as through libraries, e-mail and the internet, giving ordinary citizens a chance to take part in the process of publicly defining what are important issues in their home town Tampere. The answers of the candidates who were elected to the council will be posted on the internet throughout the 2001–2004 term, allowing residents to compare what the councillors said about sustainable development ahead of the elections to their actions in office.

Some of the embryonic genres experimented with on Manse Forum can be summarized in figure 2.

**Figure 2.**

Embryonic civic genres	Objective from citizens' point of view	Examples
Civic queries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– to get public answers from political and administrative decision-makers and other people in power</li> <li>– to get silent parties involved in public debate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Questions to council, committees and companies</li> <li>– Meeting-place</li> </ul>
Citizens' initiatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– to provide a platform for citizens' ideas and their collective public elaboration</li> <li>– to allow citizens to submit their initiatives direct to the city's electronic registration system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Citizens' initiatives page</li> </ul>
Monitoring citizens' participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– to obtain and deliver information from a grassroots perspective on planning and preparatory processes generally closed to citizens</li> <li>– to speed up the handling of citizens' initiatives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Reports by Tampere Forum activist on the closed meetings of the joint Ranta-Tampella planning group</li> <li>– Monitoring high street bicycle lane initiative</li> </ul>
Civic visualizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– to offer a grassroots perspective on the town in public</li> <li>– to give the imagination and expertise of local residents a legitimate role in urban planning</li> <li>– to challenge the technocratic bird's-eye view that informs official planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– 'A knee-high view on Tampere' exhibition</li> <li>– 'In town in Hervanta' exhibition</li> <li>– 'Mältinranta before and after the bridge' – competing visualizations I, II and III (published together with the official visualizations by the city of Tampere)</li> </ul>
Citizens' advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– to provide information and advice on rights of participation and concrete avenues of influence</li> <li>– to get answers to questions</li> <li>– to enable horizontal sharing of information and experiences</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Participant's Handbook</li> </ul>
Arenas for public interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– to tie up citizen debate and participation with preparation and decision-making and to broader causes and consequences</li> <li>– to facilitate and arrange constructive public interaction between decision-makers and local residents even and especially in disputed issues</li> <li>– to facilitate public debate between local residents and decision-makers on an equal footing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Contextualized discussion pages</li> <li>– Public encounters (Meeting-place)</li> </ul>

### *Importance of Civic Web Genres*

Citizens' questions to decision-makers, citizens' initiatives and the public monitoring of those initiatives, the actively facilitated public debate as well as visual and other manifestations of grassroots urban creativity build up on the web a store of citizen-oriented forms of public communication and representation and, in the long run, construct collective civic knowledge and a memory base online. Together, these civic web forms contribute to creating previously inaccessible places and models for public, participatory citizenship.

In terms of communicative and socio-cultural structures, it is precisely the culturally identifiable public participant role that makes the development of citizen-oriented genres such an important exercise in more general terms as well: these genres construct and legitimize such a role of social agent that affords ordinary people the right and the competence to take a stand on issues and to be heard, to participate and exercise influence in public (cf. Agre 1998).

It is no great exaggeration to argue that the future of the web as a space of civic publicness depends crucially on the question of citizen-oriented genres. This is because communication on the web, as in other media, takes place through cultural forms that we have come to call genres. As established communicative and representational forms, genres are firmly anchored to prevailing social practices, at the same time maintaining and reproducing the power relations and role positions built into these practices.

In the Finnish context the communicative practices of public administration and institutionalized politics have traditionally constructed for grassroots actors the role of a subservient citizen (see Sassi 2000, 230-234). In recent years, along with the steady growth of commercialization in society, the consumer-orientation has rapidly gained ground within local government as well. This fosters practices where residents are increasingly treated as customers of the professional administrative and decision-making machinery rather than participants in local democracy (see, for instance, Nixon & Johansson 1999, 135-136; also Ridell 2002). On the other hand, the social actor role available in the practices and discourses of news journalism in particular is that of a privatized audience member.

Citizen-oriented genres do not define people as subjects of public administration and institutionalized politics or as a privately onlooking audience to media representations, but give them the possibility to take up a public position from which they can weigh and value and where necessary criticize the workings of the administrative and decision-making machinery – and the mainstream media. Once properly established, these kinds of civic genres could help to lend broader legitimacy and continuity to the kind of public actor role that is a basic condition for a dialogical and deliberative democracy, both offline and on.

### **The Future of the Web as a Space of Civic Publicness**

One question that surfaced time and time again during the course of our experimental project concerned the 'real life' requirements that would allow online civic genres to be and become established. Obviously, the creation of citizen-oriented forms of online public communication and representation cannot be separated from the conditions for their production, both in their structural and dynamic sense. In other words, alternative genres will only emerge in the presence of alternative practices and processes of producing publicness.

In the light of the experiences gained in Manse Forum, the conditions for production can be grouped into questions of material and technical as well as skills-related access

to the internet, opening up and dialogizing the closed, one-way and hierarchic practices of public communication and improving the technical feasibility of online applications and tools. All these factors, together with the central role of mainstream media, contribute to the cultural image of the web as a space for action and agency.

### *Infrastructural Preconditions*

In terms of material requirements it is necessary that all people, regardless of their social position, have easy access to the internet. One way of doing this, apart from upgrading the existing library network, is to set up networked citizen centres or different kinds of public localities which in addition to the infrastructure offer training and continuous technical support. In these spaces people could engage in public discussions, but also take part in organizing events and in producing materials for online and paper publications.

These networked civic spaces would make available the infrastructure that citizens need for the independent production of publicness. At the same time they would serve as a base for the teamwork that the production of web-mediated and other forms of civic publicness requires.

### *Reforming Practices of Public Communication*

One important aspect with regard to reforming the established practices of public communication is that representatives of local public administration interact openly with citizens on the web. This should be coupled with the broader exercise of de-hierarchizing existing communication practices in local administration. One possible first step in this direction could be to arrange regular meetings between residents and leading city officials, including the town manager, with public reports on these meetings posted on the web. Citizens could send in questions via the internet ahead of the meeting. This experiment would combine offline and online communication and might even evolve into a new web genre as discussed above.

Another objective should be the mutual recognition and acceptance of municipal websites and citizens' independent content production on civic websites. This would mean, for instance, that mutual hyperlinks are set up on both sets of front pages and that representatives of local administration take an active part in open debate and discussion in the sphere of web-mediated civic publicness.

Civic web genres can have a central role indeed in improving the official web sites of municipalities and in enhancing their citizen-orientation. During the Locality project, partly in direct or indirect response to the challenges thrown up by the project, the city of Tampere's web site was developed in many ways. Among other things the city opened up new feedback channels. One of these is a moderated Citizens' Kiosk where residents can put questions to town officials and get answers to those questions. The city also added to its web site a whole new section called 'Participation', and recently opened an online 'preparation forum' where residents can comment on specific issues under preparation. An experimental application that makes use of the properties of the web is the urban planning game through which residents can express their views on different alternatives in certain planning projects.<sup>7</sup> At the same time the planning authorities have used the internet to an ever greater extent for purposes of illustrating upcoming projects.

The preparation of land use and planning projects is an area where civic imagination and co-operation with citizen groups could generate fruitful ideas for putting new communications technology to much more interactive use. Apart from posting maps and graphs on the web and giving citizens the opportunity to comment on plans at different

stages, the authorities could illustrate and put to the test ideas submitted by local residents. This would be a useful way of harnessing local residents' creativity and their everyday expertise for purposes of sustainable urban planning. Another service that should be worth developing in close collaboration with interested resident groups is a web-based citizen map that makes use of geographic information technology.<sup>8</sup>

The development and use of the web for these kinds of purposes would give people the opportunity to take up the position of publicly participating citizens and allow for more open public interaction between decision-makers and citizens. This, in turn, would help to carve out a cultural meaning for the web as a place that differs profoundly from web spaces that are geared to private consumption.

### *Cultural Image of the Web*

The role of the mainstream media cannot be sufficiently emphasized in the process where cultural perceptions of the web take shape. If civic uses of the web fail to get a sufficiently broad and credible footing in the media, then people will be likely to interpret them narrowly as forms of customer service by public administration or, as far as grassroots production of publicness is concerned, reduce it to a marginal exercise.

In terms of furthering civic publicness online, one of the hardest nuts to crack is spreading the message about the existence of alternative public spaces on the web. As regards Manse Forum, our various non-commercial advertising campaigns, word of mouth and e-mail lists as well as home-made posters, brochures and the publication by Tampere Forum, paled into insignificance when compared to the space that the local newspaper can use for advertising its own online version. Similarly, our efforts to market and advertise the civic web site cannot even be compared to the situation of the city's official website: all the advertising the latter needs is the institutionalized position of public administration in people's everyday life and the knowledge that virtually all municipalities in Finland today have their own sites.

One of the ways in which awareness of citizen-oriented web sites both in the media and more generally could be increased would be to link them together into a network and perhaps set up a portal of locally-based civic web projects. This kind of network would make it much easier to circulate experiences about internet use for civic purposes and to pass on information about related web genres.

As regards the experiments on Manse Forum, the Mältinranta movement in particular received quite extensive media coverage (see e.g. Pietilä 2002). In terms of journalistic practices, one can note that during the Locality project the leading daily in the Tampere region ran several discussion-oriented series of articles on local issues in which citizens were given a prominent role. Without empirical research it is difficult to say whether the project's consistent efforts to engage the local media played any role here. More generally speaking, the development of citizen-oriented web forms certainly presents a challenge to the daily practices of mainstream media and journalism in particular. This concerns such questions as who are the parties to different issues and who should have the right to a public voice, or who are entitled to public answers to their questions and who should not be allowed to remain silent in which issues?

### *Technical Challenges*

Even though it became perfectly clear to us during our project that new information and communications technology is not in itself an answer to any social problems, the role of technology development is crucially important with respect to the public use of the

web and the creation of online civic forms. For instance, the cumbersome discussion group software that was used on Manse Forum presented serious obstacles to participation in the online discussion. Moreover, Microsoft FrontPage, which was used for creating and updating the pages was not particularly flexible in use and did not allow for any imaginative and ambitious experimenting.

All in all technological problems and poor or lacking applications present a major obstacle to the citizen-oriented use of the internet. Civic web genres require special tools that need to be designed, tested and further developed closely with the citizen groups who are using these tools. Indeed one of the biggest challenges for the future is to develop the technology that meets the communicative and participatory needs arising from the grassroots level.

*Prerequisites for Web-Mediated Civic Publicness*

The preconditions for the production of citizen-oriented online publicness and its representational characteristics may be summarized as follows:

**Figure 3.**

Civic publicness	Structural dimension	Dynamic dimension
Level of production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- easy access to material resources (networked civic centre or similar facilities; PCs, server, publishing and image editing programs, training, technical support)</li> <li>- user-friendly and reliable technology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reasons and skills to use the web for public purposes</li> <li>- familiarity with the rules of public online communication</li> <li>- teamwork among civic actors</li> </ul>
Level of representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- civic genres revolving around:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- open, public interaction across social boundaries</li> <li>- citizen initiatives</li> <li>- civic creativity</li> <li>- civic monitoring</li> <li>- civic evaluation</li> </ul> </li> <li>- collective body of civic knowledge and memory</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- contextualizing issues</li> <li>- exposure of actors' interests and power relations</li> <li>- long-term monitoring of current issues and linking them with concrete decision-making</li> <li>- facilitating dialogue between different parties (dialogical mode of mediation)</li> </ul>
	-> <b>implied public</b> , which makes it possible to recognize the public actor role of the participating citizen and to view it as permanent and meaningful	

To sum up, the key issue in the development of the web as a space of civic publicness is whether it is possible to redefine mainstream web genres or to produce and establish new online forms that break down the traditional citizen role, which is increasingly permeated by the consumerist ethos, and offer in its place the dynamic position of a participating citizen who is keen to engage in public discussion. Obviously, this presents a host of challenges to various different parties, not least to academic research. One central challenge concerns the need to form networks of cooperation across social, administrative and disciplinary boundaries.

The need now is for the academic, technical and planning imagination to find one another and work together with civic actors. Only in this way will it be possible to find new uses for the internet beyond those more apparent and fashionable ones that are being developed in the prevailing economic and cultural climate. One of the toughest problems here is the question of how to problematize, both in research and in society more generally, the culturally pervasive consumer role from the vantage-point of which the public sphere is a supermarket and the production of publicness always appears as someone else's than the audience's job.

## Notes

1. The Locality in the Global Net project in 1998-2000 and its follow-up project (Evolution of eCommunities) were coordinated by the Journalism Research and Development Centre at the University of Tampere. An umbrella website called Mansetori (Manse Square) was set up at the beginning of the project. It has three independent but closely related subsites – Manse Communities, Manse Forum and Manse Media – which continue to be active today. The author was responsible for the Manse Forum section between 1998 and 2001. See Ridell (2001); also Heinonen et al. (2001).
2. See Pietilä (1992, 1996) for an analysis of the narrational structures and strategies of news journalism in the press and television.
3. The number of people taking part in the public debates organized by Tampere Forum activists, for instance, varied from 30 to 200.
4. There seems to be some affinity between the notion of civic genres and the idea of a pattern language for citizen-oriented information society, as developed in the participatory Public Sphere Project by Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) together with a loose network of activists, researchers, policy-makers and technologists. Aimed at advancing the democratic use of ICTs, the globally oriented Public Sphere project draws largely on the work of Christopher Alexander in the field of architectural design. Each pattern has four main parts (problem, context, solution and discussion), which help to preserve and transmit insights and knowledge. Pattern language refers to a networked structure of patterns that gathers together interrelated ideas. See <http://www.cpsr.org/program/sphere/patterns/>. See also Schuler (2002).
5. As a civic web form, Citizens' Initiative resembles ePetitioner, developed by the International Teledemocracy Centre as part of its e-democracy toolkit. See [http://itc.napier.ac.uk/ITC\\_Home/ITC/e-toolkit.asp](http://itc.napier.ac.uk/ITC_Home/ITC/e-toolkit.asp).
6. Later on the city set up on its website a page for the council members' initiatives. See <http://www.tampere.fi/hallinto/aloite/index.htm>.
7. See <http://www.tampere.fi/tiedotus/viinikka/vinealku.htm> and <http://www.tampere.fi/tiedotus/tohloppi/>; also Seppälä (2000).
8. For more on the use of geographic information systems (GIS) in participatory land use planning, see Kingston (2002) and Craig et al. (2002).

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