

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Blogging the hyperlocal
The disruption and renegotiation of hegemony in Malta

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by

Alexander Grech

School of Arts and New Media
University of Hull

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*For Liz and Jacob. My loves.
I guess I'm ready to clear my room now.*

Acknowledgements

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Finally, thank you to the bloggers who provided me with a rich tapestry of texts, and for raising their voices above the barricade at a critical moment in my island’s history.

Bloggers.. are volunteers; they may have little power over whom they reach, but they have unprecedented control over what they say and whether to keep saying it. No one can vote you off the island of your own blog (Rosenberg, 2009, p.322).

I come from a paper sailing boat-sized island that is anchored solidly in the middle of the Mediterranean, with its bow optimistically facing Europe and its stern snubbing the Arab heritage that fed our nation's lifestyle, culture and religion for centuries (Malta: Living on the edge of Europe, 2009).

I sometimes think that only in Malta can the word 'blogger' be made to mean something foul, dank, evil, cheap and pandering to the populace (Biwwa, 2011b).

Abstract

This thesis examines how blogging is being deployed to disrupt institutional hegemony in Malta. The island state is an example of a hyperlocal context that includes strong political, ecclesiastical and media institutions, advanced take-up of social technologies and a popular culture adjusting to the promise of modernity represented by EU membership. Popular discourse is dominated by political partisanship and advocacy journalism, with Malta being the only European country that permits political parties to directly own broadcasting stations.

The primary evidence in this study is derived from an analysis of online texts during an organic crisis that eventually led to a national referendum to consider the introduction of divorce legislation in Malta. Using netnography supplemented by critical discourse analysis, the research identifies a set of strategies bloggers used to resist, challenge and disrupt the discourse of a hegemonic alliance that included the ruling political party, the Roman Catholic Church and their media. The empirical results indicate that blogging in Malta is contributing to the erosion of the Church's hegemony. Subjects that were previously marginalised as alternative are increasingly finding an online outlet in blog posts, social media networks and commentary on newspaper portals.

Nevertheless, a culture of social surveillance together with the natural barriers of size and the permeability of the social web facilitates the appropriation of blogging by political blocs, who remain vigilant to the opportunity of extending their influence in new media to disrupt horizontal networks of information exchange. Blogging is increasingly operating as a component of a hybrid media ecosystem that thrives on reflexive cycles of entertainment: the independent newspaper media, for long an active partner in the hegemonic set up in Malta, are being transformed and rendered more permeable at the same time as their power and influence are being eroded. The study concludes that a new episteme is more likely to emerge through the symbiosis of hybrid media and reflexive waves of networked individualism than systemic, organised attempts at online political disruption.

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Acronyms

ACTA	Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement
API	Application Programming Interface
AAPSO	Asian African Peoples Solidarity Organization
AD	Alternattiva Demokratika (also known as the Green Party)
AN	Azzjoni Nazzjonali
API	Application Programming Interface
EU	European Union
GWU	General Workers Union
GNU	'GNU's not Unix', free software movement acronym
HTML	Hyper-Text Markup Language
HTTP	Hyper-Text Transfer Protocol
IP	Internet Protocol
ITU	International Telecommunications Union
IVF	In Vitro Fertilization
MCA	Malta Communications Authority
MEP	Member of the European Parliament
MITA	Malta Information Technology Agency
MITC	Ministry for Infrastructure, Transport and Communications
MLP	Malta Labour Party
MUSEUM	Magister Utinam Sequatur Evangelium Universus Mundus (Society of Christian Doctrine in Malta)
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NSO	National Statistics Office
PBS	Public Broadcasting Services
PL	Partit Laburista (formerly known as MLP).
PN	Partit Nazzjonalista (also known as the Nationalist Party).
RDF	Resource Description Framework
RSS	Really Simple Syndication
SEO	Search Engine Optimisation
SMS	Short Message Service
TCP	Transmission Control Protocol
TCP/IP	The Internet suite built around the TCP and IP protocols
UNESCO	United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization

URL	Uniform Resource Locator
WELL	Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link. An early Internet forum.
WWW	World Wide Web
XML	eXtensible Markup Language

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

My interest in conducting this research was triggered by several years spent running my strategic consultancy practice in Malta, during which I advised successive government administrations, public agencies and media organisations. As a sporadic blogger since 2004, I had become immersed in digital culture, engaging with the technical and self-publishing aspects of blogs and other emergent social technologies. I was particularly interested in exploring claims about blogging's potential to empower citizens and facilitate radical politics.

In July 2009, when I started this research, the vast majority of literature on blogging originated in the US, and considered the practice to be tantamount to “social marketing” and money-making. Early academic literature on the subject tends to expound technological determinism; it became customary to claim that access to free, mass-self-communication tools (Castells, 2007) empowers citizens to challenge the discourse and operations of dominant institutions and power blocs in various cultures. Internet theorists such as danah boyd¹ (2008) also challenge traditional notions of what constitutes “local culture,” claiming that social technologies have disrupted a simple construction of the research field site once defined by geography and “collocated peoples”, and now vulnerable to the changes of the hypertextual world of the network society. With the social web at their fingertips, boyd claims that people now form “part of many cultures including those defined by tastes, worldview, language, religion, social networks, practices, etc.”(ibid., p.27).

Stuart Hall (1997, p.74) echoes Foucault when he observes that “things mean something and are true only within a specific historical context”. The resurgence in critical media theory and interest in case studies from non-Western contexts is a discernible reaction to “one size fits all” technological determinism propagated by early writers on

¹ All references to danah boyd are in lower case. boyd had her name legally changed after graduating with a computer science degree from Berkeley in 2000 because of "political irritation at the importance of capitalization". See: <http://www.danah.org/aboutme.html>.

Internet culture. The dialectic relationships and tensions between technological and socio-political contexts deserve to be explored more critically, and particularly within local contexts and cultures where there are significant gaps in literature. We need a coherent grasp of the social, cultural and political processes involved in making social technologies potentially transformative and sustainable within a specific context (Pettit et al., 2009) as much as we need to question the notion that our mass self-communication tools, by their very existence, pose a challenge to institutions whose power is built on dominating public discourse, irrespective of the context. This research is aligned with Johnson's (2007) treatise that: all knowledge is situated and "helps open or shut down *different possible futures*" (ibid., p.96); that the global has not replaced the national; and that "cultural studies still need to study nationality and all the other forms of local social life" (ibid., p.106). Blogging theories similarly need to study blogs as embedded in specific, localised cultural and political spaces, if we are to obtain a more nuanced understanding of their contribution to systems of power in civil society (Keren, 2006), otherwise we risk propagating "self-enclosed cyberian apartness" (Miller & Slater, 2000, p.5). The discussion on blogs, blogging, bloggers and the blogosphere must become more sophisticated than a mere focus on specific genres and contexts of use (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006). Our approach to any investigation of alternative media needs to go beyond a mere acceptance of technical social networking as some form of automatic citizen empowerment.

Grounding interdisciplinary research within the context of a micro 'island lab' such as Malta provides an opportunity to closely observe the deployment of blogs as alternative media in a context that is traditionally resistant to change. Scholarly work on the strategic use of blogging in hyperlocal contexts, and specifically on its relationship with traditional power blocs, remains sparse: in the case of Malta, to my knowledge, it is non-existent.

1.2 Objectives and significance of study

The point of departure is to investigate the way in which blogging is encountered by and rooted in a particular place (Miller & Slater, 2000). It is as much an investigation into the search for private freedoms through the narrow-casting of citizen media as an interest in the dialectic of power relationships between institutions and individuals in a bounded community.

The objectives of this interdisciplinary study are to:

- Investigate how blogging is being used to disrupt the discourse and operations of hegemonic institutions in Malta. Specifically, it sets out to examine how hegemony in civil society in Malta may be impacted by the strategic use of ‘disruptive technologies’ by citizens.
- Update the findings of previous studies on social networks in Malta (Boissevain, 1974; Abela, 1994; Mitchell, 2002) by considering the incorporation of blogging in social life.
- Contribute to academic knowledge on digital cultures by studying the relationship between technological and social change at the local level. By focusing on the use of blogs and related technologies as tools of direct democracy, the intention is to engage with debates, theories and concepts that may provide new insights into digital culture and claims for citizen empowerment through the take up of the read/write web.
- Contribute to timely research on blogging within the social sciences and the humanities and identify critical themes for future research. Although the focus of the research is on the hyperlocal, its findings are likely to find resonance with contexts other than those of small island states or small communities.
- Explore how online discourse may be used both to sustain and disrupt institutional power.

This empirical study is important as the first scholarly work to investigate the blogging phenomenon in Malta. Maltese society is going through a period of sustained social, political and technological changes that are triggering discussions and debate on the blogosphere and other new media which, at face value, are challenging the hegemony of powerful institutions in Maltese society.

This is also one of the first enquiries into the ongoing dialectic relationship between the textual practice of blogging and print journalism in Malta. As in many other Mediterranean countries, media organisations are important social actors and power brokers through formal or informal, long-standing alliances with institutions, operating a model known as Polarised Pluralist or “Mediterranean” Model (Hallin & Mancini,

2004). In observing citizen attempts at disrupting hegemony through online discourse, it is possible to examine how media practices and journalistic production in Malta are changing as a consequence, even if these changes may not always be apparent. Couldry (2000) suggests that the asymmetrical power relations between media producers and receivers, where institutional structures and producers are in a privileged position that has become naturalised, should study media texts and their cultural absorption from interdisciplinary perspectives.

The lived experiences and socio-political contexts of micro-states like Malta often challenge the ‘knowns’ of Western media paradigms and discourse (Baldacchino & Royle, 2010). Although it bears many of the characteristics of Southern Mediterranean institutional hegemony and geographic insularity, Malta enjoys a state of technology-readiness at a par with advanced western nations. The ‘hyperlocal’ in Malta also represents ‘the national’ at the margins of Europe, with “disjunctive positions and world-views that are inherently contradictory” (Grixti, 2006, p.117). In a context where popular culture sometimes appears to be in conflict with citizens’ desire for social change and technologically-facilitated modernity, claims about transformation technologies can be investigated in a grounded manner. This investigation into blogging within a specific, hyperlocal context highlights cultural differences that contribute to a more sophisticated and critical approach to new media theory, beyond the monolithic yet polarised views that have dominated scholarly literature in recent years. Different contexts produce different outcomes, something that is “repeatedly obscured by overarching theories of the internet centred on its technology” (Curran, 2012, p.25).

Nowadays, social scientists are obliged to incorporate the Internet and computer-mediated communication in their work if they wish to investigate important facets of social and cultural life (Kozinets, 2010). The archived, textual nature of the blog makes it a valid addition to the qualitative researcher’s toolkit. It incorporates “qualities of practicality and capacity that can shed light on social process across space and time” (Hookway 2008, p.93) and may provide rich insights into everyday local life. Blogs are mature technologies, with an underlying philosophy of sharing personal experiences that lends itself well to what qualitative researchers do in the conduct of their work. Just as ethnographic practice continues to benefit from its encounter with mediated communication, so will other forms of sociological practice be enriched from

engagement with new media (Robinson & Schulz, 2006). Qualitative researchers are obliged to deliver more transparent, empirical research: blogs provide qualitative investigators with a rich space within which to share their perspectives, biases, and reflective findings (Chenail, 2011).

1.3 Research questions

The main research question is:

How is blogging leading to a disruption of hegemony in Malta?

The study also aims to answer the following secondary questions:

- a) How has blogging in Malta taken on its current characteristics?
- b) What strategies are used by Maltese bloggers in attempting to disrupt the operations of hegemonic institutions?
- c) What strategies are adopted by hegemonic institutions in attempts to retain their hegemony in the face of the threats posed by blogging in Malta?
- d) How is blogging in Malta influencing mainstream media practices in Malta, and disrupting traditional notions of news flows between the mainstream media and their audiences?
- e) How can blogging operate as a citizen power tool in the Maltese media landscape, which has a history of operating as a tool of the hegemony or operating as a hegemonic entity in its own right?

1.4 Conceptualising key terms

The following subsections provisionally define key terms employed in this study.

1.4.1 Blogs, blogging and the blogosphere

Blogs (or weblogs) are one of the earliest examples of the read /write web and, until the proliferation of social networks like Facebook, were the most popular online personal publishing platform on the Internet (Brady, 2005). Blogs first came to the public attention around 1996-1997 and were immediately termed “disruptive technologies”

(Sharples, 2003), their reputation based on their self-publishing functionality and ubiquitous, low-to-zero costs that were deemed to facilitate decentralisation, anonymity, customisability and information-sharing (Zhou, 2009). Graham (1999) writes that the marks of a transforming technology are twofold: its ability to serve recurrent needs better (qualitatively as well as quantitatively); and its having a major impact upon the form of social and cultural life. As a relatively mature technology, the blog can claim to have been both transformational and a cultural invention, particularly in that its reputation has been built on practice, having emerged out of particular conditions and helped create new ones (Escobar et al., 1994).

The definition of what constitutes a blog is in a constant state of evolution, reflecting developments in the medium's functionality. In 2003, blogger Dave Winer defined a 'weblog' as:

a hierarchy of text, images, media objects and data, arranged chronologically, that can be viewed in an HTML browser (where).. the center of the hierarchy, in some sense, is a sequence of weblog "posts" that forms the index of the weblog, that link to all the content in sequence.

Nowadays, a blog is associated with a website that can be created, maintained and used easily without any technical expertise. It retains the reverse chronology of posts, hyperlinks to other online sources and, importantly, a unique permalink for each individual post. There is also the facility for interaction between creator and reader through online commentary (Farrell and Drezner, 2008). As an asynchronous type of communication media, text still predominates, although blog software facilitates the embedding of multi-media (such as photos, videos and podcasts) within a blog post. Appendix 2.1 provides an updated definition of the core functionality of a blog.

In its most basic form, *blogging* means writing a post on a weblog using blogging software, an online practice tantamount to the activities of individuals classified as "creators" according to Forrester's Technographic ladder (Li & Bernoff, 2008). Blogging requires a number of core skills including copywriting, content curation, networking, broadcasting and media-awareness skills which go beyond the interactions on social networks and micro-blogging sites. Social networks such as Facebook and Google+ now support the creation and sharing of blog-type posts, while micro-blogging sites such as Twitter and Tumblr may also be used for brief updates and posts (see

Appendix 2.4). The asynchronous nature of the blog means it shares a common characteristic with broadcast media in that it also gives time for audience reflection. Bloggers who wish to reach and engage with a wider audience beyond the immediacy of their proprietary blog nowadays need to extend their core blogging skills to include transliteracy skills, defined as:

the ability to read, write and interact across a range of platforms, tools and media from signing and orality through handwriting, print, TV, radio and films, to digital social networks (Thomas et al., 2007).

There have been several studies aimed at deconstructing blogging within the context of blog structure and content output: for instance, Rettberg (2008) identifies three genres: personal or diary-style blogging; topic-driven blogging; and filter blogging (see Appendix 2.3). boyd (2006) believes such metaphorical approaches only introduce analytic biases that hinder our ability to follow how the practice and values of bloggers shape the output. This study shares boyd's assertion that: a) we need to shift our attention to the *practice* of blogging, rather than consider blogs to be some genre of communication; and that b) blogging is a diverse set of practices that result in the production of diverse content on top of a culture-driven medium that we call a blog. By focusing on the practice rather than the medium, we may analyse how blogging has helped blur accepted distinctions such as between orality and textuality, corporeality and spatiality, private and public. Nevertheless, the medium's technical features continue to be associated with critical, disciplined, reflective or "connective writing" (Richardson, 2005), since blog software provides greater flexibility and scalability for essay-type writing than, say, tools like Facebook or Twitter. Jenkins' (2006, p.320) definition of blogging is particularly pertinent to this study in that it highlights both the proactive and reflexive nature of the practice; and that it places it within the context of both mainstream media and the activities of other bloggers:

a mode of publication of grassroots origin that responds to information circulated either by other bloggers or by the mainstream media.

The term *blogosphere* was first used by Brad. L. Graham in September 1999 to supposedly mark the end of cyberspace. It was revived in 2002 by William Quick as "the intellectual cyberspace we bloggers occupy", explicitly referring to the blogosphere

as a space for serious discourse. Nowadays, the term refers to a collective of blogs and the hyperlinks that connect them, and is clearly derivative of the public sphere (Tremayne, 2007). The degree to which scholars consider the blogosphere to be a “collective” varies: for boyd (2006), it is a discursive space, “the imagined public sphere”; for Bruns & Jacobs (2006, p.6) it is “the overall community of blogs and bloggers”. O’Neil’s (2009) “blogspace” and Dean’s (2010) “blogipelago” point to a much looser, and more individualistic collective of blogs.

1.4.2 Hegemony and civil society

The study is informed by the cultural and political theory of *hegemony* as articulated by Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), the Italian socialist, political theorist and activist. The concept was originally developed to describe and analyse how modern capitalist societies were organised or intended to be organised (Bocock, 1986), yet its basic tenets retain currency in the 21st century to express the ways ideology and power operate in modern capitalist societies. There is no one coherent articulation of a ‘theory of hegemony’, nor did Gramsci coin the term, although it remains closely associated with his work (Borg, Buttigieg & Mayo, 2002; Smith, 2010). The closest Gramsci came to a definition of hegemony is in this extract from his Prison Notebooks:

the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (Gramsci, 1971, p. 12)

As a theory, hegemony is both complex and nuanced and Appendix 3 attempts to deconstruct the key tenets of the theory that are relevant to this research. Gramsci’s key interconnected concepts of civil society, integral state, common sense and organic intellectuals are central to understanding the process of hegemony and the intricate connections among individuals, civil society institutions and the State in contemporary Malta. Hegemony is the ongoing process whereby a dominant or ruling bloc, as part of a political and ideological struggle, secures the consent of other classes and social forces within a culture (Bennett, 1996). It is achieved through consensus rather than coercion, primarily through the creation and maintenance of a system of alliances (Simon, 1982). Hegemony’s success lies in its ability to make its ideologies, institutions, hierarchies and

discourse appear 'natural', unquestionable, and as 'common sense' to subordinate (or subaltern) groups. In adopting these tactics, the desires of the hegemon are incorporated into daily life and, consciously or subconsciously, the subalterns accept its advocacy as in their best interests - "for their own good". Hegemony is a dynamic and constant process of renegotiation and redefinition of the dominant class's legitimacy and leadership since its authority can always be challenged by a subordinate group: every ruling bloc must expect moments of crisis that it may need to resolve by accommodating the ideologies of the subordinate groups. Hegemony is more likely to overcome revolutionary resistance through negotiation, incorporation and concession than through outright oppression: yet precisely because it is a process, it cannot be secured once and for all (Procter, 2004).

Ideology² and culture are of fundamental importance to sustaining relations of power (Fairclough, 2003). Gramsci challenges the simplistic opposition between domination and subordination or resistance and recasts class hegemony as ideological domination. For hegemony to root, ideas need to be embedded through the cultural institutions and practices of civil society that appear to be independent of politics. Rather than rejecting an embedded culture and imposing a new system, a successful hegemonic strategy is dependent on the establishment of links and shifting networks of influence among the existing cultural, political and economic roles of given segments of the population. This is a way of demonstrating a unity between the culture of the people who are ruled and their political representatives.

Hegemony is a process that is dialectical and communicative in character. In an exploration of the disruptive power of online discourse, culture is manifested in the texts and practices whose principal function is to signify, produce or be the occasion for the production of meaning (Storey, 2009). Hegemony theory helps explain how certain discourse representing the ideology of the dominant bloc becomes accepted and internalised by civil society as 'common sense', while other discourse is excluded. The concept has been approached in terms of a version of discourse theory in the 'post-Marxist' political theory of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), where a hegemonic struggle is about the representation of mainstream or universal meanings as embodied in discourse.

² Giddens (1997, p.583) defines ideology as "shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups".

This study follows Gramsci's *minimalist model of civil society* as opposed to contemporary readings of the concept because of its relevance and currency to the current socio-political context in Malta (see Appendix 3.3 for further discussion on civil society). Rather than being a de facto arena for popular oppositional politics, civil society is the domain for the operations of hegemony. This is the sphere where the mechanisms and modulations of power that purport to be democratic are exposed (Buttigieg, 1995); where a dominant social group organises consent, and where subordinate social groups may organise their opposition and construct or renegotiate an alternative hegemony (Simon, 1982; Mayo, 1999).

Civil society includes ideological institutions that consolidate existing hegemonic arrangements, but also contains spaces, often within the ideological institutions themselves, where these arrangements can be contested and renegotiated through the operations of organic intellectuals (Mayo, 1999; 2011). In Malta, the ideological institutions in civic society are typically civic groups, unions, schools, social clubs, the Church³, the media and other formal or informal organisations. The structures, institutions and operative norms in Maltese civil society include powerful socio-political formations that are classist and groupist and rely on the operations of agents and social brokers: these play a fundamental role in providing ideological frameworks for understanding the hegemonic order of society and the world as 'natural'. The updated definition of civil society extends beyond Gramsci's "ensemble of organism commonly called private" (Gramsci, 1971, p.12), in that it is as much "a matter of individual behaviour, tastes and values as it is a matter of regulated cultural institutions" (Jones, 2006, p.32). As hegemony becomes more and more a matter of 'everyday life', so it becomes increasingly difficult to recognise that civil society has connections with the operations of power (see Buttigieg, 1995, 2005). It may be more helpful to view civil society as facilitating both top-down and bottom-up hegemonic operations. In the former realm "the dominant forces penetrate and co-opt elements of popular movements", while in the latter civil society is conceived as "the realm in which those who are disadvantaged ... can mount their protests and seek alternatives" (Cox, 1999, pp.10-11).

Hegemony remains the ruling class's consensual basis within civil society. What distinguishes hegemony from domination is precisely the symbiotic relationship

³ In this thesis, 'the Church' refers to the Roman Catholic Church in Malta. See <http://maltadiocese.org>.

between the government (identified with ‘the State’ in mainstream political theory) and civil society - a relationship that cannot be analysed in any meaningful way if one presumes civil society as being separate from or necessarily opposed to the State. Gramsci describes this symbiosis as the “integral state,” that includes both the functions of social hegemony and political government. Gramsci’s much-quoted (1971, p.238) military metaphor of the State as the “forward trench behind which stand a succession of sturdy fortresses and emplacements” of civil society can also be used to understand how the struggle for power in a liberal democracy is an ongoing, sublime process that happens within the domain of civil society rather than a direct confrontation with the political hegemony. An effective hegemonic strategy is the formation of links and relations with the existing cultural institutions and practices in civil society that appear to be independent of politics, but which in practice prop up the state. Gramsci’s insistence on the place of culture as a constituent element in political struggle offers a compelling analytical framework for a hyperlocal study.

Gramsci’s theory provides this study with the “organising framework” (Bennett, 1986, p.219) through which to observe the organisation of an alternative discourse in the superstructure of civil society. It both grounds and counterbalances any tendency for research to get “trapped by the empirical data” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p.166), particularly where technology, popular culture and institutional power appear to be intertwined. Hegemony is applied as a critical lens through which we may examine how blogging operates within a specific, popular culture when issues of institutional power are being challenged, rather than focusing on the more technologically-deterministic approach of ‘participation’ associated with web 2.0 tools. The study of a hyperlocal cultural crisis also exposes hegemony in practice, where the rejection of an embedded culture and the potential imposition of something entirely new opens a division between the culture of the people and their political representatives. When such divisions become unbridgeable they are expressed as an “organic crisis”, opening the ground for other forces that are better positioned to make other arrangements as the representatives of popular interests (Jones, 2006).

Gramsci’s strategy for securing power by establishing consent in civil society rather than the institutional process of reproducing it (Ives, 2010) is known as the “war of position” (see Appendix 3.6). As a strategy, it challenges our own prejudices and assumptions on the sublime workings of institutional power, and has been revisited and

updated by many scholars including Foucault, Fairclough, Laclau & Mouffe, Bourdieu and others, with different inflections. For instance, Gramsci's theories are grounded in the political process of establishing consent while Bourdieu's interest is in the institutional process of reproducing consent (Friedman, 2009). Gramsci's requirement for a civil society that is unregulated from above has been dismissed as utopian, particularly in view of the historic failure of the working class to overthrow capitalism (Van den Berg, 2003). Yet the war of position retains currency, particularly in a struggle to secure popular, social consensus, where consent is the production of 'universal meaning'.

In this research, hegemony theory serves as a toolbox with which to deconstruct the attempts by bloggers to disrupt the hegemony of the ruling bloc in Malta through the production of online texts for consumption by an unknown audience in the superstructure of civil society. At the core of these attempts is a struggle for meaning through discourse, the process through which power relations become naturalised and so much part of "common sense" that they cannot be questioned. Hall's (2001, p.72) description of discourse is particularly pertinent:

a system of representation that regulates our truths at a given, historic moment in time, that defines and produces the objects of our knowledge, governs which ideas are taken for granted as common sense, articulated and put into practice, and excludes other ways of talking, of conducting ourselves in relation to the construction of knowledge about a topic.

As a strategy for securing power, the war of position is therefore about organising and executing the hegemonic struggle for representation and alternative discourse where, as a new 'political' force, bloggers can legitimately voice "claims of their particular visions and representations of the world to having a universal status" (Butler et al., 2000, in Fairclough, 2003, p.45). Reality and its meanings are constructed within language, discourse, and representation *within a specific history and culture*. In discursive terms this means that representation not so much distorts reality as productively provides the means by which reality is actively constructed (Hall, 1997, p.42).

Blogging as a disruptive practice is therefore to be considered also within an overall strategy for alternative or counter-hegemony, where issues of discourse, meaning,

representation, language and practice inevitably focus on the terrain of ‘local culture,’ since civil society is that local terrain where the struggle for power through consent takes place. Appendix 3.6 provides further background on how strategies for an alternative hegemony may be constructed.

1.4.3 Blogging as disruption

This study focuses on blogging as a discursive practice of resistance to dominant, hegemonic discourse, and where a blog is deployed as counter-hegemonic media. Disruptive blogging is about operating in opposition to, resisting and pushing against a prevailing system of power, opening new opportunities for discourse and social engagement. As Foucault (1978, p.95) writes:

Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.

Languages of power imply particular languages of resistance to that power. Routledge (1996, p.415) argues that resistance refers to:

any action, imbued with intent, that attempts to challenge, change, or retain particular circumstances relating to societal relations, processes, and/or institutions.

Disruptive blogging contests hegemonic meanings through a “discursive practice of resistance” that aims to develop non-conformist representations of the views of those marginalised, misrepresented and under-represented in the public sphere. The notion of disruption is inevitably subjective and needs to be contextualised, since blogging does not operate or function in a vacuum, but is embedded in specific economic, political and cultural settings.

Table 1 overleaf has been adapted from a number of sources, including Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008, p.19) to illustrate the key characteristics of disruptive blogging as deployed in this study. These are often found in the social, economic, cultural and political characteristics associated with alternative media such as blogs, and reflect a belief that blogging needs to be situated within the participatory political and democratic theories. Within the context of this study, perhaps the most important

feature of disruptive blogging is the desire for a discursive break with the past through a new type of citizen discourse which operates outside the reach and influence of hegemonic institutions, including mainstream media.

	Characteristics of disruptive blogging
<i>Purpose</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Rejects commercial motives. ▪ Opposes power structures and their operations. ▪ Builds support, solidarity and networking.
<i>Source of funding</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Self-funded.
<i>Regulatory dispensation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Independent / ‘free’ from regulations and codes of practice. ▪ Propensity to break rules, though rarely all of them in every respect.
<i>Organisational structure</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Autonomous. ▪ Bottom–up, citizen media. ▪ Blogging by “people at the edges participating in news-gathering and dissemination processes” (Gillmor, 2006, p. 25). ▪ Encourages countercultural loyalties. ▪ Embraces an alternative vision of technology as a tool for individual and collective transformation (Turner, 2006)
<i>Criticising professional practices</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Encourages voluntary engagement. ▪ Facilitates access and participation for non-professionals.
<i>Message content</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contradicts and resists dominant discourses or representations. ▪ Expresses an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities and perspectives. ▪ Access to mass self-communication media enables citizens to define, claim, and give meaning to their lives, and re-create the social and political openings and alternative spaces where their voices might be heard. The process is not just about raising voices, but about reshaping boundaries and finding a voice in the first place: preparing it, expressing it through diverse cultural and creative forms, and creating the social and political conditions for making these expressions legitimate. ▪ Focuses on discontent, contest and negotiation rather than consensus and harmony. ▪ It is a sphere where subordinate social groups may organise their opposition to the mainstream and construct a counter-hegemony (Simon, 1982). ▪ Free from interference by the state, market actors, and multilateral agencies; produced by the local community in their own language for their own consumption on issues that they themselves deem relevant and so ‘alternative’ in content from the dominant media.
<i>Relationship with the online audience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Democratises communication in that it enables the ‘full’ participation of social actors. Citizens may write and others respond without permission; publish without intermediaries; and comment on the published work of others, in most cases without owner moderation of content. ▪ The needs and goals may be articulated by the audience.
<i>Composition of audience</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Characterised by diversity and multiplicity ▪ Likely to be local rather than regional.

Table 1: Characteristics of disruptive blogging. Adapted from Bailey et al. (2008, p.19).

1.4.4 The hyperlocal

There is no one agreed definition for the term ‘hyperlocal’ and an actual definition remains elusive (Metzgar et al., 2011). Hyperlocal originated as a technical and marketing buzzword, to explain various phenomena triggered by the uptake of social media and relating to the use of the media in a niche community within a “local” geographic area. Media characterised as hyperlocal have been described as a hybrid of civic, community, state-wide public affairs, and alternative newspaper movements combined with the interactive and broadcasting abilities accompanying Web 2.0.

Within the context of this study, ‘hyperlocal’ is used as a noun and refers to a specific community that is well-defined by its location, culture and small size, such that these characteristics facilitate the observation of the online activities of local social actors, whose discourse is intended primarily for consumption by residents of the same community. In this study, Malta meets all the criteria for the hyperlocal, with the additional characteristics that “local” also means ‘national’ and ‘bounded’, the characteristics of a small island state. Definitions of what constitutes a “small state” often lead to stereotyping about issues such as insularity, insecurity, development, instability, vulnerability and limited scope of foreign policy. Hey (in Karatzogianni, 2009) writes that if a state is perceived as small either by its own people or by others, it should be considered a small state. The emphasis here is on how these states are represented, perceived and *mediated* in the “glocal⁴” public sphere: issues relating to media representations and transformations and the evolving dynamics between mainstream and citizen media are at the core of this study. Malta is also a “city island” (Abela, 2001), its population and size comparable to urban, technologically-connected spaces with their own perceived unique identity. This research on the practice of hyperlocal blogging therefore has implications that extend beyond the specific context and confines of Malta-based studies.

⁴ The connection or relationships between global and local.

1.5 Malta: contextual overview

Malta is an archipelago of five islands – Malta⁵, Gozo, Comino, Cominotto and Filfla, the first three of which are populated. Situated in the central Mediterranean some 93 km south of Sicily and 288 km north-east of Libya, with a surface area of 316 sq. km. and an indigenous population of 417,617, Malta is the smallest and most densely-populated country in the EU⁶.



Figure 1: Map of Malta

The island’s population is mostly composed of descendants of Phoenician, Arab, British and Italian peoples. Children under 18 comprise nearly 20 per cent of the total population, while persons aged 65 and over make up 15 per cent of the population. Life expectancy is 78 years for males and 82 years for females. Education is compulsory to age 16; and the literacy rate stands at 93% (NSO, 2011). The country has two official languages: Maltese (a Semitic language) and English. This bilingual culture is also reflected in mainstream and online media.

⁵ From now on the Maltese archipelago will be referred to collectively as ‘Malta.’

⁶ Malta has an average of 1,320 persons per square kilometre, compared to an overall average of 116.6 persons per square kilometre for the EU (NSO, 2012b).

Malta possesses few indigenous raw materials and lacks any important natural resources, particularly water. With a tiny domestic market, the economy is dependent on foreign trade. Economic liberalisation has been gradual, and protectionist measures remained until the country joined the European Union on 1st May 2004. Malta adopted the Euro as official currency on 1 January, 2008. GDP stands at €6.2 billion growing at an annual rate of 5.7% and per capita income is around €20,200 per annum. Tourism⁷ and the service industry make up 65% of GDP, followed by industry (18% of GDP) and agriculture (1.3%) (NSO, 2011). Malta serves as a freight transshipment point, and is known internationally for its financial services and online gaming sectors.

Malta has a long history of foreign domination and colonisation. The island gained independence from Britain on 21 September, 1964 and has been a republic since 13 December, 1974 (see Appendix 4, for a brief history of Malta and its institutions). Since independence, Malta has been governed by either the Partit Nazzjonalista (PN), the “Nationalist Party” or the Partit Laburista (PL), the “Labour Party”. The British military bases, which remained on the island after independence, were closed on 31 March, 1979, a day heralded as ‘Jum il- Helsien’ (Freedom Day), and celebrated as a national holiday since that date. The dominant power blocs in Malta are the institutions: the two main political parties; the Catholic church; and the media. The EU is also gaining visibility in the public consciousness, primarily as a regulatory and funding body. The Partit Nazzjonalista (PN) is a conservative, Christian-Democrat, centre-right party and member of the European People’s Party. The PN has been in power since 1987, with a break of two years between 1996 and 1998, when the PL was in government. The PL (Partit Laburista) is centre-left, with a self-acclaimed progressive and moderate policy. The third party is Alternattiva Demokratika (AD), a member of the European Green Party. The last general election in March 2008 was also contested by Azzjoni Nazzjonali (AN) or “National Alliance”, running on a right-wing, anti-immigration platform.

⁷ Tourist arrivals and foreign exchange earnings derived from tourism have steadily increased since the late 1970s. The introduction of low-cost flights in 2007 was the main contributor to the 10.6% increase in tourist arrivals over 2006. During 2009 the tourism industry faced a difficult external environment, as Malta’s major source markets were severely affected by the global recession. In 2012, tourism remains buoyant: inbound tourists for the traditional peak month of August 2012 were 199,430, an increase of 4.4% over 2011 (NSO, 2012a).

Malta's proportional, 'first past the post, winner takes all' single-transferable vote (STV) representation system with only two political parties represented in parliament is unique in Europe. With the allegiance of the voting population split neatly down the middle between the PN and the PL, the chances of a third party getting representation are remote: AD obtained 1.3% of the votes cast in the March 2008 General Elections but failed to secure any parliamentary representation⁸. The difference in voter support between the two main political parties has never been more than 13,000 votes since 1971: in the March 2008 general election, the margin of the PN victory was just 1,500 votes, a margin of 0.5% of votes, with voter turnout at 93.3% (NSO, 2011).

For the best part of two decades, technology has been associated with economic, cultural and social advancement, and prioritised in the agendas of successive governments since 1987. In stark contrast to the PL regime of the '70s and '80s, during which period computers were viewed with suspicion, the PN took a strong central role in facilitating investment in the ICT infrastructure as a means of improving the delivery of public services.⁹ The transformation of Malta into an information society and a vibrant knowledge economy has been embraced like a mantra by politicians, educators and the private sector. Government's vision for Malta is for a "smart island":

one of the top 10 information societies in the world, where the application of information and communication technology will be ubiquitous; the Internet a social equaliser; and the ICT industry a main pillar of the economy (MITI, 2008, p.3).

Table 2 includes a number of recent key ICT performance indicators which reflect the ongoing claims for technology innovation and excellence and its role as an enabler of social change in Malta.

⁸ In the 2004 elections for the European Parliament, AD's candidate, Dr. Arnold Cassola, obtained 23,000 votes or 9.33% of the total votes cast, but still failed to be elected one of Malta's five MEPs.

⁹ In 1990, the Government created a multi-disciplinary service agency, the Management Systems Unit Ltd. (MSU), to provide consultancy services aimed at improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the various business functions of government. Between 1990 and 1996, MSU provided strategic management, financial management and information technology consultancy to the public service. MSU is still associated with a time of transformation, playing "a central role not only in the deployment of information systems but also in the aggressive execution of reform in the then beleaguered Public service," (MITA, 2009, p.10). In 1996, the short-lived Labour administration separated MSU's management consultancy and information technology operations, with the former integrated within the Office of the Prime Minister and constituted as the Management Efficiency Unit (MEU) and the ICT operations collapsed into Malta Information Technology and Training Services Ltd (MITTS Ltd, now MITA). In practice, the break-up of MSU into two distinct entities signalled the end of the notion that 'transformation' and 'ICT strategy' could be managed at arms-length from the direct power or involvement of the Minister / Central Government – albeit by an agency of Government.

Key ICT Performance Indicator	Metric
Delivery of a number of basic e-government services	Ranked first in EU (source: European Commission, 2010; MITA, 2012a, b).
Broadband penetration	30.9% (vs. EU average 27.7%) (source: MCA, 2012)
% of households in Malta with Internet access	75.2% (up by 17.3% from 2010)
% of all Maltese households with a broadband connection	75% (vs. EU average 68%)
% of businesses connected to the Internet	95%
% of households using the Internet regularly	66% (vs. EU average 68%)
% of households never used the Internet	30% (vs. EU average 24%)
% mobile penetration rate	130% (source: MCA, 2012)
% of online users who use the Internet for communication purposes and to access information	97.6%
% of online users who use the Internet for social media (e.g. social networks, blogs, wikis etc.)	65.5%
% of online users who use the Internet to read or download newspapers or magazines	78%
% of online users who use the Internet for their professional life	37.2%
% of online users who use the Internet for study and learning	56.5%
% of online users who use the Internet for banking purposes	61.8%
% of online users who use the Internet to order/buy goods and services online	44.9%
% of online users who use the Internet to sell goods and services online	20.8%
No. of WiFi hotspots in Malta and Gozo	171
% of schools connected to the Internet	100%
% of households owning a PC	75%
% of households owning a PC with a broadband connection	99.5%

Table 2: Key ICT Performance Indicators in Malta (MITC, 2012, unless otherwise stated. All data based on 2011 figures)

Central government's drive to invest in the ICT sector has been complemented by fiscal and regulatory incentives to attract inbound hi-tech investment. Malta Enterprise, a government agency, administers a number of investment aid incentives for eligible industries such as those engaged in ICT and research and innovation¹⁰. In the late nineties, the banning of online gaming by the US and several EU countries was also identified as an opportunity to introduce a comprehensive regulatory framework and tax planning regime for the industry. Malta is the first EU member state to regulate remote gaming through the Malta Lotteries and Gaming Authority (LGA)¹¹. Despite the dominant role of the Church in society, there has been little complaint about the moral implications of having Malta associated with gaming, since the sector is associated with employment, foreign direct investment and positive spin-offs for key sectors such as tourism and the accommodation and building industry. In April 2007, SmartCity signed an agreement with the government of Malta to develop SmartCity Malta, a premier ICT and media park for knowledge-based industries. Government claims that the project would create a new hub of ICT and media excellence in the heart of the Mediterranean region, generate a minimum of 5,600 ICT jobs and spur development across many sectors of the nation's economy have failed to materialise to date. Nevertheless, the first state-of-the-art building, SCM 01 at SmartCity Malta, was inaugurated in Ricasoli in October 2010.

At face value, the national commitment to technology and the Internet as key economic and drivers of social change remains in place, with the islands frequently promoted as ideal for testing of new technologies within a closed societal, topographical environment. ICT is at the hub of seven centres of excellence¹² actively supported by Government as part of its "Vision 2015" for a knowledge economy (Darmanin, 2011). However, the interactions between societal and cultural factors as well as the influence of technology give a particular dimension to the exercise of the right to information

¹⁰ With its full imputation tax system, Malta's fiscal regime also eliminates the economic double taxation of company profits since tax paid by companies in Malta (35%) is, on distribution of dividends, provided as a credit against the shareholder's tax liability. Generally, a foreign shareholder in an eligible company may claim a refund of 6/7th of the tax paid by the company, resulting in a net tax liability of 5%.

¹¹ The first on-line betting operation in Malta was established in 2000 under the Public Lotto Ordinance (L.N. 34 of 2000), to regulate offshore betting offices. Since then LGA has developed its methodologies to regulate the procedures of remote gaming operations, and in April 2004, revamped Remote Gaming Regulations were published. Operators based in Malta include *Betfair*, *Betsson* and *BetClic*.

¹² The knowledge economy sectors being supported are: 1) Financial Services & Support; 2) International Educational Services; 3) Advanced Manufacturing; 4) Creative Industries (including ICT); 5) Tourism; 6) Life Sciences; and 7) Transportation & Advanced Logistics.

(Borg, 2003). In October 2012, Government published a White Paper on the introduction of digital rights in the Constitution of Malta. Its objectives are “to establish new digital rights to internet access, rights to access information online, online freedom of expression and the right to informational self-determination” (MITC, 2012, p.3).

1.6 Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is broadly structured into three parts. The first part discusses blogging’s theoretical framework in three interlinked literature review chapters and seeks to disentangle and better understand the impact of key claims associated with the blog’s potential for disruption through social networking, citizen journalism and participation in the public sphere. The second part presents the methodology and research design. The third part is dedicated to an empirical investigation of disruptive blogging and the subsequent adjustments by hegemony in Malta.

More specifically:

Chapter 2 introduces the alternative media framework that was used for the selection of three core blogging practices frequently associated with disruption. It then engages with literature related to the use of the blog for social networking, by focusing on the theories of homophily (or the echo-chamber); weak ties and social capital; networked individualism and online power laws.

Chapter 3 reviews and coalesces literature on citizen journalism. It focuses on the nascent, dialectic relationship between blogging and journalism. It also explores the process of hybridity whereby citizen media practices are appropriated by traditional media institutions.

Chapter 4, the final part of the literature review, examines various claims made for blogging’s contribution to a revitalised public sphere, including the networked public sphere and the virtual private sphere. It also engages critically with the concept of ‘participation’ in and through blogging.

Chapter 5 describes the overall design of the study and the methodology adopted through the research design and approach. It discusses the challenges of the methods

chosen (netnography and critical discourse analysis) to reconcile the theoretical discussion of disruptive blogging in Malta with the empirical analysis that follows. It also engages with the ethics of selecting and studying blogs developed in small communities.

Chapter 6 describes the manner in which the troika of the two main political parties and the Roman Catholic Church operate as de facto hegemonic institutions in Malta. It scrutinises the role played by mainstream media in the polarised, clientelist system that dominates Maltese society and discusses the attempts by mainstream media to hegemonise the nascent blogosphere.

Chapter 7 analyses a set of online texts collected before and during the divorce crisis in Malta. Using netnography complemented by critical discourse analysis techniques, it examines how blogging was used by a number of citizens to resist and disrupt hegemonic discourse propagated by dominant institutions and propose alternative meanings.

Chapter 8 analyses the the process of renegotiation initiated by political, religious and media institutions in response to the end of an organic crisis. It focuses on the discourse and measures taken by institutions in their attempt to retain their influence in civil society through a system of consent.

Chapter 9 concludes the dissertation by reflecting upon and beyond the main arguments and findings of this study to consider the options for sustainable change in Malta through the inculcation of disruptive blogging in a new episteme. The final section suggests some possible directions for further research.

Chapter 2.

Untangling claims for disruptive blogging: social networking

This chapter first introduces three blogging practices that are frequently associated with disruption in framing alternative media theories: blogging as social networking; as citizen journalism; and as participation in the public sphere. Although discussed as independent concepts, the three practices are interlinked core constructs, since it is possible for bloggers to move seamlessly from one to the other.

The chapter then engages with literature that deals with blogging as social networking by focusing on the theories of homophily (or the echo-chamber); weak ties and social capital; networked individualism and online power laws. In the process, it identifies key lacunae in applying social networking theory within the hyperlocal context.

2.1 Blogging as disruption: critical introductions

Literature on blogging in hyperlocal communities is sparse, so the majority of texts in this chapter and chapters three and four relate to US contexts. Nevertheless, they provide a framework for a better understanding of blogging practices in the specific cultural and political context described later in this research.

Schmidt (2007, p.1411) defines blogging practice as “individual episodes in which a blogger uses specific software to attain specific communicative goals,” such episodes being framed (if not solely determined) by the three structural elements of rules, relations, and code. If we focus on disruptive blogging as defined in chapter 1, the literature is helpful in identifying a number of claims about the blog’s potential as an alternative medium that may facilitate citizen empowerment, participatory democracy and political transformation. These claims can be broadly grouped as follows:

- *The creation of new forms of community and networking*, occasionally driven more by a sense of individualistic than group-centred patterns of sociability (Blanchard, 2004; Deuze, 2006; Hodkinson, 2007; Wei, 2004; Wellman, 2002).
- A new form of *citizen journalism* with socially-transformative potential, that involves a new mediation and mediatisation of politics and social life (Gillmor, 2006; Strömbäck, 2008), stimulating alternative sources of news and opportunities

for information distribution, knowledge-sharing and self-expression (Allan, 2007; Herring et al., 2004; Rebillard & Touboul, 2010; Wall, 2005).

- The *reinvigoration of a flagging public sphere*, transforming political debate and citizenship and empowering marginal voices (Moyo, 2009; O’Baill, 2004; Papacharissi, 2002; 2009; Rheingold, 1993).
- The encouragement of *civic and political engagement*, a new form of online grassroots activism that challenges and renews ailing institutions of democracy (de Zúñiga et al., 2009; Farrell & Drezner, 2007; Trippi, 2004) and promotes civic participation and public deliberation (Dahlberg, 2001; 2004; 2011; Rheingold, 2002; Shirky, 2008).
- A new form of *participation in socio-economic life*, establishing unique channels for individuals and organisations to engage with various publics (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Benkler, 2006; 2011; Tapscott & Williams, 2006; Leadbeater, 2008; Tapscott, 2009; Jarvis, 2011).
- The facilitation of *knowledge production, including education* (Davies & Merchant, 2007; Granitz & Koernig, 2011) and public policy-making (Margetts, 2009).

This seminal Internet literature points to three distinctive yet overlapping blogging practices that also qualify as being potentially disruptive: *social networking*; *citizen journalism*; and *public sphere participation*. These practices, in turn, can also be framed within the four distinct and complementary theoretical approaches to alternative media developed by Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008). In the absence of an over-riding theoretical framework for alternative media, these approaches, with their roots in political and democratic theories, ground the three disruptive blogging practices within alternative media theory.

In the first approach, alternative media *serves a community*, leveraging on an essentialist, autonomous identity, with members of a community participating in both content production and media organisation.

In the second approach, alternative media is *relationist*, operating as an alternative to the mainstream in that it focuses on comparisons with other media identities (small-

scale, independent, non-hierarchical and non-dominant discourses vs. large-scale, dominant, hierarchical discourses).

In the third approach, alternative media *plays a role in civil society by forming a third voice between state and commercial media*: it remains society-centred but can be both essentialist and relationist in its identity.

In the fourth approach, alternative media is used as a *society-centred, relational rhizome media*, linking different protest groups and movements, connecting the local and the global, operating autonomously from the influences of the state, market and elite. The blog can be used to incorporate many elements of these four approaches and can, de facto, be termed an alternative media.

In Table 3, the three blogging practices of social networking, citizen journalism and public sphere participation that form the basis of the literature review are matched with the most relevant elements of the four alternative media theoretical approaches developed by Bailey et al. (2008).

An Alternative Media Framework			
Approach 1: Serving a community (geographic or spatial)	Approach 2: Alternative to the mainstream	Approach 3: Linking alternative media to civil society	Approach 4: Alternative media as rhizome (operates autonomously from influences of state, market and the elite)
Validating and strengthening the community	Offering a ‘third way’ to media organisations	Use as part of civil society	Serves as crossroads where people from different types of movements and struggles meet and collaborate
Treating the audience as situated in a community	Alternative ways of organisation, and more balanced and / or horizontal structures remain an actual possibility	Democratisation of media in relation to micro- and macro-participation	Deepening democracy by linking diverse democratic struggles
Topics that are considered relevant to the community can be discussed by members of that community	Offering counter-hegemonic representations and discourses	Democratisation through media: extensive participation in public debate and opportunities for self-representation in the (or a) public sphere	Highlighting the fluidity and contingency of media organisations
Opening a channel of communication for misrepresented, stigmatised or repressed societal groups	Emphasis on self-representation, resulting in a multiplicity of society voices		Elusiveness makes media difficult to control, facilitating independence
Matching the three types of disruptive blogging practices with the Alternative Media Framework			
<i>(1) Blogging as social networking</i>	<i>(2) Blogging as citizen journalism</i>	<i>(1) Blogging as social networking</i>	<i>(1) Blogging as social networking</i>
<i>(2) Blogging as citizen journalism</i>	<i>(3) Blogging as participation in public sphere</i>	<i>(3) Blogging as participation in public sphere</i>	<i>(2) Blogging as citizen journalism</i>

Table 3: Three types of disruptive practices within Bailey et al.’s (2008) theoretical approaches to alternative media

There is a growing movement led by scholars such as Dean (2010); Feenberg (2002); Fenton (2012a, b); Fuchs (2010; 2011) and Morozov (2011) calling for a more critical approach to Internet studies that is grounded in social and Marxist theory as opposed to

alternative media theory. Fuchs (2010) uses the term critical media instead of alternative media to make the point that the latter “should not only be understood as alternative media practice” but also to “question dominative society” and “challenge the dominant capitalist forms of media production, media structures, content, distribution, and reception” (ibid., p.178). Fuchs proposes an alternative mass media model whose foundations are based on a “dialectic of structure and actions” where a) citizen journalism and critical reception are identified as *potential actor level aspects* and b) critical form, critical content, grassroots media organizations, and alternative distribution are considered as *potential structural aspects* of alternative media.

This study adopts a pragmatic approach to the literature review by critically assessing the three potentially disruptive practices of social networking, citizen journalism and public sphere participation within the overall taxonomy of alternative media theory as proposed by Bailey, Cammaerts and Carpentier (2008), while remaining alert to the emerging critical media inflections from Fuchs and others.

2.2 Blogging and social networking: an introduction

Although the blog is an asynchronous medium, it has been associated with social networking since its inception (Bhagat et al., 2007). According to Castells (1999, p.6), a network is “a set of interconnected nodes – potentially hierarchical but without a centre”. Relationships between nodes are asymmetrical, but essential for the functioning of the network and the circulation of money, information, technology, images, goods, services or people throughout the network.

In a set of seminal blog posts, O’Reilly (2004, 2005) lauds the blog’s “architecture of participation... designed for user contribution and harnessing collective intelligence” and “the wisdom of crowds.” Scholars such as Bruns (2007), Jenkins (2006) and Meraz (2007) associate blogging with the empowerment of people with similar interests, values or ideas to participate, connect, interact, collaborate, network and form relationships. Blogging is also claimed to accelerate the relentless push towards community-development and participation (Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 2011; Miller & Shepherd, 2004) and a network society (Castells, 1996). Strategically, the blog may position the blogger within networks that transcend the latter’s immediate location,

comprising “the mingled flows of cultural, political, financial and economic resources” (Miller & Slater, 2000, p.10).

Blogs tend to be associated with social networks because of the frequent use of hypertext and the hyperlink. A blog has been described as a form of “discrete or chunk style hypertext” (Rettberg, 2008, p.50) and the hyperlink as a mode of electronic intertextuality that provides the blog reader with the means to: a) link and contextualise chronologically distant individual entries to each other, without any explanation from the blogger; and b) comment on a blog post (Landow, 2006). Hypertext and the hyperlink represent the primary currency for the blog as a social network of trust (Davenport & Cronin, 2000), converting a web medium that is architecturally “one-to-many” into a hybrid system, the equivalent of “a peer to peer conversation with many eavesdroppers” (Froomkin, 2003, p.860). Hypertext links become the explicit statement of social relationships between bloggers, a “form of social acknowledgement on the part of authors” (Marlow, 2004, pp.1-2), as well as “visible references to express a social tie to another person” (Schmidt 2007, p.1413). Hyperlinks signify authority, affiliations and influence, particularly when bloggers quote each others’ writing; they influence search engine results since search engines use link structure to predict useful pages (O’Neil, 2006).

In an extensive blog post called “Why I blog”, journalist and activist Andrew Sullivan (2008) draws on network theory to explain how the hyperlink alone disrupts and transforms both the writing and reading experience:

Even a blogger’s chosen pull quote, unlike a columnist’s, can be effortlessly checked against the original....The blogger can get away with less and afford fewer pretensions of authority. He is - more than any writer of the past - a node among other nodes, connected but unfinished without the links and the comments and the track-backs that make the blogosphere, at its best, a conversation, rather than a production.

The blog’s social networking credentials are also based on the reflexive use of complementary embedded technologies which facilitate communication bridges with readers and other bloggers, as well as data mining and the means to track the spread of

information¹³. The diffusion of broadband, wireless and mobile technologies fused with the linking taxonomy of the blog can also prompt the development of what Castells (2007, p.246) calls “horizontal networks of interactive communication”, connecting local and global in chosen time, facilitating both online and offline engagement. The blog becomes part of a network that is at the same time centralised and decentralised, co-ordinated without a centre, with interactions replacing instructions (Castells 1996).

The blog, therefore, includes technical features that may facilitate social networking *should the blogger be thus inclined*. However, the notion of the blogosphere as a social network of blogs with some interconnecting linking structure is more problematic, and not simply because of its size, diversity in genres and variations in format (Tremayne 2007). Instead of a mass communication network with a few producers operating top-down, one-way media to broadcast to large, mainly passive audiences, the majority of blogs support a dense network of small audiences, numerous producers and some two-way interactions (Rettberg, 2008). The blogosphere is a complex, distributed network, running on the blogger’s own domain and decentralised (downloaded) software; or centralised on platforms such as Tumblr, Blogger.com and WordPress.com. Connections among bloggers and their networks are at best haphazard and not always visible. In a genre analysis on a sample of randomly selected blogs, Herring et al. (2004) found little evidence of blogs as interlinked, interactive or oriented towards external events: most blogs analysed were individualistic, intimate forms of self-expression, containing few or no links. This is not altogether surprising since the ‘diary’ genre remains the most popular to date.

Dean (2010, p.38) believes that the term ‘sphere’ in ‘blogosphere’ is misleading in describing the collective of blogs as it suggests a space accessible to any and all, “a kind of conversational unity, as if bloggers addressed the same topics and participated in one giant discussion”. Rather than thinking ‘community’, Dean believes we should be critical of the kinds of links, networks, flows, and solidarities that blogs hinder and encourage. She suggests that “blogipelago” is a more appropriate term for the collective of blogs since:

¹³ Readers may subscribe to a blog through RSS, post a comment on a blog post that links back to their own blog, and later trackback to see if anyone else links to their own page or comment. Blogrolls help locate other blogs of interest. Permalinks and trackbacks can be considered to provide explicit, quantitative data about the social relationships among bloggers.

like [an] archipelago, [it] reminds us of separateness, disconnection, and the immense effort it can take to move from one island or network to another. It incites us to attend to the variety of uses, engagements, performances, and intensities blogging contributes and circulates.

Rutigliano (2007, p.225) suggests that claims about the networking capabilities of the blogosphere are “framed in the context of network and complexity theory.” Four approaches to social networking are discussed below due to their relevance to the hyperlocal context.

2.3 Homophily and the echo chamber

In a small community, homophily is likely to be a factor determining the manner in which social networking operates online. The homophily principle states that *similarity* breeds connection and structures networks of every type (McPherson et al., 2001). We are prone to self-select into homogeneous groupings along natural, structural indicators such as shared geography, values, age, ethnicity, educational level and status (Yuan & Gay, 2006). Personal networks are similarly homogeneous with regard to many socio-demographic, behavioural, and intrapersonal characteristics (Bottero, 2007).

Homophily impacts and limits people's social worlds in a way that has implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience; whereas ties between dissimilar individuals dissolve at a higher rate, leading to the formation of niches or localised positions within a social space. In Malta where polarisation is institutionalised, homophily is likely to root more readily in an emergent blogosphere than some notion of trust in the “scale-free topology of the blogosphere” as advocated by utopians such as Balkin (2004) and Farrell & Drezner (2008). The scale-free position advocates that ideas from less popular blogs can eventually be presented to much larger audiences. Lovink (2007, p.39) is critical of this position, pointing to the “inward looking monad architecture of blogs” as one of the reasons why blogs facilitate conversations within very closed networks of bloggers and those of their own belief system.

As a strong offline human characteristic, homophily can be detrimental to the blog's potential for information diffusion, online deliberation and democratic civic

engagement. If we were still to consider the blogosphere to be a network, then as boyd (2010) suggests, most of what flows across the network flows through edges of similarity. The concept of the blogosphere as an online “echo chamber” that merely facilitates “information cocoons” (Sunstein, 2006; 2007), amplifying and echoing similar views within a closed space of bloggers, commenters and readers, is a running theme in Internet literature. Attempts at defining blogging echo chambers resort to analogies: Gilbert et al. (2009, p2) suggest a blog is an echo chamber “when more than 64% of the opinionated commenters agree with the blogger”. This definition is not satisfactory should the blog have - as is increasingly likely - very few comments. Political blogging is regularly cited as an example of the blogosphere as an echo-chamber of messages proposed by political elites in the mainstream media, often derivative of mainstream media coverage (Wallsten, 2005; 2008). Research on political blog interlinking practices reveals a constant tendency for partisan segmentation (Hargittai et al., 2008; Keren, 2010; Lehti, 2010; Meraz, 2011). Levering on similar studies, Sunstein (2007, p.148) finds that people mostly read blogs that conform to their own pre-existing beliefs and link to like-minded others; the primary reason for linking to those with different opinions is usually to “cast ridicule and scorn”. The blogosphere is dominated by the forces of group polarisation, “enclave extremism”, cocooning and “informational cascades”: rather than contributing to the dissemination of diverse opinions and rational discourse, the technology facilitates more extreme, uniform viewpoints, one-sided views of political issues, leading to “blunders, confusion, and extremism” (ibid., p.150).

The blogosphere’s propensity for homophily and the echo chamber may be vital in finding receptive audiences within a closed communication network such as Malta, but represents a major barrier to engage with citizens who are not within one’s homogeneous networks. If bloggers wish to engage with others within a taxonomy of smart mobs (Rheingold, 2000) and use the blog for disruptive purposes, they need to develop and implement strategies that can enable them to connect with individuals and groups beyond those who have similar offline filters and value systems. The next section explores how the activation of strong and weak ties may be relevant to blogging.

2.4 Strength of ties

Granovetter's (1973, 1983) theory of the strength of weak ties examines the nature of relationship strength in social networks, and offers an alternative approach to the homophily principle. Specifically, it can be used in understanding how networks in the hyperlocal are deployed in the practice of disruptive blogging. Ties are what connect nodes in a network: stronger ties are cemented by connections that are longer in duration, more frequent, deeper in emotional intensity and tighter in reciprocal bonds; weak ties are links or bridges that allow short connections between information and may play an important role in any number of social activities - "from spreading rumours to getting a job" (Barabási, 2003, p.43). Our small, real-world networks tend to be populated with people whose interests and knowledge are similar to ours and it is here that we invest the bulk of our social networking resources and build relationships (Siemens, 2005). Similarly, communities that are strongly tied to some common interest tend to display more homogeneous agendas and more polarised interpretative agendas than weakly-tied, heterogeneous networks such as traditional media.

Granovetter's breakthrough was in presenting weak ties as "indispensable to individuals' opportunities and to their integration into communities" and strong ties as "breeding local cohesion" and leading to "overall fragmentation" (1973, p. 1378). Strong ties may be more effective when it comes to activation, but it is the weak ties that act as bridges between social groups for information to travel beyond group boundaries (Walgrave & Klandermans, 2010). By their very nature, weak ties are more diverse and thus more capable of spreading new ideas into a social system through the bridging of disparate intergroups. Granovetter's theory is a precursor to subsequent theories on social capital¹⁴, some focusing on the economic function and ways in which people with social capital are materially better off than people who lack it (Fukayama,

¹⁴ Definitions of social capital are nuanced and plentiful, but tend to originate from the premise that relationships and social networks are valuable in their own right since they may lead to other social, economic and/or political benefits (Grech, 2010). In this study, the emphasis is on an individualised form of social capital, rather than at a collective level. Pierre Bourdieu (1986, p.248) defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to the possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition." Robert Putnam (1993, p.35) describes social capital as "features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit". Putnam (2000) has recently changed focus from trust to social networks in his definition of social capital. Woolcock (2001) distinguishes between three types of social capital: a) *bonding social capital* refers to the ties between people in similar situations e.g. family members, close friends and neighbours; b) *bridging social capital* refers to more distant connections of people in similar situations, such as friendships and work colleagues; c) *linking social capital* refers to vertical relationships with those in positions of power.

1997); and others such as Putnam (1993, 2000), focusing on the political aspects of engaged communities and the ways in which communities with high social capital (defined by people's local, stable face-to-face interactions) will lead to "better political participation, education and community policing" (Benkler 2006, p.362). All of these arguments are framed in terms of individuals and groups deriving benefits from an underlying social structure or social network (Adler & Kwon, 2002; Bourdieu, 1986; Easley & Kleinberg, 2010).

The theory of weak ties retains currency with the emergence of the social web, where the shape of social ties, their relative strength, and who is connected to whom have become more prominent features in determining how online communities work. Rheingold's (1993) premise of geographically-dispersed, virtual communities was based on the establishment and activation of numerous and diverse weak ties that could supplant the loss of informal public spaces from daily lives. In an empirical study, Kavanaugh et al. (2005) demonstrate how the Internet enhances information exchange and social relations by increasing also face-to-face interactions that, in turn, help to build both strong and weak ties across diverse cliques, groups and individuals.

Granovetter (1973, p.1378) originally wrote that the strength of weak ties theory was only a "fragment of a theory" that ignored variables such as the content being transmitted between ties, demography, coalition structure and mobility. This has not stopped subsequent references to the theory once the read/write web became mainstream – such as a "moderate or democratic blogosphere" being one "predominantly made up of a large number of weaker social ties" (Hampton et al. 2010, p.148). Such interpretations are countered by concerns about the fragmentation and erosion of deep, organic social and family ties and personal social engagement in a culture of distraction mediated by screens and fuelled by the social web and mobile technology (Turkle, 2011). Stefanone et al. (2011) suggest that Granovetter's tie strength theory is most applicable where requested resources are limited to information sharing (as opposed to instrumental action or networked resource mobilisation) and unlikely to be successful when requesting other categories of resources such as providing a service. Gladwell (2010, 2011) is dismissive of the transformative powers of online social networking as he believes that the weak ties produced by social media are not as important as the strong ties produced by face-to-face iteration, and not particularly conducive to social change. This position is echoed by Lanier (2010) who

believes that the wisdom of crowds should be used selectively, not glorified for its own sake. On a more micro level, links between blogs that may be interpreted as a strong relationship between one blogger and another may simply mean that a blogger “merely likes reading another blogger’s posts” (Rettberg 201, p.60), and is simply another weak tie.

Nevertheless, weak tie theory continues to provide a compelling framework for any study of online communities, including hyperlocal communities where, because of reasons of size, weak ties may actually have a greater chance of activation under the right circumstances, and in response to certain and triggers. The next section explores how the theory of networked individualism levers on weak ties theory to create a hybrid approach that may be applied to this study.

2.5 Networked individualism

As in other countries, in Malta blogging is predominantly perceived to be the exclusive domain of the individual and rarely understood as a group or communal practice. Wellman (2002, p.16) describes networked individualism as:

the shift to a personalized, wireless world ...with each person switching between ties and networks. People remain connected, but as individuals rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Individuals switch rapidly between their social networks. Each person separately operates his networks to obtain information, collaboration, orders, support, sociability and a sense of belonging.

Wellman’s (1997; 2001; 2002; 2003) theory centres on individuals with their own combination of strong and weak ties; who switch networks, cross boundaries with little regards of space and weave their own web of more or less tactical and relatively fluid relationships. This theory converges with Castells’ (1996; 2000) networked society in that it explores a shift away from a group-based, mass society to a new form of network society that directly impacts the composition of communities. The Internet merely reinforces a global trend towards networked individualism that was already well underway (Castells, 2001; Wellman et al., 2003). Social technologies facilitate a move away from geographic, densely-knit urban communities that are isolated from each other, yet organised under the umbrella of the nation-state, to a society comprising

individuals operating in small, spatially-dispersed, loosely-knit communities - not bound by location but strongly interconnected through digital media. Even bounded communities such as those in Malta are not immune to this process if they have access to social technologies. A seminal study by Hampton & Wellman (2003) of the impact of the Internet on a new, small, wired community in Netville, a Toronto suburb is of particular interest. Its findings showed how people who were connected online recognised three times as many of their neighbours by name, and regularly talked with twice as many as those who were not online; stronger ties were associated with the length of time people had spent in the neighbourhood rather than the time they had spent online; offline weak ties (such as knowing someone's name) were significantly strengthened by interactions offline while strong ties remained unchanged.

Early studies on networked individualism focus on how engaging with others online creates new social settings and modes of behaviour that are supplementing and potentially replacing the network benefits accrued through participation in traditional physical settings (Wellman et al., 2003). What used to be 'community' is gradually changing and being structured as personal (or egocentric) networks, with the individual at the centre of their own community (Pahl, 2005; Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Ryan 2010), empowered with a high degree of control or authority to increase social ties and interaction, provide an outlet for self-expression, and participate in seeking, curating and sharing information (Gallant, Boone, & Heap, 2007). People remain connected in their immediate offline networks, but are looking beyond the immediate little boxes of home, work and social clubs to new and better-connected relationships with geographically-distant people, creating new weak-tie relationships around communities of practice (Wellman, 2002).

Prima facie, networked individualism appears to be a pre-requisite for individuals who wish to engage in disruptive, counter-hegemonic blogging - and particularly in the hyperlocal context where every contact and weak tie may lead to greater influence in civil society. To reach out and connect with 'unknown others' online, bloggers need to operate as specialists, as a "primary unit of person-to-person connectivity", the equivalent of "a switchboard, between ties and networks" (Wellman et al. 2002, p.160). The personalised wireless world actively encourages people to switch rapidly between ties and personal social networks on a needs basis. In the process, citizens learn to navigate through partial involvement in multiple, diverse (homogenous and

heterogeneous) online personal communities, engage with other social actors and exchange “network capital”¹⁵ For bloggers engaged in some form of disruptive blogging, networked individualism becomes a form of personal empowerment through which they operate their personal networks to “obtain information, collaboration, order, support, sociability and a sense of belonging” (Wellman 2002, p.15). The social networking aspect of blogging may be more about increasing stocks of network or social capital by investing in and nurturing of weak ties to looser and potentially geographically-dispersed online networks. The ties themselves may be more important than the network (Wellman, 2001; Wellman & Frank, 2001). Hence, if the blog is part of a network, it is an egocentric network.

Hampton et al. (2011) are critical of networked individualism’s focus on the technological aspects of underlying media (such as the blog). Specifically, they point to the theory’s failure to recognise the importance of ‘place’ for the organisation of personal networks, understating the relationship between ICTs, participation in local settings and network diversity. The promise of transformation through networked individualism has remained locked in an ‘online and global’ or ‘offline and local’ dichotomy that fuels existing conceptualisations of community as less bounded, more spatially dispersed, and less tied to place than in the past. Although there is evidence of the positive and substantial contribution of technologies on network diversity and the social capital accessible through personal networks, there is little to suggest a *total shift* in the structure of community from place-to-place toward person-to-person networks. Hampton et al. (2011) make three key arguments: a) traditional local settings remain extremely important sources for social capital accessible through personal networks; b) the optimism that the social web may offer new settings that independently and directly contribute to the diversity of people’s networks is largely misplaced; and c) the use of social media primarily supports diverse networks through participation in traditional, local settings or “glocalization” (Wellman, 2002) as opposed to networked individualism.

Despite this valid criticism, networked individualism remains a compelling strategy for this study, not least because of the ongoing dialectic between what constitutes

¹⁵ Network capital is “social capital that is embedded in interpersonal relations that can provide custom-tailored helpful resources that are flexible, efficient and effective” (Plickert, Wellman et al, 2007, p.406). Network capital resonates with Putnam’s (2000) view that social capital incorporates both bonding and bridging capital.

global/local and modern/traditional in Maltese emerging Internet culture. Rather than community-building, the theory may be more useful for deployment in contexts where individuals attempt to resist, influence and disrupt the incumbent system of power, reminiscent of the processes of power, resistance and power/knowledge articulated by Foucault (1978). The blog can be positioned as an alternative media hub to develop, nurture and eventually activate weak ties. The persistent and pervasive nature of the media enables the blogger to switch strategies at will: at times engaged in ambivalence, reflexivity and ‘whatever blogging’ (Dean, 2010), and at other times in developing discourse for public consumption in alliance with a loose network of known or unknown ‘others’ engaged in a struggle against the hegemon. The blogger may similarly switch from community to anti-community discourse, from one post to the next, depending on the nature of the topic. The “switching of ties and networks” can extend to bloggers switching from their proprietary media to commenting on other blogs, and participating in other social media (such as micro-blogs and social networks) and as commentators on online media belonging to the mainstream. Finally, networked individualism is also about an awareness of networking in a more geographically-dispersed community, a desire for a world view. In a geographically-isolated yet technologically-connected context such as Malta’s, networked individualism may well be successfully deployed as a hybrid blogging strategy; particularly in the ongoing tensions between traditional culture and the promise of modernity.

2.6 Hierarchy, authority, ranking and online power laws

There has been an interest in assessing a blog’s authority and influence since the inception of the medium (Nakajima et al., 2009; Sheh et al., 2008). The blog’s reliance on hypertext and the hyperlink facilitated the creation of social ranking systems such as Technorati’s ‘Top 100’ and ‘The Truth Laid Bear Blogosphere Ecosystem’. These systems attempt to measure index authority, identifying the most authoritative blogs as those which command the majority of inbound links. Leading search engines such as Google and Bing also play a major role in determining a blog’s influence based on link-building, although Google’s page rank algorithm ranking of objects in blogs and other social networks remains the source of industry speculation (Sedigh & Roudaki, 2003; Slawski, 2011). The relatively recent development of the “social graph” (Maayan et al., 2010), proposing a global mapping of online users and their link relationships is being

actively supported by Facebook and Google through a social graph API, and explored by academics such as Heer and boyd (2005) and Roth et al. (2011).

The attention to the hierarchical power, authority and influence of the blog and other social media is primarily driven by capitalist interests. As one of the first social media applications that came to public attention, the blog was quickly appropriated as a new online marketing tool and its power and influence linked with money-making, customer-engagement and branding. The more ‘popular’ a blog (on Google natural search engine results), or the higher the Klout¹⁶ score of its owner, the more valuable the blog is likely to be to its owner (for potential advertising-revenues) and organisations like Google and Bing that make their money from pay-per-click advertising campaigns.

Current thinking on automated, indexed and search-oriented representations of the influence, authority and rank of a blog is of importance to this study - with the caveat that this also needs to have currency within the local context where issues of community size, structure, culture and ideology are of significant importance. The prevalent methods for the ranking of blogs are based on hyperlink patterns (structural power and power laws), blog traffic (hits), comments and citations of blogs posts (also through hyperlinks from third party online collateral). Within this context, the blogosphere becomes “the domain of pure index authority”, and rankings “the currency of blogs” (O’Neil 2009, p.109). The power and authority of blogs are derived from their centrality or prominence in the blogosphere, with centrality evaluated through the hyperlink: the blogs that are most linked to are deemed to have significant potential for control of communication, as brokers or gatekeepers (O’Neil, 2006). The *structure* of relations among bloggers as actors and the *location* of these actors on the blogosphere are perceived to have important behavioural, perceptual and attitudinal consequences both for the individual units (the bloggers) and for the system (the blogosphere).

Despite technical concerns on the accuracy of ranking services, particularly with niche sites (Kirkpatrick, 2009), there is consensus that the network of blogs is not equally distributed (Drezner & Farrell 2004, Rettberg 2008). Blog networks are also not perceived to be neutral communication places (O’Neil, 2009). The notion that some

¹⁶ Klout is an application that claims to measure an individual’s influence online through a score of 1-100. The Klout Score uses data from social networks in order to measure ‘true reach’, ‘amplification’ and network impact (see <http://klout.com/corp/kscore>)

relationship distributions may be highly-skewed, or follow a ‘power law’ as opposed to a bell curve, was introduced by Simon (1955). Revisiting the concept, Barabási (2002) illustrates that power law distributions in self-organising, scale-free networks often arise from a process of preferential attachment, where nodes with a higher degree of connections are more likely to receive new links than less connected ones: thanks to growth and preferential treatment, a few highly-connected hubs emerge. In an essay called “Power Laws, Weblogs, and Inequality”, Shirky (2003) describes the skewed distribution of influence and power in the blogosphere as a ‘scale-free’ network with an overwhelming majority of peripheral nodes and a tiny minority of hyper-connected central hubs or authorities. The allocation of inbound links to a blog pushes users towards a small number of hyper-successful sites that enjoy the vast majority of online traffic in a ‘winner takes all’ scenario, propagating further inequality in the system. In a survey of 433 blogs in The Truth Laid Bear’s Blogosphere Ecosystem, Shirky found a power law distribution in which three per cent of the top blogs accounted for 20 per cent of the incoming links. As the blogosphere expands, the unequal distributions of the power law kicks in: although there are more new bloggers and readers every day, most of the new readers add to the traffic of the existing, small number of top, legacy A-list blogs, while most new blogs keep getting below average traffic, with the gap growing as the weblog world does. It becomes more difficult with time for a new blog to get a wide readership, irrespective of the quality of content: the more powerful simply become more powerful, and the chance of perfectly valid blogs never finding their audience increases.

The power law has other schisms. Successful bloggers with high volumes of traffic do not have time to interact with their commentators, and their blogs inevitably become broadcasting outlets, distributing content without participating in conversations with others. At the other extreme of the popularity scale, the ‘long tail’ of blogs with few readers becomes conversational; and in between the two extremes lies ‘blogging classic’ - blogs published by one or a few people, for a moderately-sized audience, with whom the authors have a relatively engaged relationship. Shirky believes that this taxonomy will resist the test of time – except that the ‘blogging classic’ will be in the minority for both traffic (dwarfed by the mainstream media blogs) and the overall number of blogs (outnumbered by conversational blogs). In a scenario where most bloggers get ‘below average traffic’, bloggers therefore cannot hold audience as the only metric for success.

The power law theory grates against the cyber-punk, techno-utopian claims of networking, community-build and personal empowerment associated with blogging. It also leaves questions unanswered about the relative socio-political power of some blogs in the hyperlocal that enjoy low traffic and few inbound links and yet exert an influence within their immediate communities because of contexts that have nothing to do with social network theory. Specifically, it ignores the role social capital, culture and history play on relations of power. The power law distribution model may be challenged by examining the link patterns within specific 'local' online communities, such as university or newspaper homepages, which exhibit a more uniform, less skewed distribution model (O'Neill, 2009). Pennock et al. (2002) also show how category-specific subsets of web pages in the same category exhibit very large deviations from power law scaling, with the magnitude of deviation varying from category to category. The "winners take all" characteristic of the power law may be much less drastic among competing pages of the same type. The distributions for outbound web links, and for a variety of other social and biological networks, also display significant deviations from power law, qualitatively similar in nature to those we find in web subsets.

A further anomaly of the power law theory is that the blogosphere suffers from the 'iceberg effect' (Henning, 2003), where the blogs above the waterline (those that are frequently updated, linked-to and widely-read) represent a tiny fraction of the total number of blogs, the majority of which are rapidly abandoned by their owners. For Barabási (2002, p.245) the most intriguing result of his web-mapping project was the "complete absence of democracy, fairness and egalitarian values on the Web", the topology of which renders invisible all but a tiny fraction of the millions of existing documents. With the blogosphere still considered to be some collective of blogs that are somehow linked to each other and when the majority of blogs are inactive, it is difficult to understand how blogging is actively contributing to networking and community-building when the blogosphere is primarily made up of 'dead', archived content.

Even if we ignore the notion of power through hyperlinked networks, the blog remains ensnared in the tyranny of statistics, with visitor traffic and comment scores also seen to be indicative of a blog's power (Karpf, 2008). Both traffic and comment volumes are perceived to render the blog more visible for natural or organic search results and improve its index authority - the relative position of the blog in an index of web pages,

which is the core component of search engines such as Google. The lowest rung of Internet hierarchy is occupied by blogs that receive no user feedback or, as in Lovink's (2007) seminal work 'Zero Comments'. The universal expectation is that the blogger is writing in the hope of securing an audience *and* some form of social engagement with the same audience (or appreciation). Within the overall taxonomy of ranking, a blog with no comments becomes a public statement of failure, an "unambiguous statistic that nobody cares" in a blogosphere with "far more people who write blogs than actually read blogs" (ibid. p.6).

Lovink's work dovetails with Dean's in its criticism of blogging as large-scale interlinked conversations caught in a system of blog hits and rankings that lock bloggers in intensive, reflexive, communication and entertainment networks. Importantly, both writers highlight the ambivalence and contradiction of blogging, and the difficulty in the blog fulfilling its potential for deployment as networked media to link communities. Lovink (2007, p.16) fears that blogging is being reduced to a ranking game where instead of focusing on the quality of the content, the practice is becoming "more of a rat race for maximum attention, measured in links and 'friends'". Dean (2010, p.88) wryly observes how "the compulsion to poll and survey how the mass speak tracks neither truth nor meaning, but the fact of the spoken while directing away from what is actually being said".

The promise of the blogosphere as a horizontal, open structure that resists any kind of hierarchical organisation appears flawed if we accept that hyperlink theory appears to favour the development of hierarchies, rather than their destruction. More importantly, it is also logical to assume that the migration online of real-life social networks results in a similar migration of the processes of differentiation, hierarchisation and control which structure offline human interactions and relations (O'Neil (2006, 2009). This echoes Bourdieu's insistence on 'habitus' and 'the field' (Swartz, 1997)¹⁷ and the structuring capacity of culture (Jenkins, 1992) over the formalism of abstract theory.

¹⁷ Bourdieu's 'habitus' concept contains the "meanings of habitat, habitant, the processes of habitation and habits of thought" (Fiske, 1992, p.155). Swartz (1997, p.35) writes that it encourages a move to "a conception of action and structure that breaks with and transcends the traditional dichotomies of subjectivism and objectivism". 'Field' follows a similar movement by situating individuals, groups, and institutions within a broader matrix of structuring relations. Bourdieu makes the case for a blurring of the divide between the objective and the subjective for the middle ground of what he calls 'dispositions'.

It may be best to move away from community as structure towards a more symbolic construction of community as culture and practice, where communities are links between people, or worlds of meaning in the minds of their members (Cohen, 1986). Views of ‘community’ are increasingly tempered by activity and associations at the personal, group, and network levels which may span multiple geographical locations but also remain rooted in local action and activity (Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 2010). The blogosphere may simply equate to another ‘imagined community’, leveraging on Anderson’s (1991) treatise that all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are in fact cultural artefacts and imagined. Even where the hyperlocal is the national, as in the case of Malta, the blogosphere is likely to remain imagined since:

the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion (Anderson, 1991, p.6).

The imagined online community may also lead to ambivalence. Lampa (2006) compares the temporal nature of this discursive, transnational, online imagined community with the 20th century ritual of reading a newspaper, with information previously consumed by flipping from page to page of print being replaced by the clicking of links and mediation via screens. In this imagined community, a decentralised realm of individual publishers produce and consume texts in blogs that are circulated, reproduced, and consumed by others whom they may never meet, but with whom they may sporadically engage in conversation and share a common identity. In practice, bloggers may be less interested in their immediate community than otherwise suggested by studies (such as Benkler, 2006, 2011; Leadbeater, 2008; Shirky, 2008; 2010) that advocate strategic monitoring to optimise eventual exchanges of information with target audiences. A study by Brake (2009) highlights how bloggers have limited interest in gathering information about their readers, appearing to rely instead on an assumption that readers are sympathetic – a practice based as much on an imagined and desired social context as on an informed and reflexive understanding of the communicative situation. Blogging practices include a variety of envisaged audience relationships, and some are essentially self-directed with potential audiences playing a marginal role; technical characteristics and social norms, such as the potential to block user comments on a blog also appear to enable and reinforce this lack of engagement with audiences.

On a more micro level, the classification of blogs with no comments as failed projects has been superseded by the emergence of Facebook as the social network of choice for online engagement and community. It is now customary for bloggers to promote a blog post via horizontal media such as Twitter and their Facebook page, and also on third-party Facebook pages and groups (such as Blogs of Malta), and for interaction about a blog post to happen on Facebook as opposed to comments on the blog. The number of Facebook ‘likes’ is substituting what used to be the number of comments on a blog post: indeed, it is much easier to press ‘like’, than formulate a comment on a post. Blogs with zero comments are not necessarily without influence in hyperlocal communities such as those in Malta. Simply because nobody comments does not mean that the blog message is not reaching target or influential audiences.

For the purpose of this study, rather than examining the deep, underlying structural architecture of the ‘blogosphere’ as a connection of nodes, strong and weak ties to support large-scale, interlinked conversations (and hence ‘community’), it is more relevant to consider the individual blogger’s engagement with the tool as ‘personal media’ - with the caveat that the practice may occasionally, *but not necessarily*, lead to a mix of online and offline togetherness. Lovink (2007, p.38) writes that “like other media... [blogs’] role is important but actually marginal. It’s when marginal matters that blogs can be most influential”. In the hyperlocal, the size of the audience for the marginal ‘media’ message will be much smaller than in other spaces – but it may potentially be more attentive *because* of issues of size. Bloggers may already be familiar personalities in the community, with access to offline social capital – particularly if they are already members of prominent institutions in civil society. This would render their texts ‘visible’ and amplified in a manner not possible when targeting audiences in much larger communities. Similarly, bloggers with an intuitive sense of networked individualism and some awareness of the blog’s potential for creating weak ties may similarly find a receptive audience in the hyperlocal.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter engaged with literature associated with blogging as a social networking practice, focusing on the theories of homophily, strength of weak ties, networked individualism and power-laws. The concept of the blogosphere as a coherent, open,

horizontal, democratic social network of interconnected blogs in which virtual communities are formed appears to be flawed. Power law theories that have been propogated by US scholars to explain why a few blogs end up securing the majority of online readers do not necessarily resonate in hyperlocal communities where issues of geographic size and social capital may be more pervasive in explaining influence and audience reach. Where bloggers need a readership to resist and disrupt the discourse of the dominant bloc, they are likely to remain alert to the opportunities to operate as network individuals and activate weak ties in pursuit of their goals.

The next chapter explores blogging as a form of citizen journalism.

Chapter 3.

Untangling claims for disruptive blogging: citizen journalism

Blogging first came to mainstream attention as citizen media, coinciding with a downturn in the fortunes of print media journalism. This chapter first discusses the alternative media credentials of citizen journalism. It then explores the dialectic between citizen and print journalism through a discussion of blogging's contribution to the economic downturn of the print media, the competition for audiences, and the development of horizontal information flows. In the process, issues relating to the creation of online power and authority are also discussed. The final part of the chapter reflects on how blogging is contributing to a new form of journalism.

3.1 Definitions and origins

Blogging is frequently associated with the emergence of a new form of “citizen journalism”, sometimes also called “participatory journalism” (Lasica, 2003). When blogs are used as the media for citizen journalism, it is also customary to conflate the notion of “citizen media” (Rodriguez, 2001) with “alternative media”, with variants of these including “citizen-generated media” (Scott Hall), “We media” (Bowman & Willis, 2003), “open source media” (Deuze, 2001) and “grassroots media” (Gillmor, 2004).

It is important to distinguish at the outset between “citizen” and “alternative” journalism and “alternative” and “mainstream media”. As widely understood in new media scholarship, citizen journalism is enabled *solely* by the emergence of the Internet while alternative media predates the Internet (Kperogi, 2011)¹⁸. Nevertheless, definitions of citizen journalism reflect the conflation between citizen media and alternative media. Bowman & Willis (2003, p.9) use the term “participatory journalism” to define how individual citizens or groups use tools like blogs to engage in online journalism:

¹⁸ For instance, radio, a mainstream medium, was considered to be a “revolutionary, political medium in the 1930s by the newspaper industry” (Levinson 1998, p.86). Mainstream media today can still be deployed as alternative media: *Alternative Radio*, a radio programme established in 1986, is carried by over 125 radio stations and provides information, analyses and views that are frequently ignored or distorted in other media. The only change from 1986 is that in 2012 the programme has its own website and can also be downloaded as a podcast (see alternativeradio.org). The mode of delivery alone does not constitute alternative media - it is the practice that does.

collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information...to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires.

The definition is meant to celebrate the promise of collaborative and social media, a “bottom-up” approach to journalism in which there is little or no editorial oversight or formal journalistic workflow dictating the decisions of staff. Johnson & Wiedenback’s (2009, p.333) definition is narrower, less collaborative and makes no reference to democracy, defining citizen journalism as online “news content produced by ordinary citizens with no formal journalism training”.

Both of the above definitions leave room for interpretation. It is perfectly feasible for citizens with a formal training in journalism to participate in non-commercial, user-generated production. The practice of alternative journalism, on the other hand, is not merely non-professionalised and non-institutionalised journalism produced by ordinary citizens; it is also purposively *counter-hegemonic* (Atton, 2002; Carpentier, 2005; 2007; Harcup, 2003). While all online alternative media are citizen media, to the extent that they are products of the journalism by ordinary citizens outside institutional and professional structures, not all citizen media are alternative media. According to Atton (2003), to qualify as alternative media, citizen media should be expressly *oppositional* and actuated by a progressive, emancipatory political agenda. Atton (ibid. pp.267-8) positions alternative journalism as “closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of ‘objectivity’ with overt advocacy and oppositional practices”, relying on “radical structural imperatives” that are opposed to “market-driven, mass media institutions” and “hierarchical, elite-centred notions of journalism as a business.” This vision of alternative media echoes Downing (2001, v), who associates alternative media with an alternative political vision of “radical media”, media likely to be “small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives”.

Citizen journalism is typically presented as a media practice that can only be realised in contrast and (often) in opposition to the established mainstream media. These contrasts incorporate both *structural* and *ideological* characteristics, and are highlighted in Table 4, which is adapted from Bailey et al (2008, p. 18), Moyo (2011, p. 750), Atton (2002) and Kperogi (2011):

Mainstream media characteristics	Alternative media characteristics
<p><i>Structural</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Large-scale and geared towards homogeneous (segments of) audiences ▪ Owned by the State, political organisations or commercial entities ▪ Vertically (or hierarchically) structured organisations ▪ Staffed and managed by professionals 	<p><i>Structural</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Small-scale and aimed at specific communities, some of which may be disadvantaged groups or minorities ▪ Independent of state and market ▪ Horizontally (or non-hierarchically) structured, allowing for the facilitation of audience access and participation within the frame of democratisation and multiplicity ▪ Self-managed
<p><i>Ideological</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Carriers of dominant discourses and representations ▪ Product of the market economy ▪ Relies on capitalist models with the primary motivation of making profit 	<p><i>Ideological</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Carriers of non-dominant (possibly counter-hegemonic) discourses and representations, stressing the importance of self-representation ▪ Product of gift economy ▪ Voice of subalterns and their ideologies, for whom the mainstream constitutes the incomprehensible / irrational ‘other’ ▪ Seeks to move the centre from mediated grand narratives of national elite to self-articulated / self-published small, subjective narratives of ordinary people in specific locales (the hyperlocal) ▪ Motivated by collectivist-democratic ideals

Table 4: Mainstream vs. Alternative Media characteristics (adapted from Bailey et. al, 2008, p.19; Moyo, 2011, p. 750; Atton, 2002; and Kperogi, 2011)

Fuchs (2011, p.298) believes that the strong connection of alternative media studies to anarchist perspectives tends to idealise small-scale production and neglect its potential orientation towards the political public. He suggests that “alternative media should not only be understood as alternative media practices but [also] as critical media that question dominative society.” Fuchs proposes “a realistic Marxist theory of alternative media”, where alternative media are “*mass media*”¹⁹ that challenge the dominant capitalist forms of media production, media structures, content, distribution and reception.

¹⁹ My italics.

From around 1999, the rapid roll out of free blogging software and the mass take-up of ubiquitous broadband in many countries turned the blog into the modern equivalent of a lightweight printing press. In a post on his blog *Press Think*, Rosen (2008) provides a nuanced definition of citizen journalism that links the practice to empowerment, as citizens secure the means to migrate from passive consumers of third-party content into media participants and online publishers in their own right:

When the people formerly known as the audience employ the press tools they have in their possession to inform one another, that's citizen journalism.

In his book 'Say Everything', Rosenberg (2009), a co-founder of Salon.com and an early participant in the WELL, provides an eloquent history of blogging and chronicles the gradual awareness that the blog's publishing potential extended beyond personal diary narratives. The aggressive blurring of established boundaries between producers and consumers of information, "between writer and reader, journalist and activist, editor and publisher" (ibid., p.162) radically challenged mainstream media structures, operations and ideologies. It also led to what Jenkins (2006) calls "convergence culture".

Structurally, the top-down, broadcast, mass media model has been associated with the singular power of a privileged gatekeeper to disseminate information and impact public opinion, where the mass audience is perceived to be both passive and gullible (Creeber, 2009; Meraz, 2011). Up to the end of the 20th century, the investment to set up and manage print, TV and (to an extent) radio media outlets remained prohibitive to aspiring new entrants: inevitably, media ownership became the domain of closed, proprietary, state- or commercially-owned organisations. Citizen journalism disrupts the 'one-to-many', hub and spoke, industrial broadcast system operated by a few media producers. It relies on a bottom-up, networked, 'many-to-many' or 'few-to-few' horizontal (non-hierarchical) system of blogs run by individuals, groups or small-scale independent organisations (Gillmor, 2006). Importantly, it operates largely outside market-based and price-based production models targeting mass-consumption: the majority of blogs do not employ trained journalists or rely on paid subscriptions and advertising revenues. Benkler (2006, p.2) dubbed this social form of production "the networked information economy" whereby people collaborate, give of their time and energy to develop content for the benefit of others without the solid promise of financial profit.

Operationally, the blog is part of an information system of exchange made possible through the complex interrelations and connections among interdependent individuals (Mejias, 2010). The early association of citizen journalism with democratisation agendas was based on the possibilities for citizens, alone or in groups, to play an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analysing and disseminating content to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information (Bowman & Willis, 2003). This is precisely the type of operation traditionally associated with mainstream media outlets.

In practice bloggers may switch between the creation, collection and curation of content at will, leveraging on information that often first originates in the mainstream media²⁰. Axel Bruns has developed two important concepts – ‘produsage’ and ‘gatewatching’ – that are of particular relevance to the type of citizen journalism observed during the course of this study. Bruns says that in becoming active publishers, commentators and discussants, bloggers turn into *producers*—a hybrid of producer and user. As users of collaborative environments who engage with content interchangeably in consumptive *and* productive modes (and often in both at virtually the same time), what bloggers do is carry out “produsage” (Bruns & Jacobs 2006, p.5). Produsage can be defined as the collaborative and continuous building and extending of *existing content* in pursuit of further improvement (Bruns, 2007). “Gatewatching” is the observation of the output of news publications and other sources, in order to identify important material as it becomes available (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006). When bloggers are involved in gatewatching, they operate as media watchdogs, filtering content, checking facts and investigating media accountability: watchdog and advocacy journalism are subtly enmeshed under the guise of correcting errors and problems in media coverage. MediaBugs.org, for instance, asks its users to report specific, correctable errors and problems in media coverage – in a newspaper, magazine, on TV or radio, on a website or a blog. Blogs and mainstream media portals also provide citizens with an online space for commentary and criticism; such content may in turn be used by mainstream media as a gauge of public opinion on various issues and to create a spiral of user-generated content’ around a single news item or feature, extending its longevity. The

²⁰ Li and Bernoff’s (2008) social technographics profile groups people according to the way they participate in the read/write web, differentiating between Inactives, Spectators, Joiners, Collectors, Critics and Creators. Nowadays, curation tools, such as Scoop.It and Storify facilitate the operations of citizen journalists.

information exchange system triggered by blogging also benefits from the emergence of horizontal citizen media like micro-blogging and social networks which facilitate rapid link-sharing to large numbers of people without the involvement of traditional media organisations (Rosen, 2011; 2012).

Ideologically, the use of the blog for citizen journalism is perceived to represent a major shift in media power from the institutional media to the former passive audience, since there is a clear opportunity to disintermediate mainstream media outlets. In principle, what constitutes ‘news’ and ‘stories’ is no longer the exclusive domain of professional reporters and their employers, but of ordinary citizens who have the potential to act as personal broadcast networks. The motivation for citizen journalism has been attributed to such diverse reasons as altruism, gift-giving, reputation-seeking, hobbyism, innate human sociality and accumulation of online stocks of social capital (Carpenter, 2010; Leadbeater, 2008; Tapscott & Williams, 2006). Shirky (2010a) believes that the social web facilitates the aggregation of cognitive surplus, where the free time of educated citizens is put to collective creative use online. In this, citizen journalism appears to share something of the open source and counterculture ideology espoused by Kelly (1999), Perry Barlow (1996) and Raymond (1999) in taking Stewart Brand’s (1987, p.202) mantra of “information wants to be free” to its extreme by developing and giving away content for free online. For the incumbent, mainstream media system, this practice is nothing short of a direct challenge to its core business model based on the production and sale of content. No less disruptive is the notion that instead of trained journalists at the back of a press conference, ordinary citizens have tools that provide them with an online megaphone through which to participate in public discourse without requiring permission from media intermediaries.

3.2 The dialectic relationship between blogging and journalism

Blogging and mainstream journalism are intersecting and the relationship is in a state of evolution (Lowrey, 2006). Initial mainstream media curiosity about blogging as a new mode of mass communication “unhindered by the normal journalistic standards of objectivity, balance and accuracy” and predicted to disappear “within a year” (Raynsford, 2003) gradually gave way to outright hostility as the free content culture of blogging was blamed for the loss of jobs in print journalism, a lowering of reporting standards and destabilisation of the so-called Fourth Estate (Butterworth, 2006). Carr

(2005) and Keen (2009) associate blogging with the celebration of the amateur and a mistrust of the professional: both lament the loss of editors and professional journalists as cultural gate-keepers, equating blogging's ease of publishing with the veneration of user-generated, unreflective and a lack of analytical discourse. Blogging is regularly mocked by professional journalists working for mainstream newspapers. In an online version of the *Financial Times*, an editor (Whitehead, 2009) wrote that the "activity of blogs... has never been of any real consequence", equating the practice to "vanity publishing, only made feasible by the removal of costs". Whitehead is representative of other journalists when he opines that worthwhile blogs tend to be linked to "well-known organisations, able to provide time and resources, or they have become professional concerns in their own right".

The difficult and occasionally hostile relationship between journalists and bloggers is chronicled in numerous blog posts and academic literature. Rosenberg (2009, p.270) believes that the mainstream media failed to understand that citizens' enthusiasm for the read/write web was fuelled by the literary aspirations of generations of potential writers blocked by the media's gate-keeping practices, such as newspaper editors not publishing readers' letters: the "soapbox less multitude" realised that it required next to nothing to get published. On 12 March, 2011, Rosen posted a transcript of his South by Southwest talk on his blog, in which he revisits the perennial antagonism of mainstream journalists towards bloggers. Rosen attributes this to five ongoing media developments: 1) the collapsing economic model of newspapers; 2) journalists having to face new kinds of competition; 3) a shift in power to the audience; 4) new patterns of information flow in which information moves horizontally from citizen to citizen as efficiently as vertically; and 5) the erosion of trust and related loss of authority. Rosen's list is useful as a primer to reflect on how blogging as citizen journalism both disrupts and changes the journalism associated with mainstream media.

3.2.1 The collapsing economic model of newspapers

The emergence of blogging over the past decade coincided with the downturn in the newspaper business, particularly in the US (Bentley, 2008; McChesney, 2011; McChesney & Pickard, 2011). Newspaper profits depended on local monopolies in cities and the bundling of a variety of disparate forms of information such as news reports and opinion columns, and then selling that bundle to subscribers and advertisers

(Rosenberg, 2009). When news content used to be a scarce resource in print, TV or radio format, citizens were prepared to both pay and wait. Blogs created a sudden abundance of competing voices on the web, in the form of produsage-based personal media²¹: by their existence, they exposed the fragility of mainstream media authority and franchise and the opportunities still available to build “the next press” (*The Economist*, 2010). Media scholars (McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Jarvis, 2011) believe that the US mainstream media was already in a crisis towards the end of the 20th century because of the industry’s total reliance on the commercial advertising model: blogging in its citizen journalism incarnation merely exacerbated the inevitable. McChesney (2011) advocates a return to the past, with journalism treated as a “public good” and supported by public subsidies, as opposed to a private good or a commercial undertaking, and supplemented by paid subscriptions. The market alone may never provide sufficient resources or safeguards to guarantee a credible, independent, competitive free press - no more a safeguard for newspapers than blogging is directly to blame for the demise of the free press.

3.2.2 Journalism vs. new forms of competition

Blogs engaged in some form of citizen journalism are perceived to compete with institutional or professional journalism, despite differences in structure, focus, culture, resourcing and reach, both at national and hyperlocal level. Citizen journalism is historically associated with a confrontational position towards the mainstream media, with gatewatchers attempting to disrupt the routine operations of media institutions (O’Neil, 2009); or exposing the established procedures, practices and conditions of mainstream media production and professional journalism as the workings of ‘fortress journalism’ (Myers, 2011).

²¹ In the US, media outfits such as America Online (AOL), Yahoo and MSN positioned themselves as information gateways while old media counterparts argued whether to go online. By 2000, when the latter finally got online, the dotcom bubble started to collapse, encouraging newspapers to introduce payment gateways. With few exceptions, these attempts at revenue-generation failed, with readers simply moving elsewhere, dividing their loyalties and attention between sites run by professionals and others run by enthusiasts. The more professionally-run sites included South Korea’s *OhmyNews* (set up in 2000) and *The Huffington Post* (2005). These organisations built their reputations and business models by melding 20th century hectoring into “bottom up, interactive and democratic journalism” (Gillmor 2006, p.126), consciously blurring the divide between traditional and alternative media, hiring low-paid (or even unpaid) ‘citizen reporters’ to go into the field and investigate issues that the mainstream media was not in a position to cover.

If hyperlinks are deemed to be indicative of relationships, then from its inception the blogosphere believed it could play an important role within the emerging media ecosystem (Hiler, 2002) since the sites blogs link to most frequently are, in fact, large media sites (Rosen, 2004). As newspaper circulations continue to decline and online information consumption increases, discourse on the notion of ‘competition’ has shifted to the differences between journalism and blogging. The following is a summary of the recurring arguments that dominate the journalism vs. blogging ‘competition dialectic’, reflecting journalism’s historic association with “ideal-type values” (Deuze, 2005); as well as its current identity crisis (Deuze, 2008; Domingo & Heinonen 2008; Friedman, 2010; Matheson 2004):

a) *Lack of professional journalist training.* The most common argument against blogging is that journalism is a craft that requires professional training and industry experience while anyone can become a blogger. This lacuna is directly reflected in the lack of deliberation in most blogs where blogging is closer to “talk” radio or “lunch table conversation” (Sunstein, 2007). Blogging is not journalism, or, at best, a flawed form of journalism (Ambinder, 2010; O’Dell, 2010).

Bloggers point to a number of factors to counter this criticism. The professional journalist employed by a media outlet tends to be a generalist while some bloggers are actually experts in their field and have earned their authority to write about a subject. In the case of ‘breaking news’, it has become common place for citizens to witness an event first-hand and ‘report on site’ using a mobile device before ‘the media’ can mobilise – in which case a blogger may “commit journalism” (Lasica, 2002). Blogging *is* journalism any time the blogger records and reacts to the events of the day, asks questions and seeks answers, checks facts and fixes errors. Similarly, journalists become bloggers any time they “adopt the format of a blog as a vessel for their work” (Rosenberg, 2009, p.274). While it is clear that most blogs cannot be considered to have any journalistic qualities (in terms of news and current affairs content), journalist-type blogs are not some monolithic grouping of blogs. Many former journalists have also crossed over to blogging, blurring the boundaries between old journalism and blogging; several news media now include some variants of weblogs in their online sites. Domingo & Heinonen’s (2008) typology of journalistic blogs clearly illustrates how the blog is no longer the domain of people without either journalism training or professional accreditation (see Table 5). In this framework, citizen blogs challenge

journalism from the outside, without any of the constraints of the media institution while media blogs transform journalism from the inside, normalising professional newsrooms with the new genre and embedding it in their production logics.

Type of Journalistic Blog	Written by	Examples
Citizen Blog	The Public Outside the Media	Scripting.com
Audience Blog	The Public within the Media	Times of Malta.com
Journalist Blog	Journalists outside Media institutions	ProPublica, The Next Web, Huffington Post, Politico, Gizmodo
Media Blog	Journalists within Media institutions	The Guardian, La Repubblica, El Mundo

Table 5: Typology of Journalistic Blogs (based on Domingo & Heinonen, 2008, p.7)

b) *Subjective reporting.* Journalists make much of the fact that their job requires them to be “impartial, neutral, objective, fair and (thus) credible” (Deuze, 2005, p.448). The immediacy and actuality which is inherent in the concept of ‘news’ is subject to industry operating standards and journalism codes of ethics that provide quality assurance guidelines and safeguards. As an unregulated terrain, blogging cannot deliver ethical journalism: at best, it is opinion, not journalism.

Bloggers rarely make any claims about objectivity – indeed, many blogs embrace partisan expression, old stories, stories driven by non-elite sources, and highly-specialised content (Lowrey, 2006). Trust, credibility and online reputation are earned specifically by being personal, subjective and opinionated (Wall, 2005) as opposed to the professional production values required from a media brand (Matheson, 2004). Yet citizen journalism is also associated with dogged, obsessive, investigation, 24 x 7 coverage, speed and getting to the breaking news before the mainstream journalists: unashamedly personal, subjective reportage is “fuelled by personal obsession rather than institutional edict” (Rosenberg, 2009, p.286). Bloggers claim they are still subject to a self-regulating system since the community of readers and third-party bloggers performs the traditional editorial duties present in mainstream media: blogs that feature reportage or news-checking reveal their sources through links (Raynsford, 2003). Wilhelm (in Friedman, 2010) opines that “blogging=journalism+opinion.” Atton

(2008) levers on Matheson & Allan's (2003) study of professional journalists who maintained blogs during the last Gulf war to explain how blogging appears to encourage informality and subjectivity, *irrespective of who is writing*. Journalists engaging with the medium instinctively emphasised their independence from organisational and administrative constraints, while readers trusted the bloggers because their methods were "transparently subjective" (Atton, 2008, p.223).

c) *Echo chamber reporting*. Journalists say they report with a sense of ethics, validity, legitimacy and impartiality. Blogs facilitate echo chambers of texts which confirm what we already know, exclude what we don't and hear only those with whom we agree - a view that gains currency within the context of political blogging (el-Nawawy & Khamis, 2010; de Zúñiga et al., 2011).

The difficulty with this argument is that mass media have a long association with agenda-setting; a practice McCombs & Shaw (1977) associate with the ability to effect cognitive change among individuals by structuring citizens' thinking to one's own agenda. Mainstream journalism is inevitably shaped by the host media institutions – a reality that has contributed to a broad disengagement of audiences with the political process in some countries (McChesney & Pickard, 2011). Bloggers underplay the risks of echo chamber reporting, perceiving these to be preferable to the covert agenda-setting of mainstream media: 'reporting news' may be too important a function to be left in the exclusive domain of journalists (Forde, 2011; Meadows, 2011; Meikle, 2004). Moreover, media institutions also suffer from their own variant of the echo-chamber, since they often draw on the same sources (the journalist's contact book) for 'impartial' expert opinions and sound bites on 'news'.

d) *Lack of resourcing and institutional accreditation*. Journalism is an expensive business. Bloggers lack the financial resources and the privileged media networks to undertake the important, expensive, investigative (and sometimes dangerous) journalism. Through the membership of their institution, journalists' social capital typically crystallises in the form of a network of informants at all levels of political and civil society. Bloggers remain primarily locked into laptop journalism.

What bloggers lack in resources, accreditation and access to decision-makers to facilitate news-gathering is compensated by personal 'authenticity' (Matheson, 2004).

Early literature on blogging in the US includes accounts of lone or networked individuals on the ground whose operations as individual ombudsmen, fact-checkers and ideological watchdogs (Regan, 2003, Rosen, 2005) led to full-scale investigations of high-profile establishment figures.²² The lack of affiliation with a media institution may actually be of benefit to news-reporting. Local bloggers who work for no money do not have the restrictions of mainstream media journalists to choose one story over another, mobilise, travel, report and move on to another story. Bloggers who use a blog as an information hub may yet free up the public agenda from the judgements of a finite number of commercial media managers. By being available to report and produce first-hand accounts of events that may not necessarily be deemed newsworthy by mainstream media outlets, bloggers operate as the underdogs of public interest media, unfettered by the institutional trappings of professional journalists, bureaucratic and editorial constraints, and pressure to monetise content (Laughey, 2009; Lowrey et al., 2011).

e) *Protection of the Fourth Estate.* Journalism is a public service where journalists operate as watchdogs or ‘newshounds’, active collectors and disseminators of information. A civilised society needs big media as a fundamental component of our culture and to provide us with a “central narrative for our national life” (Rosenberg 2009, p.298). The mix of subjectivity, celebration of the amateur and reflexivity in citizen journalism is eroding the fundamentals of the Fourth Estate.

There are several high-profile examples of the difficulty news institutions have with being seen to be fair and impartial when reporting does not fit within a pre-determined editorial line (Adie, 2002). The closure of the *News of the World* in 2011 and the resignation of BBC’s Newsnight editor in October 2012, following a decision to shelve an edition of a programme investigating allegations of Jimmy Savile’s sexual abuse of minors, are recent reminders of the mainstream media’s hidden agendas and difficulty in serving the public good. The vast majority of bloggers do not see themselves as journalists, although some have a visceral understanding that they participate in a complex informational ecosystem. Yet in some cases, there is little to distinguish a

²² Examples in the US include blog campaigns against Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott and aspiring U.S. Supreme Court judge Harriett Miers (see Davis, 2009, pp.22-25). Trevers Scott (2008) includes a list of situations in which blogs are “purported to have in some way influenced, supplanted, surpassed, or scooped mainstream news media.” This familiar list of political scalps which peaked around 2003-4 gained renewed currency in 2011, when, during and after the Arab Spring, bloggers become increasingly associated with political activism, revolution and social change.

blogger from a journalist, other than determining if the content provider is working for an accredited institution, or writing for money in return for writing online on a local blog, website or forum imparting information about a local community (Friedman, 2010; Robinson & DeShano, 2012) . The issue of what actually qualifies an individual to claim to be a journalist has recently become a legal issue in the US²³. In Malta, blogging appears to fall under the provisions of the Press Act but attempts to renew a journalist code of practice to include digital media have to date failed (Sammut, 2011a).

3.2.3 Information flows, power and authority

Blogging and mainstream journalism are radically different approaches to the compilation, mediation and dissemination of information for public consumption. Information flows in the mainstream media are top-down over proprietary communications infrastructure; in the blogosphere, information flows in and out, horizontally, and sometimes upwards and downwards. Landow (2006) expounds the virtues in shifting from systems of central information control “founded on ideas of center, margin, hierarchy and linearity” to dispersed systems of “multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks”. He believes that the current crisis of “push media” is of its own making, contrasting this with the virtues of “user-centred hypermedia” and “networked computer environments [that] empower users to act as more than mere consumers” (ibid., p.325).

The new patterns of information flows facilitated by citizen journalism are therefore facilitated by a combination of factors: hyperlinked technology, institution organisation (horizontal and flat as opposed to institutional and top-down), speed of production and publication, the availability of citizen journalists in every possible news location, on a

²³ On 30 November 2011, United States District Judge Marco A. Hernandez of the U.S. District Court for the District of Oregon, Portland Division, ruled against ‘investigative blogger’ Crystal Cox, who had represented herself before the court in a defamation case in which she was the defendant. The judge ordered Cox to pay \$2.5 million in damages to the plaintiffs and ruled that in order to qualify for basic First Amendment protections like state shield laws, freelance journalists must meet a set of six criteria : 1) education in journalism; 2) credentials or proof of affiliation with a recognized news entity; 3) proof of adherence to journalistic standards such as editing, fact-checking, or disclosures of conflicts of interest; 4) keeping notes of conversations and interviews conducted; 5) mutual understanding or agreement of confidentiality between the defendant and his/her sources; 6) creation of an independent product rather than assembling writings and postings of others; and 7) contacting “the other side” to get both sides of a story. The ruling was widely criticised as archaic, with calls for an urgent update of pre-Internet shield laws and provide protection for investigative bloggers (see Hilden, 2011; Angelotti, 2011; Coursey, 2012).

24 hour, 7 days a week basis. The claims for the former audience's²⁴ propensity to resist and disrupt mediated discourse through blogging echo Foucault's (1980, p.98) belief that "individuals are the vehicles of power", engaged in weaving an alternative "net-like organisation".

By the end of the 20th century, the network was starting to take shape online in subversive fashion and the blog, as the first social software to gain mass take-up, was associated with two complementary facets of audience empowerment through information exchange: peer-to-peer journalism (Sullivan, 2008) and media activism (Kperogi, 2011; Saeed, 2010). Citizen journalism depends on the ability of ordinary citizens to set up their own media agenda and decide what constitutes "news" in the blogosphere, leveraging on the online tools of the day to search and rank content (Regan 2003; Delwiche, 2005). Echoing Couldry (2000) and Deuze (2003), Atton (2008) associates online citizen empowerment with ordinary people operating as media producers: narrating their own stories "without the formal education or professional expertise and status of the mainstream journalist" (ibid., p.213); yet with an awareness that they are operating an alternative media, "that the natural state of the mass media is not the only possible form of media" (ibid., p.215). If we focus on a more activist interpretation of information exchange, blogging as citizen journalism may take any of the four distinctive forms of action that Carroll & Hackett (2006, pp.88-89) associate with the democratisation of communication: a) influencing content and practices of mainstream media; b) advocating reform of government policy/regulation of media in order to change the structure and policies of media themselves; c) building independent, democratic and participatory media; and d) changing the relationship between audiences and media, chiefly by empowering audiences to be more critical of hegemonic media. One of the concrete by-products of the 'many-to-many' blogging ecosystem is that it facilitates a modern form of 'long-tail', niche journalism (Anderson, 2006), disseminating news information that is inevitably neglected by mainstream media journalists due to internal and external factors such as resourcing, editorial guidelines and space (TV minutes, column inches). Blogging's reputation for partisan expressions, 'old stories', news driven by non-elite sources and highly-specialised content also needs to be interpreted within this long-tail context (Lowrey (2006).

²⁴ With the advent of the Internet, Castells (1996, p.337), observed how the audience had gone from a passive object to an interactive, differentiated subject, opening the way to "the subsequent transformation of the media from mass communication to segmentation, customization and individualization" facilitated by "technology, corporations and institutions".

Literature on citizen journalism is prone to an enthusiasm for cyberculture and technological determinism (Leadbeater, 2008; Gillmor, 2006; Tapscott & Williams, 2006; Trippi, 2004). Benkler (2009, p.212) describes the move from the “hub and spoke architecture with unidirectional links to the end points” in the mass media model towards a “distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes” on the Internet. Ryan (2011, p.7) celebrates the “absence of the central dot...the coming power of the networked individual as the new vital unit of effective participation and creativity”. Following this logic, everyone online has a voice, can link to everyone else, and can subvert central authority. There is frequently a lack of a coherent grasp of the social, cultural, and political processes that can make the use of citizen media transformative in one context and irrelevant in another. Pettit et al. (2009, p.446) correctly observe how media and communication are still seen as “technical ‘add-ons’ to projects, as forms of message delivery, or as ways of enabling voices to be projected (not necessarily heard) within formal political processes”. Morozov’s “The Net Delusion” (2011) is a sobering reminder that the read/write web does not automatically lead to citizen empowerment, and can be appropriated by totalitarian regimes and their media just as easily as by networked individuals. The Internet’s decentralised taxonomy may make it harder for comprehensive censorship but it has also rendered “propaganda more effective, as government messages can now be spread through undercover government-run blogs” (ibid., p.82). When comparing the power of citizen media with the incumbent mainstream media, we need to look for concrete examples of audience empowerment through empirical research in local contexts that are not necessarily in the US or the West (Katz & Lai, 2009).

The ownership of the personal soapbox (Blood, 2000) does not guarantee an audience, let alone citizen empowerment. There is an unprecedented concentration of power within old media (Jenkins 2006). Although citizen media may, at face value, threaten to disintermediate incumbent media institutions as privileged gatekeepers of information, mainstream media (particularly TV) remains a source of cultural and political influence, particularly in small places like Malta. People have not switched off TV any more than they have stopped reading the news - they may simply prefer to do this online because technology is ubiquitous and news content online is primarily free of charge. Rosen (2012) highlights how in the mid-1970s over 70% of Americans told Gallup they had a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the press: by 2012, it is down to 44%. Yet it

is too simplistic to attribute the loss of trust in institutional media authority to the emergence of citizen journalism and online “word of mouth” empowered by the network. Just because the technology facilitates peer- to-peer exchanges online does not mean that what used to be the centre of the hub of information exchange has necessarily lost its power to mediate, reinvent or appropriate the practices of the new media to retain and even potentially strengthen its authority. In 2004, *Reason Magazine* editor Jesse Walker blogged about the growing integration between old and new media. Rather than displacement, Walker believed blogging would lead to the transformation of old media into “faster, more transparent, more interactive” entities, with a regeneration of the incumbent institution’s business models and greater speed in breaking news, greater transparency with sources, and more reflective editorials.

On a purely economic level, the net beneficiaries of the “free content culture”, promoted by writers such as Anderson (2009) and Lessig (2008) remain a handful of multinational capitalist organisations, adept at operating as online content producers, content aggregators or sourcing of user-generated content for eventual monetisation (such as through pay-per-click advertising). Indeed, the free culture is attributed as a primary reason for the failure of many culture businesses in recent years (Levine, 2011). Bloggers may simply become a low-cost talent pool for the publishing industry, destroying careers and reducing demand for ‘professionally-trained’ journalists. The Huffington Post, one of the first bastions of citizen media, is an example of how “blogging the news” simply provided free content to a private organisation whose net worth was eventually monetised through its sale to AOL for US\$315 million on 7 February, 2011.

Bloggers appear to share certain routines, expectations and folksonomies when the blog is used as a tool for information, identity, and relationship management. These are in turn governed by the three structural dimensions of rules, relations and codes (Schmidt 2007) through which bloggers manage identities, build networks and attempt to establish authority and visibility through their particular selection of technical platform, blogroll, hyperlinks and other features of the blogosphere. Those bloggers who consider their work to be a form of journalism in the first place, such as those who run blogs as collaborative efforts or write about public affairs, tend to adopt the organisation and journalistic practices of mainstream media. They demonstrate “perception-motivation-behaviour” that compels them to act as journalists via activation of a motivation to

inform and influence readers” (de Zúñiga et al. 2011, pp.599-600). However, despite the adoption of increasingly similar practices to retain their power and authority, contradictions and tensions between citizen and mainstream media remain. Jenkins (2006, p.222) describes this as “the pull and tug of the two media systems: one broadcast and commercial, the other narrowcast and grassroots”. Lovink (2007) also attributes this to blogging being a nihilistic venture which questions and attacks the ownership structure of mainstream media and documents their diminishing power without consciously providing an alternative ideology. Blogs “zero out old structure but do not claim to be its predecessor. Users are tired of top-down communication - and yet have nowhere else to go” (Lovink, 2007, p.34).

3.2.4 Reinventing journalism: embracing hybridity

There are two distinct, symbiotic changes that appear to be facilitated by the emergence of citizen media and the practice of citizen journalism: changes in media structures; and changes in media practices. Both of these lead to a renewed interest in what actually constitutes “journalism” - particularly the journalism that used to be associated with the “public good”.

Changes in old media structures are increasingly transparent, reflected in closure of print plants and staff redundancies - but also in the engagement of freelance journalists, flat reporting structures, online editorial policies and investment in online collateral. Online business models remain tenuous at best, despite the introduction of pay walls by newspapers such as the *FT*, the *UK Times* and *The New York Times*. Newspapers compete with news websites, with radio and TV stations, magazines, and new professional and amateur entrants (Domingo & Heinonen 2008; Shirky, 2010). They also have to compete with a small number of born-digital news enterprises such as the *Huffington Post*, *OhmyNews* and *The Texas Tribune* that have built viable organisations doing instantly recognisable accountability journalism (Zuckerman, 2009). *ProPublica* is another well-funded online publication set up in June 2008 by former reporters from *The Wall Street Journal* with the specific objective of delivering “journalism in the public interest”. These new digital news enterprises compete but also occasionally collaborate with mainstream media organisations in a formal manner. *The Texas Tribune* produces content for *The New York Times*, and in exchange receives both a

payment and significant non-monetary gains including enhanced marketing reach, brand visibility and credibility with sources.

The notion of hybridity as a critical concept has been a prominent theme in cultural studies for some years (see Nederveen Pieterse, 2001). Within critical media theory, its leading exponent is Andrew Chadwick whose work is associated with the “hybrid media system.” Chadwick (2011, p.2) describes the system as:

built upon interactions among old and new media and their associated technologies, genres, norms, behaviors, and organizations. Actors in the hybrid media system are articulated by complex and evolving power relations based upon adaptation and interdependence.

Hybridity is best explored by observing the profound, ongoing disruption of old media practices and the introduction of hybrid practices, with a corresponding transformative and disruptive impact on news production hierarchies and the public consumption of and interaction with such news (Bruns, 2008; Deuze, 2006; Gillmor, 2004; McChesney, 2007; Shirky, 2008; Tilley & Cokley, 2008; Robinson, 2010). What used to be considered alternative citizen journalism practices have now been appropriated by, for instance, *CNN's iReporter* and the blogs on *Al-Jazeera*, and blended and remixed into TV reportage: bloggers are invited as opinionists on prime-time TV. In the US, major media outlets such as *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times* have integrated bloggers into regular coverage, often turning to hyperlocal and political bloggers for breaking news stories and insights. Sites such as *Niqash.org* and *Global Voices* are trusted sources for news stories in both citizen media and mainstream media²⁵. In 2011, blogging and other social media were perceived to have played a role not just in the news coverage of major crises and conflicts such as the Arab Spring revolutions and the Japanese earthquake, but in citizen organisation and mobilisation. The public imagination on citizen media has been conflated with anecdotal media references to citizen journalism and “Twitter revolutions” (Mejias 2011; boyd et al., 2011), prompting Fuchs (2012) to remark that “rebellions and revolutions are made by people living under certain social conditions and power relations, not by technology.”

²⁵ *Niqash.org* provides a platform for debates on Iraq. *Global Voices* is an international community of bloggers that reports on blogs and citizen media from around the world. This entry on the *Global Voices* website is particularly poignant: “*Global Voices* seeks to aggregate, curate, and amplify the global conversation online - shining light on places and people other media often ignore. We work to develop tools, institutions and relationships that will help all voices, everywhere, to be heard.”

Hybridity appears to be involved in the changes underway as new citizen media practices get appropriated by old media institutions:

a) *The 'old' media is increasing permeable*, and what used to be considered “alternative practices” are both hybridising and changing what we used to call journalism. Old and new media are locked in a dynamic process of hybridisation, influencing and borrowing from each other, such that media created in one tradition may be altered or transformed by another. Petit et al. (2009, p.444) describe this as:

a global acceleration of inter-cultural exchange and diffusion where it is not always possible to say whether a media or communication initiative is mainstream or alternative, is initiated from ‘outside’ or ‘inside’, is part of a development intervention or intrinsic to a social movement, or is distinctively derived from a particular national, cultural, or movement context.

In the permeable media ecosystem, one can also observe bloggers’ networked individualism, the activation of weak ties to make news, and the enduring importance of hyperlinking. Professional journalists, bloggers, sources, readers and viewers appear locked in a relentless online dialectic where news information is exchanged and re-broadcast. Increasingly, journalists are perceiving blogs, Facebook, Twitter and other forms of social media to be indispensable to traditional media reportage and fact-checking (*The Economist*, 2011). Major breaking news is often first leaked on Twitter by the modern equivalent of smart mobs with mobile devices before the broadcasting media has had time to mobilise (Myers, 2011). Similarly, the blogosphere may operate as an “early warning system” for journalists, providing material that can be turned into mainstream stories following routine fact-checking. The private echo chambers of blogging are increasingly used, remixed, appropriated and amplified by the bastions of mainstream media for dissemination to prime-time TV audiences and iPad readers.

b) *Journalistic habits are blurring*. Professional journalists are taking on the habits of bloggers and citizens with journalistic aspirations appropriate mainstream journalist practices. By blogging, staff journalists appear to take a more ‘personality-driven’ approach to news, providing a more subjective and opinionated commentary as opposed to the routine reporting of news. Journalists are also likely to blog on a paper’s portal to

boost traffic and search engine optimisation (SEO) ranking through frequent updates, comments and links: these efforts may attract incremental advertising revenues for the media organisation to make up for some of the losses on print revenues.

Most bloggers do not see themselves as journalists or activists, yet many harbour a yearning for heightened popularity and status, and for advertising revenue, particularly those running public interest blogs (Lowrey et al. 2011). Conversely bloggers who see their work as a form of journalism are more inclined to inform and influence readers, write about public affairs, and behave as a more traditional journalist (de Zúñiga, et al. 2011). Some citizens also aspire to be integrated with the community of professional journalists, as “contributors in their own right, as major branded commenters on news and events, and as key sources of local information” (Robinson & de Shano, 2012, p. 964).

c) *Convergent media is coming of age*, facilitated by the relentless hybridity of social media and mobile devices. Tumblr, for instance, is a hybridisation of blog and social network functionality - part content development, part content curation, part sharing, and part broadcast machine. For Deuze (2008, p.103), media convergence must be seen to have a cultural logic of its own:

blurring the lines between different channels, forms and formats, between different parts of the media enterprise, between the acts of production and consumption, between making media and using media, and between active or passive spectatorship of mediated culture.

Jenkins (2004, p.34) imagines a future with two kinds of media power: the “media concentration” of broadcast media that places issues on the national agenda as a definition of core values; and the “collective intelligence” of grassroots citizen journalism and its loose network of diverse publics that will reframe those issues for different publics to ensure everyone has a chance to be heard. Thus, innovation occurs on the fringes and consolidation in the mainstream. In 2012, we need to balance Jenkins’ endorsement of the produsage system and a belief that information gains visibility (once deemed relevant to the loose network of diverse publics) with Deuze’s view that technology is driving a conflation culture. Convergent media may facilitate polarisation and conflict as much as it may contribute to an improved public sphere (O’Neil, 2009).

d) *The onus is still on mainstream media to change*, appropriate and reform its practices and structures if it wishes to establish a more social relationship with its publics. In a 2010 interview, Rosen highlights the ambivalence and often accidental nature of citizen journalism:

People use these [social media] tools to make meaning within their own lives. And sometimes, they are ready to act as journalists. When they are, then professional news organisations should have the tools, the openness, the instructions and the frictionless system to make that possible. And that is where they should place their efforts.

e) The *hybrid nature of the blog and the increased permeability of old media* in its online incarnation provide opportunities for diffused media hegemony and counter-hegemony by institutions, power brokers and capitalist organisations (Lehti, 2010). From a pragmatist viewpoint, Rosen (2011) believes that it takes more than a blogger joining a media institution or journalists starting their own blog to disguise the culture gap that exists between the two worlds, and which yet continues to narrow:

Bloggers vs. journalists doesn't end when a blogger is hired at a big institutional player like the *Washington Post*. Instead the conflict is absorbed directly into the institution.

Media institution cultures may be challenged from within, by empowered individuals. However, there continues to be a perpetual tension between institutions' culture of professional control and the need to foster greater user participation. The manner in which this tension is navigated will affect the ultimate shape of the journalism profession and its place in society (Lewis 2012). Until such a time as hybrid journalism has become the mainstream, the spectrum of citizen journalism appears to be suspended between: a) the 'end of mainstream journalism'; b) the middle ground of "an increasingly collaborative endeavour, engendering a heightened sense of locality, yet one that is relayed around the globe in a near-instant" (Allan 2007, p.19), at times hyperlocal, at times 'glocal' (Baines, 2010); and c) the opportunity for 'quality' journalism to be reaffirmed (Deuze et al., 2007; McChesney, 2011). In a blog post in 2009, Shirky wrote that the disruption in journalism models was likely to continue for decades:

Many of these models will fail. No one experiment is going to replace what we are now losing with the demise of news on paper, but over time, the collection of new experiments that do work might give us the journalism we need.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter used literature to discuss the implications of the use of the blog for citizen journalism, and explored claims about its potential to disrupt mainstream journalism practices and media models. The tense relationship between blogging and journalism reveals changes within journalism practices that appear to be as irreversible as they are unfinished. The attention being given to emerging hybrid models of journalism by scholars points to an awareness of the appropriation of new citizen media practices by old media outlets, often as a direct reaction to blogging's gatekeeping and produsage activities.

The next chapter discusses the more nuanced notion of blogging as a means of participating in the public sphere.

Chapter 4.

Untangling claims for disruptive blogging: participation in public sphere

As a process that leads to online discourse for public consumption, blogging has long been associated with an invigoration of the old public sphere and the creation of a new online version. This chapter revisits the Habermasian public sphere as a means of examining claims that the read/write web leads to the emergence of a networked public sphere. It also engages with the popular new media claim that the blog is a participatory medium of democracy.

4.1 The new-old networked public sphere

Porter (1997, p.206) writes that the issue of the public sphere is “at the heart of any reconceptualisation of democracy”. It is a metaphorical civic space within which people come together to deliberate over and contest matters of common concern and public interest, and where it seems necessary to reach a consensus; a space outside the ambit of government, business, and home (Dean 2003). The most popular notion of the public sphere is that defined by Jürgen Habermas in “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” as the space “between civil society and the state, in which critical public discussion of matters of general interest was institutionally guaranteed” (Habermas 1989, xi). Habermas’s public sphere is exemplified in the intellectual discussions and deliberations among members of the aristocracy or the “bourgeois” at German *Tischgesellschaften*, French literary salons and English coffee houses of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This was mostly a “sphere of private people coming together as a public” to discuss matters of shared interest and to engage in stimulating debates (Habermas 1989, p.27). In this productive and open sphere, public opinion is produced through the communicative deployment of reason, and participants support their arguments through “validity claims,” to try to reach a consensus based on “rational–critical debates and the authority of better judgement” (Habermas 1990, p.58). According to Poster (2006, p.207), Habermas’s real political objective was to further the project of Enlightenment through the reconstruction of a public sphere in which reason might prevail:

not the instrumental reason of much modern practice but the critical reason that represents the best of the democratic tradition - through a set of equality, transparency, inclusivity and rationality norms.

Habermas lamented the loss of these forums of critical, rational deliberation with the rise of the mass media in the late nineteenth century, although he was hopeful that the media (newspapers, radio and TV) could still become major components of the public sphere – “a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (Habermas, 1964, pp.198-200). In 1996, he wrote that the high barriers to entry associated with broadcast media had resulted in political discourse being monopolised by a handful of monolithic, capitalist institutions, leading to a lowering of the discursive level of public communication, with issues tending to originate in and be managed from the centre rather than follow “a spontaneous course originating from the periphery” (Habermas, 1996, pp.359). Commercialised mass media had turned the public sphere into a space where rhetoric and the needs of public relations and advertising take precedence over rational deliberation and news primarily serves the purpose of entertainment. The public space, while remaining the space between state and society, had come to resemble “a network for communicating information and points of view” (Habermas, 1996, p. 360), rather than rational deliberation. Habermas (1991) identifies other barriers to participation in the public sphere: the “disparity in formal education and material resources limits freedom of speech and public opinion” (ibid., p.227); large political and economic organisations dominate public imagination and “enjoy an oligopoly of the publicistically effective and politically relevant formation of assemblies and associations”, limiting the freedom of such practices for other social groups (ibid., p.228).

Habermas’s public sphere remains associated with the discursive arena of civil groups demanding freedom of expression, due process and democratic rights – a space where people can engage in issues beyond those sanctioned by institutions, economic patrons, church patriarchs and state leaders (Keren, 2004). However, the concept has been the subject of much criticism from poststructuralists, even before the advent of the Internet and the social web catalysed claims for its revival. Fraser (1992, p.115) points to an idealised, liberal yet “elitist and monolithic public sphere that fails to examine the alternative, non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public sphere” – a space for privileged men to exercise their governance skills that also excludes women and non-

propertied classes from public discourse. As a Eurocentric, patriarchal concept, it ignores realities such as the different socio-historic experiences of non-Western / non-European societies. The rationalist model of public discourse does not allow for theorisation of a pluralist public sphere or account for the constant need for compromise between diverse political positions. Significantly, the model's obsession with consensus means that forms of communication not directed towards consensus are ignored, neglecting "both the rhetorical and playful aspects of communicative action present in the mass media" (Garnham, 1992, p.360). Calhoun (1992), p.37 is critical of Habermas for ignoring the existence of alternative democratic media strategies *outside* the ambit of mass media, and suggests that rather than associating the public sphere with the fixed architectural metaphors of alternate and nested publics, it may be more useful to think of it as a "field of discursive connections" or public culture.

The advent of the Internet was a prompt for media theorists to revive the notion of the public sphere – not as some idealised modern-day version of the coffee houses and literary salons of early modern Europe, but within the framework of a network society that organises its public sphere on the basis of media communication networks. Castells (2008, p.90) describes this public sphere as a global-local *space* constituted around the media system of "mass self-communication" conceptualised as:

networks of communication that relate many-to-many in the sending and receiving of messages in a multimodal form of communication that bypasses mass media and often escapes government control.

This is the space where ideas and projects that emerge from society are communicated to, and may be addressed by, institutional decision makers; and where citizens may articulate their autonomous views to influence the political institutions of society. Castells sees activists and NGOs as the organised expression of these views, structuring and channelling citizen debates over diverse ideas and conflicting interests: the use of the mass self-communication tools is one way of keeping the State accountable to citizens, beyond electioneering and political marketing.

Benkler (2006, p.177) updates the base concept of the public sphere to "the networked public sphere", which he defines as:

the set of practices that the members of a society use to communicate about matters they understand to be of public concern and that potentially require collective action or recognition.

Benkler's core argument is that the distributed architecture of the networked public sphere is a superior, more democratic space to the "commercial, mass-mediated public sphere that thrives on passive readers, listeners or viewers" (p.212). Levering on Roberts (2009), we can identify five distinct criteria Benkler (2006) uses to validate his position: a) "*Universal intake*", in that the social web is open and (mainly) free of charge to individuals who wish to author their own lives and produce their own cultural environments. This may in turn lead to the emergence of a new set of technical, economic, social and institutional relations; b) *Ability to filter relevant information*, such as the activities of produsage and gatewatching that can plausibly take the read/write web "within the domain of organised political action" (ibid., p.183); c) *Capability to credit information sources*; d) *Capability to synthesise public opinion*, bringing together divergent individual opinions into a coherent public opinion through pervasive, public debate, and "opening the possibility of a more critical and reflective culture" (ibid., p. 130), with conversations carried out at many levels of the political and social structure; and e) *Independence from government control*. Benkler's frequent references to 'collective action' also associate the networked public sphere with political freedom.

Benkler uses hyperlink theory to make the case for the blogosphere as a relatively organised network topology where bloggers link to other material relevant to their concerns, such that "the number of links that must be traversed from any point in the network to any other point is relatively small" (Benkler 2006, p.252). These arguments resonate with the social networking issues highlighted in Chapter 2, and may also be deemed to be mildly technologically-deterministic – in a similar vein to Shirky (2011, p.95) who describes the blog as a medium that both "enables and rewards participation in the public sphere".

4.2 Revisiting the virtual public sphere

Arguments on whether blogging does contribute to a virtual model of the Habermasian public sphere are typically polarised, from utopian visions of online civic participation

to dystopian views on the actual impact of online deliberation. O’Baioill (2004) suggests three key factors as a litmus test for an online space to meet Habermas’s ideal of the public sphere: inclusivity, disregard of external rank, and rational debate of any topic.

At face value, the blogosphere appears to offer an inclusive online space that is free from central organisation and control, where people can meet to discuss matters of public concern (Farrell & Drezner, 2008), a miniature public sphere of shared interests rather than shared geography (Froomkin, 2004). Blogging is in turn credited with the facilitation of macro participation by “playing a connecting role between individual concerns and wider social arenas” (O’Neil, 2009, p.53). As a literary practice that is both individual and social, it combines aspects of both dialogue and dissemination (Rettberg, 2008), encourages individual self-expression and conversations, supports prompt feedback, and expands the range of voices that can be heard in a national debate, ensuring that no one voice can speak with unquestioned authority (Jenkins & Thorburn, 2003; McNely et al, 2010). The more utopian views of blogging are about engendering new ways of looking at the world (Davies & Merchant, 2007), free from the power of institutions and information gatekeepers that include “parents, peers, governments, institutions and media publishers” (Keren, 2006, pp.7-8). The virtues of two-way media versus one-directional mass media and citizens’ seamless migration from passive consumers into active, independent participants, collaborators and producers (as discussed in Chapter 3) are also indicative of scholars’ optimism in the reinvigorated networked public sphere.

Nevertheless, blogging does *not* necessarily embrace the open, collaborative and deliberative elements of democracy associated with the Habermasian public sphere where consensus is secured through rational debate. If anything, this study is an observation of the online practices of individuality, disagreements and disruption in search of alternative discourse and democratic emancipation. Citizens that communicate horizontally with each other through blogging may be a significant irritant to known or unknown “publics” - not least, because it is a free, unmediated form of *participation* in an online version of the public sphere. Although the blogosphere may be technically inclusive (with low barriers to entry, anyone with access to a computer and the Internet can start a blog) the propagation network still serves to privilege some over others, with external relationships and an obsession with inward-linking and

external ranking fostering a culture of ‘A-list’ bloggers that inevitably influences which stories are propagated through the system (as discussed in Chapter 2). Habermas’s prescript of the discursive power of the better argument requires individuals from different socio-political spheres to engage and empathise with each other – a notion short-circuited by the algorithmic power of online aggregation. Control that is constituted through code (Lessig, 1999) or protocol can be a far more powerful, invisible, and incontestable barrier against universal access than more traditional forms.

Despite the problems with the notion of an updated public sphere and a purist 21st century online counterpart, the blogosphere continues to be associated with a space for citizen expression of dissent with a public agenda determined by mainstream media and political actors (Papacharissi, 2009). Political blogs have been the subject of several studies that focus on their potential to improve citizen participation, political debate and direct communication between politicians and citizens (Chambers, 2005; Ekdale et al., 2010; Keren, 2010; Lehti, 2011; Polat, 2005; Pole, 2009; Siapera, 2008²⁶). This genre of blog may be produced by dilettantes and specialists and includes journalists-to-journalist type blogs such as *ProPublica*, *Politico*, *The Daily Beast*, *The Daily Kos*, *Scoop.com*, *FiveThirtyEight*, *Gizmodo* and *TheNextWeb* that operate as independent online news sources: seven of the top 20 blogs on Technorati’s Top 100 blogs are political blogs. Trippi’s (2004) positioning of the ‘Blog for America’ at the nerve centre of Howard Dean’s unsuccessful 2004 Presidential campaign (for campaign ideas, feedback, support and funding) is held as one of the earliest examples of online political activism in the US and future campaign communication, where blogs become a standard part of campaign communications (Lawson-Borders & Kirk, 2005). The lessons of Trippi’s ultimately flawed campaign were absorbed by Obama’s successful online campaign in 2008 and carried into the Washington.gov site and embraced by many Western-style regimes in a show of ‘open government’.

Pole (2009) believes that blogging has already transformed the US political landscape, in that it is recognised as an effective means of civil engagement for minorities and under-represented groups, enhancing existing modes of organisation such as marches, protests or rallies. Blogs in wider Western contexts are used to make previously

²⁶ According to Siapera (2008, pp.51-52), research on blogging’s influence on the political process typically falls into four categories: 1) through bottom-up agenda setting; 2) through independent investigations into political actors, exposing scandals and misconducts; 3) by acting as an extended public sphere through inclusive and deliberative actions; and 4) by opening up new and direct channels of communication between politicians and citizens.

marginalised actors and arguments more visible to a broader public (Gerhards & Schafer, 2010; Langman, 2005): bloggers may engage in political activities that used to be the exclusive domain of elites and shape agendas for specific interest areas (such as women's rights). Farrell & Drezner (2008) point to the skewed distribution of the link taxonomy of the blogosphere, and the unequal distribution of blog readership in their assertion that interesting news and opinions can rise to the top of the blogosphere and to the attention of elite actors – whose own understanding of politics may therefore be influenced by blog discourse. In their US-based study, they found that while blog exposure was limited to only 7% of the general population, over 83% of journalists had used blogs, and 43% of journalists used them at least every week. The claims for blogging as an effective political tool are therefore also related to the disproportionate influence some blogs may exert on power brokers such as the local media, particularly in localised contexts – despite the blogosphere's apparent disadvantage in terms of audience reach compared to TV, radio, print and their online media representations. Network structures, search engine knowledge, personal charisma and distinctly local parameters are some of the variables that may contribute to a blogger's ability to frame political debates and create focal points for the media and political hegemonies. Influence may not relate as much to the quantum of reader statistics or comments as to who is blogging and who is reading. Such influence may be amplified in hyperlocal conditions such as those in Malta, where bloggers may be easily identifiable (because of issues such as size of community and the blogger's offline social capital).

Non-Western literature on blogging as political participation is typically based on case studies for civil society activism in countries such as South Africa (Berger, 2011; Somolu, 2007), China (Zhou, 2009), Tanzania (Chacage, 2010), Egypt (el-Nawawy et al, 2011) and Zimbabwe (Moyo, 2011). In 2011, the Arab Spring, the London riots and the Occupy Wall Street movement rekindled interest in blogging and other social media tools as a force for the organisation of large-scale, national and civil activism. Gladwell's (2010) much-cited view in *The New York Times* that “the weak-tie platforms of social media seldom lead to high-risk activism” is in stark contrast with recent renewed media interest in digital activists and smart mobs with mobile devices. There is much anecdotal and little empirical evidence to support the belief that blogging

operated at the hub of a citizen media ecosystem in conjunction with Twitter and Facebook to organise and mobilise support for the revolutions in these countries²⁷.

Nevertheless, there is growing scepticism about technology's actual role in invigorating and fuelling political participation, not least because of the enduring difficulty of correlating cause and effect, as evidenced in media effects research (Wilken, 2012). Doubts also exist in the case of resource-poor citizens where the digital divide remains in place, or getting worse (Van Laer, 2010). Pessimists also note that as blogging becomes a more established feature on the political landscape, it may become increasingly ineffective, get co-opted as mainstream media or as an increasingly pervasive tool through which politicians and others will deploy to influence political debate (Farrell and Drezner 2008): large parts of the blogosphere are already dominated by corporates, political parties and large media organisations. Morozov's "The Net Delusion" (2011) is a relentless chronicle of how relatively closed and authoritarian societies such as China, Russia, Iran and Belarus continue to be more than adept at appropriating social media technologies to reinforce their hegemonies and suppress dissent and hopes for democracy. Away from the immediate spotlight of revolution, online political participation is seen to reinforce and in some cases exacerbate some of the existing social inequalities in offline political participation by marginalising the less educated and those from lower socioeconomic groups. Morozov's critique of Western technological determinism, that given enough gadgets, connectivity, and foreign funding, dictatorships are doomed, finds resonance in Wright's (2012, p.257) critique of Internet politics literature that "if researchers wish to frame their research with the revolution/normalization dichotomy, they must be explicit about what they mean by the terms". Nevertheless, Wright concludes that academia is being unduly pessimistic about the prevalence and nature of political debate online.

Habermas's own observations on the impact of the Internet on the public sphere have been muted. In a speech on 9 March, 2006, he said that online discourse may be both democratising and defocusing since Internet use both broadened and fragmented the contexts of communication. The less-formal, horizontal cross-linking of online

²⁷ Kirkpatrick (2011) suggests that the organisation, coordination and mobilisation for online collective, grassroots action is more likely to take place within the 'closed' structures of Facebook users and their large circle of 'friends' and slow-burn of blogs before Twitter and YouTube are activated for the viral distribution of messages in the public domain. Freelon (2011a, b) has proposed a framework for navigating through claims on 'Internet revolutions' that received attention from Shirky, Parry and Morozov.

communication channels might have a subversive effect on intellectual life in authoritarian regimes while simultaneously weakening “the achievements of traditional media”. Habermas believes that this lacuna:

focuses the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public on select topics and information, allowing citizens to concentrate on the same critically filtered issues and journalistic pieces at any given time. The price we pay for the growth in egalitarianism offered by the Internet is the decentralised access to unedited stories. In this medium, contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus.

Habermas’s musings on the Internet have drawn critical responses from digital media theorists. Habermas may either be unwilling or unable to translate his public sphere model of political communication in modern societies from the mass media to the network age (Bruns, 2007). In an impassioned blog post, Rheingold (2007) writes that we cannot rely on the Habermasian model of the public sphere for the formation of public opinion fora in twenty-first century democracies since Habermas only equates the Internet to “a series of chat rooms” (Rheingold, 2007)²⁸. Friedland, Hove & Rojas (2006, p.6) counter these arguments by asserting that Habermas is consistently revisiting and updating his concept to account for the “growing centrality of networks” and the problem of complexity in democracy: the issue of multiple publics; the dependence on a “civil society”²⁹ for opinions which end up increasing fragmentation; the way privatisation directly shapes the public sphere; and how the political and economic systems are increasing in complexity and autonomy.

4.3 Rethinking participation

Critical media theorists share a dilemma when writing about blogging and the public sphere. They acknowledge the latter’s validity as an academic construct, and that blogs have an important role to play as “social systems that reach a wide public and are, therefore, part of communication processes in public spheres” (Fuchs, 2011, p.8). The

²⁸ In a footnote to the journal article of the speech, Habermas added that: “In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics”.

²⁹ ‘Civil Society’ in this instance is used as the space dominated by activists and NGOs, rather than the Gramscian minimalist model employed in this study.

difficulty is whether *access* to and the simple *use* of the technology is automatically tantamount to participation in the public sphere. Dahlberg (2001, p.655) warns that the expansion of the public sphere through the Internet is:

not only [about] developing deliberative spaces but also attracting participation from citizens who have been socialized within a commercialized and individualized culture hostile towards public deliberation.

Dahlberg's caution, repeated in subsequent writings³⁰, is echoed in less diplomatic terms by Fuchs, ten years later. In a blog post on 30 May, 2011, Fuchs accuses media and communications scholars such as Jenkins of a "vulgar and reductionistic notion of participation", equating this to a form of "cultural reductionism...simply meaning that users create, curate, circulate or critique content". Rather than viewing the communicative process as "a series of practices that are often restrictively controlled by media professionals", we need to consider participation in the media as "a human right that cuts across societies" (Bailey et al., 2008, p.11). Carpentier (2011, p.11) suggests that we firmly ground participation in participatory democracy theory if we wish to rediscover the political notion of participation, and that we need to differentiate between participation *in* and *through* the media. Participation *in* the media is associated with citizen journalism and deals with the participation of non-professionals in the production of media output (content-related participation) and in media decision-making (structural participation). Participation *through* the media deals with the opportunities for extensive participation in public debate and for self-representation in public spaces (Carpentier, 2007, pp.87-88).

The notion of what constitutes political participation has become diluted in communication and media studies, and increasingly complex in other disciplines (Cooke & Kathari, 2001). Carpentier (2011) suggests we use Mouffe's (2000, p.101) concept of the political as "the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations", such that we frame participation not just within institutionalised politics, but also in individual social practices. Carpentier (*ibid*, pp.24-28) identifies "six key

³⁰ In a reaction to the diversity of understandings of the concept of 'digital democracy', Dahlberg (2011) provides a reconstruction of four distinct digital democracy positions: 1) liberal-individualist; 2) deliberative, 3) counter-publics; and 4) autonomist Marxist. The delineation of each position is drawn from critical-interpretative research and developed with respect to the democratic subject assumed, the related conception of democracy promoted, and the associated democratic affordances of digital media technology.

characteristics of participation” which have resonance when localising participation through blogging within a public sphere the size of Malta’s:

a) The key defining element of participation is power. If we are to consider blogging purely as an individualistic online practice, Lovink (2007, p.24) suggests formulating a theory of blogging as “a technology of the self”, a concept developed by Foucault (1988). Foucault frames power as a set of relations which are “dispersed throughout society rather than being located within particular institutions such as the State or the government” (Mills, 2003, p.35): in other words, power circulates. In Malta, blogging would be expected to be interested in both the macro workings of institutionalised politics (including media participation) and the micro social operations of citizens. The implicit or explicit inclusion in / exclusion from hegemonic institutional power is a perennial concern of this study.

In a poststructuralist power context, blogging would therefore be seen as something which has to be constantly performed rather than achieved; less as something possessed than a strategy. Again, poststructuralist accounts of decentred and fragmented subjectivity, such as those propogated by Poster (2006, 2008), would tend to view blogging as an opportunity for an individualised politics of resistance to the hegemony, premised on horizontal networks that can facilitate information dispersal. Yet we remain locked in an impasse where changes in the field of communication media (such as blogging) are still considered to contribute as much to the reasoned and social communication espoused by the Habermasian public sphere as to the empowered political subjectivity favoured by Poster and Mouffe. The challenge of this study is to remain grounded in pragmatism - particularly since the structural power of institutions, exercised through hegemony, remains intact in Malta and inevitably structures social relationships.

b) Participation is situated in particular processes and localities, and involves specific actors. Any assessment of blogging as a political participation must address the specific socio-economic characteristics, power positions and contexts of specific processes, localities and actors: these are the “conditions under which the blog’s promise can be delivered” (Siapera, 2008, p.60). Factors such as the offline social capital of bloggers as social actors and ongoing relationships with existing hegemonies, including media hegemonies, need to be considered. As discussed earlier in this

chapter, some blogs in certain local contexts are clearly influential, political, disruptive, even transformative – with or without the comfort of network theory. In 2009, Sant, leveraging on Prensky's (2001) treatise of "digital natives", believed that young Maltese citizens were still "digital immigrants" but would rapidly acquire digital literacies to close the gap on their international counterparts (p.53): take-up of social media in 2012 indicates that this gap has now been bridged. Perhaps one of the more pragmatic views is Sreberny's (2011) who in a blog post wrote:

When used creatively within a rich mix of local face-to-face politics, configured in the languages and symbols of national traditions, and in contexts where the older generation simply doesn't want to give up power, it is evident that small media can punch way above their weight.

c) The concept of participation is contingent and itself part of the power struggles in society. When writing of participation as a political struggle, Carpentier (2011, p.25) differentiates between "the minimalist and the maximalist variations of democracy" where: (i) in the minimalist model, democracy is confined mainly to processes of representation through institutionalised politics, and participation to elite selection through elections that form the expression of a homogeneous popular will; and (ii) in the maximalist model, democracy is seen as a more balanced combination of representation and participation, and the political is considered a dimension of the social, which allows for a broad application of participation in many different social fields (including the media), at both micro- and macro level, with respect for societal diversity. In Malta, the minimalist model remains dominant, although the networks of political institutions run deep within civil society, and the media in particular. Political struggles are part of the cultural landscape.

Yet, blogging, with its capacity for creating horizontal information webs, may stimulate a more subtle, Foucault-type understanding of power than the familiar top-down, binary institutional model. Within the context of this study, the litmus test for blogs is the way they may be operated as mass self-communication tools by ordinary people in informational politics; and whether such operations may indeed "bypass the mediation of elites, challenge hierarchical discourse and encourage direct democracy" (O'Neil 2009, p.32). Foucault's (1976, p.95) much-quoted "Where there is power, there is resistance" can also point to the emergence of a new order of power relations that may

truly promise a “multiplicity of points of resistance” that are also present everywhere, that on occasion may forge binary dimensions, but:

more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory point of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds (Foucault 1976, p.96).

d) Participation is not to be linked to democratic-populist utopia. Blogging is not an *automatically antagonistic* practice directed against the ideology of the dominant bloc. Lovink (2005, p.22) challenges the notion that blogs are politically effective or even inherently democratic tools. He frames their power in the way that they have the potential to “question authority – any authority”, but focuses primarily on their disproportionate influence on TV and media editors. Despite the frequent description of the Internet as a horizontal and open structure which resists any kind of hierarchical organisation, being a network devoid of a centre, and hence of a central authority, O’Neil (2006; 2009) believes that the vision of the blogosphere as anarchic or heterarchic systems fails to account for a basic fact: if social networks have migrated online, it is logical to assume that the processes of differentiation, hierarchisation and control which structure offline human interactions have also done so. As a practice, blogging may still be tantamount to one-way directed, mass self-communication (particularly if post comments are disabled), tantamount to megaphone broadcasting, even “electronic autism” (Castells, 2008). Public participation needs to be understood in the context of wider social and economic changes and not simply as a network phenomenon (Roberts, 2009). Blogs may be networked, but not necessarily *socially* networked; the blogosphere may occasionally be a space for deliberation, but not necessarily the location for social interaction or activism (Meijjas, 2010). In the case of specific, bounded communities, the doubts about blogging’s ability to mobilise crowds increase, rather than dissipate.

e) Participation is invitational. For blogging to be truly participative and have a chance of contributing to social change, it must be the result of individual choice, not the coercion of some higher authority. Shaw (2009) levers on Mouffe’s (2005) use of “the political” as opposed to “politics” to discuss how blogging as a form of online discursive politics is defined by the struggle of actors for discursive hegemony. She

uses the concept of the “constitutive outside” to show that political positions are defined in terms of their opposition to other political positions. Every order is based on some form of exclusion, and “the political” is thus necessarily an oppositional struggle rather than deliberative, representative or dialogic. In the case of the blog, the political also corresponds to decisions on allowing commenting and linking (or not linking) - indeed the disruptive potential of blogging may lie in the endless possibility for texts of citizen journalists to migrate into “hypertexts” that are reconstructed in the act of reading, “rendering the reader an author and disrupting the stability of authorities” (Poster, 1997, p.214). Just as the blog is a self-performance, so too is the instantiation of the political: both of these acts are invisible undertakings.

As an alternative to the individual, autonomous choices made by bloggers, we could also consider blogging as a politics of subversion premised on reflexivity within the blogosphere. Dean (2010, p.127) says blogging is “an affective practice, better understood via the negativity of drive and reflexivity in real networks.” She believes that the affective charges transmitted and confronted through blogging reinforce and extend affective networks without encouraging or displacing their consolidation into organised political networks. This grates with the notion that for blogging to make a distinct contribution to current politics, it must take the form of being critical of, oppositional to or fundamentally different from other forms of communication and the subjectivities to which they are linked (Siapera, 2008). Power is enacted through discourse, yet it is constrained through the normalisation of language. The question is not so much as to “who gets to speak, but who is heard, and to what end” (Shaw 2009, p.3); to devise new ways in which information can flow freely from one place to another, from people to people.

Papacharissi (2009; 2011) suggests an alternative lens through which to study blogging as a discursive form of political action in an increasingly individualised culture. She believes that blogging is a practice within a “virtual private sphere”, whereby the citizen acts politically from a private sphere of reflection, expression, and behaviour. The private sphere is the citizen’s private media environment, dominated primarily by privately-contained online activities with a public scope, such as news reading, lurking on political conversation and following opinion leaders’ blogs or tweets. These activities take place independently and represent the focal point of all civic activity that develops, whether it remains within private confines or broadcast to public audiences in

the form of a blog post or engagement on other forms of the social web. The common threads of online political writing³¹ are located in the individual, who operates civically in a political sphere that is founded on the tension between that which is considered public and that which is considered private. Within the private sphere, the citizen is alone yet connected, operating in a mode and with political language determined by him or her alone. Although bloggers are primarily monitorial, they can still become an “agonist of democracy, if needed, but in an atomised mode” (Papacharissi, 2009, p.230). The reflexive architecture and connectivity capabilities of blogging technologies provide these multiple private spheres with the capability of connecting and influencing the public sphere.

f) Participation is structurally different from access and interaction. A negative-relationist strategy may distinguish between the three concepts and help clarify what we mean by participation. The technologically-deterministic view that access to blogging inevitably leads to non-market production, activism and a shift in power relationships needs to be challenged. Similarly, the tendency to equate passive audience practices such as surfing on the web and chatting on a social network to participatory activities inevitably obscures the link with the main defining component of participation, namely power. In the blogosphere, the blogger’s authority may be based on a number of variables such as: the excellence of the information being exchanged; the ability to act as a content curator and filter; to properly attribute sources, or to rely on sources which are described as authoritative, or to use the network to verify sources. Bloggers’ success in acquiring this ‘learned’ authority and disrupting media hegemonies is likely to depend on the individual’s ability to operate blogging technologies as “Foucault machines”, undermining power as they produce it (Lovink, 2005, p.18). Foucault (1977, p.27) reveals the reciprocal connections between power and knowledge:

Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations.

³¹ Papacharissi (2009, p. 244) identifies three trends in online writing which have democratic relevance: 1) narcissistically-derived, civically beneficial expression of political opinion present in blogs; 2) subversive actions articulated in discourse that emphasises plurality and agonism; and 3) privately generated narrative published in commercially public places.

Terranova (2004, p.2) draws on Foucault to explain how the blogger cannot remain in control of the text or its meaning, which spreads online, in asynchronous, unpredictable and uncontrollable forms:

What we used to call ‘media messages’ no longer flow from a sender to a receiver but spread and interact, mix and mutate within a singular (and yet informational) plane. Information bounces from channel to channel and from medium to medium; it changes form as it is decoded and recoded by local dynamics; it disappears or it propagates; it amplifies or inhibits the emergence of *commonalities and antagonisms*.

Even if we accept that the read/write web has created a new public space for politically-oriented conversation, whether this public space transcends to a public sphere is not up to the technology itself (Papacharissi, 2002). Technology does not automatically turn every user into an active producer or every worker into a creative subject, any more than “an enhanced ability to communicate at low cost [can be] equated with being heard” (Curran, 2012, p.14).

To conclude on participation in the public sphere: Notaro (2006) suggests that the Habermasian concept of the public sphere is ‘alive’ as long as it is useful as an analytical, self-reflexive category and not as an ultimate ideal. It is one category among many because there is no single public sphere between civil society and the state, where public discussions on topics of general interest occur. The difficulty with extending the public sphere concept to blogging is that it exposes the limits of a concept that relies on the notion of a receptive public connected through one-way print and broadcast mass media culture: blogging, like other social media, challenges the very notion of what constitutes ‘the public’. As a ‘public sphere’ the blogosphere is constructed and unified not by ideal or rational discourse, but at best by algorithms and the telecommunications infrastructure of the Internet (Geiger, 2009). It is inhabited by a mass of blogs with few inbound links and comments, and which may yet have ‘horizontal credibility’ in the offline ‘local’ communities they operate in. Indeed, the metaphor of ‘community’ – even a virtual one - is probably inadequate and inappropriate when applied to blogging (Fernback, 2007). Rather than creating or renewing the public sphere, we could consider the blogosphere as a buffer zone between the private and public sphere, expressing the attitudes and convictions of the writer while being in the public domain and raising questions that may be of public interest (Keren 2006). In an age of “always on networks of computers and media running in the background” (Royston, 2009,

p.162), digital cultures are composed of many publics, with their own private spheres, potentially suspended in the comfort of their online echo-chambers. In place of one overarching, dominant public sphere, it is safer to postulate the concept of multiple public spheres (Dahlgren, 1991) that are not only oppositional to the notion of a hegemonic public sphere but also incorporate the aspirations of subalterns and marginal groups in society such as the working class, women, and racial and sexual minorities. Participation is about the empowerment of ordinary citizens to raise their voices, and take responsibility for distributing their own ideologies and representations through blogging. The blog becomes a counter-hegemonic tool deployed by individuals or groups of like-minded individuals and therefore of necessity incorporates elements of grassroots activism for collaboration and mobilisation towards a common cause (Rodriguez, 2001); and as social movement media (Downing, 2003), particularly for marginalised or repressed societal groups or causes mis-represented or ignored by the mainstream media.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter discussed claims for blogging's contribution in a new or revitalised public sphere, within both the traditional Habermasian framework and the updated theories associated with participatory democracy. It also engaged with the critical issue of whether access to and the simple use of the technology is automatically tantamount to participation in the public sphere. It concluded that for the purposes of blogging, it may be best to consider the public sphere as an analytical, self-reflexive construct and focus on blogging's more tangible impact on localised, popular culture.

The next chapter explains the methodology deployed in this study.

Chapter 5. `Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology and mixed methods used in this study. The first section discusses the primary approach of netnography, using the methods of online participant observation and online archival research for data collection of online texts, backed by semi-structured, face-to-face interviews for verification of facts. The chapter follows with a discussion on discourse and critical discourse analysis. The final section discusses the challenges inherent in this type of research, including the issue of ethical netnography.

5.1 Methodological Approach

This study is socially constructionist in design and interpretative in paradigm, based on the belief that reality is socially constructed rather than objectively determined (Easterby-Smith, 1991). It is rooted in the qualitative tradition and adopts an ethnographic approach, adapting the in-person research techniques of anthropology to the study of online cultures formed through computer-mediated communications.

Creswell (1998, p.15) defines qualitative research as:

an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The research builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting.

While Creswell's definition covers the operational role of researchers, this study subscribes to Hammersley & Atkinson's (2007, p.15) recognition of the "researcher's reflexive orientation, shaped by socio-historical locations", including the values and interests that these locations confer upon the researcher. This does not mean that there is a rejection of the pursuit of 'realism'; simply a reiteration that the pursuit of knowledge cannot be based on some absolutely secure foundation.

Qualitative methods are particularly suitable when setting out to explore and learn about a particular issue about which there is little academic knowledge, such as the practice of counter-hegemonic blogging in Malta. The point of departure is that ethnography is an ideal approach for "studying, knowing and reporting about the world" (Atkinson, 2001,

p.160), since it may contribute to a detailed and nuanced understanding of a social phenomenon in a specific culture, and then capture and convey its cultural qualities. Specifically, it can render more transparent the mechanisms of social processes and representation to explain how social actors develop distinctive meanings, processes and artefacts in a specific culture (Fernback 2007).

Ethnography has a number of distinct features: a) it involves the study of an intact cultural or social group (or an individual or individuals within the group; b) it is based primarily on the researcher's observations, records and engagement in the daily life of the culture being studied (Marcus and Fisher 1986); c) it requires a prolonged period of time to be spent by the researcher in the field – an immersion in group culture and a long-term involvement among people, using a variety of methods such that any one aspect of their lives can be properly contextualised in others (Creswell, 1998; Miller & Slater, 2000); d) in the process, the ethnographer is also a primary research instrument, bringing a strong lens to understanding the underlying cultures being researched; e) the primary sources of data are what people say and do to contextualise their lives - 'discourse' plays a major part in this; and f) while ethnography allows for stand-alone subject-supplied narratives and meanings, the ethnographer's objective is to obtain the *most complete data* on a group.

'Netnography' is a term coined by Kozinets (2002, 2010) to operationalise, extend and adapt ethnography to the Internet's influence on contemporary social worlds. Sometimes also referred to as 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000; Ruhleder, 2000), netnography extends the traditional notions of ethnographic study from the observation of co-located, face-to-face interactions, to physically distributed, technologically mediated interactions in virtual networks and virtual communities. It provides the researcher with guidelines for the adaptation of participant observation procedures to the contingencies of online community and culture that manifest through computer-mediated communications. These include recommendations on issues such as planning for fieldwork, entering and engaging with an online culture, collection of cultural data, ethnographic interpretation and ethics. Netnography is a flexible approach that can be used in conjunction with other methods - for instance, in-depth interviews with a small sample of a target community can supplement the initial results from netnography data collection. As a naturalistic and unobtrusive technique, when the raw data is in the form of public, online texts (as is the case with this study) the researcher can secure an online

‘voyeur’ position, observing without necessarily divulging identity or the nature of the research, significantly reducing the risk of influencing the community being observed and / or ‘polluting’ the production of data. The very notion of what constitutes ‘participation’ and ‘observation’ online therefore means something radically different to the researcher’s activities when conducting offline, traditional ethnography.

Nevertheless, netnography remains a participative, human approach to the study of online culture, rather than some automated process to gather and code qualitative online data. The affordances of the media may have a radical impact on how people use discourse and interact online and offline – yet ‘the discourse’ inevitably remains reflexive and responsive to offline culture. Beneito-Montagut (2011, p.719) believes that we have overstated the differences between ‘virtual’ and everyday ethnography, apart from research decisions regarding the particular field and location of research:

the appropriate methodology for studying social interactions on the internet in the everyday life needs to scrutinize in detail – sensitively and reflexively – the ways in which SICT³² are experienced in use both online and offline.

In bounded communities like Malta, conversations within an online community may sometimes carry on offline, in face-to-face meetings. The social fabric of the media and the local community culture are interlinked, impacting the way researchers choose to enter an online community, and how they may participate and observe their target groups’ interactions online and offline. The netnographer has the benefit of pursuing an open-ended yet rigorous form of inquiry, focused on portraying as detailed a picture as possible of the culture being observed: the intensity of the hyperlocal makes it a pre-requisite for researchers to immerse themselves quickly in the field. The approach may sometimes be less time-consuming and resource intensive than traditional ethnography, and not benefit from face-to-face social cues; yet it can also be strategic, elaborate, inclusive and have geographic reach (Chen & Hinton, 1999).

5.1.1 Operationalising netnography

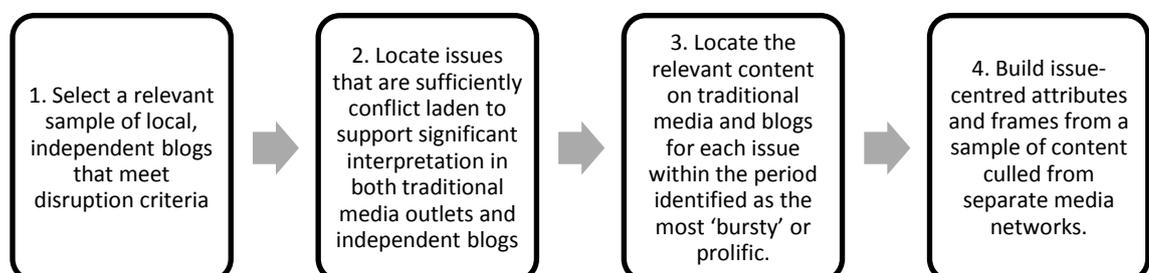
The over-riding objective of this study is to base knowledge claims on pragmatic grounds - consequence-oriented, problem-centred and pluralistic (Creswell 2003, p.18).

³² internet and social information and communication technologies

Netnography supports Gramsci's critique of positivism, scientism and evolutionary economism, and his theory of knowledge in which the relation between the subject that knows and the object of knowledge is active and dynamic. For Gramsci, "to know is to master and to know is to construct material and social reality by giving form and structure to it" (Fontana 2006, p.41). The immediate challenge of this study is to operationalise the critical theory of hegemony with a grounded approach to an observation of practices, most of which occur 'over the Internet' – and particularly at a stage when issues relating to participation, influence and power online are the subject of debate and discord among critical theorists.

Conversely, the asynchronous, archived and reflexive characteristics of blogs makes them ideal for the observation of discourse rooted in place, but dispersed across space and time - and particularly for the collection of substantial amounts of data. Blogs may shed light on social processes and provide practical insight into everyday life, making them an invaluable addition to the qualitative researcher's toolkit (Hookway, 2008). The point of departure for this study was therefore to determine how netnography could be operationalised to secure emic³³ online data that could be representative of hegemonic discourse, and attempts at disruptive or counter-hegemonic discourse in Malta. While netnography is primarily associated with studies of online communities and / or studies of the Internet and how people engage in it (Bengry-Howell et al., 2011), every Maltese citizen online is potentially part of the community being researched.

Meraz (2011) suggests a stepped approach to researching blogs (see Figure 2 overleaf):



³³ In this context, "emic" is used as an adjective. It is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as: "of, relating to, or involving analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of one who participates in the culture being studied".

Figure 2: Stepped approach when researching blogs (adapted from Meraz, 2011)

As a straw man approach, the Meraz model was important in providing a broad framework from which to develop a research design that can address the research question, account for the unique context in Malta, and focus on a number of operational issues that were eventually absorbed into the overall approach. These issues were addressed at different stages of the research, and reflect the non-prescriptive, dialectic nature of the overall methodological approach.

5.1.1.1 First-hand experience of blogging

To understand blogging, and blogging culture, the researcher also needs to be a blogger. It is not enough just to research the affordances of the medium ‘from the outside-in’. I approached this study having set up a Malta-related blog in 2009 (MaltaInsideOut.com), and the blog remained active throughout the course of the study. It is also through this ‘hands-on’ management of the medium that the researcher as participant obtains invaluable, granular insights into the co-determining and co-construction forces at play between technologies and culture, and the commitment to develop ‘discourse’ for an unknown audience. As a practitioner, developing and publishing content, networking, and activating both strong and weak ties to reach as wide an audience as possible, the researcher may understand the potential and limitations of the medium, and the dialectic with the culture it purports to observe and document. Becoming a blogger turns the potentially ephemeral notion of a “virtual community” into a more tangible construct: the ‘setting’ being studied starts to take shape since the researcher is now also part of the setting being studied, exposed to the commentary of unknowns, but also in charge of a tool of potential power and disruption through discourse (Rheingold, 1993; Hine, 2005). Lysloff (2003, in Kozinets 2010, p.63) associates cyberculture with “the postmodern notion of the fragmented multiple self”, the extension of our identity into a virtual world of disembodied presence that simultaneously incites us to take on other identities. Through the writing of blog posts, commenting and lurking, the more nuanced attributes of blogging, such as performance and the actualisation of multiple and perhaps idealised selves through text and image, can start to be understood.

5.1.1.2 Embedded in the hyperlocal

Although the primary data for this study was collected mainly online, this study is grounded in local culture. It subscribes to the view that the researcher spend “sufficient time in the local setting to get to know, both online and offline, those who live, work and / or play there” (Postill, 2008, p.414). I remained located in Malta for the duration of the research, so the study is informed also by first-hand participant observation, securing rich insights into day-to-day socio-political developments and the nuanced workings of institutional hegemony in civil society. My intention from the outset was to consciously blur the barriers between ‘the virtual’ and ‘the real’, the texts online and the ‘popular culture’ outside my door, irrespective of the potential “strangeness of technological subjects” (Hine 2000, p.15). Bloggers are fellow citizens and the hegemonic institutions seeking to manage the threat of disruption are an essential component of my own ‘culture’ and personal history. Blended ethnography is also the product of the relentless process of moving back and forth between online texts and observing and documenting ‘street and political life’. This ensured the research remained focused on the real issues of power and the potential disruption of a culture, as embodied in dominant discourse. As boyd (2008, p.29) points out, “hanging out across numerous spaces” enables the researcher to observe the relevant cultures from different angles.

As an ethnographer, the researcher is also a primary research instrument, bringing a strong lens to understanding the underlying cultures being researched. Netnography represents a way out of the academic paradox since data collection is not conducted exclusively online, but incorporates some form of involvement, engagement and interaction with community members (Kozinets, 2010). The extent or intensity of the researcher’s interaction with the community is very much dependent on how immersive an approach the researcher intends to adopt: for instance, in her ethnographic and critical study of cam-girls and their viewers, Senft (2004, p.67) set up a webcam in her own apartment for the duration of her study, declaring her research intent as a “commitment to engage, rather than forestall action in our mediated communities.” The benefits of direct engagement need to be gauged within the offline context of the communities being studied. I decided at the outset that protracted engagement, of any kind, with target bloggers in the bounded community of Malta represented a potential threat to the collection of ‘pure’ texts since there was a significant likelihood that I might personally know some of the bloggers. My very presence in the field, as an early

researcher of local Internet culture, with visible intent to engage in online conversations on subjects of mutual interest could potentially lead to a wave of reflexive blog posts, or simply discourse that may not have happened unless I had made my presence felt in the blogosphere. My intention was to study texts developed naturally, in reaction to attempts at hegemony by dominant institutions and their agents, rather than some 'manufactured' academic trigger. I therefore established a set of working rules that I followed throughout this study, guided by Travers (2009):

a) I chose to collect data unobtrusively, from publicly-available online sources (blogs and the mainstream media). Participant observation was tantamount to many hours spent lurking online, following inbound links from social networks and micro-blogs (Twitter, in particular), reading blog posts and user comments, web pages (particularly those of the mainstream media); monitoring activity in social networks and online discussion groups, including the online forums of the English-language media. Face-to-face engagement with local bloggers was restricted to the bare minimum. I did not wish to become too familiar with counter-hegemonic bloggers, although I often empathised with their causes. Online discourse from hegemonic institutions was monitored with the same vigilance as that from the blogosphere.

b) In the rare occasions that I needed information from anyone online or offline to supplement data collected online, I started the conversation by making it clear that I was conducting research on blogging in Malta.

c) About mid-way through the study, I decided I needed to check some facts to fill gaps in the history of the early blogosphere. A handful of interviews were held with some of the early players in the Maltese blogosphere, focusing on their motives for starting and eventually abandoning their blogs. All interviews were covered by Ethics release forms. Towards the end of the data collection phase, another set of semi-structured interviews were held to validate the initial wave of analysis. These were useful in eliciting qualitative data about bloggers' ontological knowledge - their motives for participation, online socio-political engagement, writing styles and regimes and particularly, how language was deployed to represent their views during a period of conflict with dominant power blocs. As Moyo (2010, 2011) observes, bloggers may use language as much as a medium for resistance as to legitimise relations of organised power.

5.1.1.3 Profiling of media and relevant bloggers

Once the research question was locked, the immediate challenge was to determine the criteria for the selection of online texts that could be representative of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse.

The mainstream media, for reasons of direct ownership, commercial interests, history and the characteristics of the Mediterranean model, plays an active role in supporting the incumbent power blocs or it aspires to operate as a hegemony in its own right. It both “shapes and is in turn shaped” by discourse (Moyo 2010, p.194). There is a list of the media in Malta and their online collateral in Appendix 5. News and opinion pieces posted on these media were monitored on an ongoing basis, as potential examples of dominant discourse.

Profiling bloggers in Malta to identify potentially counter-hegemonic discourse is more challenging. In line with blogging practices in other countries, the Maltese blogosphere is a graveyard of blogs that have a very short lifespan such that the number of active blogs, of any kind, at any one time, is likely to be low. In the absence of any definite data to corroborate claims about the size or composition of the Maltese blogosphere I decided to develop my own database of active blogs managed by Maltese citizens. This served to guide me in identifying bloggers who were likely to engage in potentially counter-hegemonic discourse. The size of the online community in Malta legitimises this grounded approach.

The first step was to track back to the early-adopters who provided the foundations for the Maltese blogosphere. My point of departure was a list of some 50 blogs on AboutMalta.com owned by the pioneering *Malta Media*. Since most blogs on this list were inactive or deleted by their owners, the Internet Wayback machine at Archive.org was used to attempt to reconstruct historically important blog discourse. Search engines were then used to identify other curated lists of Maltese blogs. A community site on Ning and eventually a Facebook page, both called ‘Blogs of Malta’ provided me with a critical mass of blogs from which I could start to develop my own updated list of active Malta-related blogs. Each blog was scanned to determine: a) the identity of the owner (where possible); b) date of set up; and c) range of topics discussed. The list was kept

updated for the duration of this study, and enabled me, over a period of time, to identify bloggers who posted regularly on socio-political topics (see Appendix 6).

In parallel, a number of third-party applications were used as an integral component of the netnography and, eventually, to shortlist key texts for critical discourse analysis. The complete set of sites and online applications and their corresponding use are summarised overleaf in Table 6:

Online Application	Purpose for netnography
About Malta - List at http://www.aboutmalta.com/Internet/blogs	Profiling of early Maltese blogosphere.
Ning - 'Blogs of Malta' Community site at http://blogmalta.ning.com	Monitoring and profiling of active blogs and update of database with new blogs. The site is curated by Jacques René Zammit, a Maltese blogger.
Facebook - Blogs of Malta page at http://www.facebook.com/groups/201274786556946/	Monitoring and profiling of active blogs and update of database with new blogs. The Facebook page is used by bloggers to promote blog posts.
Internet Wayback Machine at http://archive.org/web/web.php	Location of blog posts on deleted blogs.
Blog Analysis Toolkit - at https://surveyweb2.ucsur.pitt.edu/qblog/page_main_menu.php	Application developed by the University of Pittsburgh, used for preliminary discourse analysis on a finite set of blogs, to determine subject matter.
NetVibes	Dashboard for monitoring of online texts of potential interest for the study. The RSS reader feature was used to set up a page tab to regularly monitor blog posts from a set of target bloggers dealing with socio-political issues. Further tabs were set up to remain updated with the thinking and best practices of netnographers and academics with an interest in Internet culture. Mainstream media collateral was monitored via online bookmarks also stored on the site.
Diigo	Bookmarking of relevant online texts for preliminary analysis and creation of a dedicated list of chunks of texts selected for critical discourse analysis. Diigo enables highlighting of online texts and notes.
Google Bookmarks	Backups of online bookmarks.
List Serv List - managed by the Association of Internet Researchers at https://surveyweb2.ucsur.pitt.edu/qblog/page_main_menu.php .	Monitoring of latest methodological practices for ethical netnography and critical discourse analysis.
Twitter	Monitoring of real-time discourse through search strings, lists and hash tags.
Google	Internet search throughout the duration of this study to monitor relevant discourse.

Table 6: Online Applications used for Netnography and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

5.1.1.4 Identification of an organic crisis

Although grounded in the critical theory of hegemony, a key challenge for this study was to identify a means of exposing the potentially invisible and ephemeral workings of power such that they can be observed in action, and studied in real time. According to Gramsci, at some stage, every ruling group finds itself in a situation called “an organic crisis” when it cannot satisfy the aspirations of its subalterns or is overtaken by some contingent event. An organic crisis is a cultural breakdown or a crisis of ideological hegemony in the legitimating apparatus. Gramsci (1971, p.210) recognises that:

If the ruling class has lost its consensus, i.e., is no longer “leading” but only “dominant,” exercising coercive force alone, this means precisely that the great masses have become detached from their traditional ideologies, and no longer believe what they used to believe previously, etc. The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born”.

Although Gramsci’s theory of organic crisis is framed within the ambit of military conflict, it is equally applicable as a crisis of values played out within popular culture. It is an opportunity to remove the veil around political power to *expose hegemony in practice* – revealing the way that civil society institutions that prop up the State actually function as a “powerful system of fortresses and earthworks” whenever the state “tremble[s]” (Gramsci, 1971, p.238). Every crisis is also an opportunity for renegotiation and reconstruction – as Hall (1987, p.19) points out:

historically nothing is dismantled without also attempting to put something new in its place;.. every form of power not only excludes but produces something.

The selection of a suitable organic crisis as a trigger for close observation of the workings of hegemony (and counter-hegemony) is inevitably subjective, and prone to a fair degree of luck. To qualify as an organic crisis, a socio-political situation in Maltese society needs to have some semblance of longevity to enable the dominant blocs to take corrective action; and, from the researcher’s point of view, for a representative body of online texts to be developed and potentially qualify as ‘discourse’. From late 2009 onwards, a number of situations were monitored to determine if they had the requisite attributes to mobilise both mainstream and alternative discourse on a national scale.

The private member's bill for the introduction of divorce legislation in Malta in 2011³⁴ was eventually identified as having all the attributes of an organic crisis. It unravelled over a period of some 11 months up to a public referendum on 28 May, 2011, and gradually worked its way into the public consciousness as civil society grappled with the historic, social and cultural significance of divorce legislation – the most significant ideological crisis since 2002, when Malta held a referendum for EU membership.

The issue of divorce in Malta has long been a powerful political and socially-charged issue because of the influence of the Church in Maltese society, and the alliances it forged with various political administrations. As at July 2010, together with the Philippines and the Vatican, Malta was the only country where divorce remained unavailable to citizens. The ruling power bloc of the PN, in alliance with the Church, found its traditional ideologies unexpectedly challenged, a situation tantamount to a “crisis of authority...the general crisis of the State” (Gramsci, 1971, p.210) – but also a crisis of values enacted within popular culture. The failure to resolve the issue in parliament and the decision to seek the consent of the broad masses through a referendum risked creating not just a disconnect between representatives and represented, but the loss of ideological credibility since what was “invisible, disseminated throughout the texture of social life and naturalised as custom, habit, spontaneous practice” (Eagleton, 1991, p.116) was suddenly the object of critical discourse and eventually subject to the rule of the ballot box.

The divorce issue represented an opportunity to observe a political and cultural struggle on a national scale, represented by an attempt of “divided classes and the separated peoples – divided and separated by culture as much as by other factors” to turn “into a popular democratic cultural force” (Hall, 1997, pp.452-3). The state's ability to resist the claims of those it ruled were jeopardised the moment a solution to the crisis could not be found in parliament or through political brinkmanship. The referendum suddenly offered citizens the possibility of a ‘moment of consent’ based on the power of a ballot (as opposed to moral and intellectual consensus). It also triggered a visible increase in the hegemonic operations of the ruling bloc as its agents mobilised to safeguard its interests.

³⁴ On 6 July, 2010, Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando, a PN MP, presented a Private Member's Bill for the introduction of divorce and caught his own party by surprise. A series of political manoeuvrings eventually led to Parliament deciding to put the question of divorce to a public referendum (see Appendix 8 for divorce timeline in Malta). The bitter campaign that ensued between pro and anti-divorce movements received global media coverage.

The net result was a surge in mainstream and alternative media activity that generated numerous online texts in an intense period of netnography, as data, theory and questions came rapidly into collective focus (boyd, 2008).

5.2 Analysis

In a study of this nature, analysis does not start at the end of data collection, but is an ongoing process throughout the study. Data collection and analysis tend to be interwoven in a seamless dialectic, such that the boundaries merge and blur such that it is impossible to disentangle the precise points where data collection stops and data analysis begins (Dey, 2004). Although netnography and critical discourse analysis were used for analysis, in practice the two research approaches contributed to emerging cycles of data. This is the hallmark of most qualitative analysis, where data is reviewed, the researcher tries to make some sense of them by finding patterns cutting across the words of the participants, and then organises them into categories or themes (Creswell, 2003).

5.2.1 Engaging with discourse

This study primarily investigates the discursive power of online texts in Malta by considering their effect in inculcating, sustaining, resisting or changing dominant ideologies and relations of institutional power. In Western society, the exercise of power is increasingly achieved through the ideological workings of language, where ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which can be shown to contribute to establishing, maintaining and changing social relations of power, domination and exploitation (Fairclough, 1989; 2003). To engage with and analyse discourse, we need to move from seeing language as something abstract to seeing our words as having meaning in a particular historical, social, and political context; to understand that texts are never neutral, but always politicised, as they carry the power that reflects the interests of those who speak [or write]" (McGregor, 2003): they are also likely to conceal class conflict and other forms of inequality (Moyo, 2010). Since meaning may never be fixed, this opens up the way for constant social struggles. It is the researcher's task to "plot the course of these struggles to fix meaning at all levels of the social" (Jorgensen & Phillips, 2002, p.24).

This study levers on Gramsci's theory of hegemony to observe how political, intellectual and moral leadership is produced, reproduced and resisted in the hyperlocal. It also uses Foucault's historic and Fairclough's dialectical theory of discourse as the *entry point* for understanding discursive aspects of subject formation and techniques of subjectivation. Foucault defines discourse in different ways throughout his work. In "The Archaeology of Knowledge" discourse is described as:

the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements (Foucault 1972, p.80)".

In his essay "The Order of Discourse", discourse is associated with a system which structures the way we perceive reality:

a violence which we do to things, or in any case as a practice which we impose on them, and it is this practice that the events of discourse find their regularity" (Foucault 1981, p.67).

Discourse is therefore both a collective term for all *statements* and a set of *structures* and *rules* which produce particular utterances and statements. The reason Foucault's work on discourse remains relevant is due to its association with relations of power: indeed, Foucault believes discourse provides the foundations for power. Power is not the exclusive property of an individual, group or institution, but can be located everywhere and can originate from anywhere. Power circulates, it "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives" (Foucault, 1980, p.30). Despite his historic studies of asylums and prisons, Foucault's (1977) notion of power is neither coercive or violent but disciplinary: power controls but is productive in that it produces reality. Another important element in Foucault's view of power is resistance. While power is a source of pressure, discourse can also be refused, contested, critiqued and challenged through subjugated or counter-hegemonic discourses (Mills, 2003). Texts may be viewed as having multiple, infinite and even conflicting meanings - they resist order, coherence and systematisation (Poster, 1990; Prasad, 2005). In turn, examining resistance becomes in itself a diagnostic of power.

Foucault (1978, pp.100-1) shows that there is both the means of oppression and resistance in discourse. Power enacted through discourse does not so much actively repress as it constrains through the normalisation of language:

Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart.

Foucault is as interested in the processes and cultural rules under which certain statements, terms, categories and beliefs emerge and are kept in circulation as in others which are rejected and fenced off. These processes are likely to include non-discursive conditions such as institutional regulations and political decisions and the workings of historically-, socially- and institutionally-specific structures and rules.

Since discourse is a system that enables the formation of statements as well as providing the conditions for social action, an analysis of discourse requires an analysis of practices. Foucault challenges the orthodox separation of “discursive practices” (texts and language) from “non-discursive practices” (such as institutions and class divisions), proposing that we need to explore the relations between these if we wish to expose the connections between knowledge and domination (Mills, 2003). Attention shifts to how “changes in discourse correlate with changes in institutional practice” and which lead us to see, and be attentive “to the power of language and ideas, to their imbeddedness in networks of social and political control” (Welch, 1985, p.17). These are what Foucault (1977, p.23) calls “technologies of power” or domination, devoted to normalising individuals (of which biopower is a critical element).

Foucault argues that it is through discourse that the social production of *meaning* takes place, through which subjectivity is produced and power relations are maintained (Kenway 1990, p.173). Discourse produces knowledge. The deployment of a discourse is the way in which we speak about fields of knowledge, the way truths are produced, and through which subjects (and objects) themselves are constituted, and ensuing courses of action planned and set in motion. Rather than the meaning of representations, Foucault is concerned with the representation of *knowledge*, the *context* in which such representations are given form, meaning, and, ultimately, applied (Hall, 1997). For Foucault (1980, p.131):

Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned ... the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

Discourse therefore should be seen as both an overall term to refer to all texts and statements, the rules whereby those statements are formed, and the processes whereby those statements are circulated and other statements excluded (Mills, 1996, p.62). Foucault's methods enable us to understand the rules that govern the salience and expression of ideas *at a particular point in time*; the ideas that endure in cultural memory and others destined to disappear over time, and the relationship between prominent ideas in the present and those in the past (Prasad 2005, p.246). What is of particular interest is the process whereby some texts acquire meanings and become accepted as mainstream discourse while others are branded 'alternative' or excluded, since this process is inevitably associated with the workings of hegemony. Foucault (1972) argues that nothing has any meaning outside of discourse. This theme was taken up by Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p.185) in their theory that social phenomena and objects only acquire meaning within a discourse - "the structuring of a discursive field" - and therefore are neither stable, explicit or determined by something in nature itself. For them, hegemony is transformed by articulation, and different struggles in a hegemony are linked by a "chain of equivalence", where the term 'equivalence' is used in recognition of each mode of oppression.

The theory of the chain of equivalence can be operationalised as a toolkit to better analyse texts generated by conflict during a social struggle, as a dominant group attempts to neutralise oppositional discourse into 'common sense' and preserve the existing social structure. With respect to political hegemony, Laclau and Mouffe identify the simultaneous operation of a 'logic of difference' and a 'logic of equivalence.' These are respectively tendencies towards creating and proliferating differences between objects, entities, groups of people, etc. and collapsing or 'subverting' differences by representing objects, entities, groups of people, etc. as equivalent to each other. To undermine a hegemony built on a logic of equivalence is therefore to do the opposite, differentiate the issues and propose a logic of difference:

If every order is a hegemonic order, this implies that there is always an outside. There is always something that has been excluded, so there is no consensus without exclusion. There is no possibility of complete inclusion, because in order to create a hegemonic order, there is always something that needs to be oppressed. (Mouffe, in Carpentier & Cammaerts, 2006, p.4)

What Foucault (1980) shows is that power and knowledge production are intertwined through discourse to form power/knowledge. Discourse exposes the interdependent and inseparable relations between power, meaning and practices. Power is realised through a universal acceptance that a coherent text underlies all apparent contradictions and paradoxes. Foucault counters positivist claims to the 'truth' by identifying the mechanisms through which some versions of 'truth' come to be accepted and internalised, whilst other readings are marginalised, discredited or discarded. Foucault also directs our attention to power at more local and micro levels, an ascending analysis of power as opposed to macro and centralised (cascading) forms of power (such as those favoured by historical materialist analyses). As Prasad (2005, pp.252-253) notes, "rather than asking "who has power" and "how much power", we need to shift our attention to looking at actual "techniques, practices and procedures through which it is exercised...circuits of power"; how these construct the powerful and powerless categories, the dynamics between them and their relationships to social institutions. In Malta, while discourse creates the relationships of power, it is through practices and strategies by institutions and their social actors in civil society that the mechanisms of domination and perpetuation of relations of power occur. It is for this reason that this study focuses on discourse propagated by the Church, the State, the political parties and the mainstream media to understand the workings of hegemony.

Hall, 2001 (p.73-74) suggests we consider the following when conducting a study of discourse: a) how subjects in some way personify the discourse, with the attributes we would expect them to have, given the way knowledge about the topic was constructed at the time; b) how the knowledge about the topic acquires authority, embodying and constituting the truth of the matter at a historical moment; c) the practices within institutions for dealing with subjects whose conduct is being regulated and organised according to those ideas; and d) recognise that a different discourse (or episteme) will arise at a later historical moment, supplanting the existing one, opening up a new discourse formation, new discourses with the power and authority, the 'truth' to regulate social practices in new ways.

5.2.2 Using Critical Discourse Analysis

Since netnography is based primarily upon the observation of textual discourse, ensuring trustworthy interpretations requires a different approach to the balancing of discourse and observed behaviour that occurs during in-person ethnography (Jupp, 2006). In this study, critical discourse analysis (CDA) complements netnography to answer the research question. It takes the social nature of language, representation and meaning as its starting point to analyse texts in blog posts that appear to resist and reject the universal discourse propagated by hegemonic institutions and their proprietary media and embraced as ‘common sense’. It is used also to analyse the discourse on mainstream media reporting on a major organic crisis.

Fairclough (2003, p.205) defines CDA as the:

analysis of the dialectical relationships between discourse (including language but also other forms of semiosis).. and other elements of social practice. Its particular concern is with the radical changes that are taking place in contemporary social life: with how discourse figures within processes of change, and with shifts in the relationship between discourse and more broadly semiosis and other social elements within networks of practices.

CDA’s roots are in linguistics, speech act theory, Western Marxism and psychology (Potter & Wetherell, 1994; Van Dijk, 2001a, b). It is distinctive on account of its view of the relationship between language and society, and its critical approach to methodology. As a method, CDA is interested in the process of meaning-making: the interplay between the production of text; the text itself and the reception of the text. When used to analyse written texts and spoken words, its objective is to reveal the discursive sources of power, dominance, inequality, and bias and how these sources are initiated, maintained, reproduced, and transformed within specific social, economic, political, and historical contexts (Van Dijk, 1993, 2011; Fairclough et al., 2011).

There are a number of terms that are extensively used by CDA scholars that need to be highlighted, since many of these are used in conjunction with each other.

In CDA, ‘*discourse*’ is closer to ‘semiosis’, “a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning”

(Fairclough 1992, p.64). Discourse is a form of social practice with a dialectical relationship between a particular *discursive event* and the diverse elements of the situation(s), institution(s) and social structures(s) which frame it.

A ‘*discursive event*’ is an instance of language use, analysed as *text* (the written or spoken language produced in a discursive event), *discursive practice* (the production and interpretation of the text) and *social practice* (including situational, institutional and societal practice) (Fairclough, 1993, p.138). The divorce issue is such a discursive event. Language is influenced by society but society is also shaped by language - this is why language is described as a social practice. The two-way relationships are illustrated in Figure 3:

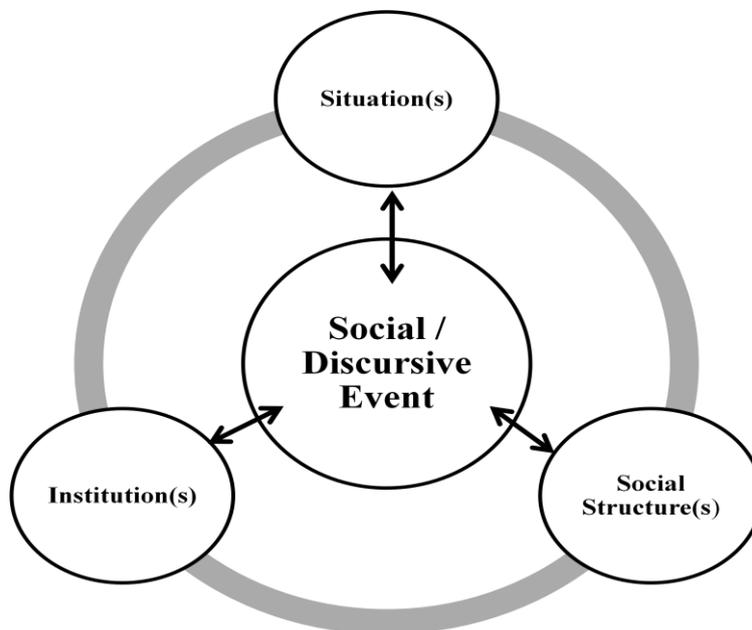


Figure 3: The dialectic relationship between language and society

Discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially shaped. It constitutes situations, objects of knowledge and the social identities and relationships between people and groups of people. It both helps sustain and reproduce the social status quo and contributes to transforming it (Fairclough et al 2011).

Texts are therefore parts of social events which are shaped by the causal powers of social structures (including languages) and social practices (including *orders of discourse*) on the one hand, and social agents on the other (Fairclough, 2003). Texts are interpreted and acted upon by readers or listeners depending on their rules, norms, and mental models of socially acceptable behaviour. It is through social interaction that

meanings are formed, assigned and grouped into the larger systems of understanding and acting (the ‘discourses’).

There are three main aspects of *meaning* in texts - Action and Social Relation, Representation, and Identification, which correspond to the categories of *Genres*, *Discourses* and *Styles* at the level of social practices. Table 7 summarises the way Fairclough (2003) understands aspects of meanings in texts to correspond to a set of categories of social practices:

Aspects of Meanings in Texts	Corresponding Categories of Social Practices	Definitions
Action & Social Relations	1) Genres	Diverse ways of acting, of producing life in semiotic mode
Representation	2) Discourses	Diverse representations of social life
Identification	3) Styles	Voices, social and personal identities.

Table 7: Meanings in texts as categories of social practices (Fairclough, 2003)

CDA leverages on Foucault’s concept of ‘orders of discourse’ in a general theoretical perspective on discourse which recognises the constitutive potential of discourse within and across social practices without reducing social practices to their discursive aspect (Farrelly, 2010). An *order of discourse* is a means of linking discursive and social orders, a set of conventions underlying discursive events (Wodak, 2006), a particular combination or configuration of genres, discourses and styles which constitute the discursive aspect of a network of social practices - tantamount to the semiotic aspect of social order. Fairclough (2003, p.205) sees orders of discourse as “the social structuring of linguistic variation or difference”. Orders of discourse are resilient - but may still change over time. One aspect of the ordering of discourse is dominance – the way some ways of making meaning are dominant or mainstream in a particular order of discourse while others are marginal, or oppositional, or ‘alternative’ (Fairclough 2003, p.206). Since an order of discourse is neither closed or rigid and therefore vulnerable to what happens in actual interactions, the struggle for hegemony can also be framed as a struggle to give a ‘universal’ meaning to particular discourses and representations, where the words of those in power are taken as “self-evident truths” while the words of

those excluded from power are dismissed as irrelevant, inappropriate, or without substance (van Dijk, 2000). For Fairclough (2003, p.61) hegemony is “the attempted universalization of particulars... which entails a reduction of dialogicality”.

Within a scale of dialogicality, the most dialogical option is the inclusion of other voices and the attribution to them of quotations (a form of intertextuality), and the least dialogical option is *assumption*, taking things as given³⁵. *Intertextuality* is the manner in which texts draw upon, incorporate, recontextualise and dialogue with other texts (Fairclough, 2003). The intertextuality of a text is the presence within it of elements of other texts (and therefore potentially other voices than the author’s own voice) which may be related to (dialogued with, assumed, rejected, etc.) in various ways³⁶.

The concepts of intertextuality and assumptions, and how certain voices are reported and others excluded, are important in a study of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse. Not only do the meanings within a text have multiple layers and references, they may also create new meaning by “drawing on and transforming past texts and restructuring existing conventions” (Fairclough 1992, p.270). The focus on intertextuality is to reveal how “any text is a link in a chain of texts, reacting to, drawing on, and transforming other texts” (Fairclough et al. 2011, p.361). The analysis of a text is also likely to reveal elements of *interdiscursivity* - whereby a mix of genres, discourses and styles are worked together back into the text. In this case, CDA mediates between the linguistic analysis of a text and various forms of social analysis of social events and practices (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

³⁵ Assumptions are the implicit meanings of texts used in seeking to universalise particular meanings to achieve and maintain dominance. ‘Assumed meanings’ acquire particular ideological significance since relations of power are best served by meanings which are widely taken as given. Fairclough (2003, p. 55) distinguishes between three types of assumptions: a) Existential assumptions (about what exists); b) Propositional assumptions (about what is or can be or will be the case); and c) Value assumptions (about what is good or desirable). It is also partly a matter of the assumptions and presuppositions people make when they speak or write. What is ‘said’ in a text is always said against the background of what is ‘unsaid’ – what is made explicit is always grounded in what is left implicit. In a sense, making assumptions is one way of being intertextual – linking this text to an ill-defined penumbra of other texts, what has been said or written or at least thought elsewhere” (see Fairclough 2003, p. 17 and p.219).

³⁶ The most common and pervasive form of intertextuality is reported speech (including reported writing and thought), though there are others (including irony). Reported speech may or may not be attributed to specific voices, and speech (writing, thought) can be reported in various forms, including direct (reproduction of actual words used) and indirect report (summary) (Bakhtin, 1986; Fairclough, 1995).

The CDA aspect of this study broadly follows the procedures applied in Fairclough’s (2003) systematic approach as illustrated in Figure 4 below (also see Meyer 2001, pp.28-29):

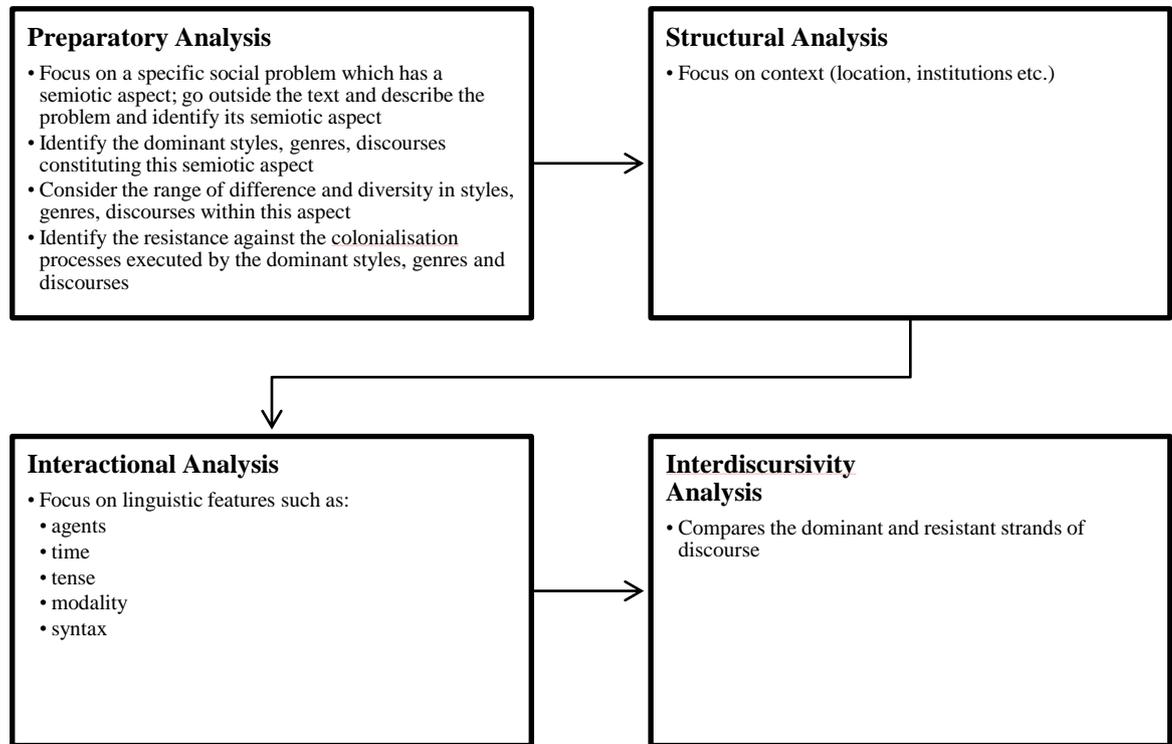


Figure 4: Fairclough CDA Approach

Within this approach, each of the above procedures are subject to three levels of analysis: a) a *descriptive* level which analyses texts and accounts for linguistic characteristics of the data, b) an *interpretative* level which investigates the relationship between the productive and interpretative processes of discursive practice and the texts; and c) an *explanatory* level where the findings of the first level are contextualised and explained, drawing on linguistic and social theories. Claims made out of discourse analysis primarily draw on social rather than linguistic theories. The analysis also remains grounded by constantly switching focus from structure to the action of social actors as the discourse triggered by the organic crisis unravels. As Fairclough (2003, p.10) aptly observes, we need also to take account of the various institutional positions, interests, values, intentions and desires of *producers*; the relations between elements at different levels in *texts*; and the institutional positions, knowledge, purposes and values of *receivers*.

CDA is appropriate as a key analytic tool for this study for several reasons:

a) *It is based on the notion that while power relations are discursive, a contingent domain exists for aspects of discourse to be revisited, negotiated and changed* (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). In Malta, structures are socially created by dominant institutions, and are inert and resistant to change. Since discourse constitutes society and culture, every instance of language use has the potential to contribute to reproducing and transforming society and culture, including relations of power.

b) *It seeks to uncover the ideological assumptions that are hidden in texts in order to resist and overcome various forms of power* – the manner in which discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power and dominance in society (Van Dijk, 2001a). Ideology, particularly the reinforcement of Catholic ideology, is at the core of the divorce crisis and ensuing social conflict described in this study. By systematically exploring often opaque relationships between discursive practices, texts, and events and wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes, our attention is drawn to power imbalances, social inequities, non-democratic practices, and other injustices; as well as the potential corrective actions (Fairclough, 1993). This facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how hegemony is secured and maintained.

c) *It refers to extra-linguistic factors such as culture, society and ideology in historical terms* (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 1996, 2001). Today's discourse, irrespective of the medium in which it is published, is irrevocably connected to the past. The organic crisis that unravels to threaten hegemony in Malta has its origins in historic struggles for domination. On a more micro level, discourse is interpreted differently by people because of different backgrounds, knowledge, and power positions - personal histories which inevitably render interpretation subjective.

d) *It goes beyond textual analysis by considering the relationship between discursive practices and social practice to be dialectic*. It is, dynamic, open, interpretative and explanatory and may be affected by new readings and new contextual information (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 1996, 2001). It is ideal for the textually-oriented practice of blogging during a time of social change, where there is an awareness of the “two-way, dialectic relationship between a particular discursive event and the diverse

elements of the situations(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it (Fairclough et al. 2011, p.357)". Wodak (2001, p.6) explains the complexity when she argues that:

the situational, institutional and social settings shape and affect discourses, and on the other [hand], discourses influence discursive as well as non-discursive social and political processes and actions.

e) It helps make connections between socio-cultural processes and structures on the one hand, and properties of texts on the other (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997; Wodak, 1996, 2001.) This mediated relationship between text and society is studied by looking at 'orders of discourse.' The discursive event (or text) is inevitably chained to and influenced by the hegemony it attempts to influence.

f) It studies discourse as a form of social action, without necessarily attempting to reflect reality in a neutral way. It interprets, organises and classifies the subject of discourse in an ideological way (Moyo, 2011), and openly and explicitly positions itself "on the side of dominated and oppressed groups and against dominating groups" (Fairclough et al, 2011 p.358). The counter-hegemonic discourse of bloggers in Malta is positioned as an important struggle for social change, with linguistic strategies deployed to facilitate attempts for a subaltern 'voice' to be heard over the mainstream.

g) It highlights the manner in which the link between text and society is mediated. The influence of the institutions on the Maltese media inevitably raises awareness of the extent to which action and interaction in Maltese society is 'mediated'; and how mediated texts contribute to processes of governance (McLuhan, 1964). In their attempts at 'mediation', print, TV, radio, and the Internet operate as 'copying technologies' which disseminate communication and preclude real interaction between 'sender' and 'receiver'.

h) As an analytical approach which recognises politicised struggle and shifts in meaning, it provides great flexibility. It is not a purely discursive approach (such as Laclau & Mouffe's); avoids the overly 'structuralist' or 'objectivist' side of Bourdieu, which excludes the role and force of language in constituting social life (Myles, 2010); and retains key elements of Foucault's post-structural 'orders of discourse' tool kit

without losing sight of the power of the institutions which, in the hyperlocal, still reign paramount. It accommodates an overall approach of transdisciplinarity, where the logic and categories of different disciplines are brought into dialogue with one another. It facilitates an exploration of the discursive aspect of contemporary processes of social transformation – in this case, the political theory of hegemony is combined with CDA’s general dialectical theory of discourse in social practices to inform the analysis.

KhosraviNik (2010) proposes a structure for a CDA study of a given social group, based on a representation of ‘in’ and ‘out’ groups / Self and Other). If we consider counter-hegemonic bloggers as ‘out groups’ and adjust for the hyperlocal context, we can adapt his model to depict the CDA structure and context level interactions of this study:

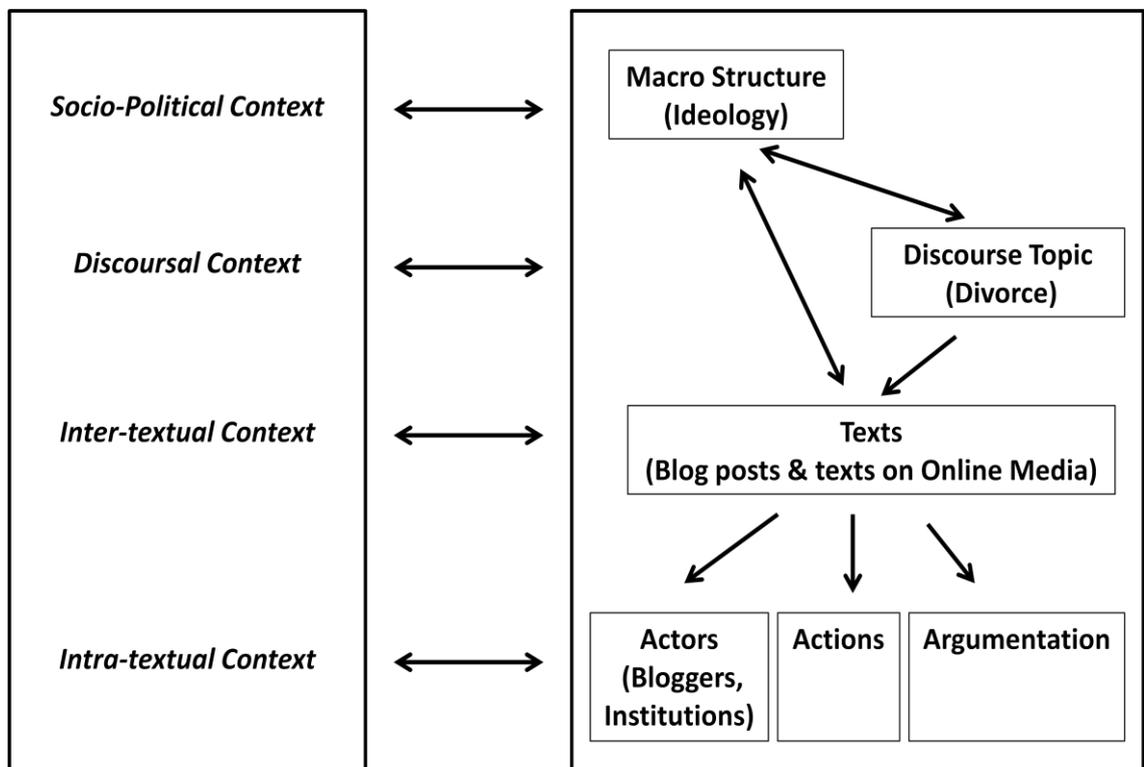


Figure 5: Structure of CDA aspect of Study - Context Level Interactions (adapted from KhosraviNik 2010, p.67)

The model helps highlight a number of key relationships and interactions:

- There is a close mutual ‘dialogicality’ between the given ideologies on one hand and the discourse topics and texts on the other. The dominant monolithic and Roman Catholic structure of ideology, actively supported by the two-party political hegemony, is not immune to the influence of either the discourse topic (the ongoing

crisis on divorce in Malta) or the discourse that is being generated through texts (in the case of this study, blog posts and texts on online media collateral).

- Discourse is depicted as socially constitutive as well as constituting society (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). There is a systemic network through which discourse and society interact, whereby a given text analysis relies on the macro-elements of ideology and discourse topics) and where interaction happens at different levels of analysis as well as through the links between intra-textual analysis and corresponding context levels.
- The ‘discourse topic’ has a direct relationship with the notion of ‘universal discourse’, and specifically discourse which is treated as mainstream, and alternative discourse that is marginalised or ignored. Were it not for a maverick back-bencher, it is unlikely that ‘divorce’ would have forced into the Maltese public consciousness between 2010 and 2011 in Malta. The discourse topic exemplifies the core defining quality of the macro-structure of a given society, and is subject to the gate-keeping processes and operations of institutions such as the mass media, the Church and the education system.
- The CDA framework relies on the analysis of three main intra-textual elements: the social actor(s), social action and argumentation. In this study, these elements represent (and are locked in) opposing positions on the discourse topic, and inevitably, produce divergent world views in the texts they produce, and the ideology they embrace.
- The strategic textual choices, made by bloggers and other social players, are inevitably subject to extra-linguistic factors, or “perspectivization” (KhosraviNik, 2010, p.67). CDA continues to ground this study with its pragmatic approach, reminding us that texts are never developed in a vacuum.

5.3 Methodological Challenges

Baym (2006) identifies six characteristics of good qualitative Internet research. It must: a) be grounded in theory and data; b) demonstrate rigour in data collection and analysis; c) use multiple strategies to get data; d) take into account the perspective of participants; e) demonstrate awareness of and self-reflexivity regarding the research process; and f)

take into consideration the interconnection between the Internet and the life world within which it is situated. Netnography and CDA were deployed in the belief that they facilitate research that could meet all of Baym's criteria. Both approaches present a number of technological and theoretical challenges.

5.3.1 Technology challenges

This research was conducted during a period of intense technological innovation, driven by factors such as the proliferation of the mobile Internet and the mass adoption of social media, particularly social networks. These developments give rise to new ways of collecting, analysing and displaying data; and help drive theoretical innovation in qualitative research and social sciences more generally (Travers, 2009).

There is much debate about the various merits of using the Internet as a research tool. Although the blog as a medium may appear to be relatively mature, the rapid pace of technological development of the new media ecosystem has stimulated many embryonic theoretical perspectives, making the understanding of its impact on society problematic. While all cultures change over time, what makes the Internet so challenging for research is that the fundamental architecture also changes rapidly (Lessig, 1999). In this study, there is the additional challenge of conceptualising the relationship between technological and social change at the local level (Postill, 2008).

Illingworth (2001) reiterates that Internet research must be employed and understood as part of a commitment to existing theoretical traditions. Both Cho and Trent (2006) and Travers (2009) believe that the current emphasis on innovation may lead to the neglect of difficult and unresolved problems when there is a need for careful systematic fieldwork based on spending a long time observing or participating in the activities of some social group. The inherent turbulence of networked communications and rapid cycles of innovation, adoption, adaptation, and obsolescence leads to difficulties with developing credible critical media theory, since the object of one's theoretical focus and critical ire are liable to quickly change or vanish altogether. The time of theory-making is overtaken and taken over by ever morphing, interlinking media. This study mitigates this threat by remaining grounded in the critical theory of hegemony, and using netnography in conjunction with CDA to observe and reveal the strategies deployed by a set of bloggers in a specific struggle against hegemonic discourse. It is underpinned

by a belief that the best way to learn about a social system is by participating in it; and that using the same media at the disposal of the social actors being studied enriches empirical observations and provides an element of ‘methodological triangulation’. The hands-on experience of having set up and managed a blog on Maltese culture (www.MaltaInsideOut.com) was invaluable in this regard.

Netnography also presents structural issues that challenge common research methods. For instance, many blogs are only active for a short period of time, and are often abandoned or eventually taken offline by their creators. In the absence of a clear, stable, finite universe of blogs, generalisations on the basis of random sampling are therefore impossible (Keren 2010). This lacuna is again partly mitigated by the hyperlocal context of this study. Rather than propose an inclusive typology based on a random sample of Maltese bloggers and media collateral, this study relies on: a) a selection of representative blogs that has been identified ‘from the ground up’, through a process of profiling the entire active Maltese blogosphere; b) the finite number of mainstream media collateral in Malta, facilitating the constant review of online media texts and selection of representative texts; and c) the offline process of participative observation, facilitated by remaining in Malta for the duration of the study.

5.3.2 Theoretical challenges of Netnography

The quality of netnography relies to a great degree on appropriate representation: on the selection of blog posts and online media texts that are truly representative of discourse that seeks to retain, resist, and renegotiate a hegemony; and on the selection of the right type of crisis to shake and expose the fortresses of civil society institutions supporting the power bloc. Where blogs are frequently associated with the personal, the mundane, the diary-piece, the unashamedly subjective and unreliable - at the most extreme level, the celebration of lies and untruths - the study explores blogs that resist the dominant discourse propagated by the institutions and propose an alternative. In this context, issues of ‘truth’ may not be as important as the manner in which the constitutive elements of blogs work to produce “particular effects” (Silverman, 2001, p.122).

Kozinets (2011, p.161-173) has operationalised these characteristics to propose a set of ten criteria that may help evaluate and inspire netnographic quality standards. The criteria are harmonised with all four evaluative positions (positivist, post-positivist,

postmodern and poststructural) to guide researchers in designing their own research. Table 8 flexes the Kozinets criteria to the specific context of this study to highlight the challenges netnography poses as an over-riding methodology. Some of these criteria (such as coherence and reflexivity) may appear contradictory at first reading.

Criterion	Definition ('the extent to which')	Applicability in this study
Coherence	Each recognisably different interpretation is free from internal contradictions and presents a unified pattern.	The majority of third party discourse that forms the core data for analysis was generated through archival research online and non-participant observation online – tantamount to online lurking. Care was taken to minimise the risk of polluting the data by keeping interviews with players in both the blogosphere and the media to a bare minimum. These served to triangulate the data and preliminary analysis based on participative observation (online and offline).
Rigour	The text recognises and adheres to the procedural standards of netnographic research.	The majority of the data was collected from the ground up, over a period of close to three years, with a 'bursty' period between October 2010 and June 2011, as the divorce crisis unravelled. By the time campaigning started in earnest, my netnographic system was monitoring a large number of bloggers and all Maltese mainstream news media on a daily basis for indications of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourse.
Literacy	The text recognises and is knowledgeable of relevant literature and research approaches.	The study engages with literature that ranges from Internet culture and media studies to critical theory (see Chapters 2 – 4).
Groundedness	The theoretical representation is supported by data, and the links between data and theory are clear and convincing.	The study is grounded in the hyperlocal discourse of the social actors being studied; in the researcher's understanding of the affordances of the medium and the workings of the hegemonic institutions in civil society; in the knowledge that the crisis situation is truly organic, on a national level, enabling close observations of attempts by the dominant bloc to secure its hegemony, and by the alternative bloc to disrupt the 'common sense'.

<p>Innovation</p>	<p>The constructs, ideas, frameworks and narrative form provide new and creative ways of understanding systems, structures, experience or actions.</p>	<p>The interdisciplinary study explores new academic territory. It seeks to understand how the new technologies of power can potentially transform old institutional systems of power; how personal publishing media can encourage citizens to engage in a new discourse, in the bounded culture of Malta, at another important milestone in its recent history. It attempts to observe how the dominant bloc uses its networks in civil society to neutralise, renegotiate and continue to dominate the discourse. It attempts to operationalise Gramsci's 20th century theories on civil society in a culture caught between the promise of a modernity that may simply be imagined, and the certainty of systems of patronage and clientelism that, till now, have been bound together by the pervasive Catholic ideology.</p>
<p>Resonance</p>	<p>A personalised and sensitising connection with the cultural phenomenon is gained.</p>	<p>The texts produced by the 'culture' also reflect attempts by citizens to find their own discourse - to resist the discourse of the hegemon - but also to broadcast, entertain and give voice to their lived cultural experiences.</p>
<p>Verisimilitude</p>	<p>A believable and lifelike sense of cultural and communal contact is achieved.</p>	<p>The study is about contrasting world views: the institutional vs. the alternative; the traditional vs. the modern; the dominant vs. the subaltern. The researcher's skill is in selecting texts that truly represent the conflict in the hyperlocal.</p>
<p>Reflexivity</p>	<p>The text acknowledges the role of the researcher.</p>	<p>Beyond the reflexivity of the researcher and the topic, there is reflexivity between media and blog discourse, since bloggers operate primarily in produsage mode; between bloggers' posts and the divorce billboards in the street; between blog posts and the community chatter on Facebook. The blog is at the hub of a new media ecosystem, which has its tentacles offline and online.</p>
<p>Praxis</p>	<p>The text inspires and empowers social action.</p>	<p>The struggle at the core of the study is about the promise of praxis to a community (in the form of granting divorce rights to Maltese citizens). On a political level, the line of inquiry leads to "moral, practical, aesthetic, political and personal issues - the production, that is, of texts that articulate an emancipatory,</p>

		participative perspective on the human condition and its betterment” (Denzin 1994, p.501 in Kozinets 2011, p.171).
Intermix	The representation takes account of the interconnection of the various modes of social interaction - online and off - in the culture member’s daily lived experiences, as well as in its own representation.	The study explores how the boundaries between the virtual and the offline cultures are getting blurred and how the very intermingling provides opportunities for a new ‘episteme’, a new order of discourse. Data that has been collected exclusively online feeds into data that has been generated through offline participative observation. The conclusions of this study can become an input into other qualitative and quantitative studies of power in the hyperlocal.

Table 8: Netnography Quality Standards Checklist

5.3.3 Theoretical challenges of Critical Discourse Analysis

Criticisms of the merits of CDA for data analysis tend to centre on issues of structure, subjectivity and reflexivity.

The overall structure of a CDA study may appear to be vague, since not enough attention is paid to the links between ideologies, discourses, texts and intra-textual analysis (KhosraviNik, 2010). CDA does not constitute a well-defined empirical method but rather a cluster of approaches. Since theoretical components of very different origins are adopted, there is no guiding theoretical viewpoint that is used consistently within CDA, making it difficult to trace a consistent process between theory to discourse and back: for instance, there is no typical CDA way of collecting data (Meyer, 2001).

Schegloff (1997) argues that CDA is often short on detailed, systematic analysis of text or talk. He says the necessary linkage of discursive material to issues of power and domination may result in critical analysis not binding to data, becoming “merely ideological”. There is no denying that CDA’s interest in the social processes of power, hierarchy-building, exclusion and subordination, and its objective of rendering transparent the discursive aspects of societal disparities and inequalities means that in the majority of cases it takes an explicit position to side with the underprivileged and

tries to expose the linguistic means used by the privileged to stabilise or even intensify their dominance in civil society. This opens up CDA to criticism (Stubbs, 1997; Toolan, 1997) of its lack of theoretical rigour and objectivity, constantly sitting on the fence between social research and political argumentation. Widdowson (1995, p.169) believes that the term critical discourse analysis is a contradiction in terms:

in a dual sense, a biased interpretation: in the first place it is prejudiced on the basis of some ideological commitment, and then it selects for analysis such texts as will support the preferred interpretation.

Analysis, he argues, ought to mean the examination of several interpretations: in the case of CDA this is not possible because of prior judgements. Each 'technology' of CDA research must itself be examined as potentially embedding the beliefs and ideologies of the analysts and therefore prejudicing the analysis toward the analysts' preconceptions. Stubbs (1997, p.1000) believes that CDA provides no systematic comparisons between texts and norms in the language, and "language and thought can only be related if one has data and theory pertinent to both: otherwise the theory is circular." If our view of reality is influenced by our use of language, then we need to find some independent, *non-linguistic* evidence of a pattern of beliefs and behaviours to be able to support whatever claims we make using CDA. Myles (2010, p.36) claims that although CDA is deployed to understand textual practice, its fundamental concern is with "textual orders rather than orders of practice". He contrasts the CDA approach with Bourdieu's (1977) approach to textual practices which he relates to social structural forces such that language is necessarily secondary to these as a form of practice, although it can still be seen as both resource and medium of social-symbolic struggles. The CDA approach diverges from this, predicated on the belief that the vital structure of language is language, rather than language as a realisation of social practice.

The above criticisms do not deflect from CDA's contribution to making this study pragmatic. For a start, the study's intent to investigate the potential of blogging to disrupt the workings of hegemony makes explicit the position and political commitment of the researcher. The researcher has a role in society; and therefore any resultant theory formation, description, and explanation is inevitably socio-politically "situated." CDA rejects the notion of value-free science and argues that scholarly discourse is inherently part of and influenced by social structure: it is produced in social interaction,

and academic research inevitably benefits from the researcher's own insights of and relationships with the society being studied (Schiffrin, Tannen et al., 2001)

As an approach to studying the relationship between language use and its social context, CDA keeps the researcher focused on the power of discourse without losing sight of the workings of ideology and culture in civil society. When analysing texts, it makes up for the loss of face-to-face symbolism by remaining reflexive, open to competing knowledge claims originating from other approaches. Its importance is in its linking of methodological challenges about how we acquire knowledge to epistemological challenges about the nature of knowledge itself, encouraging "critical readings not only of conventional research methods but also of established modes of understanding" (Jupp, 2006, p.76.) Van Dijk (2001a, pp.95-96) makes a powerful case for CDA's versatility, particularly in an interdisciplinary study such as this:

Good scholarship, and especially good CDA, should integrate the best work of many people, famous or not, from different disciplines, countries, cultures and directions of research. In other words, CDA should be essentially diverse and multidisciplinary.

Meyer (2001) refers to Wodak's and Scollon's suggestion that triangulation procedures are used to ensure the quality and validity of CDA analysis. Both Wodak and Fairclough believe the CDA analysis structure itself provides the requisite theoretical triangulation, since it unites and determines the relationship between three levels of analysis: (a) the actual text; (b) the discursive practices (the process involved in creating, writing, speaking, reading, and hearing); and c) the larger socio-cultural context that bears upon the text and the discursive practices (Fairclough 1989, p.109; 2000). All three levels are analytically separate without being discrete since they are dialectically related. This emphasis upon the 'dialectical relationship' between structure and agency presents a dynamic view of power and individual agency. In this way, CDA emphasises discourse as a location of wider social struggle. Wodak's triangulatory approach is based on permanent switching between four levels of context and evaluation of findings from different perspectives: a) the immediate language - or text-internal context; b) the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between utterances, texts, genres and discourses; c) the extralinguistic (social) level which is called the 'context of situation' and explained by middle-range theories; and d) the broader socio-political and historical contexts.

This study leverages on a limited number of semi-structured interviews - primarily with former participants in the Maltese blogosphere - to triangulate the initial analysis of the mediated actions of these and other bloggers. The reactions, interpretations and even divergencies expressed in these interviews provide an extra layer of granularity above the waves of grounded analysis from netnography and CDA. Nevertheless as Meyer (2001, p.30) asserts, the notion of strict 'objectivity' cannot be achieved by means of discourse analysis since:

each 'technology' of research must itself be examined as potentially embedding the beliefs and ideologies of the analysts and therefore prejudicing the analysis toward the analysts' preconceptions.

What this study may lack in objectivity by deploying CDA in its analysis, it gains in an approach that enables a close examination of the role of "discourse in the (re)production and challenge of dominance" and the role that "structures, strategies or other properties of text, talk, verbal interaction or communicative events play ...in ... modes of reproduction" of social power (van Dijk 1993, pp.249-250).

5.3.4 Reflexivity challenges

A study of this nature is inevitably reflexive. As a participant in the culture being researched, the researcher cannot be immune to the various dynamics at the core of this study - such as the unravelling of the crisis that triggers the actions and arguments of the social actors engaged in a war of texts; or the culture of the blogosphere itself. Simply put, as a researcher I cannot write myself out of this study.

Both netnography and CDA therefore embrace elements of a reflexive approach (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000), open to competing knowledge claims and new insights, rather than remaining locked in formulaic analysis. Researchers question themselves, reflect on their actions, observations, hunches, feelings, how they impact participants and are in turn impacted by them, and how these aspects are important data (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). This reflection on self, process, and representation and the examination of power relations and politics in the research process, and researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation lasts throughout the research process (Sultana, 2007).

I remained acutely aware that as a blogger and a researcher, there was a Heisenberg effect to be aware of and manage. Similarly, my professional and social networks in Malta provided me with privileged insights into the strategic actions of the two main political parties - both in their historic attempts at hegemonising the mainstream media, and in their strategies to do the same with the Maltese blogosphere. Data was continually collected in parallel with the analysis stage to provide comfort that the conclusions were not unduly influenced by my own world-views and personal political positions - particularly on the divorce issue. Traditional ethnography dictates that by the very nature of conducting research, ethnographers may never become complete insiders in the community they are researching. The corollary is that as a researcher and blogger on a small island, I have obligations to operate as a responsible intellectual in contemporary life. I was aware that because of the size of the country, my research was of interest to dominant groups in Malta (the independent media, politicians and the Church in particular). I was careful to keep a low-profile in the field for this specific reason, without, however, subjugating my personal beliefs as a citizen on key socio-political issues. This text has particular relevance:

Critical discourse analysts ought to aspire to be ‘organic intellectuals’ in a range of social struggles (feminist, socialist, anti-racist, green and so forth), but should at the same time be aware that their work is constantly at risk of appropriation by the state and capital (Fairclough et al. 2011, p.374).

Figure 6 illustrates the dialectic relationship between the researcher and research topic.

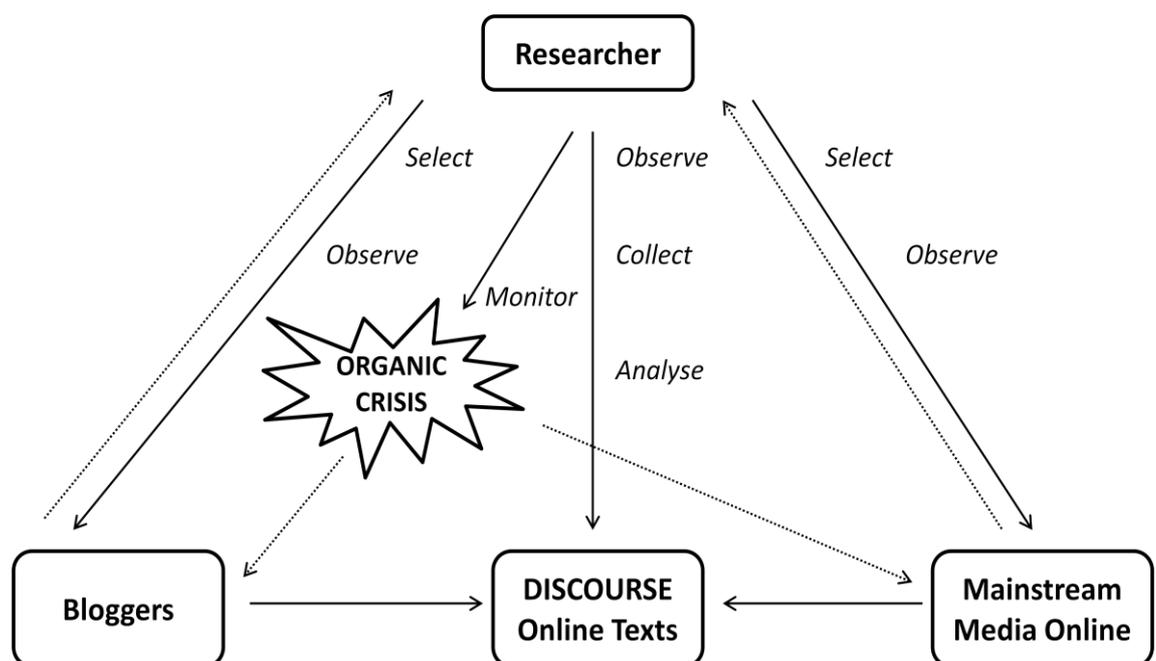


Figure 6: Netnography in action – symbiotic process between blogosphere and mainstream media to disrupt (or renegotiate) discourse

5.4 Ethics

The study has taken a cautious and pragmatic approach to research ethics. The hyperlocal context, particularly the size of community and all-pervasive ‘familiar’ Mediterranean culture represents an additional challenge to normal practice. The research has been informed primarily by the best practices at the Association of Internet Researchers (Air-L) and the National Centre for Research Methods (NCRM) and by monitoring ongoing discussions on ethnography ethics issues on the Air-L forum, academic blogs³⁷ and literature (such as Debatin, 2011). Robert Kozinets has a number of posts of interest at: <http://kozinets.net/archives/category/netnography>. Buchanan’s “Internet Research Ethics blog” at internetresearchethics.org run was also consulted regularly.

The ethical concerns with using netnography have centred on whether blogs are to be considered a private or a public space, and about what constitutes informed consent in virtual communities (Paccagnella, 1997). At face value, netnography uses cultural information that is not given specifically, and in confidence, to the researcher. Similarly, the bloggers who originally create the posts that are reviewed in studies such as this do not necessarily intend or may not welcome their use in research representations. Kozinets (2010) cautions that the models governing Internet codes of ethics need to be flexible in the way they use and acknowledge both spatial and textual understandings of computer-mediated communications.

Sections 5.4.1 to 5.4.4 summarise the approach taken in this study to ensure that online texts were collected in an ethical manner.

5.4.1 In the online public domain

The over-riding principle is that a text which is in the *online public domain* is ‘fair game’ for attribution, and therefore not deemed to be ‘private’. By online public

³⁷ See <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics.pdf> and <http://internetresearchethics.org/>.

domain, I mean that the text can be accessed by the general public via a search on a search engine. People who write or say something in a specific online context understand that their content is publicly available and subject to *archiving*. By being publicly available, it also has the potential to be published on a different media and made available to a potentially different audience that wouldn't normally have accessed the text in its original location: in this case, text on a blog could be published in an academic journal, instead of remaining in its original online format. Blog posts and texts on the newspaper portals in Malta are the equivalent of texts in the online public domain. Blogs and newspaper portals are media that support *asynchronous*, persistent forms of communication for public consumption.

The over-riding principle in this study is the *intent* by creators of online content to have the content accessible by others in the online public domain. Mainstream media collateral is clearly part of a mass communication media meant for public consumption. Bloggers also develop content with the intention of communicating with an implicit if potentially unknown (hence public) audience (Hookway, 2008). By being in the online public domain, content developed on a blog must be treated differently to, say, communications within the walled garden of social networks intended for the sole readership of 'friends' or members of a community.

It is therefore legitimate to cite direct quotes from blog posts without having to inform every individual blogger. Similarly, people who comment on a particular blog post can expect people other than the blogger to read their comment, and do not need to be contacted in the event of a comment on a particular post being of interest to the study. Texts on blogs are not meant to be private and therefore qualify for an exemption from the human subjects code of ethics propagated by the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

5.4.2 Privacy & Identity issues

The crediting and citation of blog posts followed some simple conventions. Most of the blogs that form the basis for this research have easily-identifiable owners. Very few have pseudonymous identities: the 'goldfish bowl' syndrome in Malta makes it difficult for bloggers to conceal their real identities online, and particularly in the blogosphere - despite a tradition, say, of people writing letters to the editors of newspapers using a

moniker to conceal identity. When the identity of the blogger is clear from the ‘About us’ section of the blog, the blog name, the URL, or from an individual blog post, text from a blog post has been attributed to the person rather than the name of the blog or pseudonym used. In situations where bloggers use a pseudonym, and choose not to reveal their identity as above, online pseudonyms have been treated like real names. This convention was respected even when the identity of the blogger was clear because of clues or online links (for instance, to a Facebook profile). Clearly, it may still be possible for a third party to track back a direct quote from a blog post to the originator of the text by conducting a full-text search in a public search engine, since the blog is an online public place for search engines.

Although extensive use was made of social networks and micro-blogs (as part of orthodox participant observation - for instance to understand how bloggers use inbound links to blog posts to promote their blog or to explore discussions around blog posts) as a general rule texts on these media were not used for critical discourse analysis. Although blog comments were reviewed to determine how reflexivity works in the blogosphere, comments were not used for critical discourse analysis. In the sole case where a comment is cited (from former blogger, Sandro Vella), specific permission was granted by the blogger during a personal interview.

5.4.3 Awareness of potential of harm

Despite the provisions of the above, clearly there is an over-riding obligation to protect bloggers from any harm as a result of texts being cited in this study. Blogging, after all, provides bloggers with an online mask that enables them to write more honestly and candidly, relatively unselfconscious about what they write since they remain hidden from view (Hookway 2008). At the end of a semi-structured interview, a blogger told me:

You know you can never be totally anonymous in this country, but you set up a moniker to blog, anyway. In the bad old days, political retribution would be in the form of an ex-ufficio assessment from the Inland Revenue Department. People in power will always find a way of trying to ruin you. These days they might just try and ruin your reputation via the party-political media. Or through some under their control. (Joseph, 2011. Name changed).

No information that was provided in confidence to the researcher was divulged in this study. All of the bloggers cited were over the age of 18.

5.4.4 Securing informed consent

There are few, if any, ethical procedures for in-person fieldwork that translate easily to the online medium. The abstract guidelines of informed consent are particularly open to wide degrees of interpretation.

As explained previously, as the medium or locale of research, blog posts and texts on online mainstream media collateral are considered to already be in the public domain since they can be located via a text search on a search engine. Since the texts for critical discourse analysis have been primarily produced through archival research and the download of archived posts and texts, they do not strictly qualify as human subjects research. On this basis, no attempt was made to secure informed consent from either bloggers or the mainstream media for use of selected texts in this study.

In the case of online or offline interviews with bloggers (for fact-finding or to better understand behaviours and motives), the research falls into the area of interaction and therefore requires informed consent. In such cases, the University's Informed Consent form was signed, with full disclosure of the researcher's presence, affiliations, intentions and focus of study.

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the methodologies and methods of data collection and analysis employed in this research. The mixed methods approach provides a concrete basis from which to study the workings of power through the online observation and subsequent analysis of mainstream and counter-hegemonic discourse in the hyperlocal. CDA goes beyond semiotics to complement the findings of netnography by being both interpretative and explanatory, particularly through its dialectic relationship with extra-linguistic variables such as culture, society, and ideology. This provides the researcher with a flexible, hybrid approach that can manage ongoing cycles of data collection and analysis of online texts, without losing sight of the 'bigger picture'. Regularly

switching between netnography and CDA – at times approaching texts as a critical theorist, at other times focusing on semiotics – also helps tease out the granular, nuanced meanings of counter-hegemonic blogging in a specific culture.

The next chapter discusses the operations of the primary hegemonic institutions in Malta.

Chapter 6. Hegemony and the institutions in Malta

This chapter introduces the local terrain where the two political parties, the Church and the media operate as de facto hegemonic institutions in Malta. It explains how the political parties thrive in civil society through a mix of polarisation and clientelism. It addresses also how the Church continues to be a power-broker in the 21st century, backed by legislation and a symbolic hold over citizens throughout their lives. This chapter also examines the changes within mainstream media as its role as a privileged information gate-keeper is potentially challenged by the emergence of citizen media. The final part of the chapter reviews the beginnings of the Maltese blogosphere, attempts by media outlets to occupy and dominate the online space, and the first attempts by online citizens to raise their voices against institutional hegemony.

6.1 Same as it ever was: institutions matter

What makes hegemony such a relevant and resilient system of power in 21st century Malta is that it is rooted in the operations of the dominant socio-political institutions of civil society – the two main political parties, the Church and the mainstream media. These institutions thrive in a capitalist, classist system, of which Malta is not only a hyperlocal but a national-representative. They play a key role in providing stability and ideological reproduction under the guise of moral and intellectual leadership, whereby their interests are projected as legitimate interests for the common good – and a breeding ground for what Gramsci would term ‘common sense’. In a context in which popular culture is distinctly Mediterranean and the island a bounded community, like Gramsci’s Sardinia, hegemony is carried in cultural, political and economic forms, “in non-discursive practices as well as in rhetorical utterances” (Eagleton, 1991, p.113). Bennett et al (1995, p.2) point out how seemingly arms-length and distanced observers and critics of events are “actually locked into a power structure and act largely in tandem with the dominant institutions in society”.

As a young independent nation and a relatively new EU member state, Malta continues to grapple with its postcolonial legacy and self-identity. These issues have worked their way into the public consciousness through a seemingly permanent crisis of nationhood and modern European identity (Baldacchino, 2002) and provided an opportunity for the powerful “troika” of local institutions - the two political parties (the PN and PL) and the

Church - to dominate public discourse and fill the gaps in the public imagination. Baldacchino believes that Malta is a “nationless state”, in which only members of the troika are anchors of identity: in practice, any notion of ‘national interest’ has been long sabotaged: imploded into frenzied partisanship internally; replaced by integrationism externally. The Maltese are, from cradle to grave, called upon to express loyalty and commitment to the Church and one of the two political parties. It is the political party that “assumes the characteristics of an ‘*ethnie*’ - a moral community, extending the locus of empathy, trust and identification with others as if in an extended family” (ibid., p.197).

The institutions’ influence is underpinned by some remarkable statistics: 98% of the population is baptised Roman Catholic; the Constitution describes the Maltese state as Catholic; since 1966, the country’s parliamentary democracy has been the exclusive domain of the two main political parties, together enjoying the support of over 95% of the population, split right down the middle. This means that “the public sphere and any civic expression within it is channelled through the discourse of these mammoth institutions, outside which all else is marginalized” (Falzon & Micallef, 2008, p.399). The success of institutions is gauged by their ability to enclose and confine the definitions of forms of popular culture through a dominant discourse, disseminated as all inclusive and universal. This is vital to secure consent and manage resistance, projecting their particular set of interests as the general interest and therefore representing a key source of stability in civil society (Giroux 1981, in Orłowski 2011; Hall 1998; Levy & Egan, 2003).

As in other Southern European countries, liberal institutions in Malta, including both capitalist industrialism and political democracy, developed later than in Western Europe and North America, such that the forces of old regimes – such as the absolutist state and the Catholic Church – remained stronger, with liberalism triumphing only after a protracted political conflict that continued in many cases well into the twentieth century (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). The political spectrum remained wider and political differences sharper. The Maltese troika is bound by a common interest in the manner in which discourse circulates both through mainstream media channels (particularly TV, radio and the English-language newspapers) and by word of mouth in grassroot civil society, where the role and range of influence of local information gatekeepers (such as educators, journalists and clerics) is particularly important.

Mitchell (2002) eloquently describes patronage and the practice of clientelism in Malta as a system in which citizens secure access to resources they need through the personal relationships and friendships they foster with patrons in positions of power in Maltese civil society. Rather than attributing the Maltese inability to get rid of old systems of social exchange to “Mediterraneanism” and “the other / backward ” narratives associated with Western anthropological readings of the region, Mitchell associates the Maltese ambivalence towards Europe with the constant struggle between the promised “modernity” of EU membership (making the dominant classes more accountable and the country more regulated and bureaucratic) and the perceived “safety of the traditional” together with a profound sense of cynicism and even helplessness in the face of the state and its all pervasive influence and reach in civil society. Patronage thrives in Malta despite the Europeanisation process (Cini, 2000), where EU membership introduced a new regulatory force and potentially another hegemonic institution. Perennial issues of size, history, culture and class structures combine to facilitate personal patron-client relationships in daily life. Citizens are trained from birth to adopt a posture of deference towards those who appear to be in a position of power by virtue of having access to political, economic and cultural resources (Caruana Galizia, 2010c).

6.1.1 Hegemony and the political parties

Political parties have great importance in all Mediterranean countries on account of a history of political conflict, the strong role of the state and “historically weaker development of civil society” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.140). The Maltese political system thrives on the polarisation, partisanship and conflict that are endemic in Maltese society (Cini, 2002; Frenco, 1994a, b; Hirczy, 1995). Its primary interest is not to promote consensus, nationhood and responsible citizenship, but to secure power and preserve its hegemony in civil society. It is the inevitable consequence of Mediterranean-style micro-state politics with a high voter turnout (93% in 2008), and where the difference between victory and defeat in a general election is truly marginal: a mere 1,500 votes or 0.5% of the votes cast sufficed for the PN to secure a further five-year, one-party mandate for government in 2008. Despite proportional representation, the third party, Alternattiva Demokratika (AD), has little chance of gaining a seat in parliament. On a micro level, a candidate requires close to 3,300 votes to get elected to

the 69-seat national parliament. This leads to intense campaigning by individual candidates for every single vote – not just against political adversaries, but also against other candidates of the same party, since the voter’s lower-order preferences also count. Boissevain (1993, p.150) says politics in Malta is “a corrosive zero-sum contest characterised by factional loyalty that reaches a veritable frenzy just before elections”. Over the past four years, the PN’s one-seat parliamentary majority has made it vulnerable to the demands of a handful of backbenchers complaining, among other things, of oligarchy and lack of accountability within the party. The result is that the country appears to be subject to permanent waves of campaigning and political brinksmanship.

Unlike other Southern European countries, where polarised pluralist systems are “typically complex political systems, with many contending parties, often themselves made up of contending factions” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, pp.131-132), Malta has a “purified” polarised two-party system whose roots go back to colonial history. The Partit Nazzjonalista (PN) was founded in 1880 to fight Anglicisation with the weapon of ‘Italianita’ to demand a new constitutional order while the Malta Labour Party (MLP) was founded in 1921 by one of the union branches affiliated with the British Workers’ Union - the ‘Camera del Lavoro’ (Frendo 1991). Yet, before the 1970s, Malta had a semblance of a multi-party system. The PN and the MLP have perennially adopted diametrically opposed positions, often based on issues of class and ideology.³⁸

In the 1950s, the Labour Party saw its interests as allied to those of the British in Malta and lobbied for integration with the UK, while the PN lobbied for self-government or independence in the interests of Malta’s pro-Italian middle class. Post-independence, the internal party-dynamics of the two parties led to the consolidation of polarisation, particularly during the PL socialist rule in the 1970s and 1980s which created a veritable ideological chasm between Government and Opposition and “crystallised the intense bipolar division in Maltese society” (Howe, 1987, p.236). The parties have

³⁸ The PN has historically nurtured alliances within the small business sector and professional classes – its pro-Europeanism is derived from a pro-clerical Christian Democratic ideology. The PL retains core support with the ‘working class’, and historically has adopted a broadly anti-clerical, socialist notion of “Malta for the Maltese” (Mitchell 2002, pp.156-157). In terms of social stratification, the industrial working classes are traditionally loyal to the Labour Party, while farmers, entrepreneurs and civil servants gravitate mainly towards the PN. In spite of a congruence of policy by the two political parties over recent decades, this occupational/social class split remains surprisingly strong (Baldacchino, 2002).

continued to nurture these divisions in numerous high-profile policy disputes – from conflicts on neutrality, state-subsidisation of Church schools, VAT to EU membership.

What the two parties have in common is their propensity to operate as hegemonic entities with varying degrees of success. Today they are ‘catch-all’ parties, which deploy both conventional and modern techniques for both the “mass and customised socialisation of citizens into loyal and unswerving party faithful” (Baldacchino, 2002, p.197). The PN’s long periods in government since 1987 are indicative of its ability to reconfigure itself in accordance with changing social contexts and retain a broad system of alliances in civil society: in the 1980s, it was a populist, modern, moderate party promoting national unity; in 1998, it presented itself as socially-conscious and credible; in 2002, its vision was tied to the concrete project of EU membership (Briguglio, 2010). The opposition party, the Partit Laburista (PL)³⁹, has been under new leadership since 6 June, 2008, and is repositioning itself as a progressive movement, reaching out to the middle class in an attempt to renew the strategic alliance that returned it briefly to power in 1996 (Mayo, 2010; Briguglio, 2011).

The party-political culture of perpetual disagreements and conflicts may, at face value, appear to run counter to the objective of securing consent through hegemony in civil society. In practice, the deep socio-cultural cleavages within Maltese society actually facilitate the hegemonic operations of both parties, irrespective of whether they are in power or in opposition (Cini, 2002). The politician thrives in the stark polarisation of an “either-or” and “us-them” partisan paradigm (Baldacchino, 2002, p.203). The nation state may be partially imaginary, but both parties’ hegemonies are sustained through the operations of concrete, long-standing personal networks in civil society. The centralisation of authority in parliament is embedded in the national psyche and public consciousness through the personal relationships that are nurtured between politicians, agents, supporters, constituents, relatives and other social actors. The politician is “personally familiar” (Mitchell, 2002, p.7) – not just as a public figure because of the size and pervasiveness of various media, but also as a grassroots operator, often directly accessible (in social gatherings such as weddings, or to constituents through regular office clinics) or through personal representatives (e.g. at party clubs and local councils).

³⁹ In November 2008, the Malta Labour Party approved various changes to its statute, including a change in the party’s name to “Partit Laburista” (PL).

Two-party polarisation is also embodied in party symbols, flags, anthems, rituals, rival political clubs and band clubs – even a north/south island divide. Boissevain's anthropological and network analysis studies (1974; 1979; 1980) chronicle several examples of petty rivalries ('pika') at the most micro of levels, such as the village feasts ('festas'). Boissevain (1993) believes that the polarisation between the PL and the PN is simply a replacement of the historic MLP-Church feuds of the sixties: together with the structural, class system, it provides the parties with clear boundaries within which to retain and negotiate consent within civil society.

The repressive socialist regime of the 1980s may have been replaced by the free-market policies of the PN, but the notion of the governing party representing all Maltese citizens is contested, even treated as political rhetoric. When a party secures power, its first duty is to support the interests of individuals and groups within an active patronage relationship: political allegiance often translates into privileged access to the resources of employment (direct/ indirect) and housing (Mitchell, 2002). Political hegemony in Malta relies on this constant, informal, delicate process of exchange, often outside of the public arena and invariably in the Maltese language, and therefore incomprehensible to the outside world. Alliances are built and nurtured with key brokers in civil society and activated through clientelism at a very local level. This does not mean that social capital and structural divides between those who rule and those who are ruled do not matter. Citizens attempt to enlist the help of politicians, well-placed bureaucrats and 'high' society to secure resources in the full knowledge that the ruling class is at liberty to renege on obligations – and also strike deals with opponents as part of the constant renegotiation process to secure consent and neutralise frontal attacks. For subalterns in the clientelist system, the only recourse is not to vote for the politician who reneges on a promise – Malta's single transferable vote (STV) system rewards affiliational strategies, and often "reflects the interest of groups or individuals with the particular politician, as opposed to a conception of the general interest" (Hallin & Mancini 2004, pp. 131-132).

The deep polarisation of the electorate turns general elections into a mobilisation exercise by both parties for the votes of two target groups: 'known' party sympathisers; and first-time voters, also likely to follow family voting traditions. Both parties use a mix of word of mouth and statistical information to profile voters, and then candidates employ networks of family and friends to promote their election chances and achieve

greater social control over their sympathisers (Hirczy, 1994). Pirotta's (1994, pp.96) description of the grassroots mobilisation by political parties to secure the votes of the faithful retains currency:

On Election Day, cloistered nuns have been known to abandon the seclusion of their convents to join other voters at the polls. Other voters, sometimes only a few days away from the grave, can also be seen being ferried, frequently at their own volition, from their sick beds to some polling station in order that they too may register a preference.

The red/blue political divide is actively nurtured through ritualised antagonisms that are crystallised in hegemonic discourse. The 1970s Mintoffian slogan of 'Min mhux magħna, kontra tagħna⁴⁰', continues to have greater resonance in Maltese society than the PL's 1990s attempt at social inclusion through a new mantra of 'min mhux kontra tagħna huwa magħna⁴¹' (Briguglio, 2001, pp.238-239). Lifetime red/blue affiliations produce a simple dichotomy of meaning that is consolidated in the collective imagination through word of mouth. Personal (subjective) narratives are enslaved in a "partisan circle of memory" from which the Maltese still find it impossible to detach themselves (Monteforte, 2012, p.4). They also form the basis for what is acceptable as "universal discourse", and what is excluded - the system through which citizens perceive reality. In Malta, the parties, and to a great extent the Church, have imposed their discourse through a particularly resilient strain of institutionalised symbolic violence. These systems of symbolism and meaning are in turn experienced by citizens as legitimate through the imposition of a "cultural arbitrary" (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p.22). The institutions impose their symbolic violence as pedagogic action through three modes of cultural arbitrary: diffused education (informal peer groups); family education; and institutional education. This is complemented by the hegemonisation of the media, equally adept at inculcating meaning in the overall structure of power relations.

Political hegemony in Malta is therefore necessarily tribal, focused as much on the marginalisation of "the alternative" as on the promotion of homogeneity, albeit in the inclusion of straightjacket red / blue partisan silos. The parties, in tacit agreement with the Roman Catholic Church, have significant power in defining and managing the

⁴⁰ Those who are not with us are against us.

⁴¹ Those who are not against us are with us.

universal discourse. It is perfectly acceptable to promote confrontational PN-PL discourse, since this resonates within the familiar stomping ground not just of politics, but of the polarised public sphere. There appears to “be little room outside the parameters of affiliated quarters: technocrats, professionals and intellectuals are not perceived to be able to exist separately from parties” (Sammut, 2007, p.36). In practice, citizens’ reluctance to affiliate themselves with a red / blue ideology leads to mistrust, social marginalisation and diminished stocks of social capital. The anthropologist Mark Anthony Falzon (2012, pers. comm.) says that such a person is often perceived as someone who “plays the game” (in Maltese, ‘jilghabha’) - someone who is callous and overtly strategic to try and secure access to resources from both parties, irrespective of who is in power. A person who is not aligned to one of the two parties and prone to voting, say, on the basis of track records and electoral manifestos, is similarly mistrusted as a “floating voter”. It is unusual to find people who will admit to having switched support from one party to another, despite the fact that such people clearly exist. Even in defining exclusions, it is impossible to imagine people capable of living their lives outside the polarised political discourse⁴². The alternative discourse of the intellectual - the marginalised, non-politicised and disconnected – continues to be ignored, despite the very low margins between victory and defeat at a national election and, by inference, the power that such groups of people have if they choose to exercise their democratic right to vote.

Both parties continue to take ambivalent positions on issues that can undermine their hegemony. Although there is a reluctant endorsement that EU-membership is inevitable as a force for modernisation (and regulation), there is a hesitancy to encourage debate on morally-charged issues such as corruption, racism, the secular state, abortion and IVF. Both parties continue to tacitly support populist traditional causes, such as spring hunting, despite the disapproval of the EU⁴³. The combination of issues of size, culture, voting systems and ingrained polarisation “institutionalises close personal and patronage links between politicians and their constituents” (Baldacchino, 2002, p.197). Despite popular acknowledgement that the clientelist system leads to patronage and

⁴² People who voice their preference for AD, the Green party, are also dismissed as irrelevant, because of AD’s historic inability to secure representation in parliament. Although discourse is the means of both oppression and resistance (Foucault, 1978), in Malta, to date, it needs to be framed within the clear regime of the two-party silos to have a chance of circulating as the mainstream (via the media and word of mouth channels).

⁴³ Malta is the only EU member state for which the Court of Justice of the EU has accepted that a spring hunting derogation for turtle dove and quail may be justifiable.

corruption, that “all politicians are bastards” (Mitchell, 2002, p.147) and ordinary citizens used as cogs in a networked, zero-sum game of representation, there is little indication of a culture of protest or desire for alternative politics outside the red/blue camp. The state continues to play a large role in social life, reflecting an authoritarian, paternal tradition of intervention and contributing to a broad politicisation of society (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Significantly, in the absence of a proper attempt at documenting Malta’s political history of the past 30 years, the country has to rely mainly on oral and therefore invariably polarised narratives (Monteforte, 2012). Within this charged polarised context, the notion of citizen media for empowered, alternative, counter-hegemonic voices inevitably would sound as a warning call to arms to the political bloc, as well as a potential opportunity for new hegemonic operations.

6.1.2 Hegemony and the Church

Eagleton (1991, p.113) says that religion is “probably the most purely ideological of the various institutions of civil society”. The Roman Catholic Church is one of the three great monotheistic religions in the Mediterranean (Mayo, 2010). In Malta, it operates as a de facto hegemonic entity because of the all pervasiveness of Catholic ideology. If the Maltese language is an important sign of Maltese identity, so is the Church: its “ethos and ceremonies remain today is the closest to a national Maltese symbol” (Baldacchino, 2002, p.196).

In their work on religious neutrality in public institutions in Europe, Ercolesi & Hägg (2008) propose four criteria that can determine the secularisation of a nation, based on the degree to which: a) the state ‘recognises’ religions, taking into account discrimination and privileges to certain religions; b) the state gives financial support to religions; c) the state intervenes in religious affairs; and d) religions intervene in affairs of public institutions. Malta meets all four of Ercolesi & Hägg’s criteria for a “non-secular state”.

The Roman Catholic Church’s hegemony has its roots in legislation, direct influence on education in state schools, which have become “sites of cultural reproduction” (Borg, 2006, p.62) and indirect influence through various networks in civil society, including the media. Its presence is not just symbolic, but all-pervasive – indeed, Malta’s skyline is as much a skyline of spires as it is of satellite dishes and solar panels. As an

institution, the Church's networks and influence extend beyond its 359 churches to brass band clubs in every village, numerous social clubs and lay movements⁴⁴ and ownership of its own media outlets. Its influence on the government of the day is enshrined in the Maltese Constitution⁴⁵ and ten concordats signed between Church and State in the period between 1985 and 1995. Where political polarisation has generated divisions that are evocative of ethnic hostilities, the Roman Catholic Church often appears to be the "social glue" that binds people together (Baldacchino, 2002. pp.56-57). Goodwin (2002, p.76) observes that being Maltese is "virtually synonymous with being Roman Catholic". The intensity of day-to-day contact sustains a sense of 'common culture' that is reinforced by often emotionally charged rituals and ceremonies, such as the Maltese Catholic village *fešta*, that give the impression of a simple and integrated community sheltered from the outside world and impervious to its influences. Most marriages take place in church. Such hegemonic and homogenising discourse would tend to give the false impression that *all* Maltese are practising Roman Catholic.

Despite the historic run-ins between the PL and the Church, in practice Malta has operated as a quasi-theocracy or "confessional Christian state" (Grech, 2005, p.196) since independence. Following the mid-eighties fallout of the PL government with the Church, subsequent administrations have been careful to avoid getting into ideological disputes with the Curia. History has taught political parties that the Church is a power broker whose interests need to be accommodated. Calls for 'Christian moral values' are prevalent in political and public discourse, and it is habitual for the mainstream media to devote entire pages to contributions from the clergy or religious organisations.

The Church has for long recognised that education plays a critical role as a "hegemonic apparatus" (Mayo, 2012, p.96) that becomes institutionally-embedded within the integral state. The National Curriculum grants Catholicism a central location, based on an official perception that the Maltese state represents an entirely Catholic population, rather than a secular community with a potential for multiple ways of understanding

⁴⁴ See <http://maltadiocese.org/lang/en/institutions-movements>.

⁴⁵ Cap. 1, Article Two states that: (1) The religion of Malta is the Roman Catholic Apostolic Religion; (2) The authorities of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Church have the duty and the right to teach which principles are right and which are wrong; (3) Religious teaching of the Roman Catholic Apostolic Faith shall be provided in all State schools as part of compulsory education." Despite these provisions, article 32 (Chapter 4) of the Constitution still grants freedom on equal footing to all religions. The fundamental charter of human rights (with its freedoms of association and expression) is also entrenched in the same Constitution.

religious practice: the Catholic vision is de facto treated as the official state vision (Borg, 2006). Religion lessons in both state schools and private schools are based on Roman Catholic doctrine, and there is little attempt at teaching comparative religions. Catholic hegemony is also facilitated by the Church's direct involvement in the running of kindergarten, primary and secondary schools in Malta and Gozo⁴⁶. Schools that are under Church ownership are also provided with financial support by the state and highly prized by citizens: in the early 1980s, the Labour administration's dispute over Church school subsidies led to street protests.

The role of faith in the lives of the Maltese needs to be positioned within the social, economic, political and importantly historical contexts in which they arise, where the propagation, interpretation and dissemination of these messages is not necessarily benign or neutral. The Church's regulatory hegemony is supplanted by its domination of cultural life, where as a cultural force it has "a hold over society and polity" (Abela, 2004, p.83). The Church regularly describes itself as an institution that "closely accompanies Maltese families through their life journey" (Laiviera, 2011). Abela (1991) asserts that Malta is 'neo-traditional', incorporating a modernist orientation to economy and rationality, with Catholicism deployed as a traditional wedge both to embrace and resist a European identity. Mitchell's (2002) updated treatise of a nation that remains ambivalent towards Europe because of its trust in the 'traditional' system in which the Church continues to operate as an important social broker, continues to have resonance in popular culture.

As at the beginning of 2011, there was a striking anomaly in Maltese law. The Church's internal tribunal – answerable to canon law, and not to national legislation – had, since 1995, been empowered by a Church-state concordat to override its civil equivalent under certain circumstances. This effectively granted automatic recognition of Church tribunal decisions before the civil courts, making the tribunal part of the State's judicial apparatus when proceedings before these tribunals follow canon law. Although no regulation should ever take precedence over national legislation, since the majority of marriages in Malta are Church weddings, the concordat created a situation where the power to dissolve marriages rested almost exclusively in the hands of the Church.

⁴⁶ As at July 2012, the Church managed 30 kindergarten schools (23 in Malta and 7 in Gozo); 24 primary schools (20 in Malta and 4 in Gozo); and 42 secondary schools (20 in Malta and 22 in Gozo). See <http://maltadiocese.org/lang/en/church-schools/church-schools-in-maltaskejjel-tal-knisja-fmalta> for list.

6.1.3 Hegemony and the media

The mainstream media in Malta is the historic home of the clientelist, political system and a primary stomping ground for the operations of hegemony in civil society. Rather than the watchdog of democracy, it plays a crucial role in naturalising dominant forms of ‘common sense’ and bears all of the characteristics of the Mediterranean or polarised pluralist model in southern Europe: low-level newspaper circulation; a tradition of advocacy reporting; instrumentalisation of privately-owned media; politicisation of public broadcasting and broadcast regulation; and limited development of journalism as an autonomous profession (Hallin & Papathanassopoulos, 2002; Hallin & Mancini 2004). The media are also key, active participants in the “democratisation game” (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2007, p.xiii):

not seen as just passively expressing or reflecting social phenomena, or as sites where discourses merely circulate, but as specific machineries and ‘systems of dispersion’ (Foucault, 1984, pp.37–38) that produce, reproduce and transform social phenomena.

In the traditional media system such as that in the encoding / decoding model (Hall, 2003), the media shape the way we look at the world, with encoding happening during media production and decoding by the audience as media is consumed. The media in Malta is similarly associated with “the social space where power is decided” (Castells 2007, p.238), playing a critical role in public opinion brokerage. This excerpt entitled “Public Opinion” from Gramsci’s (2007) Prison Notebooks is particularly poignant in the polarised political landscape in Malta, where “public media” in its many forms has historically been the subject of political struggle:

Public opinion is the political content of the public’s political will which can be dissentient; therefore, there is a struggle for the monopoly of the organs of public opinion - newspapers, political parties, parliament - so that only one force would mould public opinion and, hence, the political will of the nation, while reducing the dissenters to individual and disconnected specks of dust (Gramsci, 2007, Q7, §83, p.213).

In principle, the monopolisation of the organs of public opinion should be difficult to execute in the modern liberal state where the freedom of the press is sacrosanct, as is the

right to establish new political parties. However, non-coercive means can still be employed to achieve a near monopoly of the organs of public opinion, with the *concentration of ownership* of the mass media a key component in such a scenario. The Maltese media has been fashioned in the traditional, one-way broadcast paradigm, with many of McQuail's (1995, p.86) mass media power attributes, including the capacity to:

attract and direct public attention; persuade in matters of opinion and belief; influence behaviour; define reality; confer status and legitimacy; inform quickly and extensively but also selectively.

These attributes are inevitably more available to those with political and economic power. Malta is no exception in that there is an acute awareness within the dominant classes that mass media shape public consciousness about topical and controversial issues (Hall et al. 1978). This awareness is intensified by the small size of the islands and the density of the population; economies of scale also dictate that the number of TV, radio and print media that can survive in a micro-market are limited. Power-law theories favour the long-standing traditional media incumbents, and represent a formidable barrier to aspiring new entrants. The ownership of a media outlet protects and potentially advances hegemony through the direct influence of symbolic representations embedded in society through language and culture.

Malta remains the only European democracy where political parties are allowed to own national radio and television stations, and use them as advocacy tools in support of political ideology. Indeed, the majority of media outlets belongs to or are controlled by one of the two major political groupings (Bugelli, 2005). As in other Mediterranean countries, the State's role in media enterprises in Malta is associated with interventionism – from direct ownership in commercial media to programme manipulation and outright partisan propaganda. In the 1980s, the state-owned broadcaster Xandir Malta (now Public Broadcasting Services or PBS) became the subject of numerous court cases and boycotts as the PN sought recourse to get media coverage of its events: the PN eventually started broadcasting from Sicily (Borg, 2009). Controversies about the impartiality or otherwise of PBS as a centralised information system continue to this day.

The central role of the State in Mediterranean media systems has limited media “watchdog” roles (Hallin & Mancini (2004, pp.120-121), while opening up the

possibility for other social actors to influence state policy *through* the media. Economic elites in Malta are deeply enmeshed in party politics and have a vested interest in monitoring state contracts, subsidies, waivers of regulations and so on. The proximity of business to political actors inevitably encourages economic elites to position themselves as political power brokers through the “subsidisation or even direct ownership of economically marginal media enterprises” (Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p.134). Media has a central role in the process of bargaining with political society, particularly due to the latter’s need to remain in the public consciousness. Media outlet owners can also use their media properties as vehicles for negotiation with other elites. In Malta, even in the case of independent media such as *The Times* and *Malta Today*, there are linkages between key stakeholders of the private media and either of the two main political parties. In a prevailing system of clientelism where ‘news’ is inevitably associated with politics, this leads to a heavy focus of local media on political life and the very real risk of instrumentalisation of both public and private news media.

As the primary broadcast media outlet and driver of family entertainment, TV is still considered as the most effective medium for sustaining ideology. In 1994, the launch of Labour-owned *Super One TV* (now *One TV*) was perceived to have contributed to the 1996 MLP election victory: the PN’s launch of *Net TV* in time for the 1998 elections was a direct reaction, despite concerns about the financial viability of the operations. *TVM* remains the station with the largest audience in Malta, as many independent local producers “prefer to be associated with the public service station than one of the political stations and [thereby] avoid the risk of alienating supporters of either party” (Borg, 2009, pp.24-25).

The direct ownership of media enterprises by hegemonic institutions and the influence of the government of the day on PBS have made advocacy journalism the mainstream; unashamedly subjective and partisan, it takes place in the local equivalent of what Curran (1991, p.29) coins “the radical democratic public sphere... a battleground between contending forces”. Political parties use their media as part of a public relations rather than social engagement strategy. Within partisan media, no dialogue with the intended audience is required since “the main objective is to put forward one particular view of the world – which may or may not be completely truthful” (Tench & Yeomans 2006, p.147, in Sciberras 2011, p.64). Partisan media typically encourage citizens to consent to status quo power structures, marginalising alternative voices and

opinions by reinforcing the values and ideas of powerful elites (Laughey, 2009). They reach out to the converted, but do little in engaging with the undecided and non-polarised segments of the electorate who may swing the balance of power in an election, reaffirming the institutionalised suspicion and marginalisation of citizens who are not visibly partisan (Sciberras, 2011). Both sets of partisan media slip easily into a dialectic, two-sided information stream with pro-government journalists constructing dominant, feel-good messages and opposition journalists positioned to uncover and expose the mistakes and scandals of “the others”. According to Eurobarometer (2012), the Maltese trust in the media is among the lowest in EU member states⁴⁷.

The incumbent clientelist system is vital in sustaining the hegemonic media. Although many Maltese journalists are trained in the Anglo-American paradigm, “information” is treated as a private resource and therefore unlikely be shared publicly, with an inevitable knock-on effect on the development of journalism as an institution and as a profession (Massa, 2000). Journalists have little option other than to be integrated into clientelist networks to access stories through links with the parties, the Church, the business sector and other patrons. This process only serves to reinforce the process of negotiation among hegemonic elites as opposed to mediating information for the benefit of the mass public. Journalists employed by party media systems are aware of the lack of professional ideology or editorial autonomy in working to promote the party agenda. The rewards for partisan journalists lie in social capital and the potential stepping-stone for future careers within public communications or PR: even those working for the Opposition frequently move on to work with independent production houses (Sammut, 2009).

Within the party-polarised media landscape, as the newspaper with the highest readership on the islands, the English-language *The Times*⁴⁸ wields significant influence and operates as a *de facto* hegemonic entity in its own right: its origins are in fact

⁴⁷ According to the Eurobarometer survey conducted in November 2011, the Maltese trust data for the mainstream media is as follows: Radio 36%; TV 41% and Press 30%. In terms of evolution over the previous 12 months, trust in the Maltese press fell most sharply when compared to other EU member states (by 6%, at par with Italy).

⁴⁸ The original names of the daily paper and its Sunday stable mate are the *Times of Malta* and *The Sunday Times of Malta*. In 1978, Dom Mintoff’s government decreed that no company, organisation or newspaper could use the word ‘Malta’ in its name, forcing the change of name.

political (Aquilina, 2010), having been first published on 7 August, 1935⁴⁹ by the now defunct Progressive Constitutional Party. Since independence, *The Times* has been associated with conservative world views, supportive of the Roman Catholic Church and sympathetic to business interests and the Europhile positions regularly taken up by the PN. The perceived power of its discourse, as a fierce critic of the MLP regime in the seventies, is exemplified by the arson attack on its printing press on 15 October, 1979, during an MLP political rally in Valletta, an incident now known as ‘Black Monday’.

Mitchell (2002, p. 24) describes *The Times* as “a curious publication, occupying a space somewhere between a serious tabloid and a scholarly journal”, a reputation based on the paper’s propensity for publishing academic articles alongside political features. The latter takes place not only in articles but also in the ‘letters to the editor’ section where replies to articles make it something of a forum for discussion of topical issues. Prior to the launch of the online version of the paper, *The Times*’ editors were tantamount to citizen information gatekeepers through the choices made on selection of readers’ letters for publication. Content on *The Times* is perceived to have an impact on universal discourse, and letters have traditionally been an important litmus test of public sentiment. Sammut (2007, p.112) claims that until recently, party-faithful were still “trained regularly in English letter-writing so they could be better equipped to write letters for potential publication in the independent papers”.

Although Malta is officially a bi-lingual country, the choice of Maltese or English language by a particular media organisation reflects the complexity of relations of hegemony within Maltese society. It is also indicative of the difficult relationship between dominant and subordinate languages in postcolonial paradigms, where the issue of language is perennially associated with cultural capital and citizenship (Ives, 2004; Mayo, 2005). It is beyond the scope of this study to tackle the thorny issue of language, but the following viewpoints are representative of the ongoing debate on English vs. Maltese in popular discourse, of which the media forms an essential part. In “The Maltese Language Question,” Hull (1991, p.363) disputes the notion of a bilingual country as opposed to one where “diglossia reigns”, with Maltese “despite its official position... perceived essentially as a dialect, i.e. a private language, a domestic and local

⁴⁹ The Times of Malta was turned into a non-party newspaper in 1944 and a national newspaper in 1947, “defending the principles of loyalty to God, Queen and country” (Aquilina, 2010, p.318).

idiosyncrasy socially subordinate to English”. Grixti (2006) believes that for many Maltese the deliberate choice of English as the only language of communication has become a means of distancing themselves from local insularity, and of aligning themselves with (and approaching some of the attributes of) the ‘outsider / foreigner. Borg and Mayo (2006) also interpret the use of English by the Maltese as an operative means of social differentiation that demarcates the hierarchal nature of Maltese society. The schooling system perpetuates such practices, with private schools teaching in English and state schools, for the most part, in Maltese.

Bugelli’s (2005) study⁵⁰ on the relationship between the English language print media and politics is interesting because of his association of the use of English with class, politics and ultimately the language of power in the Maltese print media. Bugelli (ibid., p.7) believes that English language print media is the media of choice for people with a higher level of education and therefore with “the ability to formulate opinions under their own steam independently of the established party lines”. He claims that the educated white collar class maintains its ties within the ranks of the PN while the less educated blue collar class is firmly ensconced within the Labour Party. It therefore becomes “a natural sequitur that English language publications would appeal more to the educated classes who traditionally vote for the PN” (ibid.).

Bugelli believes that the English language newspapers continue to exert significant influence on voting patterns, particularly those of the undecided or floating voter, operating as de facto power brokers in Maltese politics. Nevertheless, his treatise needs to be updated and challenged. The claim that the “educated classes” will continue to vote for the PN belies attempts by the new PL leader to reach out to organisations such as *The Times* and its editors, leveraging on his own past as a columnist for the newspaper. *The Sunday Times* now has columnists that are not allied to either the PN or the Church. One aspect that needs to be particularly challenged is the trust in a strong editorial gatekeeping role that is immune to bias and instrumentalisation. Bugelli (2005, p.16) explains that the political parties’ influence on the media is also exerted in terms of “acquisition of advertising space on a newspaper during an election campaign”. Friggieri, in a 2009 blog post on *Malta Today*’s online platform, is much more circumspect:

⁵⁰ Martin Bugelli is a former Director of Information with the Maltese Government. In May 2011, he was appointed EU Commission Head of Representation in Malta.

The independent Maltese columnist is, ultimately, a lonely figure. His arguments – largely drowned out by the triumphant orchestras of the Rainbow Parties – often sound like the rants of the desperate narrator in Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from Underground*. And I suspect that, just like the character in the novel, he often asks himself why he doesn’t just go with the flow.

In practice, journalists in the employ of Allied Newspapers (publisher of *The Times* and *The Sunday Times*), Media Today (*Malta Today* and *Illum*) and Standard Publications (*The Independent* and *The Sunday Independent*) only have “licensed autonomy” (Curran, 1990, p.70), since their independence has to be exercised in a form that conforms to the employing organisation’s requirements. Politicians are very much aware that they ‘make the news’ and treat the local media like a “billboard” for their personal agendas (Chircop, 2011). Personal letters from politicians to the editor are invariably published. Despite its conservative legacy, *The Times* ideology is influenced by the need to protect its commercial hegemony, particularly its advertising revenues. Like any other print organisation that is dependent on advertising, it is inevitable that commercial content is increasingly embedded in news texts. Although *The Times* still has the majority of the advertising share, it is involved in a fractious relationship with *Malta Today*, not just because of the latter’s unconventional and irreverent approach to traditional institutions (particularly the Church and increasingly the PN), but because of the way the paper has (according to *The Times*) unashamedly courted advertisers in return for column inches.

If print is in the business of political hegemony, TV is of great importance to the dominant classes because of its resilience as a source of popular entertainment. A new generation of set-ups and independent local production houses such as *Where’s Everybody* (‘WE’) have become TV production power houses through two long-running, current affairs programmes on PBS, *Xarabank* (Maltese bus) and *Bondi+*. Both programme presenters (and stakeholders in *WE*) have anti-PL credentials⁵¹. *Xarabank*, a talk-show, was launched on 4 April, 1997 during the short MLP administration between 1996-1998, and rapidly became the most-viewed programme on

⁵¹ Peppi Azzopardi, presenter of *Xarabank*, was the leader of an activist group (*Tan-Numri*) in the groundswell civic protests against the MLP during the eighties dispute over the funding of Church schools, and was a co-founder of AD. Lou Bondi served as PN campaign and communications strategist until 1997, and is a cousin of PN Minister Austin Gatt.

TVM through a mix of populist ‘edutainment’ and openly irreverent stance towards powerful organisations, causing unease within the PL because of its influence among its grassroots (Sammut, 2007). In Christmas of 2001, the PL started boycotting ‘*WE*’ productions on the basis of political bias and *WE*’s monopoly over locally-produced current affairs programmes. The boycott was tantamount to an admission by the PL that it no longer had a political platform on national TV. Despite the boycott (which was eventually dropped by the PL) and numerous allegations of pro-PN bias and run-ins with the Malta Broadcasting Authority, *Xarabank* and *Bondi+* remain the leading current affairs programmes on *TVM*. At face value, surviving a political boycott (with potentially devastating implications for advertising revenues) made *Xarabank* one of the first instances in Malta where “audience sovereignty empowered independent producers in defiance of the leading parties” (Sammut 2007, p.92). The corollary is that *WE* has won several government contracts in recent years, and leaves little room for other independent production houses to compete on PBS. *WE* operates as a quasi-hegemonic media institution in its own right (vulnerable to retribution in the event of a PL victory at the next elections) and PBS continues to be conditioned by partisan pressures and the influence of the government of the day, despite the presence of the Malta Broadcasting Authority (MBA). Hallin and Mancini’s (2004, p.131) warning about the perennial problem with Mediterranean-style media continues to resonate:

The sharpness of ideological divisions and the high stakes of political conflict [make] it difficult for the media system to become differentiated from politics; difficult for a professional culture and organization of journalism to develop across party lines, ...difficult for public broadcasting to be separated from party politics.

Nevertheless, the hegemony of the Maltese media, with its penchant for politicisation, is vulnerable to two distinct threats: economics and the Internet. The direct ownership of media outlets represents a significant ongoing economic investment (in infrastructure, newsrooms, content etc.) that neither political party can sustain indefinitely. Around 90% of Maltese citizens choose independent media in general and *The Times* in particular (both printed and offline) as their first choice of local news, rather than party-owned media: in practice, only as little as 12% of supporters of either party rely exclusively on party-owned media (TV, print or radio) for local news (Sciberras, 2010). Political media structures ultimately engender detachment, disenchantment and mistrust in the political system (Sammut, 2009). There are increasing doubts over whether the

partisan media are providing the parties with an adequate return on investment value for money. The two main parties (and to a limited extent, the Church with radio) are locked in a stalemate, fearing that withdrawal from one media would leave the ground open for ‘domination’ by their adversary – despite statistics pointing to the contrary. Party media continues to operate as an echo-chamber, a one-sided resistance to the hegemonic interests of the rival, re-affirming the polarised world views at the exclusion of all other meanings.

Local media has to compete with online sources such as the *BBC*, *CNN* and *Al Jazeera* for international news, with citizens increasingly mistrustful of local TV, print and radio reportage (Eurobarometer, 2012). There is little empirical data available to date on citizens’ trust in the online collateral deployed by the political parties and the Church. What is evident is that the parties and the Church tend to use online media with caution, as a cheap, parallel add-on to their core media collateral. The two official party portals (*Malta Right Now* for the PN, and *Maltastar* for the PL) and the Church portal (*MaltaDiocese.org*) operate as traditional broadcast channels, with little attempt at using the affordances of the media for two-way citizen engagement. Party videos on YouTube tend to be delivered as party political broadcasts and comments are disabled. In 2012, as the country prepared for a general election in early 2013, the new PN portal *mychoice.pn* promised engagement through a ‘Let’s Talk’ button, but required registration and submission of identity card details which are then validated against an internal database. The PL launched a site (*www.gonzi.pn*) dedicated to crowd-sourcing blog posts criticising the Government’s record. New media appears to have been embraced by both political parties, but the PN is visibly investing more resources into its new portal than the Opposition.

6.2 The hegemonisation of the hyperlocal online space

Malta's short Internet history is replete with attempts by organisations and institutions to occupy and dominate the online space. This is symptomatic of the institutional hegemony prevalent in a hyperlocal media system, where there is a cultural awareness that the emergence of new technologies and unmediated spaces represent a set of unstable equilibria that the hegemon needs to manage and supersede. The relationship between technology, communication, and power often reflect opposing values and interests, and engages a "plurality of social actors who may potentially be in conflict" (Castells, 2007, p.239). As a key component of civil society, the media is an arena occupied by a struggle for class domination expressed through material, ideological and cultural control (Hallin, 2000). While in a media representation system there is some room for alternative views and voices, hegemony will work to marginalise these alternative opinions by ultimately reinforcing the value and ideas of powerful elites (Laughey, 2009). An alternative media by its very existence will inevitably be associated with ideology, domination and a counter-hegemonic subcultural style:

whether on an explicitly political platform, or employing the kinds of indirect challenges through experimentation and transformation of existing roles, routines, emblems and signs (Atton, 2002, p.15).

Despite high tariffs, slow connections, disputes between Internet Services Providers (ISPs) and telecoms providers and a nascent regulatory structure, Malta embraced the Internet from the outset. In 1992, the University of Malta was granted the authority to manage the top-level country domain for Malta (.com.mt) and in 1995 ISPs were awarded licences to provide Internet services, upon subscription, in a competitive market. The Malta Internet eXchange (MIX) was in place by 1999 (MCA, 2002). Government appeared to limit its role to the development and provision of e-government services, to be delivered via its gov.mt portal and through partnerships between the Malta Information Technology Authority (MITA) and the private sector.

In December 1998, *Malta Media*, an audio-visual production house and aggregator of Internet content, was set up as Malta's first online news service. It positioned itself as a trusted source of local e-journalism and in 2000 associated itself with the nascent

blogosphere after taking over an online guide to Malta run by Grazio Falzon⁵², a Maltese expat in the US (subsequently re-branded as AboutMalta.com). As from 2004, starting with a blog written by Toni Sant, a *Malta Media* founder and then US-based Maltese academic, the company started to develop and host blogs on its own platform. *Malta Media*'s early influence as the only local online news agency was challenged in 2000 with the set up of *di-ve*, a portal owned by Maltacom, the telecoms company (now Go). *Di-ve* had access to significant seed funding, and engaged staff to develop online local news content and aggregate international online news: its overt strategy was to drive business to Maltacom's ISP, Terranet (subsequently Maltanet) and consolidate the telecom group's grip on Internet connectivity through its partial ownership of the submarine cable to Malta. Significantly, it deployed an online forum to encourage engagement with the nascent online community. The PL set up a site, *MaltaStar.com*, in November 2001, with the current PL leader Joseph Muscat as editor and the PN set up its portal *MaltaRightNow.com* in 2004. *Malta Media* managed to stay in business through banner advertising revenues and by syndicating some local content as a Vodafone Malta 'on-demand' SMS service (Debattista, 2011).

The first blog by a Malta-based blogger was probably 'Malta Girl', set up on 1 May, 2002 by Rebecca Buttigieg (Debattista, 2006). By 2005, blogging in Malta had a sustained following, driven by the interests of young, articulate professionals and graduates, following the trends observed by Hindman (2008) in his analysis of top A-List bloggers in the US, who were effectively higher on the social ladder than the 'elite' mainstream journalists whose power they were supposed to be challenging. Mifsud (2011) says that the blog represented unmediated space for "no-lands man" – the individual who is not allied to a political party system, mistrusts the Maltese media hegemony and often finds himself marginalised as a result. Some bloggers, such as Pierre Mejlak, Guze Stagno', Sharon Spiteri and Immanuel Mifsud, harboured literary aspirations and blogged both in Maltese and English, often sharing snippets of short stories in progress. The early blogosphere was also driven by the nascent Maltese diaspora in Luxembourg and Brussels, taking up positions within EU organisations. Jacques Rene Zammit (whose blog 'J'Accuse' has been active since 2005), Mark Vella, David Friggieri and Franklin Mamo (who blogged under the pseudonym 'Fausto Majistral' on 'Malta, 9 Thermidor') positioned themselves as filter and political

⁵² Grazio's Malta Virtwali, set up by a US academic of Maltese origin, is reputed to be the first Malta-related website.

bloggers, watchdogs of local media and society, writing pieces that were often critical of the socio-political state of the nation. The early Maltese blogosphere also had a social element, with offline meetings and dinners occasionally organised for active bloggers (Vella, 2011).

The first sustained attempts at online disruption were made by far right groups and their associates. In October 2001, *Malta Fly*, a Maltese-language satirical website was set up by Henry Abela and Kevin Attard Bonici, and gained nation-wide notoriety as a source of political parody. The site's irreverence towards national institutions and the EU, uncensored user forums and innovative use of online cartoons with audio were a catalyst for counter-culture. In 2002, coinciding with the arrival of unprecedented influxes of sub-Saharan irregular migrants, an online forum called *Viva Malta.org* became the fertile ground for promoting the activities of a small and highly diverse number of individuals, groups and political actors peddling far right ideas, with activity on the site reaching a peak in 2004 -2005. From 2004, the forum dove-tailed with *Imperium Europa.org*, the site for a far-right group led by Normal Lowell. The unmediated and anonymous spaces on *Viva Malta* and *Malta Fly* were often dominated by populist racist and anti-Semitic discourse. Lowell caricatured the typical Maltese as 'għan' – a simpleton hijacked by the two political parties ('lesbian prostitutes sharing the same bed') and the KKK' (the 'Knisja Kattolika Korrotta' or 'Corrupt Catholic Church') (Falzon and Micallef, 2008). In 2003, Vella Bonici defended *Malta Fly*'s decision to regularly showcase Lowell's material as an indication of the site's commitment to serve as an alternative media channel to the incumbent media hegemony, rather than any ideological endorsement of extremist right-wing ideologies (Malta Today, 2003).

In November 2006, the award of an e-journalism award to a *Malta Media* blogger at the Malta Journalism Awards was heralded as an indicator that blogs were starting to get noticed by mainstream media (Debattista, 2006), but this view was not universally endorsed. In 2006, the Malta Fly founders decided to take the site offline, disillusioned by the mediocrity of user comments on the site (Vella, 2011). Sandro Vella, who had been active within Malta Fly since its foundation, launched his own blog in 2006 in an attempt to keep Malta Fly's alternative media ethos in place, and to encourage other bloggers to find their voice against the mainstream. Vella also collaborated with *Malta Media* and in 2007 helped set up a section on that site called 'Blogosfera', pulling in

feeds from a set of Malta-related blogs not hosted on its platform, a move perceived by some bloggers to placate criticisms that the company was trying to ‘own’ the local blogosphere (Zammit, 2010f).

2008 was a watershed year for online engagement and blogging in Malta for several reasons: a) a general election on 8 March, 2008; b) citizens’ enthusiastic take-up of Facebook, the social network⁵³; c) the opening up of online news on the *Times of Malta* portal to user commentary; and d) the entry into the blogosphere on 2 March, 2008 of Daphne Caruana Galizia, a journalist with the *Malta Independent* and now Malta’s most followed blogger. Until 2008, blogging had operated away from the public eye, the exclusive domain of graduates, people with an interest in technology, young diarists and expats. One exception was ‘J’Accuse’⁵⁴ with socio-political posts that attracted a sizeable readership, prompting Zammit to opine that the site had “inadvertently become a forum for people from all walks of life, all forms of political belief and, sadly, all forms of political fanaticism” (Zammit, 2008b). In the run up to the election, the commenters on J’Accuse included Ms Caruana Galizia and Sandro Vella. On 21 February, 2008, Caruana Galizia commented on a J’Accuse post⁵⁵ that she had reported Mr Vella to the police for a comment he had placed about her earlier in the comment thread, and the story was picked up by *Malta Today*. Nevertheless, mainstream journalists made little reference to the local blogosphere with the exception of a *Times* article on 7 March, 2008, about the PN’s use of blogging and social networks during the general election campaign – albeit penned by the editor-in-chief at *Malta Media* (Debattista, 2008). The run-up to the 2008 elections was also characterised by the set up of online portals by both political parties, and the decision by *di-ve* not to cover political activities and statements as part of its day to day operations, allegedly after pressure from the Office of the Prime Minister, unhappy with *di-ve*’s favourable reporting of PL activities (Vella, 2008).

⁵³ As at 3 November, 2012, there were 215,340 active users or around 53% of Maltese citizens on the social network, placing Malta among the top 25 countries in terms of proportional take up (see <http://www.socialbakers.com/facebook-statistics/malta>).

⁵⁴ All references to Mr. Zammit’s blog posts appear as “Zammit”, as opposed to “J’Accuse.”

⁵⁵ Vella’s comment on the blog post portrayed Ms Caruana Galizia in the afterlife, after having been supposedly killed in a bomb attack. Original post at: <http://jaccuse.wordpress.com/2008/02/22/wheres-everybody/>

Although *The Times* first went online in 2000, the site was limited to publishing selected articles from the daily print edition, with ‘breaking news’ stories delayed until the print version was published. Financial rather than ideological considerations were at play, including the protection of print sales and hopes for paid subscriptions for a full electronic version of the paper (Scicluna, 2010). As from January 2008, *The Times*’ new-look portal published the majority of news items online, and opened news posts to user comments with minimal monitoring, bringing the potential of the read/write web to mainstream attention. In one swoop, Malta’s long tradition of citizens writing letters to newspaper editors (to voice opinions on political and socio-economic issues) and using ‘phone-ins’ on the radio, found a repository in a virtual *piazza* of citizen commenters⁵⁶ – a veritable hyperlocal online public sphere. In the process, *The Times* reinforced its reputation as a trusted intermediary and media brand; attracted free, SEO-friendly user-generated content; and boosted its print revenues with incremental revenues from online banner advertising. Unlike other countries, where mainstream print media was being challenged by new online entrants, in Malta the print incumbent migrated its economic and social influence seamlessly online, leaving little space for the entry of new media intermediaries⁵⁷.

To further dent *Malta Media*’s hold on the blogosphere, in 2008 *the Times* also introduced a ‘blogs’ section on its masthead. As opposed to providing a space for more reflective or personal articles from its journalists, the blogs were online spaces for the opinions of prominent members of Maltese civil society, including academics, lawyers and clerics, reflecting the editorial bent of the paper. The blogs frame on newspaper portals may be interpreted as both an endorsement of the Malta blogosphere, and that the blogs on display represent ‘the best’ of what is available. In practice, the ‘blogs’ on *The Times*’ portal, with the exception of Alison Bezzina, a spokesperson for gay issues, represent mainstream, conservative voices in line with the editorial direction of the paper.

⁵⁶ This study uses the term “commenter” to as opposed to “commentator” to describe people who comment online on blog posts and the online collateral of mainstream media. “Commentator” is a term that is more readily associated with the qualification to write intelligently about a particular topic, approaching it and analyzing it in terms of a body of knowledge (Maddox, 2010).

⁵⁷ *Malta Today* launched its online news portal on 14 June 2010. Although it claims to be the most read Internet news portal service after *The Times* (Malta Today, 2011), its online advertising revenues are reportedly a fraction of those enjoyed by the *Times* (Scicluna, 2010).

The Times' hegemony of the media in Malta extends to a long-standing network of advertising agencies that have continued to place trust in its online collateral in the same way the newspaper continues to be the preferred advertising outlet in Malta. According to Saeed (2009), the regression of mainstream media from watchdogs of democracies to online business ventures leads to a Habermasian feudalisation of the public sphere. And yet, by accommodating disparate and discordant voices on its online platform through user comments, *The Times* can claim to have countered Enzensberger's (2000) critique on the absence of reciprocity in mass media, serving the function of a Habermasian public sphere without intentionally being one (Poster, 2006). Reader comments may be occasionally disruptive in having racist and anti-institutional overtones and potentially dilute the brand's existing editorial, gate-keeping hegemonies and historic alliances with the Church and the PN; but they also provide 'eyeballs on the website' that are being monetised. *The Times'* economic hegemony of the online market, whereby competitors have been neutralised and new entrants blocked from gaining access to online advertising revenues while the site appears to be increasingly 'open' to views against its editorial grain and 'blog-like' in design is a successful attempt at what Dean (2010, p.4) coins communicative capitalism, that is "that economic-ideological form wherein reflexivity captures creativity and resistance so as to enrich the few as it placates and diverts the many".

The Times' provision of a space for online citizen discourse appears to be driven by capitalist gains rather than an interest in the invigoration of the local community or the public sphere. Jönsson and Örnebring (2011, p.127) refer to similar practices whereby user-generated online content (UGC) is harnessed by mainstream media for profit as "a political economy of UGC", with users mostly empowered to create "popular, culture-oriented and personal/everyday life-oriented content rather than news/informational content". Rather than reflecting direct user involvement in the news production, or the democratisation of the media through a participatory system, online citizen commentary may actually be another form of produsage, an activity Fuchs' (2011, p.287) equates to the further commodification of human creativity:

the outsourcing of productive labour to users who work completely for free and help maximize the rate of exploitation [such]that profits can be raised and new media capital may be accumulated.

While *The Times* continues to dominate online attention in the hyperlocal, very few of the early Maltese blogs are still active at the date of conducting this study⁵⁸. Mifsud (2011) attributes this to the relentless commitment to content development; and doubts about the actual existence of a readership. Vella (2011) says that his decision to take his blog offline in 2009 was directly related to the manner in which blogging had been denigrated by the combination of *The Times*' pseudo-association with the blogosphere ("blogging under a media masthead"); and the instant, national popularity of Ms Caruana Galizia's blog, which Vella claims turned blogging into "mediocre, populist, national entertainment and relentless political campaigning".

6.3 Online rumblings against the hegemony

In 2009 and 2010, a set of isolated incidents were observed that indicate how online discourse was being actively monitored by the State. They brought issues of freedom of speech, online privacy and censorship to mainstream attention, and raised awareness of how the Press Act⁵⁹, enacted to regulate print journalism and broadcasting, could still be used to suppress the publication of alternative discourse on online media. With the benefit of hindsight, these incidents may represent the first online rumblings of dissent that were to crystallise from mid-2010 onwards, as the divorce crisis started to unravel.

On 6 November, 2009, the eighth edition of *Ir-Realta'*, an analytical and critical newspaper distributed for free at higher education campuses, was banned from distribution by the University Rector and the 22-year-old editor reported to the police for the inclusion of a controversial, explicit, short story *Li Tkisser Sewwi*. *Ir-Realta'* promptly published the edition on its blog, leading to a spate of links from blogs and social networks, including Caruana Galizia (2009b) who published the entire text of the story in a blog post on 7 November, 2009. The police proceeded with prosecuting the editor and writer for breaking Article 7 of the Press Act, which states that those who publish material which injures public morals or decency are liable to face imprisonment or a fine, or both. No action was taken against Caruana Galizia or other bloggers who chose to publish or link to online versions of the story. Both defendants were acquitted

⁵⁸ Appendix 6 includes a list of active Maltese blogs at the time of this study.

⁵⁹ The Press Act (Chapter 248) of 1974 has been amended by Acts: LVIII and LIX of 1974; Legal Notice 148 of 1975; Acts: XII and XVII of 1978, XIII of 1983, VIII of 1990, XII of 1991, X of 1996 and XV of 2000.

on 14 March, 2011, prompting an appeal on 30 March, 2011 from Attorney General Peter Grech. The state's zeal in pursuing this particular case is revealed in the 32-page appeal, particularly in the following text:

The author must realise there are others living with him, whose ideas, preferences and tastes are unlike his; a society that must be protected, and its morality preserved. And there's God above everything and above everyone, and God is certainly bigger than the biggest of egos of even more famous writers (Vella, 2011).

On 20 May, 2010, Karl Farrugia, 24, was given a one-year suspended jail sentence and fined 500 Euros for a comment on 7 April, 2010 on a Facebook group called "No to the Pope Benedict XVI in Malta". Mr Farrugia had written that the Pope should be shot in his hands, cheeks and side to imitate Christ's wounds. When charged under the Press Act with incitement, Mr Farrugia's defence argued that the comment was a bad joke in a closed online group and that the charge was outside the jurisdiction of the Press Act since Facebook was registered in the US and the offending comment had been published in the US. In giving his ruling, the magistrate reconfirmed that the provisions of the Press Act extended to all forms of electronic communication, and that publishing on the Internet did not grant Maltese citizens immunity from local legislation. Within 24 hours of the ruling, a new Facebook group was created to help Mr Farrugia pay his fine, and on 27 May, 2010, Mr Farrugia posted a message on the Facebook group wall to advise that the amount of the fine had been collected and exceeded, and that anything donated over 500 Euros would be donated to charity.

These two cases highlight an increased militancy by the state in pursuing and prosecuting online instances of disruption with moral or religious overtones, prompting views that the choice of targets was selective, and instigated by the Church (Falzon, in Massa, 2010)⁶⁰. Although the Press Act (Cap.246: 6) identifies offences related to

⁶⁰ The Nadur carnival on Malta's smaller sister-island Gozo has a history of revellers dressing up as priests or nuns. At the end of the 2009 edition, Malta's Archbishops issued a statement about the need to 'recognise and respect religious and civil rights'. Malta's laws prohibit people from wearing 'any ecclesiastical habits or vestments' without permission as this constitutes 'offending public order'; the use of words or gestures that vilify the Roman Catholic Church are similarly prohibited. Soon after the bishops' statement, a 26-year-old was given a one month jail term suspended for 18 months after he pleaded guilty to dressing up as Jesus Christ during the carnival. Six people who dressed as nuns were acquitted after the court found the simple fact of dressing up as a nun, even if at carnival time, did not, on its own, amount to vilification. In March 2009, a Facebook group entitled 'Friends of Jesus: Nadur 2010' was set up to organise a "peaceful protest against a modern-day inquisition". The group hoped to encourage hundreds of people to dress up as Jesus in the 2010 carnival to overwhelm any fear of retribution "by numbers". By February 2010, it had 640 members. Before the 2010 carnival, the Nadur local council and police asked to vet the lyrics of rock bands playing at the carnival 'to eliminate

‘race, creed and colour’ on a par with those of ‘creed’, racist discourse continues to be rampant in the comments section of *Times of Malta.com*, without either the individual writer or the paper being censored. The Church, however, appeared to be concerned about the way it was being reported in the mainstream media. On 21 May, 2010, at a reception to mark World Communications Day, Archbishop Paul Cremona told journalists they should keep the reporting of facts separate from their interpretation of the events and ensure that speeches were reported faithfully to reflect their message without taking words out of context. He also encouraged priests to familiarise themselves with the modern media to be able to better fulfil their mission of evangelisation (Calleja, 2010).

In 2009, politically-oriented discourse on the blogosphere appeared to be treated with ambivalence by the political institutions, despite the best efforts of Zammit to promote his blog through a weekly feature on *The Independent*: only a handful of politicians chose to have a blog, and those who did only blogged sporadically. At the start of 2010, a blog post brought to mainstream attention the issue of permissible discourse online. On 30 January, 2010, Caruana Galizia (2010b) used her blog to attack a female magistrate, Consuelo Scerri Herrera⁶¹, alleging that the latter’s affair with a young PN politician represented irresponsible behaviour for a person in public office. Caruana Galizia made extensive use of photographs of the magistrate, the politician and their friends which she lifted from Facebook as part of a number of allegations about the magistrate’s lifestyle and the couple’s dubious associations. The mainstream media appeared reluctant to report the story, so most media debate took place in comments on the blog and reportage on other blogs: traffic on Caruana Galizia’s blog grew exponentially as a result. On 6 February, 2010, Caruana Galizia was summoned to the Police HQ for interrogation and on 2 March, 2010 she pleaded not guilty to defaming and harassing the magistrate in a number of blog posts. The case was eventually abandoned on 23 November, 2011, when Magistrate Scerri Herrera filed an application in court withdrawing her criminal libel and defamation proceedings against Ms Caruana Galizia – who promptly blogged her version of why the Magistrate had chosen to abandon the case. One concrete consequence of the case is that on 15 February, 2010,

offensive or vulgar language’. The online backlash from bloggers and media pundits forced the police to swiftly issue a statement retracting their request. The carnival was held with a heavy police presence and the mainstream media reported that the event was ‘muted’. The 640 ‘friends of Jesus’ did not materialise.

⁶¹ Magistrate Scerri Herrera is the sister of the shadow Minister of Justice.

the Commission for the Administration of Justice ruled that that membership of social networking sites on the Internet is incompatible with judicial office (Macdonald, 2010). Unofficially, Caruana Galizia had made the term ‘blog’ a household name, and ‘blogging’ associated with her particular penchant for outspoken, opinionated and politically-militant blog posts, as well as an ongoing dialectic with an online forum of admirers and opponents. It is a label that remains associated with blogging till this date: for many in Malta, blogging is ‘Daphne’.

6.4 Conclusion

In Malta’s postcolonial bounded society, political and ecclesiastical hegemony continues to thrive in the traditional system built on political polarisation, citizens’ respect of authority and trust in clientelism. The media struggles to fulfil its role as the Fourth Estate because of issues of outright political ownership, or because of the pressures of communicative capitalism. The fledgling blogosphere has not been immune to the pressures of offline hegemony, with *The Times* securing a dominant position in determining online discourse, and many of the pioneer bloggers seemingly silenced. Nevertheless, as the mainstream media explored the potential of user-generated content on their portals, an element of counter-hegemonic discourse was starting to infiltrate the blogosphere, reflecting a mass take up of social media. By the start of this study, it was clear that the State was monitoring alternative discourse on blogs and social media, and prepared to take selective action against individuals perpetuating anti-ecclesiastical discourse.

The next chapter is the first of two analysis chapters, focusing on how Maltese bloggers operated as counter-hegemonic social actors as the divorce crisis unravelled from 2010 onwards.

Chapter 7. Blogging as disruption of the hyperlocal

7.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses how blogging was deployed by some Maltese citizens as a tool with which to challenge institutional hegemony in Malta. It approaches the notion of counter-hegemonic blogging cautiously, mindful of Fiske (1994, p.137) who observes that “power is social, not just technological, and [that] it is through institutional and economic control that technology is directed”. The first section identifies the strategic positioning of the media at the beginning of the divorce crisis, and assesses the credentials of Maltese bloggers to operate as organic intellectuals. It then provides six answers to the research question, which are presented as counter-hegemonic blogging strategies as observed by studying online texts during an intense period of discursive activity as the divorce referendum crisis unravelled in Malta. In the process, a set of key socio-economic, cultural and political themes emerge, exposing the workings of institutional hegemony in Maltese civil society when it is challenged by citizen online discourse.

7.1.1 The divorce issue: strategic positioning

In 2010, Malta was one of one two countries worldwide without divorce legislation. On 6 July, 2010, Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando, a PN back-bencher, proposed a private member’s bill for divorce, based on Irish legislation – a move that caught both political parties by surprise and triggered a socio-political crisis. In an interview with *Deutsche Welle*, Mr Pullicino Orlando later said he did not consult any politician before tabling the bill in order to send a clear signal that his motivation was to highlight citizen rights. Nevertheless, he was aware that any attempt at tampering with marriage regulation in Malta was likely to involve resistance from the Church. In April 2011, former Prime Minister Dr Alfred Sant blogged about a meeting “in late 1996/early 1997” with Vatican Secretary of State Angelo Sorano which he says gave him an insight into the Church’s vested interest in marriage regulation in Malta:

To my surprise, Cardinal Sorano was mainly interested to learn whether the then Labour government wanted to bring any changes to the local marriage law, which had been amended

some years previously to ensure that for marriages celebrated in Church, only Church annulments would be possible. This confirmed my view that the salience of marriage and how it is regulated in Malta, is due to its importance as a tool of social control.

The amendment to which Sorano refers is the 1995 Concordat between Malta and the Vatican which gave the Ecclesiastical Tribunal supremacy over the civil courts of justice in marriage annulments. In a blog post, journalist Raphael Vassallo (2011) observed how the Concordat together with Article 2 of the Constitution had worked itself into popular culture as the Church's "unbeatable trump card", luring citizens into believing that "anything that goes against the Roman Catholic Religion is unconstitutional, and therefore automatically illegal".

What distinguished the divorce issue from previous national crises was the uncertainty over the positioning of the political power blocs (and their media), the independent mainstream media and the blogosphere on the issue. At the outset, divorce did not appear to be an issue that could be addressed on traditional, polarised political lines. In practice, the issue became a national crisis because of the reluctance of the two political parties to hold a parliamentary debate of the proposed bill. While the PL was in favour of a 'free vote' in parliament, the PN, led by Prime Minister Gonzi, a former head of the Catholic Youth League, said it did not have the mandate to discuss the bill, and that any decision on divorce legislation would have to be taken by the electorate – possibly via a referendum. Between July 2010 and February 2011, a number of attempts were made to find a solution in Parliament, including the introduction of a revised bill, now co-sponsored by a Labour MP, Evarist Bartolo⁶²; the launch of a pro-divorce movement ('Iva' or 'Yes') with politicians from all three political parties, chaired by family lawyer Deborah Schembri; and an anti-divorce movement ('Le' or 'No') headed by financial services lawyer André Camilleri. On 16 March, 2011, at the end of a three-week parliamentary debate, 28 May, 2011 was set as the date for a national referendum on the introduction of divorce legislation (see Appendix 8 for a timeline of key milestones in the divorce issue). The population was asked to vote 'yes' or 'no' to the following question:

⁶² Mr Bartolo is a former minister of Education and a lecturer in Communications at the University of Malta. At the time of the referendum, he was also head of One News, the PL's TV station.

Do you agree with having the option of divorce for married couples who have been separated for four years when there is no reasonable hope for reconciliation, and when adequate maintenance is guaranteed and the children are cared for?

Although it only took a formal stand against divorce on 9 February 2011, the PN had long-mobilised its proprietary TV, print and radio media to position the party as one promoting family values, and therefore supportive of the ‘No’ campaign. The PL refused to take a formal position on the divorce issue, although it allowed its MPs to take a private vote: this was widely interpreted as an attempt not to appear to be hostile to the Church. In the weeks leading to the vote, Dr Joseph Muscat, the PL leader declared he would vote in favour of divorce legislation. AD remained consistent in its pro-divorce position, with its leader Michael Briguglio playing an active role in the ‘Yes’ campaign.

At the outset, the divorce issue therefore pitched the ‘Yes’ movement against the hegemonic alliance of the PN, the Church, the ‘No’ movement (primarily comprising lawyers and businessmen with known PN-allegiances) and their various direct or indirect interests in print and broadcast media. The influential *The Times* remained non-committal about the issue – but was expected to be anti-divorce because of its conservative legacy: one of its directors, Dr Austin Bencini, was a member of the ‘No’ movement; one of the ‘bloggers’ on its masthead is Fr. Joe Borg, a University communications studies lecturer, founder of the Church’s *RTK* radio station, former chairman of the PBS editorial board and advisor to the Minister of Culture. *Malta Today* adopted a pro-divorce editorial position.

The positioning was unusual for two main reasons: firstly, unlike the EU referendum, the struggle was not pitched along traditional polarised, political fronts. The involvement of the Church as a strong and vociferous anti-divorce petitioner, with its networks and influence in both political parties, may have forced the PN into taking the Church’s side despite doubts from PN media pundits, and the PL into a ‘neutral’ position which rankled with its leader’s pro-divorce view. This blurred the traditional ‘representative’ roles and weakened the immediate range of the politician’s influence, ostensibly opening a rare opportunity for non-partisan debate. Secondly, in mobilising its campaign, the ‘No’ movement decided to focus on top-down, mainstream broadcasting media – PBS, the PN and Church TV, radio and print and online collateral,

and billboards - visibly ignoring cyberspace. It is likely that the movement decided that the blogosphere and social networks were unlikely to be influential in the campaign. By default, blogs and Facebook became the exclusive domain of the ‘Yes’ movement and its supporters. This may simply have been the consequence of a lack of campaign funds, rather than a conscious campaign strategy by the ‘Yes’ movement: the ‘No’ movement benefited from an injection of cash from the Church, lay religious movements and private donors.

Figure 7 summarises the positioning of the institutional power blocs and the various media⁶³ at the start of active campaigning.

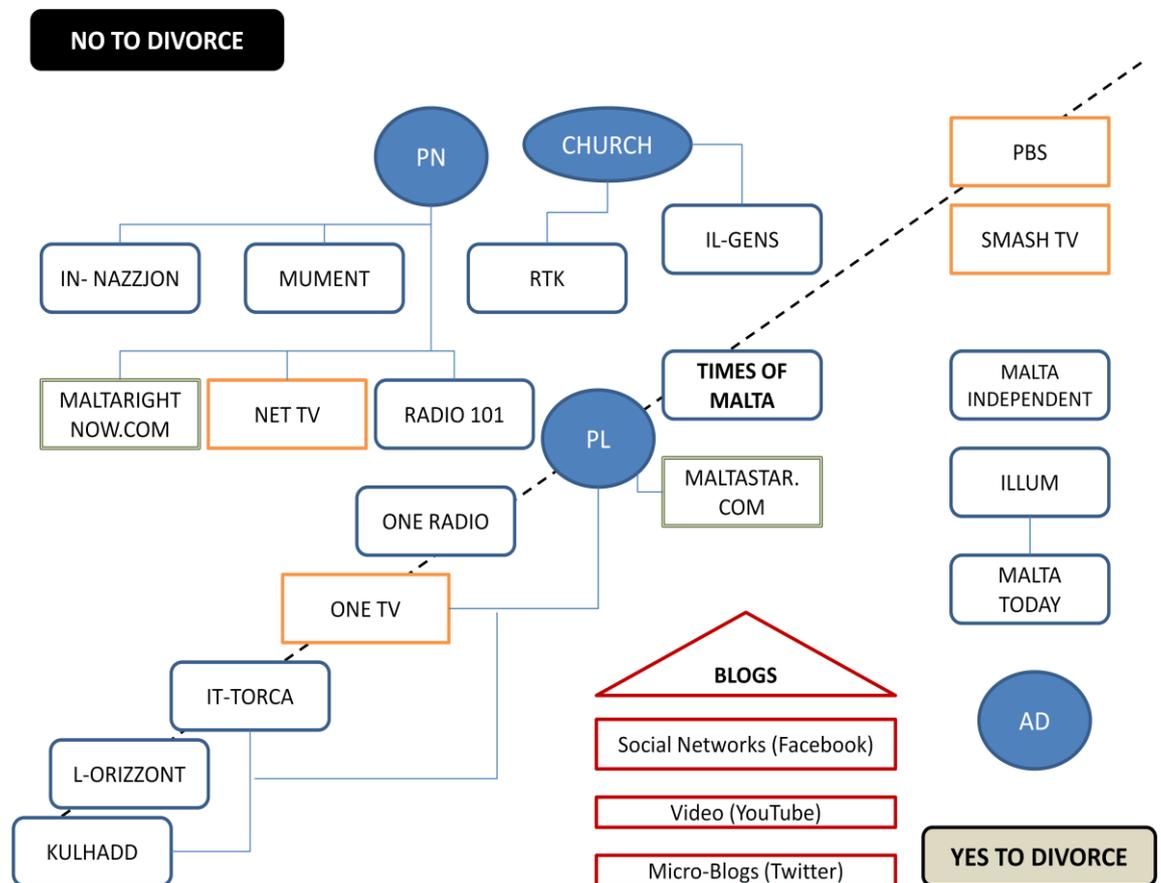


Figure 7: Strategic Positioning of Institutions, Mainstream & Alternative Media on Divorce issue

By the start of 2011, it was apparent that the divorce issue was a threat to the credibility of the historic bloc, not least because of the unexpected opportunity for the inculcation of an alternative ideology. The period during which the crisis unravelled – from the

⁶³ Appendix 5 lists the media outlets in Malta.

deposit of the private member's bill to the playing out of the campaigns and referendum and their aftermath - represented a magnifying glass through which to observe: a) the operations of hegemonic institutions and their alliances in a unique hyperlocal context; b) the mediation of truths and meanings through the practices of hegemonic and alternative media, since these practices are inevitably rendered visible in an exaggerated manner during a crisis; and c) the struggle for the reaffirmation or renegotiation of 'popular culture'. If the 'national popular' until 2011 was represented as "Malta cattolicissima" (Pirota, 2009) founded on the homogeneity of Roman Catholic doctrine, the divorce referendum opened up the possibility of radical alternatives. As a textual practice, blogging both reflects and attempts to change popular culture, since the latter is also "what men and women make from their active consumption of the texts and practices of the culture industries" (Storey 2008, p.81). Deployed in an unexpected struggle against the discourse of a dominant culture, blogging starts to take the shape of a war of position at a given historical moment - the popular being "the point at which power relations are negotiated and contested rather than predetermined in advance" (Procter 2004, p.33).

7.1.2 Bloggers for divorce: the new organic intellectuals?

The Maltese blogosphere is small, disparate, and primarily composed of personal diarists. The term 'blogosphere' is being used as a collective rather than as a community of bloggers, although Sandro Vella (in Buttigieg, 2008) clearly believed a community existed in 2008:

We bloggers form an inclusive party. Let us extend this our family. It shall not be a new beginning or even wind of change but we shall continue to build upon that which we have built. If you open a blog you may find peace of mind that nobody will give you a transfer. With blogs everything is possible.

Vella's hyperbole is interdiscursive and politically-loaded: from the reference to 'winds of change', a PL electoral slogan in 2008 to 'a transfer', a throwback to a widespread tactic of the socialist governments in the seventies and eighties when public sector workers with known PN-sympathies were frequently transferred to menial jobs, including the sister island of Gozo. Vella saw the blog as a tool of personal empowerment and the blogosphere as a haven of sorts, free from the polarisation of Maltese politics and the fear of the political "other". Yet, quoted in the same blog post,

Caruana Galizia (in Buttigieg, 2008), who had just started her own blog, had a different opinion on kinship:

Is there a blogging community? That comes as a surprise. I know there are many people who blog, but that is about the only thing we have in common.

Bloggers who operate in a disruptive mode are often anti-community in the way they behave online: what matters is not so much belonging to a community as grabbing attention and having the freedom to switch from one group to another (O’Neil, 2009). If we are to build on the notion of networked individualism, disruptive blogging in Malta has more in common in performing to an unknown audience than getting to know the audience. Nevertheless, there are some distinctive collective characteristics among citizens whose blogging was considered to be ‘disruptive’ within the context of this study:

a) Social capital. Bloggers in Malta share the traits of bloggers in other countries in that the acquisition, maximisation and retention of stocks of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital appears to be an important motivation for people to operate as citizen journalists or watchdogs of hegemony (Ferlander, 2003; Vaezi et al., 2011). According to Wellman et al. (2002), when people have a strong sense of community and sense of belonging they will mobilise their social capital more willingly and effectively. Given the size of the offline community in Malta, the correlation between blogging and the blogger’s social capital issues may be even more accentuated, in that blogging supports the individual’s desire to participate in online social networks as a means of personal branding and securing social support and community trust. In Malta, the disruptive potential of blogging relies, to a great extent, not just on the blogger’s technical, online networking and copywriting skills, but also on existing stocks of offline social capital. Power and authority online in Malta does not start from a level playing-field any more than the blog’s hypertext capabilities afford a structural way out of offline institutional hegemony. More than the quantum of traffic, inbound links and comments, disruptive success is likely to be measured in terms of who is doing the writing, what is being written, and who may be reading. Maltese bloggers are more likely to be known to power brokers and recognised in the offline world than if they formed part of larger communities. Power-law theories developed for large-scale engagement have limited applicability for a scalable model of blogging in a community

of over 400,000 people. There are few elite or A-List bloggers in Malta, with the exception of Caruana Galizia, who can claim this status and visibly operate as an intermediary or broker between the blogosphere and the political and media spheres.

The majority of Maltese bloggers are middle-class graduates whose social capital may be related to class, but also to political affiliations. Caruana Galizia is frequently accused by PL followers of operating as a mouth-piece for the PN, with alleged privileged access to government information. Jacques René Zammit is a lawyer in the European Parliament in Luxembourg, and benefits from both critical distance and immunity from retribution in Malta if he antagonises power blocs. Caroline Muscat is a former Greenpeace activist and *Times* journalist. Where political society is dominated by professionals such as lawyers, architects and doctors, blogging is another opportunity to write oneself into the public conscience - to broadcast and raise one's agenda above the barricade. If content may be used on multiple platforms to extend audience reach, so much the better (see (d)).

b) Media affiliations. Many of the bloggers engaged in some form of counter-hegemonic writing have had some previous experience or affiliation with mainstream media organisations. Moreover, some bloggers choose to feature selected posts on the portals of *The Times*, *The Independent* and *Malta Today*⁶⁴ while others exclusively post on the 'blogging' space provided by the media portal. These contributors are not paid for their work, with the exception of Caruana Galizia⁶⁵. The Maltese culture of blogging's close collaboration with mainstream media outlets raises questions about the motivation of bloggers. Zammit (2011n) attributes the practice to "ego" and the opportunity to market one's blog to a mainstream readership. The exchange system between blogger and media outlet may also be understood as an example of the gift economy: the blogger provides the mainstream media outlet with free content in exchange for an inbound link to the blog from the newspaper and / or the newspaper's portal. Bloggers engaged in such exchanges claim that their content is published on mainstream collateral with no mediation from the paper's editor. The practice is also indicative of the perennial reverence of the alternative media to the brand-pull and

⁶⁴ Appendix 7 includes details of bloggers with past or present media affiliations.

⁶⁵ *The Times* features four bloggers on its online masthead – two of whom (Fr Borg and Dr Borg Cardona, a lawyer) are also weekly columnists and known PN sympathisers. *Malta Today* has a set of 10 bloggers, composed of the editor, four politicians, two academics and three former Times of Malta journalists.

legacy of the mainstream: an article published in a Sunday paper or a media portal results in an immediate spike in blog traffic and increased stocks of social capital. In a society in which many citizens have part-time jobs to supplement their regular earnings and where the freemium model has yet to be seen to provide any sustainable financial returns for any local blog, working for no money for a third party must translate into some other form of return.

c) Propensity for produsage. Although bloggers are often critical of the mainstream media, they are still dependent on the news it produces as source material for their blogs. With the possible exception of Caruana Galizia, the majority of bloggers are not in the business of breaking news or investigative journalism. At best, they engage in content filtering and ‘produsage’ - the collaborative and continuous building and extending of existing content in pursuit of further improvement (Bruns, 2007). In a blog post on 4 January, 2012, Biwwa, the pseudonym for a prolific blogger, says that he is not in the business of writing the news on his blog, only his views upon the news. The mainstream media lead with the story while the blogger reflects, reacts, comments, links and occasionally remixes. The fact that commenters on *The Times* also refer to themselves as ‘bloggers’ is as much a source of amusement as irritation to bloggers (Hamilton, 2010); it is also indicative of the asynchronous / secondary source / reactive mode associated with the blogosphere.

d) Digital literacy skills. Essay-type blogging means that Maltese bloggers need to possess digital literacy skills. Van Deursen & van Dijk (2011, pp.895-6) associate digital literacy with the incorporation of four Internet skills sets: (i) operational; (ii) formal; (iii) information; and (iv) strategic⁶⁶. Blogging involves the operational and formal skills in engaging with the medium as well as the information and strategic skills associated with content development. Maltese bloggers’ close affinity to Facebook and YouTube and an interest in the remix web also requires transliteracy skills (Thomas et al, 2007). Bloggers with an interest in cultural disruption tend to be operators in what Jenkins (2006) coins ‘convergence culture’, weaving personal mythologies from

⁶⁶ Operational internet skills are derived from concepts that indicate a set of basic skills in using internet technology. Formal Internet skills relate to the hypermedia structure of the internet which requires the skills of navigation and orientation. Information Internet skills are derived from studies that adopt a staged approach in explaining the actions via which users try to fulfil their information needs. Strategic Internet skills are the capacity to use the Internet as a means of reaching particular goals and for the general goal of improving one’s position in society. The emphasis lies on the procedure through which decision-makers can reach an optimal solution as efficiently as possible.

fragments of information extracted from the ongoing flow of media; this is in turn transformed into resources through which they make sense of their everyday lives.

If we wish to update Gramsci's thinking to contemporary organic intellectuals, we need to look at practitioners with specialist knowledge - activist-intellectuals and knowledge managers, equally adept at offline protest as with online counterculture. Within this study, rather than someone who writes about blogging, the organic intellectual needs to be defined as someone who actually blogs, understands the technologies and engages online with a community. As Hall (1996, p.268) says:

it is the job of the organic intellectual to know *more* than the traditional intellectuals do: really know, not just pretend to know.. to know deeply and profoundly.

For Bourdieu, the most productive intellectuals in a modern society, those likely to generate new areas of production, are the lower middle class or new petite bourgeoisie. As social agents in a social sphere, they provide bridges between the culture of the popular classes and the 'high' culture of the upper classes, and between work and leisure. They thrive "in all the occupations involving presentation and representation.. and in all the institutions providing symbolic goods and services" (Bourdieu, 1984, p.359). Consumption and engagement are as much part of organic intellectuals' role in modern society as knowledge of the categories that make the social world possible and the struggle for the "representation of the social world" (Bourdieu, 1985, p.723) – where representation ultimately becomes part of the political struggle for hegemony. The challenge of organic intellectuals is to "manage a balance between populist and change projects, in the knowledge that they too will be reshaped by having to couch their appeal in popular terms" (Jones, 2006, pp.86-87).

Maltese bloggers' education and social status indicate that they represent an intellectual class. However, if we are to position bloggers as social actors in counter-hegemonic practices, then we should determine also if this authority extends beyond their immediate range of influence and consider if they are indeed operating as the modern day equivalent of organic intellectuals within Maltese civil society. We need to look beyond the technical knowledge, eloquence, profession and intellect which are core components of the blogger's toolkit and look for what Gramsci (1971, p.10) describes as an active participant in practical life, a constructor and organiser, a "permanent

persuader and not just a simple orator". Organic intellectuals are catalysts for social change, prepared to shape and organise the reform of moral and intellectual life; the voice of the disruptive blogger must similarly be associated with leadership and authority within a certain class as well as contact with popular 'common sense'. Within a Gramscian context, that class was subaltern, marginalised and voiceless. Subaltern is nowadays a loaded term, and immediately raises further questions about representation and credentials. If we were to follow Gramscian theory, disruptive blogging should be undertaken by intellectual representatives of the working class: in Malta, the constitution of the blogosphere indicates a bourgeois-style act of rebellion rather than a sustainable movement with any real linkages to / credibility with other strata of Maltese society. Leaving aside social elites such as Caruana Galizia and Zammit, it remains to be determined whether the remaining bloggers have any affinity with subalterns and their grievances against the power blocs, or indeed whether bloggers claim to represent anyone other than themselves.

The corollary is as follows: in a struggle for the right to obtain a divorce in Malta, before 2011, Maltese citizens who wished to obtain a divorce, or believed that divorce was a civil right, could consider themselves subalterns. This notion takes particular currency within two distinct caveats to the seemingly bullet-proof sanctity of 'marriage for life' whereby: a) people with access to social capital, financial resources for good lawyers and connections with the Curia could sometimes manoeuvre an annulment of marriage – divorce by another name; and b) where the Maltese state was obliged to recognise divorces obtained by Maltese citizens who resided in other countries.

In Malta, social networking, citizen journalism and participation in the public sphere are chained to the unique characteristics of the local context: geography, size, popular culture, institutional and media hegemonies have a bearing on any analysis of blogging. To operate in a counter-hegemonic manner means disrupting the consensus of the mainstream, so bloggers would be expected to target the "common sense" view of society, described by Gramsci (1971, p.324) as "the folklore of philosophy": unsystematic; heterogeneous; spontaneous; incoherent and inconsequential. If the hegemonic bloc systematically intervenes to shape this "common sense" for its own ends, the counter-hegemonic blogger must be prepared to infiltrate the same social space, explore opportunities for resistance to the prevalent ideology, and transform "common sense" into the more coherent "good sense". Prior to the divorce crisis in

Malta, “common sense” could, for instance, translate into assertions such as: 98% of Maltese are baptised Roman Catholic; embrace the Church’s teachings; believe marriage is sacrosanct for life; and never accept divorce as an option for the common good. Within this construct and the historic importance of Malta’s media system in the hegemonic set up, bloggers would be expected to simultaneously target the general public and the mainstream media in their bid to influence common sense. The very act of writing on a public medium is an attempt at public engagement and influence, albeit asynchronously and with a potentially imaginary audience.

7.2 Strategies for disruption

The divorce issue did not initially appear to be fertile ground for discussion on the blogosphere, let alone participation or online mobilisation. In 2007, Sammut (p.138) doubted whether a “virtual” public space could ever mobilise people outside the bipolarised domain in Malta, since this space not only necessitates access and new media skills, but also transformation in the islands’ political culture. Indeed, before campaigning started in earnest, bloggers appeared ambivalent (Biwwa, 2010a; Sciberras, 2009; Zammit, 2011d) or equated the issue to a civil right that should have never been subject to a referendum:

Nations can never be homogenous in beliefs. Let’s stop pretending Malta is. Not all Maltese are Catholic or adhere to catholic values, nor are church goers, nor anti divorce. Malta needs to get divorce on its statute books, move on and turn itself to more important issues (Ayling, 2011).

Yet as referendum activity picked up with the deployment of the two movements, this study’s findings indicate that for the duration of the divorce issue up to the referendum a set of Maltese bloggers conducted a war of position to disrupt the hegemony of the Church, the PN and their allies by activating six, intertwined strategies that are presented in this chapter as answers to the main research question.

The bloggers’ discourse is described as “strategies” since the analysis indicates bloggers were engaged in “strategic action” and “symbolic violence” directed at a common enemy rather than any attempt to engage in some Habermasian-style, empathetic, rational, refined or balanced communicative action (el-Nawawy and Khamis, 2010, p.244). The notion of strategy as associated with disruptive blogging in this study is

therefore closer to Bourdieu's description of social actors' "practical knowledge" and "sense of practice" who respond dispositionally to the opportunities and constraints of a situation over a period of time "rather than a set of conscious or rational calculations" (see Swartz 1997, p.100).

In his CDA work, Fairclough (2003) levers on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theories of hegemony and logic of equivalence which identify the simultaneous working of two different logics: a logic of difference which creates differences and divisions; and a logic of equivalence which subverts existing differences and divisions through pragmatic universality in social relations. Fairclough suggests these logics may be applied as a general characterisation of the social processes of classification to the textual moment of social practices; and that these also shape how people think and act as social agents. Equivalence and difference are in part textual relations, and it is therefore possible to 'operationalise' theory in text analysis by looking at how entities of various sorts (people, objects, organisations, and so forth) are *differentiated in texts*, and how such differences are collapsed by "texturing" relations of equivalence between them (Fairclough, 2003, p. 88). Discursive reproduction and change is investigated through "an analysis of the relations between different discourses within an order of discourse and between different orders of discourse" (Fairclough, 1999, p.56).

This study describes a struggle for meanings in a specific context, in the belief that the textual process of meaning-making by social agents is vital in the political process of seeking to achieve or disrupt hegemony. The manner in which certain "particulars" come to be represented and repeated as "universals" in texts is as important as the manner in which alternatives are excluded (Fairclough, 2003, p.41). Understanding this classificatory process is ideological work, since attempts to universalise *particular* meanings are made in the service of achieving and maintaining dominance through hegemony. The analysis of a set of online texts generated as a result of an organic crisis may therefore reveal the constant, classificatory processes of relations of equivalence and difference that is going on in texts, with entities being either "differentiated from each other, put in opposition to one another or set up as equivalent to one another" (Fairclough 2003, p.88). This analysis looks for an accentuation of difference, conflict, polemic, and struggles over means, norms and power.

The six strategies as discussed in sections 7.2.1 to 7.2.6 represent a potential new order of discourse in which, within the context of this study:

- The dominant, hegemonic discourse, enacted by the Church and its allies can be framed as ‘the discourse’, and represents the social order and ‘logic of equivalence.’
- Blogging is an alternative discourse of ‘difference’ that attempts to resist and disrupt the incumbent discourse (‘the counter-hegemonic discourse’).
- The hegemonic discourse (enacted as genres and inculcated in styles) has its roots in long-standing hierarchies of equivalence. The bloggers’ discourse is a strategy for social change, and therefore in opposition to the discourse.
- In order for the chain of equivalence to be established, there is a need to define “a common adversary” (Mouffe, in Carpentier & Cammaerts 2006, p8). The existence, definition and identification of the common adversary in the form of the Church, the PN and their allies united the counter-hegemonic online movement.
- The theory of hegemony is operationalised through an analysis of a conflict of discourse. Bloggers challenge the dominant and mainstream order of discourse, as represented by the hegemonic bloc through a hierarchy of ‘meanings’ and world views. Although a “particular social structuring of semiotic difference” is dominant, propagated and legitimised as ‘common sense’, it is always vulnerable since an order of discourse is neither a closed or rigid system (Chiapello & Fairclough, 2002, p.194).
- The hypertextual affordances of the blog facilitate bloggers’ use of *intertextuality* and *assumptions* in their counter-hegemonic operations to expose the *differences* between their position and that espoused by their adversaries. Intertextuality tends to open up differences by bringing other ‘voices’ (or dialogicality) into a text, whereas assumptions tend to reduce difference by assuming common ground. The extent to which these differences are highlighted is also important. Fairclough (2003) identifies five scenarios that can help determine social actors’ orientation to difference⁶⁷. This study focuses on *the accentuation of difference*, normally associated with conflict, polemic, and a struggle over meaning, norms and power.

⁶⁷ Fairclough (2003, p.41-42) identifies five scenarios: (a) an openness to, acceptance of, recognition of difference; an exploration of difference, as in ‘dialogue’ in the richest sense of the term; (b) an accentuation of difference, conflict, polemic, a struggle over meaning, norms, power; (c) an attempt to resolve or overcome difference; (d) a bracketing of difference, a focus on commonality, solidarity; (e) consensus, a normalization and acceptance of differences of power which brackets or suppresses

Figure 8 below summarises the six counter-hegemonic blogging strategies observed during the course of this study:

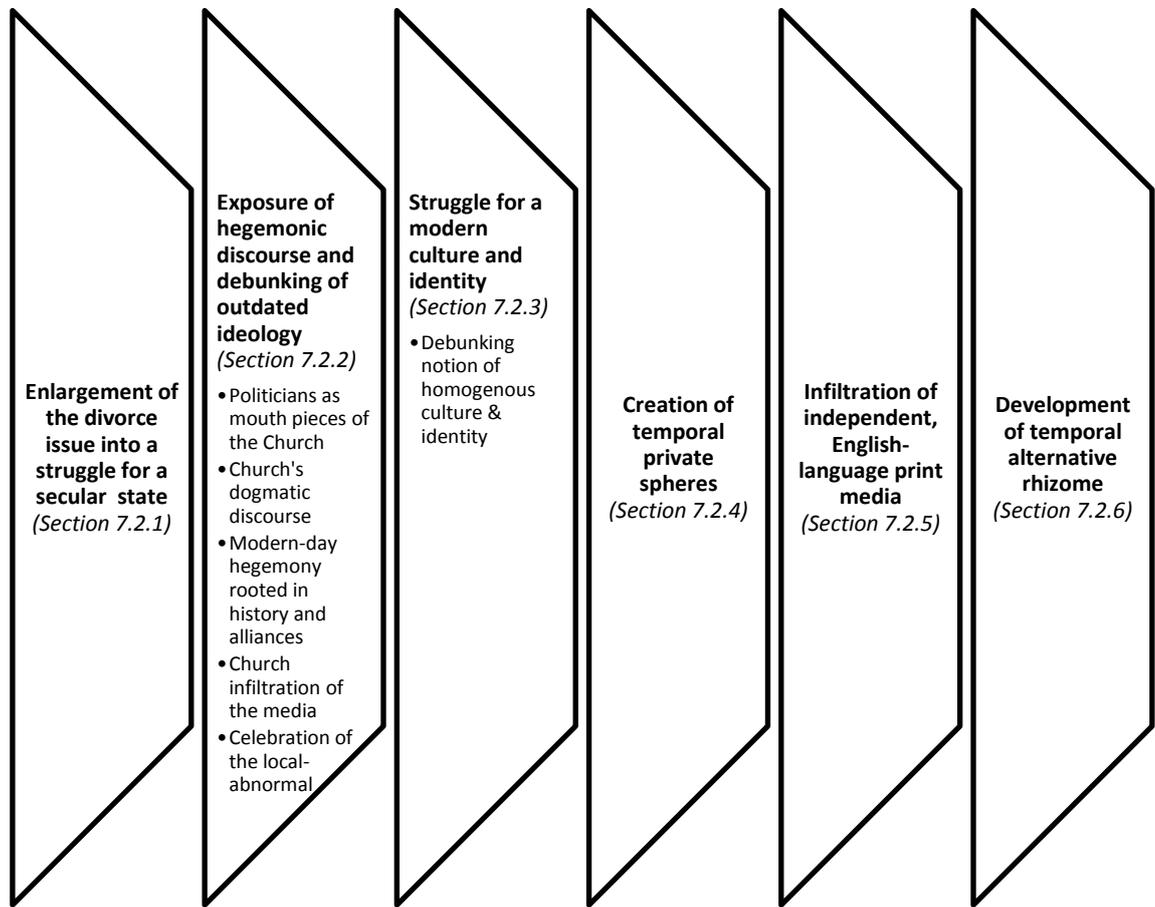


Figure 8: Six Blogging Strategies for Disruption – answers to research question

7.2.1 Enlargement of divorce issue into a struggle for the secular state

In Malta, the concept of the secular state rankles with the incumbent ideology of Catholicism. Bloggers operated as citizen journalists to raise awareness that the divorce referendum was an opportunity to endorse and renew a commitment to the implementation of the secular state. They did this by: a) framing the divorce issue within a wider historic context, explaining how the Church had experienced run-ins with the state in previous generations; b) exposing the power the Church retained over the state and Maltese society through the Concordat and the Constitution; and c)

differences of meaning and norms. This is not a typology of actual social events and interactions; social events, and texts, may combine these scenarios in various ways.

focusing on how the political establishment was not prepared to forsake its personal ideology to enable the operations of the secular state and an open society.

Ercolesi & Hägg (2008, p.1) believe political religious neutrality represents the best possible strategy to integrate diverse fellow citizens in the values and principles of liberal democracy, individual human rights, and of the rule of law - “the ideal model of laïcité with complete separation between state and Church.” Yet in 2009, the journalist Raphael Vassallo wrote that given a choice, many Maltese would opt for a religious icon to symbolise the state. He describes how in a Victory Day homily on 8 September, 2008, Bishops Paul Cremona and Mario Grech launched an attack on the “threat of secularism,” comparing the struggle against secularism to Malta’s great sieges against the Turks and the Fascists – and equating the introduction of divorce with abortion and euthanasia. Professor Kenneth Wain subsequently called the Bishop’s homily “a declaration of war” (Vassallo, 2009).

If it were a war, it was not one in which politicians of either party were prepared to engage. In 2010, Friggieri blogged on how “politicians-cum-columnists” chose to remain silent about the “large elephant in the room” represented by the unresolved issue of whether Malta was indeed a secular state. Any chance of a coherent public debate on the subject in the foreseeable future was inevitably jeopardised with “a political class in deep crisis: paralysed, fearful and increasingly incoherent”. Once Pullicino Orlando’s proposed divorce bill was tabled in parliament, Zammit (2011a) was one of several bloggers who quickly associated the divorce issue with the ideological struggle for the affirmation of the secular state. Zammit wrote that “the intelligent Maltese voter” could witness first-hand the two parties’ “abdication” from their responsibilities as elected representatives to debate an issue in parliament:

Two of the three branches of an effective democracy have been all but neutered and hijacked in the name of political opportunism. I accuse the partisan parties of PLPN of wilfully failing to treat a civil right with the dignity and relevance it deserves, of falsely imputing moral reasons to their machinations and shenanigans when it is blatantly evident that the paramount concern is the electoral vote come the next round of elections; preferring the rainbow spineless option where ‘anything goes so long as it gets us votes’.

Zammit's post sets the tone for the blogger's determination to engage with the secular state issue. His appeal to "the intelligent voter" is indicative of the assumption that bloggers and their readers are intelligent 'free-thinkers' in Maltese society. Zammit is also an astute observer of political brinkmanship: his deliberate association of "moral" with "the rainbow spineless option" is particularly effective in exposing the callous workings of a political class whose priority is not defending civil rights, but securing votes. Carmel Caccopardo, a member of the AD executive, blogged regularly about the PN and the PL's abdication of their responsibilities in parliament; at one time, he compared the PL's reluctance to make its position clear on the matter to "Humpty Dumpty" politics, a local version of "sitting on the wall" (Caccopardo 2011b).

As the campaign progressed, a multiplicity of society voices were unleashed to raise awareness of the importance of the issue to the future of citizens. In the following post, Caruana Galizia (2011h) uses sublime intertextuality to lever on the collective, powerful memory of the 2002 EU membership referendum to draw parallels between the bitter, Euro-sceptic discourse of the time and the present moral-panics of the 'No' campaign:

Is it my imagination, or has Malta experienced a rapid deterioration in the ability to separate church and state? I get the feeling that the reaction in some quarters to EU membership (and the perceived secular barbarians at the gate) has been a panic-induced retreat into theocratic reasoning.

The "secular barbarians" appeared intent on exposing the disconnect between the hegemonic institutions and the legitimate hopes of citizens for a modern secular state. Muscat (2010) linked government's democratic credentials to its ability to safeguard minority rights, celebrate diversity and ensure there was "no discrimination against people who think differently". In a post in 2011, she wrote that the time had come for the Church's hold over several generations of Maltese citizens to be resisted:

The Church's attitude is rooted in the desire for power, a sense that the Church ought to be in control of society. It's a dangerous, authoritarian tendency and one that needs to be opposed. The divorce 'debate' is rooted in the problem related to the long overdue separation between Church and State.

The text prepares the battleground through orders of discourse, using key words as triggers to jolt the reader to the problem, the "long overdue" Church-State separation.

The accusation that the Church was meddling in state affairs was echoed in a long piece entitled “Malta failing tests” from a US-based academic, John Baldacchino (2011) and published in *The Times*. Baldacchino accused both political parties of failing to protect the secular nature of the state after independence and the establishment of the republic – the promise of an “open society” had yet to be guaranteed to citizens by “Malta’s ruling elites”:

Apart from doing disservice to society, the greatest disservice goes towards the freedom of moral conviction itself. This is because the more the religious and political establishments use the state to moralise over matters that pertain to individual choice, the less it is possible for Maltese citizens to express and live their diverse moral convictions freely.

Baldacchino went on to explain how Malta continues to be perceived as a backward nation by the Maltese diaspora, generating a hostile response by some commenters on the forum: the tension between citizens who leave the islands and comment on the state of the nation and those who “remain” is a perennial postcolonial issue. Nevertheless, the piece is also indicative of *The Times*’ editorial decision to offer space for alternative and pro-divorce views, irrespective of its own conservative ownership.

Bloggers also used logics of difference to magnify the unusual hold that the Church held over the state:

the workings of the local Church, (comforted by the entrenchment of the Church-State agreement) have been exposed as being different from the workings of the church worldwide... elsewhere in this world it is the Church that waits for (or expects) a civil divorce decree before proceeding with annulment (Zammit, 2011k).

The repetition of “world” differentiates the local situation from ‘the outside’. At the same time, the reported speech adds a formal tone to the piece. It is not known “who” is doing the “exposure”, but the post is typical of the blogger writing with informed authority. Mifsud Bonnici (2010), another lawyer, frames the divorce-secular state issue firmly within the anomalies between the jurisdiction of canonical and civil law, but chooses the uncomfortable analogy of “child abuse” as a reminder of the troubles the Church has beyond the immediate divorce issue – a high-profile court case of three priests accused of child-abuse in a home for orphans. In this case, there is both the

assumption that the reader would be aware of the court case, and the attempt to expose the subjugation of civil to canonical laws:

If canonical laws were not intended to substitute the civil laws of a secular state where child molesting priests are concerned, neither should they come into play to justify the denial of a basic civil right that is divorce.

The collaborative Maltese language blog, *Il-Blog tal-Mazzun Malti*, known simply as *Mazzun*⁶⁸ was launched on 11 April, 2011, the day after the divorce referendum was inaugurated. The blog, managed by a group of PL sympathisers, took the fight for the secular state to new levels through a mix of rage, erudite discourse and dogged analysis, often reminding its readers of the historicity of the moment. Towards the end of the campaign, it published four semi-academic posts analysing how church-state relations had evolved in Malta. Of particular interest are the many references to popular culture and the colonial past, such as in this (2011f) post:

In our country, cultural secularity is low as most of our culture is influenced by festas and the Church; an age-old influence that the English colonisers did not dare touch as they were well aware that religion is an efficient means of retaining control over an enslaved people.

By contextualising the crisis as a perennial, unresolved issue of power under the guise of “cultural secularity”, *Mazzun* shifts the reader’s attention to the politics of convenience, where the Church operates as a hegemonic institution with the active consensus of successive governments. The state’s historic alliance with the Church is founded in the knowledge of the latter’s influence over citizens’ lives: it is to the mutual benefit of political and ecclesiastic hegemony that the status quo be retained to conduct their complementary politics of consent. Digging deeper into blog posts such as this unravels layers of assumptions and signposts that point to the operations of hegemony in popular culture: for instance, the Church is the key stakeholder in the village “festas” that help secure ongoing consent from subalterns through the inculcation of such popular rituals into the culture’s ‘common sense’. *Mazzun*’s subliminal reference to “English colonisers” is a reminder of the legacy of the Church’s “age-old” power that begs for renewal and social re-engineering; and a call to action by

⁶⁸ The blog of the Maltese Red Mouthed Goby. In Maltese slang, “*Mazzun*” refers to someone who is gullible. I have translated the Maltese texts into English.

working on postcolonial sentiments through the association of the Church with old, foreign, cultural powers.

7.2.2 The exposure of hegemonic discourse and debunking of outdated ideology

Hegemony is sometimes described as “the principal manner in which social order is maintained within capitalist societies” (Orlowski, 2011, p.42) because it represents the connection between ideology and discourse. Throughout the divorce campaign, blogging was used as the hyperlocal equivalent of citizen oral media (Borg, 2003) to expose the hegemonic discourse propagated by the ‘No’ movement, the Church, the PN and various lay groups mobilised against divorce. Operating in purely reflexive mode to news items published in mainstream media outlets, blogs offered counter-hegemonic representations to debunk the notion of a monolithic, homogenous Maltese society and that of a pervasive Catholic ideology. As Zammit (2010c) opined, blogging “held up a mirror to society, and society did not like what it saw”. It used the very discourse of the adversary as an opportunity to magnify the religious and social assumptions underpinning the ideology that had made ‘divorce’ a taboo subject for legislators. It questioned what had come to pass as the prevailing “common sense”, the common ground of shared meanings without which any form of social communication or interaction in Malta was difficult if not inconceivable. The alternative turned its attention on mainstream discourse to expose how hegemony shapes the nature and content of the common ground: what was unusual was that the discourse of the mainstream would provide rich opportunities to make the trusted Catholic ideology suddenly appear part grotesque, part entertaining: this is exemplified by Mazzun’s (2011j) publication of its top 10 laughable (or pathetic) quotes of the campaign.

7.2.2.1 Exposure of politicians as mouth pieces of the Church

Politicians’ discourse on the divorce issue provided an early target for bloggers. Senior figures within the PN used the English-language media to position themselves as de facto spokespersons for the Church and defenders of the status quo. This is significant, since statements made by senior politicians on the media on subjects like religion and public morals are tantamount to a “regime of truth, to be distinguished from false statements through different practices” (see Mills, 2003, p.74).

On 3 February, 2011, Dr Austin Gatt, the Minister for Infrastructure, Transport and Communications, wrote a feature entitled “The role of the Catholic Church” for *The Times*, the traditional, independent media outlet of choice for political opinions. In Malta, politicians regularly double up as columnists on print media, a practice that the Maltese accept as “entirely normal” (Friggieri, 2010). Chircop (2011) says that by default, the media has been groomed to operate as a billboard for various power blocs, including the business sector: it is unlikely that *The Times* would have edited any of the Minister’s original text.

Gatt’s choice of language and ideological assumptions were a precursor to the discourse advanced by the Church and its supporters during the campaign. The first sentence is an immediate emotive reference to the politician’s linkage to the church: “I am a practising Catholic and proud of it”. This is a statement reminiscent of partisan and tribal speak, particularly in Malta where people regularly profess allegiance to their political party, band club or football team of choice. In this case, the militant tone is applied to defend the right of the Church to “participate in the [divorce] debate” and “use its media, its pulpits and its churches to send out its message to those who want to hear it”:

Trying to eliminate the Church from the debate is wrong and anti-democratic. I and many others expect to hear our bishops speak clearly without, as they said, crusades or condemnations but outlining what is the teaching of my Church.

The emphasis of the Church’s right to use its media and networks involves the association of churches and pulpits with one-way broadcast media; equally curious is the advocacy for the right to “debate” when Gatt’s expectation is that the bishops are heard. The repetition of the word ‘I’ and association with active verbs such as “expect” are a reaffirmation of the writer’s sense of self-importance in civil society. The inflection on “my Church” transforms the relationship with a potentially faceless institution into a personal one. It also has overtones of papal supremacy, reminiscent of Christ laying the foundations of the papacy on earth (see Matthew 16: 13-19). In the process, Gatt presents himself as a de facto privileged spokesperson for the Church. The very notion of a secular state is questioned since Gatt states that his role as a

legislator is guided by the moral teachings of the Church, with the additional fillip that divorce only becomes a civil right “once Parliament recognises it as such”:

I have absolutely no problem in clearly stating that, in my decision on the issue, I have to be inspired by what is good for our society, for our country, for our people. In coming to this decision, however, it is illusory to think I will not be greatly influenced by my religion and it is also ridiculous to even ask me not to.

Gatt appears to acknowledge that the issue is really about a struggle for the ‘common good’ by linking “society”, the “country” and the “people”; yet the use of “illusory” immediately dismisses the possibility of this happening. Gatt’s request that he is not even asked about the Church’s influence on his decision-making as a legislator has two sublime inferences: he is seeking to take the moral high ground, as a man of religious conviction, whose views will not be wavered by others; he is also acknowledging the politician’s traditional clientelist role in society, where it is common place for face-to-face lobbying to happen in formal or informal spaces.

The response of the blogosphere is typified by Caroline Muscat’s blog post on 7 March, 2011, where she tracks back to the original *Times* article to dissect the arguments. Muscat’s strategy is to represent Gatt as unfit for government, a politician who promotes his religious beliefs at the expense of his obligations to protect citizen rights. Maltese politicians and other public figures have had time to adapt to public comments on newspaper portals, and often seek a right of reply (online and in print). In the case of blog discourse, they have no jurisdiction or influence over the citizen media; or the fact that the blog can use hypertext to link to newspaper portals without asking for the editor’s or contributor’s permission.

Muscat finds the minister’s “newfound religious fervour” not only “nauseating” but also “repeatedly imposed on the nation through a compliant media” - a veiled reference to the blogger’s former employers at *The Times* that is likely to have struck a chord with the paper’s editors. Gatt is compared to a monarch or dictator, who “has been in power for far too long” and whose views are “incompatible with the fundamental principles of democracy”. Muscat infers that religious convictions may also be a smokescreen for the more serious denial of citizens’ rights and a means of power over civil society:

When civil rights are denied, it is the legislators' responsibility to correct that injustice. Religion is often a convenient tool for justifying restrictions on individual freedom.

The politician's strategic alliance with the Church to prevent divorce legislation is reframed as an ideological position that prevents the workings of democracy. Muscat looks for the moral high ground of a "debate [that] should appeal to reason, not belief":

Debates on policy in a democratic country have to address citizen concerns irrespective of their faith. Elected representatives have a duty to nurture a democratic spirit, not actively participate in its annihilation. It is indisputably easier to be dogmatic than democratic, especially about issues that are complex and highly charged.

The context of "debates", "citizen concerns" and a "democratic country" are ordered against Gatt's "dogmatic" discourse. Muscat's emphasis on the "complex" issues at stake is also indicative of an alternative, intellectual position, suggesting that politicians, caught in a web of political rhetoric and religious affiliation, are simply not up to the task of understanding the seriousness of the issue for the rest of the nation. On 27 April, 2011, Tonio Fenech, the Finance Minister provided further ammunition to this argument by writing a column on *The Independent* that included the following sentence: "I am sure Our Lady is very sorrowful that Malta is considering divorce".

Debono (2011c) was one of several bloggers who lampooned the politician's article. In a blog post on *Malta Today* called 'The loony Nationalist Party', he introduced the concept of the "confessional party" – a term that was embraced by both the blogosphere and the mainstream media, and from which the PN struggled to disassociate itself throughout the campaign⁶⁹:

The PN has lost any claim of being an inclusive moderate party (which explains why the PN won so many elections) and is increasingly resembling a loony, confessional party whose identity derives from confessional beliefs rather than economic and social programmes.

⁶⁹ The term "confessional party" was widely used throughout the divorce campaign, to link the PN to the Roman Catholic Church ideology. It is a richly-evocative term, as it associates the visually-ritualistic and semi-public practice of confessing one's sins in a confessional in Church with the PN's anti-divorce and pro-Church stand. The term is also reminiscent of the "confessional Christian state" as used by Alfred Grech (2005, p.196) in his work on religion, tolerance and discrimination in Malta.

The PN's historic alliance with the Church was suddenly being used by bloggers to magnify the party's radicalism as opposed to the cosy conservative family values traditionally espoused by the party. On 22 May, 2011, the Prime Minister was quoted by *The Times* as saying that "the choice facing the people was between keeping something which had existed for thousands of years, or ditching it". In a post laden with uncomfortable contrasts, Caruana Galizia (2011i) wrote that:

The fact that something has not existed for thousands of years does not mean that it is bad and should not be taken up. The Amish, Mennonites and Osama Bin Laden think (thought) like that. It's Luddite thinking. It sounds a bit strange coming from internet fan Dr Gonzi.

In a country where the PN's embracement of technology is often cited as a reason for social progress, the roll-call of religious fanatics and association with Luddite thinking may have been meant to be a personal wake-up call for the Prime Minister. Caruana Galizia appears to be warning the PN of undermining its own legacy by embracing theocratic thinking.

7.2.2.2 Exposure of the Church's dogmatic discourse

The Church had a vested interest in opposing divorce for ideological reasons, and was therefore expected to actively support any movement opposing the legislation. However, the militant, dogmatic discourse propogated by high-profile clerics before campaigning had even started set the tone for the bitter 'No' campaign. It indicates that new legislation was recognised as a very serious threat to the Church's hegemony. A retired judge, Dr Philip Sciberras, opined that the campaign against divorce was motivated by financial considerations since any loss of the Church's monopoly on marriage annulments would lead to loss of revenues from tribunal fees (Sansone, 2011). Significantly, rather than using its privileged status as the social glue of Maltese society and taking the moral high ground on any debate, the Church appeared to dismiss any possible discussion on the merits of divorce and opt for a mix of dogma, rhetoric and scare-mongering. This monolithic discourse⁷⁰ is likely to have been critical in mobilising bloggers into their own form of counter-hegemonic discourse. Were it not

⁷⁰ Within this context, monolithic discourse is tantamount to discourse which does not provide space for discussion of alternative beliefs. Maltese citizens, according to the Church, could not be afforded the option of discussing divorce as a civic right since the practice (the civil dissolution of a marriage) was contrary to Roman Catholic doctrine.

for the Church and its allies having decided to take a proactive, militant stance on divorce, and rely on dogma over the politics of consent, it remains uncertain whether bloggers would have rallied so quickly to develop a movement of online resistance; or whether they would have taken up the divorce cause with such fervour in the first place. It was the Church that turned the issue into a conflict from the outset and in turn provided triggers for waves of reflexive blogging.

On 8 October, 2010, during a mass for lawyers to mark the start of the forensic year⁷¹, Judicial Vicar Mgr Arthur Said Pullicino (Sansone, 2010) provided a noteworthy trigger by telling a congregation of lawyers that the Church did not have to discuss anything related to divorce because Christ's teachings on marriage were clear:

All the Church has to do is teach that whoever cooperates in any way in the introduction of divorce, who applies the law and who seeks recourse to it, though not the innocent party, would be breaking God's law and so would be committing a grave sin.

The comments were immediately branded as "an unacceptable interference of the Church in secular matters" by the outgoing president of the Chamber of Advocates, Andrew Borg Cardona – a PN sympathiser and blogger on *The Times*. Two days later, Zammit (2010d) blogged on the irony of the legal establishment, "one of the main institutions that guarantee the balance of power in the land" gathered in "confession" so "the speaker from the pulpit" could perpetuate a tradition begun in the Middle Ages to "help them in their ministry of administration of justice". The Church is described as "the Church of indulgences, fire and brimstone, mortal sin and whatever other superstition it chooses to revive".

The inflection on the "revival" of myths and superstitions was regularly associated with the discourse from the pulpit. The Bishop of Gozo in particular provided some memorable quotes that appeared as faithful reportage in the mainstream media. In October 2010, as news leaked of a high-profile child abuse case in Malta involving

⁷¹ The word forensic comes from the Latin *forēnsis*, meaning "of or before the forum." In this context, the forum is the court, so the mass is a ritual to celebrate the beginning of the judicial year on the first of October of each year. The influence of the Church in judiciary matters may be inferred from the forensic year being divided into three sessions named after Catholic feasts: the 'Victory' session, commencing on 1 October; the 'Epiphany' commencing on 7 January; and the 'Pentecost', commencing on the Thursday after Easter Sunday (see Court Procedure and Good Order Rules, Art. 28.1).

priests, the Bishop, addressing a conference on the theology of the body, said that educating children about contraception was tantamount to “child abuse”, since:

The education system may be abusing students if instead of helping them to control their sexual energy it teaches them about contraception.

In a post called “Malta remains in the stone age”, Reasoned Rants responded by describing the Church as:

an organisation that not only brainwashes young children with terrifying stories of hell and damnation (surely abuse in itself), but that frequently places them in situations where it knows that its own priests will rape and torture them (let’s call a spade a spade here).

On 23 March, 2011, a week after the motion for the divorce referendum was passed in Parliament and the referendum date set for 28 May, 2011, a pastoral note signed by the two bishops was issued to all parish priests and published on the Archdiocese website. It included the following text:

The Christian must take a decision to vote in favour or against divorce legislation in the light of his belief. For the Christian, a law that transforms marriage into something temporary runs counter to the will of Our Father. For this reason, the Christian who favours divorce will create a division between his beliefs and his intended decision: which decision will bear irreparable consequences.

The pastoral note may have been intended to merely instil a sense of gravitas within Church-goers contemplating voting in favour of divorce – a call to action, to reject the option of divorce at the *exclusion* of the alternative. However, the note is laden with the two causal powers which shape texts: social structures and social practices on one hand and social agents on the other (Fairclough, 2003). A semantic relation is set up to associate the Christian’s “belief” with the “irreparable consequences” of the “intended decision” which “runs counter to the will of Our Father”. In doing so, the text sublimely revisits the excommunication territory of the sixties. The writer assumes that the congregation, and the wider public, would link the “consequences” to the unsavoury moment in the past when citizens risked committing a “mortal sin” when voting for the Labour Party. In this way, the abstract discourse of the present is rendered concrete

through the activation of assumptions, triggering a dialectic with the discourses and styles of the past.

Tortell's (2011) post is representative of the type of blogging that systematically targeted the hegemonic discourse originating from the pulpit, 'friendly media fora', press releases, religious websites, radio and TV interviews and leaflets posted to the home.

The anti-divorce lobby, or the Roman Catholic Church, appeal to authority, both their own and that of their God. They make threats of punishment, again in the name of their God, should anyone transgress. They don't offer any reasoned arguments and they play the guilt card. They act on the assumption that they know better, and they do it all with a condescending smile, because they are obliged to guide by virtue of their exalted position! They do this all in the name of saving our souls and preserving our moral integrity.

Tortell internalises the Church's discourse to represent it as a genre that has been considered to be the "mainstream" and yet is so fundamentally flawed that it needs to be resisted at all costs. The logic of difference is established through a rudimentary process of classification, where the repetition of the word "they" serves to magnify the chasm between the anti-divorce lobby and those whose souls it seeks to save. The Church and its allies are presented as a de facto political institution, enjoying an "exalted position" in civil society, empowered by an authority that has no need to engage in "reasoned arguments" as it can peddle "guilt" or threaten punishment to secure consent to its hegemony. Tortell's objective is to expose the Church's common sense as the product of a flawed ideology that must be resisted by the alternative.

The setting up of the *Kristu Iva, Divorzju Le*⁷² movement coincided with a fresh spate of religious determinism that reached its apex in the last two weeks of the campaign, when a Church leaflet suggested voters should put the divorce decision to the 'crucifix text' (Vella, 2011). In a blog post on *The Times* entitled "Closet Nazis, intolerant divorzisti and Christian crusaders" Church strategist Fr Joe Borg (2011e) wrote of his concern over the "the language, symbols and imagery" being deployed by the movement would be "counterproductive". He was particularly "saddened by the

⁷² "Yes to Jesus, No to Divorce". The movement erected billboards with images of Jesus Christ next to its slogan. See Appendix 9, Image 7.

decision of the Pastoral Secretariat at the Curia to send to parish priests a script with several references to divorce for use during the Duluri⁷³ procession”, fearing that this would :

increase people's temptation to vote for divorce not because they favour divorce but because they view such acts as confirmation of their fear (in my opinion unjustified) that the Church's position results from its desire to dominate not from a desire to serve.

As an insider, Borg's blog post indicates that the Church's campaign might not have been as co-ordinated and organised as many thought, making it vulnerable to religious zealotry. Bloggers such as Raphael Vassallo (2011) made the most of the opportunity to focus on the bizarre practices of the Christian crusaders and accuse the Curia of double-standards:

the 'Kristu Iva Divorzju Le' campaign has in fact done unto Jesus Christ what student socialism had previously done unto Che Guevara. They turned him into a poster-boy. Small wonder the Archbishop would be just slightly upset, and even consider these people to represent a 'pastoral problem' for the Church. While the Archbishop feels no compunction in publicly demonising secularism – even comparing today's secularists to the 'biggest threat' this country has faced since Nazism in World War II – it seems words of condemnation suddenly stick in his throat, when the threat emanates from none other than his Church's most obedient and dutiful servants (Vassallo, 2011).

Vassallo's post is typical in its interdiscursivity, mixing the visual trigger of roadside billboards with images of Christ with the intertextuality of the reportage of the Archbishop's comparison of the threat of modern day secularism to the historic collective memory of Malta's Second Great siege. Like Zammit and Muscat, the blogger's strategy is to lever on relations of difference and magnify the grotesque and the exceptional in the Church's campaign, while presenting the pro-divorce arguments as a logical alternative. Vassallo is also aware the Church is caught in a public relations dilemma, of whether to allow the "dutiful servants" to take militancy discourse to new levels of aggression, or attempt to resolve the issue as a "pastoral problem". On 12 May, 2011, the Bishop called a press conference and issued a statement that the Church was not conducting a crusade against divorce but fulfilling its role to spread the word of

⁷³ This refers to a procession on the occasion of the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows, typically celebrated one week before Good Friday.

Christ and its message about the family. *The Times* reporter, Kurt Sansone (2011) poignantly reported that journalists were not allowed to ask questions. In a homily on 15 May, 2011, the Bishop of Gozo's combative language did little to support his counterpart's attempt at a more conciliatory approach:

Among us there are brigands who use every means to kill the flock. And at the moment they are targeting marriage. The brigands are wise as they are wolves hiding in the skins of lambs. And now the wolf is claiming that he is Catholic. Falsity! Trickery!

I am ready to dialogue with everyone but do not be false, do not lie. You cannot not be loyal to Christ and say you are a Christian or a Catholic. If you are not in communion with Christ's teachings, you are not in communion with the Church and you cannot receive communion... we cannot pretend to be in communion with the Eucharist, so that everybody can understand me.

This piece contributed greatly to bloggers' subsequent representation of the Bishop of Gozo as a mouthpiece for an archaic institution that had disconnected with social realities. It is likely that at the time, the Bishop was fully aware that his discourse was engaged in a modality of power, to maintain the Catholic ideology and resist the challenge to its hegemony *from within*: the references to loyalty, communion and teachings need to be understood as powerful signposts for the "flock" to be brought back to the pen. The layers of interdiscursivity at play in this piece are veiled, once again, in the threat of excommunication sixties-style: the refusal to allow Catholics to receive communion due to political ideology immediately triggered the collective memory to the hardline position Archbishop Michael Gonzi had taken with the Labour Party in the sixties. In this context, the Bishop's claim that he is prepared to "dialogue with everyone" was widely interpreted to mean the precise opposite. The following day, Caruana Galizia wrote a post titled 'Rhetoric from another age' which sublimely tracked back to the troubles at the Nadur Carnival in Gozo in 2009, when revellers were arrested for dressing up as Jesus:

Traitors who kill the flock, wolves in sheep's clothing...what next? Carnival revellers dressed as nuns and priests? Good heavens. (Caruana Galizia, 2011i)

The juxtaposition of time and place to trigger the collective memory through interdiscursivity and media-friendly historic imagery was a recurrent theme in blogging that attempted to marginalise the Church's discourse. In this case, Caruana Galizia assumes that her readers can link to the 2009 events, since she is writing about the Bishop of Gozo. She is also suggesting that the bishop's discourse is 'carnevalesque' – closer to burlesque than replete with Biblical imagery, as later claimed by the Curia. On 20 May, 2011, Fr Mark Montebello, a Dominican priest with a history of run-ins with the Church hierarchy, wrote a long blog post, in which he described the "humiliating and shameful" tactics deployed by the Church in the divorce campaign:

By officially declaring that it would not take part in the campaign debates, the Catholic Church placed itself in a position of being able to inflict damage on its adversaries without the possibility of rebuttal. In a political and pragmatic sense this is worse than what happened in the '60s. Alas, despite this stand, stealthily the Church wrought immense pressure on many people's consciences.

The Gospels present Christ as homeless, propertyless, peripatetic, socially marginal, disdainful of kinfolk, without a trade or occupation, a friend of outcasts and pariahs, averse to material possessions, without fear for his own safety, a thorn in the side of the establishment and a scourge of the rich and powerful. The Movement against divorce are portraying him as a symbol of fear and coercion what a shame!

Montebello uses relations of difference to display how the Church in Malta was the polar opposite of Christ, described as radical, "a thorn in the side of the establishment". The institution had strayed away from the teachings of Christ to become a coercive force. The image of Christ on the billboards becomes "a symbol of fear and coercion". The linkage of the 2011 crisis with the 1960s implies that the Church's dedication ideology as a modality of power remained unchanged.

7.2.2.3 Exposure of how modern-day hegemony is rooted in history and alliances

Bloggers reminded their readers that history was being repeated. In a post, Mark Camilleri (2011), the former editor of the student newspaper *Ir-Realta'* called the divorce referendum "The Third Poltico-Religious Crisis" in Malta's history, comparing

it to two previous struggles, the first in the 1920s and 30s, and the second in the late 1950s and sixties⁷⁴.

The main difference between other Crises from this Third Crisis is that the enemy of the Church is not the Labour Party but a greater transcendental being which is so powerful that cannot be identified: as the Bishop of Gozo said, wolves in sheep's skin.

Camilleri's use of "wolves" to describe the unidentifiable "greater transcendental being" indicates his belief that there is a growing movement of citizen resistance to the Church's hegemony. Zammit (2010d) compares the Church to a repeat offender, abusing "the supernatural ...and meddling with the secular" by threatening to revive the sixties' "fear of the mortal sin", when "reading a newspaper could win you a timeshare in hell". In the Maltese lexicon, the word "timeshare" is a reference to all that is unpleasant on the streets, as embodied in timeshare touts bullying ordinary citizens and tourists.

Evarist Bartolo, shadow Education Minister and co-sponsor of the divorce bill, also compared the Church's anti-divorce campaign to the Church's campaigns against the Strickland and Labour Party:

They [Church leaders] are behaving in the same way now with Nationalists and Labourites that want a democratic society, a separation between Church and state, freedom to worship and civil liberties as required by a modern society in the 21st century. When will they learn? (Caruana, 2011)

The few politicians who, like Bartolo, chose to attack the Church's hegemony, inevitably considered it to be a legitimate, political target. Nevertheless, political elites

⁷⁴ The first political religious struggle (1928-1932) was between the Church and the alliance of the Labour and Constitutional Parties. The second struggle was regularly cited by bloggers during the divorce crisis. It occurred in the late 1950s and early 1960s when the General Workers Union and the Malta Labour Party, under a united front called the Workers Movement, were engaged in a struggle to cut Maltese society's Imperial-dependency. The struggle culminated with the Church issuing an interdiction on 8 April, 1961 against executive members of the Malta Labour Party, preventing party officials from receiving the sacraments and forcing others to marry in a sacristy. Between 1961 and 1963 seven Labour officials died (including former minister and author Guže' Ellul Mercer) and were buried in the unconsecrated part of the cemetery popularly known by the pejorative term *il-mizbla* (the dump). In May 1961, the Church declared reading or selling Socialist newspapers or attending Labour meetings mortal sins, as was the act of voting for the party in the 1962 general election. The conflict was not formally resolved until 4 April, 1969, when Mgr Emanuel Gerada orchestrated a formal peace agreement with the MLP. The statement affirmed that the Church had the duty and the right to safeguard its spiritual and temporal interests but should not impose mortal sin as a censure. The agreement also declared that in a modern society it is necessary to make a distinction between the political community and the Church (see Appendix 4 and Pirota, 2009).

can only approach civil society using signifiers that segregate society on the basis of trusted, partisan lines. In his blog, Mario Vella (2011), a former PL Chairman, chose to frame the divorce crisis as the crumbling of the system of alliances that had traditionally kept the PN in power. His post is evocative of the operations of an integral state:

Governments are made possible by alliances: social and political alliances, by alliances of convenience and, sometimes, of conviction, by strategic and tactical alliances, by long-term and short-term alliances. Many of the alliances that this government is built on are beginning to come apart.

Mazzun took the influence of networks and alliances in the divorce issue to a new, personal level. For instance, it described in great detail the personal dilemma faced by the current prime minister in overseeing a civil rights issue, when he was personally linked to Archbishop Michael Gonzi, the architect of the 1961 Interdiction against the Labour Party, its voters and newspaper readers. Mazzun associated the revival of religious dogma as a ‘No’ alliance strategy to remind the national popular that it had access to the means of ideological coercion:

Fermenting fear... is what people resort to when they are incapable of formulating an argument. And whoever uses religion to instil fear in others has access to a powerful weapon in religion (Mazzun, 2011c).

Mazzun investigated the historic alliance of the Church and the PN by focusing on the activities of social agents whose primary interest in the campaign was to retain personal power through the reaffirmation of political hegemony. When the blog was launched, the ‘About us’ page listed the names of high-profile individual members of the ‘No’ campaign in an online attempt at ‘naming and shaming’. Should the medium used for the claims have been a mainstream media outlet as opposed to a blog, it is likely that the author, editor and publisher would have been subject to libel action:

Don’t forget that these people who say they are against divorce are taking this position not because they are concerned about those who are suffering because of a broken marriage (in fact they have never offered any solutions to these people), but because they see the hold they have over the Maltese slipping between their fingers; they are seeing power ebb and they are sensing that the Government that always supported them lose popularity – and if it loses the next election, their power will continue to weaken (Mazzun, 2011g).

The divorce issue is simply part of ongoing hegemony in practice, with attempts made to overcome the crisis through a process of infiltration of civil society in the hope of regaining or renegotiating consent:

The individuals we have named, in alliance with the Church and the arse-lickers who wish to keep the Maltese in the dark ages of the Mortal Sin, have all the resources they need at their disposal - newspapers, broadcast media, the PN and the pulpit – to execute their anti-divorce agenda; and as the Labour Party said that it is not going to get involved in the issue, we want to remove the masks with the only resource we have – the Internet, which we will use to show the truth on these individuals whose only objective is to keep controlling the minds of the Maltese. This is no longer a referendum about divorce, but a fight between secular Malta and a Taleban (mentality) (Mazzun, 2011g).

Mazzun prepared its readers for a conflict of ideology. Its militant yet erudite discourse, underpinned by an agenda of anti-clerical resistance, made it a popular reference blog for the pro-divorce movement, with many of its posts shared as links on the movement's Facebook page. Focusing on the agendas of social agents in the integral state provided bloggers with clear targets whose discourse was synonymous with incumbent power. Nevertheless, Mazzun's primary target remained the Church: a long post (Mazzun, 2011b) deconstructed the Church's strategy as a mix of a "Crusade, PRO and Venom", where "antiquated and dogmatic teaching" is updated to "work in a more subtle manner to encourage its satellites to conduct a hidden crusade". The enemy has "all the requisite human and financial resources", and has activated its "network of churches, schools and religious organisations to indoctrinate its faithful against divorce". The blog's sense of self-importance is in positioning itself as an instrument of "the truth" by using the Internet to prevent history from being repeated, and Malta sinking to the Christian equivalent of a Taleban mentality.

7.2.2.4 Exposure of the Church's infiltration of the media

Bloggers were fearful that PBS and the English-language mainstream media – particularly the influential and traditionally conservative *The Times* – would take an anti-divorce position. These fears were legitimate, based on former PN media personnel occupying senior management positions at PBS, the engagement of conservative

bloggers by *The Times* and the presence of Dr Mario de Marco, a PN Minister, as a stakeholder in Allied Newspapers Ltd., the publisher of the paper. Muscat (2011) was particularly concerned that the Church was adopting astroturfing⁷⁵ as its public relations strategy, deploying its “foot soldiers” in the media and other public spaces while creating the perception that their operations were “an independent public reaction” rather than the execution of a calculated plan.

Bloggers were vigilant in monitoring the activities of mainstream columnists and bloggers known to have sympathies with the Church or the PN. Fr Joe Borg, a communications expert, former PBS Chairman and blogger on *The Times*, was a regular target for scorn. Matthew Vella, an editor at *Malta Today* and a regular blogger, broke a story about emails between Fr Borg and the ‘No’ Movement where Borg suggests that parish chaplains compile a list of separated couples and children from broken marriages to speak “intelligently” against a law on divorce. Fr Borg (2011d) used his blog on *The Times* to protest about the “bullying tactics adopted by some media people” and the “behaviour of several people in the pro-divorce lobby”.

Many of their comments in several blogs are simply disgusting. They are the epitome of intolerance. Besides, last week one could notice that some media advocates for the pro-divorce lobby deemed it fit to emulate the intolerant attitude of some of the bloggers. These media outlets are showing an attitude of bullying against people active in the anti-divorce lobby.

Borg’s description of blogging as bullying, as opposed to citizen journalism or attempts at online democracy indicates that he perceives blogging to be influencing media reporting practices. The “media outlet” is likely to be *Malta Today*, since the paper operated in symbiosis with the blogosphere throughout the campaign; the “disgusting” blog may also be *Taste Your Own Medicine* that made various allegations about the cleric’s private life while employed at PBS. The irony of Fr Borg, a cleric, communications lecturer at the University of Malta and former advisor to the PN using a blog on *The Times* to attack citizen media was not lost on bloggers. On 27 April, 2011, Wayne Flask accused the Church of adopting fascist tactics in its divorce

⁷⁵In public relations, ‘astroturfing’ is associated with campaigns that try and create what appears to be a popular, spontaneous grassroots movement about a particular issue. Since ‘astroturf’ is artificial grass, astroturfing is a word that plays with the idea of genuine grass and therefore genuine grassroots popular opinion. Muscat believed that the Church was adopting similar tactics through its use of social agents in various groups within civil society, including the media, to give the impression that there was grassroots support to its strong, anti-divorce position.

campaign, and the mainstream media of selective reporting. Flask's post appears to be fuelled by the veiled threat of excommunication advocated by some clerics from the pulpit and the suspension of Dr Deborah Schembri, the head of the 'Yes' Campaign, from representing clients at the Ecclesiastical Tribunal. Flask (2011b) alludes to the hegemonic hold the Church has in facets of the media, accusing the latter of doing its job to report hegemonic discourse:

The hounds of the Church in this case aren't just the priests (after all, that's their job) but sectors of the mass media, the media that the Church used to warn us about and that has now become its logical extension. This is why I remain surprised of how certain newspapers and sites fail to report the Bishop's obscene pastoral, which again waves the flag of the Interdiction even in my own face, given that I am going to vote for divorce (legislation).

I will not hide behind semantics, in a similar vein to the Bishop, Camilleri and their friends, who are whiter than the sheets of virgins: if you Church folk say that you are fighting for the freedom of Christianity in Malta, and as you have no scruples when it comes to attacking those who have a different view to yours, I cannot remain silent: you are terrorists. Catholic terrorists.

In practice, as the campaign unravelled, blog attacks on the mainstream media subsided, probably as it became apparent to bloggers that *The Times'* editors were taking a balanced approach to reporting the divorce issue and might even represent a potential ally. Bloggers did not devote much time to commenting on the PN and Church-owned media: in a similar vein to Sciberras (2010), it was assumed that these outlets merely preached to the converted and would not influence the undecided.

7.2.2.5 Exposure of the celebration of the 'local-abnormal'

The divorce campaign was replete with monolithic representations of how Maltese culture was different from that in other countries, particularly in Europe. The rejection of divorce is framed within a special, localised version of Catholicism. Biwwa (2010b) introduced the concept of the fish pond, later taken up by bloggers such as Zammit to describe how the insularity of the bounded community can normalise abnormality:

We the Maltese are a self absorbed nation like no other. It could be because we're kings of the pond (metaphorically speaking), so the ocean does not interest us, or maybe overwhelms us. Quite a few of us would rather be the big fish in a small bowl than the medium fish in a huge aquarium. This island mentality is present everywhere you look, and is due to us being on an island (obviously), which we semi-affectionately call 'the Rock', and partly because we feel that our particular set of circumstances can only be understood by our clique, and very few, select individuals outside of it.

Biwwa's readers would readily associate the fish pond analogy with the self-absorption of the "island mentality", and the cultural associations with insularity and the echo-chamber. The reference to the "Rock" is also a popular colloquialism, but in this context hints at the resilience of the tribal culture, and suspicion of those excluded from it. When confronted by pro-divorce arguments attempting to relate the issue to modernity and progress, it became habitual for some politicians and members of the establishment to claim that the Maltese had consciously embraced a homogenous Catholic identity in preference of foreign cultures and their value systems, and had actually reaped the benefits of this choice. Minister Gatt's (2011b) piece is remarkable for its fortress mentality and postcolonial overtones:

I think everyone should also understand this country remains overwhelmingly Catholic and we, as a people, are still greatly inspired by the Catholic social ethos and values. I think we are the better for it and I am not particularly impressed by what I see when I look at societies that were once like us but have gone down the secular route at a much faster pace than us. I do not think their "lifestyle" or "social values" are anything to emulate, even though they may be economically stronger than us. This reality cannot be ignored if, as we all seem to agree, we are seeking what is best for Maltese society.

Alternative lifestyles cannot be imagined, even if they reap superior economic rewards. On 15 March, 2011, Prime Minister Gonzi's intervention in parliament followed up on the 'us vs. them' argument by associating divorce with the social evils of the 'outside'. *The Times* (2011m) reported Gonzi as saying that:

One should not act on the basis of what other countries had done. Decisions needed to be taken on the basis of what was best for Maltese families. To argue otherwise would mean also introducing abortion and euthanasia, but he was sure that no one wanted such irresponsible actions.

As the elected representative, the politician traditionally mediates the truth for his constituents: in this case, he is also in a position to slow down the pace of secularisation on the basis of Malta's superior lifestyle and inherent moral values. This view is echoed by the Attorney General of Malta, Peter Grech, who is reported by Vassallo (2011) as saying that:

Malta cannot be compared to other European Union members states like the UK, Germany and Italy, because our country has sound values and high morals which should not be lost.

Mons. Gouder, the Curia's Pro-Vicar, in an interview with the BBC also expresses pride in Malta's unique position:

Not to have divorce is special in a positive way. Statistics show that divorce brings much more marriage breakdown and more cohabitation...The fact that we don't have divorce in Malta has helped to strengthen marriage here. Most Maltese marry, and most do that in church (Cacciattolo, 2011).

Discourse of this ilk reached its apex when the PN portal 'Malta Right Now' interviewed Arthur Galea Salamone from the 'No' movement, who celebrated Malta's status as the only country (in addition to the Philippines) where divorce was illegal:

Malta should be proud of being the exception as this demonstrates that it still values the family. With a no vote on Saturday, Malta will be giving an example to the world.

Giddens (1991, p.37) says that in traditional cultures, the past is honoured and symbols are valued because "they contain and perpetuate the experience of generations". Bloggers seized the moment of historicity to debunk the myths of homogeneity (where everyone is Catholic and has a decent marriage), tradition and Malta as a special case. Rather than a generational break, it represented an opportunity to break with myths and reject a discourse which symbolised an unfinished 1960s feud. The monolithic discourse is not merely the product of insularity, but also part of a system of control over people's lives:

It is only the peculiar abnormality of Malta that makes us think of the abnormal as normal. The situation is so freakish that

people stand up and say that there should be no divorce legislation, and they are completely unembarrassed to do so. Would they do the same elsewhere? No, because they understand that they would be thought of as off-the-wall. It is only in Malta that they can give voice to abnormal opinions without feeling abnormal. Because Malta itself is weird (Caruana Galizia, 2011e).

By rejecting universal meanings, bloggers appeared to be breaking away from the habitus of previous generations that perpetuated a culture where insularity, “abnormality” and exclusion were celebrated. Tortell (2011b) similarly debunks the popular notion of the stable, resilient family unit as the foundation of Maltese society. Government is accused of propagating a regime that is “outmoded, irrelevant”, an imagined “definition of family of all and sundry”. Tortell’s uses reported speech to portray Gonzi as a delusional man who is incapable of adapting to the “needs and continued evolution of the family”:

Our Prime Minister says things like “society should always bow its head to the family, not the family should adapt to society.” In the face of a changing society, reconstituted families, people co-habiting, half brothers and sisters under the same roof and 20% of children born to unmarried parents, to name just a few changes, the Prime Minister said something so out of touch with reality as to be almost delusional!

The main accusation is that the government is flying “in the face of reason and reality” by reconfirming practices that are “a disservice to large sections of the population”. Tortell associates an anti-divorce position based on Malta’s “unique” situation as an inversion of fundamentals, an imposition of a “crazy sociological tyranny” – “top down reasoning typical of paternalistic, big brother types of state”. The post is representative of bloggers who associated the mainstream discourse of the Curia and its agents in the PN with “old tactics of browbeating and scaremongering”, life representations that were disconnected from the needs of civil society. Debono (2011f) places trust in the pragmatism of Maltese voters “to dismiss quirky views and vote for common sense solutions”, despite the appearance of being conservative. He believes that the Maltese will not miss the historic opportunity presented to them, and not made available to previous generations. Citizens had reached a level of cultural awareness to understand that “what irks the Church most is the prospect of Malta becoming like the rest of the world”; Maltese citizens would unconditionally reject the “symbolic exceptionalism which makes Malta abnormally special.”

7.2.3 The struggle for a modern culture and identity

The legacies of Malta's colonial past and ongoing issues with irregular migration help to explain the ambiguous notion of Maltese identity (Mitchell, 2002). In 2001, Abela aptly described Malta as "a city-island at the cross-roads of Mediterranean and Western European cultures" (p.74). Rather than strong feelings for nationalism, there is a yearning for the outside. Malta's selective love affair with aspects of the outsider has been severely tested in recent years: the arrival of irregular migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa has triggered a spate of racist discourse which is particularly evident in the online forums on *The Times* and regularly taken up by members of both leading parties as a means of rallying populist support.

The divorce issue offered the blogosphere the chance to engage with the complicated issue of identity and popular culture, embedded as "common sense", and revisit the issue of what it means to be Maltese in the 21st century. Inherent in the idea of modernity is a "contrast with tradition" (Giddens, 1990, p.36). Blogging manifests all three tenets of Giddens' arguments for the dynamism of modernity in that it is deployed as: a) a means of separating time and space, focusing on the historicity of the crisis; b) a disembedding mechanism, lifting out social activities from the hyperlocal context in an attempt to reorganise a crucial social relation; and (most importantly) c) a reflexive appropriation of knowledge, where the production of systematic knowledge about social life becomes integral to system reproduction, rolling social life away from the fixities of tradition. Mayo's (2007, p.7) engagement with Gramsci's discussions of the Southern Question is also helpful in this regard, by explaining how the concept of the "national-popular" remains relevant within the current dynamics of politics and culture in the Mediterranean region:

What is 'national' is often tied to the culture of hegemonic ethnic groups and is related to the whole structure of hegemony. Concepts such as 'national identity', 'national culture' are thus challenged, as part of the process of negotiating relations of hegemony. This applied to relations between different groups within the boundaries of a single nation state, the object of much of Gramsci's analysis. Subaltern groups ... had to engage in a historical bloc to challenge the concept of 'national' and transform the relations of hegemony which it represented. In this regard, one had to challenge misplaced alliances.

The blogosphere approached the divorce issue as a cultural struggle for the modern, a search for a national identity and a reaffirmation of personal freedoms, reviving memories of the arguments that dominated the 2002 EU referendum. Mitchell's (2002) study contrasts the desire to belong to 'the modern' and the perennial search for a postcolonial identity with nostalgia for the safety of tradition. Identity is inevitably embroiled in local popular culture and in this context blogging becomes both a cultural form and activity in a constantly changing field. In trying to find a definition for 'popular', Hall (1981, p.449) looks at those forms and activities which have their roots in the social and material conditions of particular classes, which have been embodied in popular traditions and practices. Hall believes that what is important is the "*relations* which define popular culture as a continuing tension (relationship, influence and antagonism) to the dominant culture".

In 2010, the AD leader Mike Briguglio blogged about his fears that Malta's EU accession was leading to a fundamentalist backlash by opponents of a Maltese "modern or post-modern world". Briguglio's pessimism leads him to opine that "it seems that Malta has joined the European Union but, in various aspects, has remained in the middle ages". In January 2011, he identified the divorce issue as being a litmus test for the modern, since it would:

reveal whether Malta can be considered a cosmopolitan European democracy or whether it is to remain the backyard of Europe, burying its head in the sand on various issues which have been long established in advanced democracies.

Having successfully negotiated EU membership, citizens had to choose between two European cultures, described here as simple, visual opposites: the ostrich in the "backyard" or the new "advanced" democracy status of "cosmopolitan" states. Briguglio's treatise was echoed by Dr Joseph Muscat, leader of the PL, at the end of a 10-sitting debate on a motion for the holding of the divorce referendum. Muscat was reported as saying that the core issue before parliament was not one of divorce or the referendum, but on "whether Malta should start the process to modernise society so that the country would be truly European, and not just on paper" (Times of Malta, 2011h). While politicians engaged in hyperbole in an attempt to minimise damage to their hegemony, the discourse in the blogosphere alternated in equal measure between parody, finger-pointing and a feeling of despair, as in the following excerpt:

I am voting No because I think the possibility of remarriage is a commodity to be dispensed by special favour from a religious tribunal of law or to be bought from abroad. Only the rich and the bazuzli⁷⁶ should have a second chance. I will vote No because I despise equality of law. I am voting No because I am very UnChristian, and as such I reject Christ's teachings on Tolerance, Compassion and Understanding (Lonely in Malta, 2011).

7.2.3.1 Debunking the notion of a homogeneous culture and identity

The divorce issue provided bloggers with an opportunity to debunk the illusion of a homogenous Maltese culture, built on the strong identity of the successful family unit that subscribes to either of the two political parties but is bound together by the social glue of the Church. In a 2009 interview, the academic Oliver Friggieri (in Sansone, 2009) wrote that the Maltese national anthem, penned by a cleric, captures the essence of Maltese identity in the anthem's verses: Christian faith, Semitic language and European culture - even if "the traditional structures are dying". The divorce crisis highlighted the intensity of traditional structures and the yearning to pull away from them in search of modernity and an albeit uncertain future. Briguglio (2011b) observes how "the traditionalists of the fundamentalist type want us to believe we should return to some 'golden age' of the traditional family, which, in all probability never existed". This notion of a potentially imagined community, the failure to recognise the reality and permanence of broken marriages and cohabitation, is symptomatic of a Maltese tendency to "sweep social problems under the carpet" - a common Maltese idiom.

During the divorce debate, blogging was used as a counter-hegemonic battering ram against the monolithic cultural package of Christian identity and collateral attributes of absolute truths and 'common good'. Rather than focus on the collective, the emphasis was on working on a depiction of 'individual truths', and the urgent need for inclusivity. Bloggers were under no illusion of the resistance they would encounter in exploring national identity to make the case for diversity and tolerance. In 2008, Friggieri blogged that in the obsessive search for identity, the Maltese have "crushed individuality in favour of strong badges of identity: linguistic, religious and political". Being Maltese is about conformity, coerced through the process of education in the

⁷⁶ This is a colloquial Maltese term to indicate someone who is politically connected or has access to stocks of social capital.

home and the school and later, by the political parties and the all-pervasive clientelist system:

We will be forever corrupt. It is just part of our make-up. The ones who will not collude will be lambasted by the spin-doctors of the ones who are. For some reason it is easier for us Maltese to believe the worst of the best people and make excuses for those who have ‘sinned’. Maybe it’s not just us. Maybe it is everyone (Farrugia, 2011c).

Farrugia’s text appears to be in a dialectic with the self and with her extended, imagined community of “Maltese”. It exemplifies an interdiscursivity that echoes the omnipresence of the institutions and their social agents in civil society: the Church and its supplicant “sinners”; the political parties and their “spin-doctors”, ever vigilant to discipline and punish the outliers of Maltese society; and the clientelist system that somehow binds Maltese society and makes all citizens “corrupt”. There are also postcolonial issues at play in this text – hence the doubt that believing the worst of people may not just be a local, Maltese issue (‘us’) but extends to outside contexts (‘everyone’). Yet, in widening the observation to the outside context to seemingly try and get some comfort that Malta is like other countries actually ends up reinforcing the assertion that the social fabric of Maltese society is corrupt.

Bloggers opposed the monolithic discourse on cultural identity by providing alternative readings of the common good. For instance, the PN’s proposal for a new law to regulate separated couples in failed marriages was equated to yet another attempt to consolidate the Church’s role in annulments since separated couples were not offered the option of closure through divorce, or re-marriage. In practice, the new law to regulate separated couples was nothing other than a typically fudged local solution to a universal social issue: a new Concordat by another name that maintained Catholic hegemony. The counter-hegemonic struggle against homogeneity owes much to bloggers recognising they lacked individual courage in resisting monolithic representations of citizenship; and this realisation was probably cathartic in that early blog posts stirred others out of their seeming complacency to the divorce issue. In a post called “Cape Fear”, Friggieri (2011a) tries to rally a generation that has long disconnected from politics or ideology and submitted to the dominance of the hegemon as an act of self-preservation. The blogger suggests that the much-required “change in

dynamic” that may reanimate the subaltern has to be stimulated by the Internet and looking “outwards abroad”:

Very early on in life the Maltese come to a conclusion that nothing can be changed: they become disheartened till self preservation kicks in and they then disengage. They can reanimate themselves once they look outwards abroad or in cyberspace but not on the rock. On the rock they follow old paths and ways. You assume that there are thousands who want to perturb the system. I doubt very much that there is strong resistance to that sort of system change. It hasn't come about and won't for some time. Preserving the status quo has its perks wouldn't you say?

The undercurrent to the text is that social change is not in the interest of many who subscribe to the clientelist system of “perks” and favours. The “rock” is not merely a representation of the physical limitations of the island, but of the resistance to social change.

The size of the blogosphere inevitably led to the use of reflexive language in blog posts attacking the monolithic culture of ‘the other’. For instance, Caruana Galizia and Zammit use the term ‘Mother’ to associate the Church with hypocrisy and fear⁷⁷. Caruana Galizia (2011h) is strident about the “small village mentality” and the “oppressive, deleterious influence of the Church that stifles citizens’ moral courage” and makes them conform “to things that are blatantly hypocritical and simply wrong”, to the extent that “hypocrisy is almost part of the warp and weft of the culture”. Zammit’s (2011h) post ‘Mother’s Way’ depicts a young country still yearning for authority and leadership, and too immature to understand modern citizen rights and the value of individuality.

Since independence we have seen the process of “educating Malta” – we toyed with socialism and then switched to a supposed liberal-democrat framework infused with identifiable values. One thing seems to be stuck in time though – our

⁷⁷ The use of the word ‘Mother’ within the blog posts is interdiscursive. In the Mediterranean, ‘Mother’ is associated with the Church, as the powerful matriarch that accompanies Christians on their life journey, from the cradle to the grave. The association with hypocrisy and fear is linked to hegemony: as a dominant group in alliance with the State, the Church has taken a position that it is in the best interests of its flock that divorce is not an option. Within a traditionally consensual system, subalterns are expected to accept that this is for their own good. Fear of coercion is presented by the Church as the threat of excommunication. Zammit use of ‘Mother’ is also reminiscent of the nanny state, where clientelism is combined with strong leadership and hegemonic authority.

collective understanding of our society's rules, rights and how to use them. Many of us want our State to be the Playground all over again – and yearn for the adult voice of authority and protection based on the arbitrary rule of “he who knows best for us”.

The subliminal references to education and playgrounds hints at the paternalistic outlook within Maltese society that has facilitated the admiration of strong-fisted leadership and subscription to institutional hierarchies. Blogging gradually became an open channel for misrepresented people, the ‘new’ subalterns who needed divorce but could not procure one in Malta. The more the Church persisted in its monolithic discourse, the blogosphere challenged the presentation of the stereotype of the church-going, happily-married family unit and embraced the ‘Yes’ movement’s alternative of separated couples “waiting for a second chance.” Sciberras (2011) said it was truly liberating that the myth of the staunchly-98%-Catholic-nation had been dispelled once and for all and “put in the dustbin of history”. In this cacophony, Mario Vella (2011) explains why the hegemony of the historic Church and PN alliance is under threat:

The debate on divorce – if of ‘debate’ one may at all speak – has confirmed that Dr Gonzi’s government does not have the advantage of the classic Nationalist governments of the past. Certainly, it can no longer rely on even a semblance of cultural homogeneity among those that have so far supported it.

What may be breaking in Malta is not so much the polarisation of the “either-or” and “us-them” partisan paradigm (Baldacchino, 2002, p.203) as much as badges of identity, such as that of a homogenous Catholic culture. The affordances of blogging and other social media make it possible for a citizen to conceptualise a culture which is not necessarily that outside one’s door; where individuals are a node in the centre of their networks of choice. In this imagined Malta, the Maltese are not all Roman Catholics, despite 98% of the population being baptised; in the future, switching allegiances from one party to another on the basis of ideology or an electoral manifesto may become less taboo than it is today.

As the campaign progressed, the Church was regularly portrayed as a disconnected institution, fearful of losing its social domination and power, incapable of change because of misplaced pride. Its agents in the ‘No’ movement appeared incapable of formulating coherent arguments. Tortell (2011) attributed this to “panicked reactions as

they realised that people were thinking for themselves”, something impossible to “tolerate after 2000 years of social domination”. Merceica (2011) contrasts a Church that peddles myths and folklore with the rise of secularism, where technology facilitates information exchange and liberates citizens:

I still remember in my schooldays when the priest could explain every phenomenon from a cloud to a drought. It’s not a long time ago when the priest would go on the pulpit and urge the people to pray for rain. Those were the years when there were no radios, television sets or internet and, consequently, information sources were limited. Since then, secularism has entered our lives and religion has steadily moved out.

Towards the end of campaigning, intellectuals and bloggers worked in tandem over a range of media. The counter-hegemonic struggle against the Church-PN alliance became tantamount to an attempt at transforming the “common sense” of Catholic hegemony into “good sense”. Baldacchino (2011) believes that “a modern state does not succumb to the pretext of the moral majority” and reminds citizens of their obligations towards the social change enshrined in the EU:

The EU looms large as the symbol of modernity and call for change. The institution is the yardstick for both progress and disappointment with the pace of change; the divorce referendum an opportunity to demonstrate to the outside Malta’s ‘modern’ credentials.

The ‘Us vs. Them’ and ‘Malta vs. The Outside’ dichotomy was regularly played out in the blogosphere to illustrate the way the local situation flew against both the country’s EU membership and aspirations for a modern society, through the take up of technology and mass consumerism. The underlying concern was that the social crisis being played out in Malta was away from the modernizing gaze of the ‘outside’ and result in the “ludicrous” continuing to dominate citizens’ lives:

For all our technological advances and glossy lifestyle magazines, the Enlightenment hasn’t quite taken root here (Friggieri, 2011d).

The idea that ‘the world is laughing at us’ is ludicrous. The world does not know Malta even exists (Farrugia, 2011a).

On 24 May, 2011, towards the end of the campaign, social anthropologist and *Sunday Times* columnist Mark Anthony Falzon contacted a handful of bloggers to publish a guest post on why he would be voting ‘yes’ in the referendum. Falzon’s piece, presented as a list, went viral online, indicating the blogosphere’s preparedness to collaborate with social actors who were closely identified with mainstream media. The following excerpt is particularly poignant:

It is patent nonsense that divorce has ruined societies ‘everywhere’. The family is still very highly prized in countries where divorce is legal, and people go to enormous lengths and expense to sustain it. The notion of ‘ruined societies’ is simply another form of the little islander’s fear and incomprehension of the outside world.

The ‘stable traditional families of old’ are a myth. In fact there have always been couples, significant numbers of them, who did not fit the model. It was simply a case of ignoring or labelling them as deviants and misfits, and creating poverty and social exclusion as a direct consequence. It is absolutely essential to understand that we will not be voting to regulate for a ‘new reality’. Rather, it’s a case of a fairer approach to the age-old reality of marriage breakdown.

Falzon’s post is tantamount to an open letter to Malta to stop living a lie and acknowledge the diversity of its “age-old” social realities. It is the polar opposite of glocalisation in berating the “little islander” for pretending that Maltese families would be ruined if divorce, a solution from “the outside world” became legal. Significantly, it brings in the voices of marginalisation, where people with broken marriages are labelled “deviants” and “misfits” with the inevitable consequences of “social exclusion”: the discourse of hegemony is unmasked. On publication of the post, one could observe a renewed eagerness in the blogosphere to ridicule the hyperlocal world view. In this post, Balzan (2011b) uses hyperbole to echo the Obama rally call of ‘Yes we can!’ in his plea to rid the country of political polarisation:

I am voting YES because we have been given another opportunity to shove this country into normality. Just like every other national election, democracy is being distorted by the two headed monster in Parliament... I will vote because I want to put down the edifice. I will vote YES not only because the referendum is winnable, but also because a YES victory will give us hope that change is possible. YES we vote!

7.2.4 The creation of temporal private spheres

The organic crisis mobilised a blogosphere dominated by pessimism and inertia in 2010 into a wave of networked individualism in 2011. A small number of increasingly vociferous social actors gradually realised that blogging could reverberate beyond its natural echo-chamber into an increasingly hybrid private-public sphere. This was clearly no Habermasian public sphere, which calls for the absence of state interference in public discourse. A handful of Maltese ‘A-List bloggers’ like Caruana Galizia and Zammit facilitated discussions around comments on their posts, but most blogs operated as alternative broadcast media, with posts gaining longevity through the insertion of hyperlinks on social networks. The blogosphere, with its private sphere of writers and small community of commenters, was used as a springboard from which to connect with the wider debate on Facebook and the often rabid exchanges on the portals of *The Times* and *Malta Today*. While Facebook was the community platform for opinion, rage, mirth, analysis and despair, the blogosphere continued to be the locus for more reflective writing. Moviment Tindahalx⁷⁸ became an active Facebook community within days of Josanne Cassar (2011c) setting up a Facebook page on 8 May, 2011, and notifying her readers of its existence in her regular column on *The Malta Independent*:

Now that the religious zealots are out in full force, however, I’ve decided that my tolerance threshold has just about been reached. After all, if we are going to bring the destiny of our collective souls into this, then let’s always measure our behaviour in those terms. Malicious gossip and rumours anyone? In response to all these movements telling me how to vote and hinting darkly at what will happen to me if I vote yes, I figured it was about time I started my own movement. It’s called *Moviment Tindahalx* and of course, it has its own Facebook page.

As in other countries, the divide between the private and public sphere and public and private persona is blurred (Papacharissi, 2009). Falzon (in Massa, 2010) claims that the new physical-spatial dynamics of the social web lulls people into a false sense of security, since many Maltese find difficulty in navigating and managing the juxtaposition between private space and public interaction. The blogosphere remains sceptical of citizens’ capacity for rational exchange and debate: Biwwa (2010c) believes that polarisation, tribalism, patronage and the alienation of the independent

⁷⁸ Mind your own business movement.

intellectual provide significant barriers to a public sphere, as well as the traditional variables of size, insularity and social surveillance:

The Maltese are horrible at taking criticism, and as a nation we are completely ignorant of the notion of ‘positive critique’. Anything you say will be perceived as an insult against one’s manhood and one’s mother, and with the full force of the law being transposed from traditional media to the online world, you have no chance. The droogs are awatching and they are awaiting.

In an interview in 2006, Boissevain revisited the terrain of hyperlocal social networks as ‘friends of friends’, the subject of his anthropological work in Malta in the 60s and 70s. He believes the island cannot escape the realities of its small scale and the conflicts this facilitates, concluding that the cultural fabric remains unchanged from the 1950s. Boissevain is unequivocal about the fear of being labelled, falling from grace with the political parties and retribution “in an island where appointees are forever sanctioned by political parties and whose fate depends upon the favour they enjoy with the political class” (Vella, 2006). Boissevain said this has created “a nation of fence-sitters”; his hope for future collective activism was based on “a new generation who were cutting their spurs in NGOs”. The fear of expressing oneself is reminiscent of recent history. Debono (2010) cites the socialist regimes of the seventies and eighties and the personal mythology associated with former Prime Minister Dom Mintoff, whose own legacy is one of “tribal loyalties and impunity for those in power”. Debono believes Mintoff’s legacy continues to stifle everyday life and leads to “an aversion towards intellectuals” making Malta “largely politically illiterate.” He worries that citizens’ lack of interest in fighting for “absent checks and balances” in society could leave the door open for the return of “authoritarianism” and a more sinister form of institutionalism.

Debono’s sombre treatise of citizens’ inability to engage in rational debate is corroborated by several bloggers. Open information exchange and discourse without fear of retribution is likely to come up against a culture of surveillance – a “nanny state” that makes a show of public consultation, but whose modern credentials remain questionable:

We have collectively fallen for the dupe that is “public consultation” in the divorce debate. We are struggling to cope with the idea of a modern open society when our instinct and

upbringing keeps raising the ghosts of a nanny-state past
Zammit (2011f).

Friggieri (2011b) observes how “proper debate” is not merely a “rare commodity”, but alien to an island culture that:

seems to inhabit an individual reality all of its own making which plays out to its own specific rules and can only be deciphered using its own particular codes. From radio stations, to television, to newspapers and the discussions which excite the man in the street, we have a very particular brand of discourse.

Rather than spaces for informed information exchanges and debate, bloggers such as Fool’s Cap (2010) associate the online mainstream forums on *The Times* and *Malta Today* with a reaffirmation of the real-world, tried and tested discourse of polarisation. The apparent inability of citizens to resist mainstream discourse, or contribute to an alternative, is attributed to number of factors. Falzon and Micallef (2010) believe this is due to Maltese citizens’ difficulty in thinking independently, in their own interests. Sammut (2007, p.36), writing about the Maltese media, similarly believes that the independent thinking associated with intellectuals is not perceived to be a virtue in a civil society dominated by a bi-partisan agenda. Discourses framed outside this realm are cynically viewed and so journalists have difficulties asserting their independence. Yet the need to expand the autonomous spaces, beyond the dominant discourse of the political class, business and regulators to the discourse of consumers and civil society is more urgent than ever. Sammut (2010) berates journalists and bloggers in equal measure for their failure to create such spaces:

Journalists claim that they base their choices of news on ‘news value criteria’ but editors are under greater pressures to select stories that attract the highest quantity of hits. In audience-driven formats, the personal and the sensational have wider appeal. This also counts for blogs; we have all read blogs that became extensions of village gossip and served the same functions of traditional forms of social control. When less popular content about macro political and economic processes is sidelined, the “we media” become technologies of a very self-absorbed but weak “me generation.”

The criticism of a popular discourse that is attentive to online “hits” and the virulent version of “village gossip” within the blogosphere’s echo-chamber finds resonance within the blogosphere itself. Zammit (2011h), for instance, believes that the Maltese

have “an innate inability to question and examine the unfamiliar” as well as “an ability to blot out huge portions of their own experience that would be incongruous with the principles and dogmas that they have been brought up to regurgitate”. He cites Caruana Galizia’s description of the Maltese blogosphere as a collective of “sad young men with anti-social habits” (Zammit, 2011n) as an indication of a wider inability to engage in rational discourse:

The language of exchanges is in the same vein as school diatribes – and we should seriously ask ourselves whether this is because for long we have been content with this kind of schoolyard rhetoric. Much of it results from our lack of understanding of the basic functions of the institutions and rules (Zammit, 2011h).

In a culture where civic expression continues to be channelled through institutional discourse, it is inevitable that discourse outside this realm would be marginalised (see Falzon, 2007). The troika of the two political parties and the Church, in turn, lever on their respective hegemony to represent themselves as the primary anchors of national identity and the quintessential expression of national interest.

On 21 January, 2011, Flask (2011a) wrote a post called ‘Stalinizmu 2011’ about the state of the nation, written in Maltese “to avoid accusations about bringing Malta’s name into disrepute with foreigners”. The concern on how Malta is perceived ‘from the outside’ is a perennial cultural issue: from Malta’s need to live off tourism (and therefore provide a homogenised, positive image to the outside) to the discomfort of washing one’s dirty linen in public and struggling with perennial postcolonial inferiority complexes. The deployment of Maltese as the language of choice for ‘rage’ and masculinity and national pride (Grixti, 2006) has as much to do with Flask’s working class background as with an ongoing search for a Malta where young people can express themselves without fear of retribution by institutions and their agents.

Flask (2011a) believes “the problem” to be cultural, and wider than the entrenchment of institutions, whose only acknowledgement of time has been to modify tactics rather than the determination to sustain power over their adversary. In this context, “the media” are seen to be fertile ground for the operations of the hegemon:

Today, instead of using a gas cylinder, they engage a journalist to conduct a character assassination on you. It's far cheaper to produce tears that way.

Flask, like other bloggers, relies on popular culture, innuendoes and throwbacks to Malta's turbulent history in the seventies and eighties to contextualise the politics of cultural control. The reference to journalists involved in character assassinations is a veiled reference to journalists Bondi and Caruana Galizia. Flask however sees a malaise that is deeper than the operations of surveillance by journalists:

To conduct an intellectual revolution you need a critical mass of unhappy people – people with new ideas, intelligence and an iron will. However, in the generation of 'Xarabank', where Eurovision is deemed to be culture and Alex Vella Gera is a terrorist, we have our soldiers of morality, who spend days on *timesofmalta.com* passing judgement, giving voice to their prejudices under the guise of being good Christians so that on Sunday they can beat their chests in the house of He who told them: don't judge. The mass is happy as it is: a comfortable mattress for society and cultural hypocrisy, lazy and anti-progressive.

Flask's text is an example of discourse that permeates the writer's private sphere but gradually enters the nascent public sphere on Facebook because of the writer's offline social capital (as a DJ) and his public persona on the social network. Unpacking the text requires some knowledge of the Maltese media landscape⁷⁹. Sammut (2007, 2008) has written extensively on audience-oriented media content that both entertains and alienates and how this led to TV being associated with power within Maltese culture. In the same way that public broadcasting in the seventies and eighties was occupied by the PL hegemony, these days PBS is presented by the PL and its supporters as an institution managed by PN apologists. Flask updates and extends this occupation of public media to newspaper portals, now dominated by "soldiers of morality passing judgement": old media may be using new tools, but they continue to be dominated by old ideology. The old symbols of ideological conflicts and media manipulation remain intact while the new media of the private sphere hum with the temporal discourse of the disaffected.

⁷⁹ Alex Vella Gera is the author of *Li Tkisser Sewwi*, the short story in *Ir-Realta'*, the student university newspaper that was banned by the University rector in 2009. *Xarabank* is a Maltese talk-show phenomenon that Friggieri (2010) describes as "the dominant cultural voice, arguably rivalling the Church in its formulation of attitudes, manners of speech and mass consciousness".

7.2.5 The infiltration of the independent, English-language print media

Blogging's primary contribution as a counter-hegemonic force in the divorce issue may have been its influence on editors and journalists employed by the independent, English-language print media. Yet, in early 2011, as divorce campaigning started in earnest, the relationship between blogging and these media outlets appeared fraught if one were to rely on blog posts, or ambivalent, judging by the lack of print or TV media interest in blogging as a cultural practice. Mainstream journalism generally ignored the blogosphere to focus its attention on nurturing its relationship with and influence over core target readerships and audiences, including those interacting on its portals.

As the most popular media outlet, *The Times* remains the target of disparaging blog posts ranging from criticism of its conservative views to exposure of frequent copy-writing errors. There may be multiple reasons for this: bloggers are in the similar business of personal broadcasting and mediation of information for audiences, albeit "unknown or even imagined" (Keren, 2006, p. 75); some bloggers have had direct dealings with the mainstream media in the past and seek retribution through their personal soap box; others are aware of the fact that, with the exception of Caruana Galizia, no blog can aspire to scale up and reach a national audience reach like *The Times*. Matt Bonanno (2011), a former *Times* journalist, is representative of a disparaging view of Maltese journalism, when he blogs that "to work as a journalist in Malta one can be a law student, a European studies graduate, a priest, or even a qualified village idiot". In a particularly virulent blog post aimed at *The Times*, Rangoon Runs (2011) blogs that Maltese journalism was a rung lower than Maltese literature, "perpetuating archaic beliefs and stereotypes and pandering spinelessly to the Christo-fascist, neoliberal, semi-educated snobs it knows to be its readers". Zammit (2010a) uses more measured tones, but is equally critical of the hegemony of *The Times* in the Maltese media landscape:

Something like *The Times* is comfortable with the current status quo – where it has cushioned itself as THE authoritative voice on the island. Anything that threatens to be a platform for other voices to reach the masses is very dangerous to *The Times* and its likes.

The mainstream media's influence on power brokers and the way it remains "exclusive in its exclusion of the non-elite" (Moyo, 2011, p.758) is a constant irritant. In Malta,

the national popular has also taken up residence as commentary on the proprietary portals owned by the same mainstream media, compounding the blogosphere's suspicion of the motives of the mainstream media online, and particularly of *The Times'* editorial policy on user-generated content on its portal. In a 2010 post laden with intertextuality, Biwwa (2010c), a leading media gatewatcher in Malta, makes two key observations: a) The mainstream media is intolerant of alternative discourse in the public sphere because of a matter of style, rather than substance: "the media crucify anyone who says things in a direct and persuasive manner instead of browbeating with political correctness". b) alternative views are good business to mainstream media outlets, since they provide entertainment value to the citizen without damaging the media outlet's gravitas, and incremental revenue streams:

The more Lowells and Kaisers and Adrian Vassallos⁸⁰ they have, the better off they are ... More page views on their websites means higher CPM rates for online advertising, which means more money. I know something about monetising online, and you don't fool me. It's the same with print, except, it's even easier, because it goes like this: more controversy = more copies sold = more money.

The publication of user-generated content on *The Times* portal that would be considered inappropriate for inclusion in its print edition became the subject of much derision from the blogosphere – despite the equally frequent practice of bloggers seeking to plant comments on the portal to attract traffic to their own blogs. Rangoon Runs (2010) describes *The Times* as a "populist, family-friendly rag that can never find room for my rants". Zammit's disapproval of *The Times* comments' policy led to a short-lived spoof in July 2010 of Times of Malta.com (TOM Uncut), in retribution for the latter's refusal to publish his comments on the portal. Zammit (2010e) defended his attention-seeking spoof as follows:

Since freedom of expression is in vogue right now we thought of creating a website where the comments that are not exactly kosher on the timesofmalta.com would be welcome. Publish and be damned Baby!

In practice, the reasons why Zammit's comments were not being published may have more to do with the fact that at the time he was a columnist for *The Malta Independent*.

⁸⁰ Lowell is Norman Lowell, the leader of a far-right group. Kaiser is a reference to Karl 'Kaiser' Farrugia, who was prosecuted by the police for comments on Facebook about the Pope; Adrian Vassallo is a PL MP with controversial views on divorce and same sex marriages.

In this climate of distrust, it would have been pertinent to assume that in the divorce campaign the blogosphere would continue to operate in a silo, at best as stand-alone citizen media engaged in filter-blogging, produsage and media gate-watching. Yet, from early 2011, blogging quickly built a semi-official alliance with *Malta Today* and appeared to meet the unofficial, tacit approval of influential journalists at *The Times Malta* and *The Malta Independent*. *Malta Today* embraced the blogosphere by setting up a dedicated “Divorce Referendum 2011 newsblog”⁸¹ on Tumblr, which included live feeds of Twitter streams (with hashtag #divorceMalta). It also solicited bloggers to alert its newsroom of blog posts covering the referendum. Significantly, the feeds and hyperlinks to blog posts would be displayed after a short delay on the home page of its portal, providing individual bloggers with a temporal, nation-wide audience (see Appendix 9). Josanne Cassar, the Features Editor at *The Independent*, used her weekly column to become a vociferous advocate for divorce. Even more importantly, the editorship of *The Times* opted for a strictly balanced reportage of divorce-related news and opinions. Conservative politicians and the clergy were provided with column space, but often had to share a page with a pro-divorce opinion. There was an evident enthusiasm from journalists of all three English-language papers to highlight the increasing incidents of hegemonic discourse by the ‘No’ campaign, and to portray the Prime Minister as a man on a personal Catholic crusade. The type of subjectivity associated with blogging can be observed also in the choice of texts and titles of what would otherwise constitute normal news reporting: for instance, in reporting a Parliament debate on the proposed private member’s bill, *The Times* (2011m) described the Prime Minister’s speech as one “during which he occasionally sounded emotional”; and where he warned that “this was a delicate and important debate which involved the institution of the family”.

Towards the end of divorce campaigning, blogging appeared to be operating in perfect symbiosis with the English-language media. Though the quantum of their readership remained small, blogs had suddenly acquired an influential readership in the form of mainstream journalists who scoured discourse on the blogosphere and links on Facebook and Twitter for an indication of real-time citizen reactions to the two campaigns. Bloggers’ produsage of mainstream media news in turn extended the longevity of a news item, encouraging new cycles of opinions and ‘subjective’ views – occasionally more thoughtful than those in the portal comments sections, more strategic,

⁸¹ See Appendix 9 for screen grab of the blog.

yet still dependent on the mainstream media making the news. Bloggers' most enduring impact on the power of the hegemonic alliance of the Church and the PN may well have been to encourage a handful of influential journalists to break from editorial norms and operate as *de facto* organic intellectuals. Bloggers failed to free themselves from the shackles of the media, not least because they coveted the media's broadcasting powers - but they helped radicalise discourse on traditional media platforms. By the time the former editor of *The Sunday Times* wrote a passionate piece on how divorce would undermine the nation's stability, it may have been too late to swing matters. Rather tellingly, the column was not carried on the Sunday but on the less popular daily. On 22 May, 2011, the Sunday before the referendum, *The Sunday Times*' editor Steve Mallia was particularly scathing of a report in the PN media (*Il-Mument*) accusing the independent media of taking a pro-divorce position. He drew analogies between the PN media practices during the campaign with the propaganda style associated with the PL media of the socialist regimes. Mallia's defence of the *Times*' inclusive editorial policy included his view that the paper's role was not to influence the electorate, since people were capable of making up their own mind. Nevertheless, he reserved the paper's right to make certain observations, including on the "the puerility of the debate":

The No camp has attempted to startle us with the revelation that divorce has a bad effect on children – as if any child who has grown up with divorced parents would need reminding of that – and to add insult to the injury of those who have not been so fortunate, it has sought to get across this message with billboards and adverts depicting happy families. What I find seriously lacking is a will towards a cultural and mental modernization. Regretfully to admit, but it will be a long way until we can embrace a European civic identity (Mallia, 2011).

In its editorial decisions, *The Times* is also aware of the threat represented by *Malta Today*, as a primary consumer of blog (and hence) free content; and of its propensity to offer bloggers a nationwide platform, particularly since the deployment of its new portal in January 2010. What blogging managed to achieve during the divorce campaign is to re-introduce media organisations to the four elements Forde (2011, p.53) believes constitute "democratising alternative journalism": a) a resonance with the unrepresented; b) working outside established societal power structures; c) the role of journalism in democracy; and d) a role in the media landscape as an endangered species. What this study also reveals is that a multi-theory approach is required when addressing the symbiotic and increasingly hybrid relationship between blogging and mainstream

journalism. Blogging is here observed and discussed as ‘strategies for disruption’ yet bloggers would not have been effective without the provision of news content from mainstream media channels. The mainstream media may have had one of its finer moments in recent history when it started to become permeable to “the outside” by starting to listen to the new back-channel of citizen commentary. As Pettit et al. (2009, p.444) note, even in cultures that are resistant to change, media and communication initiatives are becoming more permeable, “constantly influencing and borrowing from one another” to the extent that media created in one tradition will increasingly be altered or transformed by another. In 2011, blogging capitalised on the fissures in the hegemony of old media, created by the latter’s eagerness to respond to the threat of “the new” by supplanting the discourse on the forums “on the inside” with further subjective discourse from the “outside”. What remained uncertain, at the end of the divorce referendum, was whether the seeming change of heart of old media outlets in Malta was a momentary adjustment or the start of an irreversible process of rapprochement with citizen media.

7.2.6 The development of a temporal alternative rhizome⁸²

The divorce issue mobilised blogging to function as a node in a new, temporal, rhizomatic media that facilitated the rapid exchange of information and the formation of unlikely alliances. The final weeks of the divorce campaign in particular were characterised by the speed with which citizens developed and shared content online in the form of text, photograph and video over the media of their choice, over a heterogeneous, non-hierarchical and ever-changing network. The horizontal exchange of information among citizens formed an alternative rhizome information system ‘on the fly’ that relied on blogs, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter for distribution and dissemination. In the process, one could observe the formation of a rhizome community - a temporal alliance of like-minded people facilitated by the activation of weak ties to oppose a common ideological enemy. In Malta, the chances of weak ties being rapidly activated into strong ties are high - even though this activation may be temporal. As an increasingly cosmopolitan, even multi-cultural location, the size of the overall online community is still large enough for the strength of weak ties to be grounded in demographics, and cut across the natural silos of community (such as age, religion,

⁸² As used in this thesis, ‘rhizome’ refers to a heterogeneous, non-hierarchical and ever-changing network. See entry in Appendix 1 – Glossary.

political creed and location. The alternative rhizome appeared to facilitate a process where bloggers could: a) create, nurture and lever on weak ties to become informed, online counter-hegemonic social actors; b) temporarily overcome offline socio-cultural and economic barriers (including issues of social capital) to develop ties with other individuals with similar interests; c) use blogging for the creation and execution of a counter-hegemonic campaign over an indeterminate period of time (and build new stocks of online social capital in the process); d) switch weak ties into strong ties through offline engagements on a needs basis; and e) gain early access to new information that could be transformed into face-to-face social relationships in civil society at a later stage. Online ties in the hyperlocal may be as dynamic and temporal as offline ties - it is perfectly possible that weak online ties were activated and developed to a strong tie for the duration of the divorce campaign and then faded back to a weak tie, in the same way that a blogger may have operated as a highly-connected node (or hub) for the duration of a campaign and then paused or even stopped blogging altogether after May 2011, once the divorce conflict was over.

It is the use of the blog as a strategic tool to generate ties that leads to the social interaction processes that contribute to social capital generation (Damásio, 2011). To borrow Ted Nelson's (1974) term, the community and the technologies that powered the alternative rhizome became intertwined. The existence of a common ideological adversary in the 'No' movement mobilised traditional political adversaries to collaborate online to resist the discourse of hegemony and briefly function as organic intellectuals⁸³. The blog became the core platform to which a rhizome of readers and commentators, using the online media of their choice, could refer back for essay-type, reflective, counter-hegemonic discourse. The blog's hypertext linked what was essentially a democratic if uncoordinated and diverse set of personal struggles to different bloggers and other multipliers on mainstream collateral and social media networks. In the process, temporal strategic alliances were made to facilitate an alternative virtual community thriving on a remix culture (Lessig, 2008): those bloggers with media affiliations were in a better position to operated their blog as rhizomatic media.

⁸³ As Storey (2008, p.81) notes, although Gramsci refers to organic intellectuals as individuals, it has become customary within cultural studies to consider the actions of "*collective* organic intellectuals – the so-called 'ideological state apparatuses' of the family, television, the press, education, organized religion, the culture industries, etc."

Fairclough (2003) describes how mediation involves the ‘movement of meaning’ – from one social practice to another, from one event to another, from one text to another; where mediation does not just involve individual texts or types of text, but in many cases a complex process which involves ‘chains’ or ‘networks’ of texts. Changes in genre chains are ultimately perceived to represent social change. The blogger’s messages are similarly diffused as ‘genre chains’ – albeit localised chains of linked text in a hyperlocal context facilitating the enhanced capacity for action at a distance. The attempts by the virtual community of networked individuals to address the same crisis across different online media facilitated the exercise of power.

Nevertheless, for the time being, power in Malta’s hyperlocal communications remains vested in the media outlets that break, influence and control what is deemed to be popular or mainstream news. If an item is not on *The Times*, or discussed on TV, it is difficult for this to be perceived as news. Until recently, *The Times* would rarely follow up on a story broken by another media outlet. Nowadays, the ‘free content’ of the comments on a media portal often triggers further reportage by a staff journalist in response, sometimes acknowledging the source. Slowly, the journalist’s power on what is included in the mainstream, and what is excluded, is being eroded. When it comes to hyperlocal blogging, the notion of the rhizome may be more appropriate as a description of the blogosphere than a social network. There is as much conflict and mistrust among bloggers as there is among journalists: Caruana Galizia and her opponents Pierre Micallef and Alex Saliba from Taste Your Own Medicine are examples of bloggers who thrive on what other bloggers develop, and are always, echoing Rosenberg (2009, p. 259) “spoiling for a fight.” Cliques are also created as a result of reflexive discourse across different social media. Nevertheless, the initiatives started on Facebook by bloggers during the divorce referendum, such as Divorzistan, Gandir Malta and Moviment Tindahalx appear to have been genuine attempts at community – the difference being that bloggers intuitively understand that community is congregating around Facebook, not the blogosphere.

Blogging became particularly effective as a counter-hegemonic force when it focused on entertainment and satire rather than trying to emulate the mainstream media’s broadcasting tone. The deployment of billboards by both campaigns was an important catalyst in this process. The ‘Yes’ campaign used visuals of battered women and children as part of a strategy based on shock tactics. The use of the face of Christ in a

street billboard campaign by the anti-divorce group *Kristu Iva, Divorzju Le* triggered an immediate, unprecedented Photoshop response in the form of remixed images and meme videos that in turn galvanised counter-hegemonic discourse on the blogosphere and on Facebook. Cassar (2011g) recalls the moment she saw the first satirical Photoshopped billboards:

It was like the vice, which had been pressing on my brain, had been removed. I see them as a refreshing drop of normality in an ocean of bigotry, narrow-mindedness and in some cases, downright deceit. The knowledge that there are like-minded people out there who have the ability to not take themselves too seriously is truly a balm to my (otherwise doomed) soul.

Divorzistan's satirical reworkings of the original billboards and meme videos found a national following on YouTube (see Appendix 9). The physical manifestation of archaic thinking in the form of religious icons seemed to be the final release for the new discourse. Online, it found both space and form, morphing from offline texts to the temporal rhizome of alternative voices – from the erudite and academic to outright rage; from the slogans of the billboards to the remixes on the Internet, with the blog operating as an echo-chamber for the rage in Facebook. Mazzun developed cartoons to accompany posts: on 18 May, 2011 a cartoon entitled 'Onward Christian Soldiers, Marching Back through time' featured Pope John Paul II and four smiling nuns. Inevitably, a number of bloggers started to exhibit a common trait, a kind of defiant abrasiveness or damn-the-consequences prickliness.

Divorzistan's playful use of the term 'Mullah' to mock the operations of the Church was also taken up by the mainstream media, demonstrating the reflexivity of language in a bounded community. Vella (2011) used his blog on *Malta Today* to write a piece called 'Mullahs in our Mist' to lampoon the No campaign:

their idealistic vision of a society made up of virgin wives and the supremacy of the Catholic church is simply a reflection of their religious chauvinism. Are we ready to let these mullahs control our lives?

The billboards did not just give rise to parody, but also reflection. Mark Vella (2011), an early blogger with his blog *Xifer (The Edge)* used one of the 'Yes' Campaign's

billboard slogans (which referred to bastard children and relationships out of wedlock) for a guest post:

I think that this strong message is a symptom of how this fight has become emotional, and how some elements within the Church and No movement have precipitated this situation, not with legitimate faith but with offensive strategies used to make Christ dance, in the style of the Interdiction, in Caesar's robes. This has become as historic a conflict as the political-religious issue of the sixties, except this time it's not a partisan one, but between religious fanaticism and progressivity which needs to remain vigilant not to get damaged and lose its way.

With the major institutions and the 'No' movement seemingly ignoring social media, and the yearning of young people to subscribe to the promise of modernity, a space was created for a possible temporal break from traditional, polarised positions. Caruana Galizia (2010a) recognised the danger posed to the political parties, early on:

While both party leaders keep their focus on that part of the electorate which they fear most – the diehard conservatives whose thinking is still stuck in the 1930s – they have failed to notice the hardening of an even more electorally dangerous swathe of opinion: those who are aghast at the predisposition, of both parties, to detachment from reality.

Briguglio (2010) echoed this the following day by writing on the way the main political parties and the Church had become dominated by "traditionalists". Despite the existence of some internal challenges, Briguglio believed that in civil rights struggles it was inevitable that the institutions would "ultimately succumb to the dominance of traditionalist and conservative discourse".

The final act of the rhizome was a milestone break with established media practices. On the evening of the referendum date, 28 May, 2011, the Curia issued a press release that was embargoed till 22.00hrs, when voting would close. The text read like an apology⁸⁴. The Church expected the media to abide by the press embargo, which bans media reporting of political events in the 24 hours leading to the date of a public vote. At

⁸⁴ "With reference to those persons from both sides of the camp who played an active role, we wish to convey our regret if anyone may have felt slighted by any words or actions expressed by members of the Church; from our part, we unconditionally forgive all those who may have hurt us. It is now time for each and every one of us to assess, even on a personal basis, whether we may have been a cause of suffering for others".

21.00hrs, *Malta Today* published the press release in its entirety on its portal, with a statement that it was “in the public interest that the Church’s sense of sorrow over its words and actions was made known to people now”. *Malta Today*’s departure from long-established press protocol triggered an instant reaction on blogs and social networks. Caruana Galizia (2011l) wrote:

When an apology is calculated, it isn’t an apology but a tactic, a piece of strategy. Apologies come from the heart; otherwise they are meaningless and worthless.

Mazzun’s (2011h) reaction was untypically laconic:

“This “modern” church is never going to learn any lessons. And to add insult to injury, it issued an apology to coincide with the close of voting. Why do you think we called this blog “Mazzun”?”

Farrugia’s (2011b) post is indicative of the emotion that dominated the last week before voting:

Every revolution starts with many people thinking the same thing in various locations. Today, unlike the days of the pigeon, we are united through Twitter and Facebook and online news portals which act like a dry forest next to a tiny flame in the height of summer.

When I realised that the fallout of a ‘no’ result would be huge, the domino and snowball effect on the government, politicians, the mullahs placed in every top position in every single financial institution in this land and this behemoth of a business enterprise called the Maltese Curia, I wanted to vote no. I wanted to sit back and watch while their house of gold-edged cards fell down and set itself on fire.

The pyrrhic victory of those who did not want divorce would have caused severe damage to the political and ecclesiastic hegemony regardless. Farrugia’s celebration of the real or imagined power of social networks is in contrast to the imagery of the old power: “the days of the pigeon” when information was appropriated by one-way media structures and could not circulate; the “business enterprise” of the Maltese Curia and its networks in civil society and alliances with the government of the day and politicians (or modern day “Mullahs”, in the new discourse of bloggers).

As the country waited for the referendum results, Zammit's (2011e) post, titled `ctrl+alt+del`, reflects on the way the divorce crisis exposed the earthworks of civil society and the function of the integral state. It highlights that the break with the past needs to be an untangling of the "woven mix of historic tradition, social mores and the law":

When we say that this crisis is not about divorce but about much more, we do not immediately realise that we are challenging the foundations of the DNA of our society. The underlying fabric of our society is a woven mix of historic tradition, social mores and the law. The interaction between influential centres of power and representation and the individuals that make up this demo is a multi-tiered, interest-driven approach that culminates in a collective set of rules, traditions and customs that make up our operating system set-up. We have come to recognise – thanks to this crisis – that what was on the surface a system that worked and was apparently accepted by (and acceptable to) all actually had developed more than a few glitches and was evidently slowing down the whole works.

7.3 Conclusion

This chapter analysed how the divorce issue mobilised a disparate, small group of bloggers into a temporal community of practice against the identifiable enemy of the 'No' movement, flanked by the Church-PN alliance. If the discourse of the Church-PN hegemony is framed as 'the discourse', the struggle for a counter-hegemonic discourse was tantamount to an attempt to transform 'common sense' into 'good sense'. Blogging levered on relations of equivalence to expose, resist and accentuate the differences with the discourse deployed by the hegemon. These differences were revealed in six distinct, yet inter-connected strategies used by bloggers to disrupt the hegemonic discourse, shaping the struggle as a direct conflict between the mainstream and the alternative. Hence bloggers zeroed on the dialectics and contrasts between: theocracy and the secular state; monolithic and individualised ideologies; modern culture and identities and the traditional; private and mediated public spheres; open citizen media and increasingly permeable print media; and temporal alternative rhizome and traditional systems of information exchange. In the process, bloggers operated as networked individuals and at times as citizen journalists, leveraging on the affordances of the disruptive medium and their individual social capital to activate weak ties and extend the reach of their alternative discourse to an unknown audience. During the conflict, as

counter-hegemonic discourse became more pervasive, there was a perceptible shift in the order of discourse, signifying that the disruption originating from blogging was starting to undermine the hegemon's consensual hold over universal discourse.

The next chapter discusses the reaction of the troika of hegemony in Malta once the result of the referendum was announced.

Chapter 8. The renegotiation of hegemony

Since hegemony is an ongoing process, it is customary for the historic bloc to mobilise whatever ideological, economic, political and legal resources it has at its disposal to police the boundaries between the desires of those it dominates and its own interests. This chapter analyses the adjustments made by the dominant institutions in Malta after the organic crisis appeared to be over. The initial optimism of the blogosphere serves as a backdrop to the actions of the institutions at a historic moment, to preserve their dominance in civil society. These actions reflect how the ideology underpinning hegemony is also briefly subject to renegotiation – an inevitable strategy unless the hegemon wishes to risk defeat or resort to coercion (Jones, 2006).

8.1 From euphoria to uncertainty

On 29 May, 2011, it was announced that 52.67% of votes had been cast in favour of the introduction of divorce legislation⁸⁵. The day after the announcement *The Times* listed the winners and losers, including the taxpayer who had to bear the referendum costs of €4 million (Peregin, 2011b). In the same paper, Debattista (2011) followed with an acknowledgement of the role social media had played in the ‘Yes’ campaign.

The blogosphere’s reaction to the referendum result is represented by Mazzun’s (2011d) use of the Bishop of Gozo’s words to celebrate the victory of “wolves in sheep’s clothing, brigands and traitors”. Busutil (2011) wrote that citizens had refused to swallow “the bait” offered by the PN and transform the latter’s alliance with the Church into a winning alliance against the PL. In describing the victory as the win of David over Goliath, Sciberras (2011) is representative of bloggers who used biblical analogies to echo the ‘Yes’ Campaign’s claims that its victory was unexpected due to the superior funding and media connections enjoyed by its adversaries. In the aftermath of the result, the blogosphere’s euphoria extended to the hope that the polarised cultures of political representation might have been permanently ruptured. Balzan (2011a) looks forward to future discussions and debate “without politicians”:

⁸⁵ With a turnout of 72 per cent there were 230,518 valid votes cast with the Yes vote obtaining 122,547 preferences (52.67%) and the No vote obtaining 107,971 preferences (46.4 %). There were 2,173 invalid or blank votes (0.93%).

It [the result] has shown us that the PNPL/church stranglehold on our lives can be loosened. It has shown us that there is life beyond zero-sum politics and each and every one of us can participate and become a protagonist. Not for notoriety but for democracy.

The overriding hope was that the voice of the individual might have momentarily gained influence over the traditional system of alliances; and that it was acceptable to foster beliefs that had long been marginalised: there was a feeling among the blogosphere and elements in the media of a break with the past. Rangoon Runs' (2011) triumphalistic tone is emblematic of a new-found optimism that flies against the ingrained pessimism of Baldacchino's (2002) nationless state:

Why was this referendum necessary? Because it exposed the Government's cosy relationship with the Church and highlighted the urgent need for a separation (or should I say 'divorce'? Haw Haw) between State and Church. For once in a very long time I am proud of my people and my country. Viva el pueblo!

The result was also interpreted within the context of individual freedoms and representative politics. Briguglio (2011b) perceives “irreversible changes” giving rise to the “individualized society” with citizens increasingly likely to “construct their own biographies than previous generations” whose lives were dictated by “inherited tradition.” In re-affirming the right of all adults to make their own decisions of conscience without the Church or the State, Caccopardo (2012) is more nuanced: “Pluralism is not just about broadcasting. The right of choice is not just about chocolate and toothpaste”. The text assumes that the reader is of an age that can tap into the historic memory: Caccopardo's signposting is to the turbulent early eighties, when under Mintoff's repressive socialist regime, state broadcasting became the overt symbol of the incumbent's media power, and foreign imports of chocolate and toothpaste were banned to protect the state-owned producers. Friggieri (2011c) is another blogger who makes a passionate plea for a greater awareness of the importance of the secular state and political ideology, since the nation's identity is determined by those who govern and appear to speak for all. In a scenario where the institutions continue to define the “country's identity” by operating on “an exclusionary premise” as articulated in their dominant discourse, Friggieri's post highlights how exclusions that appear to be “benign” to citizens actually lead to marginalisation, dominance and erosion of personal freedoms.

The writer Immanuel Mifsud (2011) wrote a guest blog post in which he associates the referendum result as the first of a number of civil rights that the Maltese have yet to secure if they truly intend to participate in a modern society. He doubts the truly altruistic nature of the Maltese, particularly should referenda be held on truly minority issues such as abortion, gay rights and irregular migrants. His use of the word “pothole” as an analogy for a need for cultural modernisation transforms every-day vernacular into a call for a new ideology. Clearly, he believes that it is going to take more than the “jolt” of the referendum result to make the process of change sustainable. The road that citizens need to “start to walk” is still littered with all forms of socio-political obstacles that have become inculcated in popular culture:

In the euphoria that the ‘yes’ vote has brought those in favour of change, we may forget that there are other potholes that need to be filled and flattened. The revolt can be exchanged for a revolution of the mind as long as the program can reach its final destination. The results of Saturday’s votes may shed some light on social phenomena that we had started to forget or that we ignored. I believe this event was a large jolt to force us out of the potholes we have fallen into, a jolt that may help us move forward to new destinations, a jolt that may motivate us to start to walk. To walk, we need to get back to the road, but the road needs to be without potholes.

Muscat (2011) also associates the result with citizens’ desire for social change through a “different model of governance” based on civil rights as opposed to dogma. Like Mifsud, she is hesitant in associating the result with political renewal, observing that although the Church’s power had been challenged, “the country remains divided on even the most basic issues that other European countries take for granted”. Farrugia (2011a) is much less circumspect:

The Yes legislation will go through because we now have a voice: the bloggers, the internet, Facebook and Twitter will see to it. We do not need the print media, radio and television – locally all run by the same bunch of people – to make this happen. We are already making it happen. Those in power – the politicians we voted into parliament and who seem to have less balls (as we saw in the past couple of months) than an empty bowling alley – need to recognize that we are angry. *Angry.*

The post is an example of a discourse of assumptions, bringing in other voices and texts, even if here they are implicit. Hence the divorce legislation is the result of populist

online movement; a collective of unseen texts is produced by an unseen tribe of “angry” people on social media who have rejected hegemonic mainstream media and weak politicians and now demand that the referendum result translates into tangible legislation. Farrugia’s former association with the media, as a former *Times* restaurant critic is betrayed in her reference to blogging as “mass keyboard hysteria”, as opposed to the fragmentation and temporality that she sees on Facebook, where “people just write things and within a few minutes you cannot even find the words, let alone who wrote it”. Mark Biwwa (2011c) is more articulate in indicating the linking and remix practices that positioned the blogosphere at the hub of the rhizome media:

Blogs brought the news to us in the light of the blogger’s comment on it. What I normally do is take a news story out of context and distort it, hold it up against the light, make it look grotesque. Others simply write satire while yet others manipulated billboards and posters. We all shared each other’s latest posts.

While Biwwa echoes Farrugia’s tribalism and obsession with the incumbent media (“the news”), he is uncertain whether networked individualism will be sustainable beyond the euphoria of the result:

A large number of us felt that their voice was carrying and that our message had better be sincere and rooted in rationality and compassion, as opposed to veritable trove of dogma, barbs and shoddy statistics which were quoted liberally in the ‘mainstream’ debate. Perhaps we now know we have a voice.... do we intend to keep on using it and be the voice of one crying aloud in the desert?

The voice “crying aloud in the desert”, replete with Biblical imagery, is poignant, given the blogger’s militant atheism. Even at the moment of victory, it is difficult to frame the future without resorting to the symbols of the present. In an interview, media academic Carmen Sammut remains circumspect about social media’s activist role, or the ability of Malta’s digital natives to use the Internet strategically:

While the internet empowers us, striking “Like” and updating your status on Facebook will not empower you to bring about reform. The internet has a mobilising impact and it may help groups to dominate the media narrative, but for reform to happen we need to engage in some form of substantive action. There were definitely more grassroots initiatives; there were more people talking to other people. I do not feel however, that

structures have learnt how to use the internet effectively (Debattista, 2011).

Although Sammut acknowledges that horizontal networks of information exchange are facilitating an alternative discourse online, she appears to doubt whether this alone will lead to social change. Her reference to “structures” is vague: it may refer to political structures and media outlets as much as to citizens wishing to use the Internet for counter-hegemony. Citizens in Malta may be at the beginning of the road to “reform” as much as to a mediated form of online protest by clicking “Like” on a social network.

8.1.1 The “metamorphosis” of the independent English-language media

If the counter-hegemonic actions of some bloggers were tantamount to a war of position waged by aspiring organic intellectuals, once the result was announced, the mainstream media also acknowledged its role in tacitly or overtly supporting the ‘Yes’ campaign. In two pieces (Laiviera, 2011; Sammut, 2011b) published on *Malta Today*, Sammut explains how the symbiosis between the blogosphere and the English-language media contributed the victory of the ‘Yes’ campaign, although she still associates blogging’s appeal to be limited to “younger voters”. Equally interesting is the view that the absence of a “blatantly editorially committed” *Times* facilitated the publishing of ‘columnists’ with alternative views. In practice, organic intellectuals within the organisation are likely to have been operating to ensure that these voices were not excluded in the campaign coverage. As opposed to other papers, *The Times* again chose to solicit the views of columnists and academics to assess the referendum result⁸⁶. Schiavone (2011) bundles the blog as a campaigning add-on to “the media” and expects the two political parties to “seek ways to maximise their potential in the run up to the next general election”:

In this referendum we have once again witnessed the power of the media and the internet. The next general election may be two years away but the battle to win over the media’s support begins now. I dare say that the party which manages to win the media’s support is likely to win the next general election.

⁸⁶ I was asked to write an opinion piece by *The Sunday Times* editor, which appeared on the print and online edition of 12 June, 2011.

Schiavone's somewhat simplistic reaffirmation of this new, symbiotic advocacy media is still short of an automatic endorsement of the blog as citizen media. In any event, the litmus test for the persuasive powers of any new media tool is a proper political campaign; real social change cannot be imagined without reference to the acid test of a "general election" and political hegemony. A more telling indication of the changing mediascape is in Matthew Vella's⁸⁷ (2011b) blog post on *Malta Today* on 4 June, 2011:

Certainly, the fact that this wasn't a general election allowed newspapers to take distinct editorial lines. Freed from the pressure of political retribution – a retribution that is delegated to advertising firms and businesses that provide private, independent media with a revenue lifeline – the media felt it could freely take an editorial stand in favour of divorce.

Blaming the media is a lost cause. We're mediating for our readers and asking the questions they want asked. We sensed the popular feeling that the no movement, inebriated by their religious zeal, did not want to acknowledge. They don't like the referendum result because they don't like the way popular democracy works. But that's not our fault.

Rather than an empowered, independent media, Vella sees a media that is still in fear of political retribution, and chained to the communicative capitalism of advertising. Indeed, political hegemony permeates advertising agencies and those with funds for advertising campaigns, who now also exercise power over the media's role as "interlocutor for the public". In a clientelist system such as Malta's, advertising firms and business people are traditionally reluctant to fund a paper that is too critical of the government of the day. One might speculate on whether blame games and fear of political retribution also extend to *The Times*, which is equally reliant on advertising revenues; and whether the 'liberal' position taken on the divorce issue by that paper was simply a calculated measure since the fallout from lost advertising revenues was likely to be minimal with a social issue that cut across traditional political lines. Conversely, the PN took an early anti-divorce position, so one may cautiously conclude that *The Times'* balanced position on the issue is likely to have also been swayed by the personal ideology of its editors.

⁸⁷ Matthew Vella is an editor at *Malta Today*.

8.1.2 Fissures in the Church's hegemony

Just before voting started, Spiteri (2011) predicted that the Church would lose out, irrespective of the outcome of the vote. *The Independent's* editorial is one of a number of articles on print media that interpreted the referendum result as a significant dent to the Church's hegemony over Maltese civil society. The editor marvels at the Church's loss despite its structures and privileged access to networks in civil society:

The timing of the referendum was favourable for the Church. It happened just after Easter, traditionally a time when priests visit each and every household to bless it (Calleja, 2011).

The Church initially attributed its defeat to the secularist discourse in both old and new media. On 31 May, 2011, the Archbishop's aide, Fr Anton Gouder blamed "media exponents" who "did their best to attack the Church on more levels besides merely the divorce arguments and created an atmosphere of anti-clericalism based also on lies and exaggerations" (Times of Malta, 2011g). On the same day, Vassallo (2011) countered with a blog post on *Malta Today* called "Sorry really is the hardest word". On 14 June, 2011, in a homily to mark Pentecost, Archbishop Cremona said that:

Malta found itself in a social reality where marriage and families were affected by an aggressive culture, as shown on social media (Times of Malta, 2011a).

Blaming the referendum result on social media indicates that the Church was aware of the counter-hegemonic discourse on blogs, but may have only been alerted to the alternative discourse far too late in the campaign to take remedial action, or possibly only after the campaign, through reportage on mainstream media⁸⁸. The reaction is typical of moral panics, when public discourse blames media and popular culture for triggering, causing or stimulating violence (Fuchs, 2011)⁸⁹. What is equally interesting is that the Church made little attempt at reconciliation after the defeat, choosing to represent the divorce issue as an outright conflict which it was morally obliged to fight

⁸⁸ On 22 July 2011, I was invited to attend a meeting with Rev. Fr Charles Tabone, the Archbishop's delegate for Social Communications, the head of PR for the Curia and a strategy consultant to the Church. Rev. Tabone wished to hear my views on how the Church could deploy a sustainable presence on social media. His interest had been triggered by a piece I wrote for *The Sunday Times*, published on 12 June, 2011.

⁸⁹ In August 2011, UK Prime Minister David Cameron used similar language when reacting to nationwide riots, and went as far as to consider temporary banning access to some social media platforms in the interest of national security.

to defend its rights. In the same Pentecost homily, the Archbishop was reported as saying that “the challenge was to give Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s”.

While the media speculated on the costs of the ‘No’ campaign, Mazzun (2011b) returned to the theme that the Church’s militancy about the divorce issue was as much to do with financial as political hegemony:

The people are realising that the intention of the Maltese Church is not as pure as they thought. The divorce referendum exposed the Church’s willingness to fight ferociously to retain its hold on people’s minds and protect its financial interests through its monopoly on marriages and annulments created by the stroke of Guido De Marco’s pen in 1995⁹⁰. Speak to older people and they will tell you how the Church stole property by whispering in the ears of people on their death-beds to bequeath their wealth and land and secure a guarantee of a straight trip to Heaven. Further in the past, the Church had a great business in relics and indulgences that it used to sell to heal your body and reduce some of the time you have to spend in Purgatory.

In this text of contrasts, between the purity of “the people” and its propensity to “fight ferociously” to protect its “financial interests”, the “older” generation is held up as a testimony of the Church’s malpractices. The Church resembles a medieval power broker – a peddler of “relics and indulgences” in return for contributions in kind, in “wealth and land” from its constituents. The reference to the “body” that can be healed resonates with Foucault’s disciplinary regime of docile bodies.

On the same day the referendum result was announced, media scholar Fr Joe Borg (2011a) wrote a post on his blog on *The Times* that appeared to be as much about disassociating himself from the Church defeat as providing a clinical analysis:

The whispering and then loud references (veiled and less veiled) to mortal sin, the Bible brandishing during televised debates, the wrong use (not to say abuse) of sacred images and occasions were among the things that, I fear, painted the Church as an organization bent on imposition not dialogue. The Church fell into two traps: (i) this is the Sixties all over; (ii) this is a struggle for legitimate distinction between Church and state. The Church lost on both counts.

⁹⁰ The late Dr Guido De Marco was the Minister who signed off the concordat with the Church.

However, in a subsequent piece, Borg (2011b) strenuously defended the Church's right to financially support a "lay movement trying to inform people about the divorce question and the negative effects of divorce". He describes media interest in the Church's funding of the 'No' movement's communications campaign as a symptom of a media starved of content in summer. Borg's use of a blog on the portal of Malta's leading newspaper to berate "inquisitive, investigative, crusading journalists" is one of several examples of the multiple public personas that regularly emerge from his writings. He is in turn a self-appointed spokesperson for the Church, and an intellectual who is equally critical of unprofessional, untrained journalism (as espoused by bloggers, commentators on media forums and *Malta Today*) as of the Church's inability to control its lay elements in strategic communications and PR initiatives.

The Church crisis was deeper than its inability to communicate in a coherent manner. Delays in investigating child sex abuse cases (Bonello, 2011)⁹¹, the ramifications of the acrimonious divorce campaign and media speculation on the quantum of the Church subsidy enabled bloggers to sustain attacks on the Church and its ideology beyond the referendum result. The blogosphere again operated as a rhizome in symbiosis with the mainstream media to undermine the Church's status as the nation's spiritual and moral leader at a historic moment of institutional weakness. In the process, bloggers could conceptualise their power through a new system of relations that could ensure circulation of texts through humour, nuance, rumour, joining of dots, guilt by association – tactics traditionally deployed in the village square to discredit individuals' reputations such as to leave them ostracised and deserving of retribution.

On 22 June, 2011, the Church finally confirmed it had donated €180,000 to the anti-divorce movement, with a further €56,000 raised from donations by groups, organisations, families and individuals, with the total funds mostly invested in media spend. The Bishop said the Church had done its duty as "the benefit of not introducing divorce would have considerably outweighed any expenditure made to lobby against it" (Laiviera, 2011). The news inevitably caused another cycle of negative posts in the

⁹¹ Since 2000, the Church has investigated 84 allegations of abuse involving 45 Maltese priests. The investigation lasted more than seven years with the Vatican finding 13 priests guilty, with punishment ranging from restrictions to the exercise of ministry and pastoral work to limits on access to minors. In 2003, a criminal court case was brought by a group of former residents of a Catholic orphanage against three priests, with all evidence given behind closed doors. During the eight-year case, one of the three accused died. On 2 August, 2011, the court handed down a guilty verdict on the remaining two priests facing criminal charges and sentenced them to five and six years imprisonment.

blogosphere. The Church's "traditionally privileged status as the nation's 'untouchable' moral torchbearer" (Vassallo, 2011c) was called into question. Its reluctance to comment on the paedophile cases encouraged comparisons with its enthusiasm for the recent moral crusade:

Interesting how the Bishop of Gozo can only have rage and vehemence towards those who agree with divorce. For these, he reserves derogatory adjectives such as wolves and brigands, but he chooses to remain silent on some monsignor who spent decades touching up some boy (Mazzun, 2011k).

The Church was presented as an increasingly irrelevant body in modern society, relying on pacts and agreements that no longer reflected the realities:

The parish priest and the politicians are preaching to the converted whereas the lost sheep are simply increasing in numbers and refusing the imposition of the moralist regime (Attard, 2011).

The PL suggested it was time to replace the 1995 Church-State agreement which gives the Ecclesiastical Tribunal precedence over the civil courts in annulment cases (Sansone, 2011). Scicluna (2011) wrote extensively that only by redimensioning the Church's power could there be a renaissance of a valuable institution:

The days when the Maltese Church could function as a sort of state within a state – administering its own affairs, and often the affairs of its flock, by a system of law and authority that run in parallel with, and can even trump, the authority of the state must now be formally brought to an end.

The failure of the Church's alliance with the PN was interpreted as an indication of the sudden loss of faith in traditional Church-State brokerage for the common good:

Much of the ordeal politics and the Church find themselves in is the result of the thick gruel they brew. For decades they have relied on measurements priests and politicians cut, make, and trim for the rest of us. The problem is that people's trust in the country's traditional yardsticks is slipping (Grima, 2011).

The deals cut between politicians and clerics suddenly seemed to belong to a bygone era. On a radio programme, Bishop Cremona changed tactics and attributed the Church's problems to a "culture change" in Maltese society (Times of Malta, 2011b).

The Bishop's arguments centre on popular culture and social exclusion: "while 30 to 40 years ago the Church was protected by a culture which shunned people who did not go to mass on Sunday, it was now tougher to admit going to church". The recognition of the Church's identity crisis is compounded by the references to a "protection" culture and the 1960s, when the Church was at its most militant, threatening dissenters with excommunication. Biwwa's (2011a) immediate reaction was to opine that in the 21st century the Church had yet to adapt to a new reality of "rabid anti-clericalism".

The Church's new discourse – of the marginalised and the weak – created further polarised views. Spiteri (2011) warned the Church that "if it continues to hanker for bits of theocracy, to resist the separation of Church and state, it will further weaken its place in our shifting society". At about this time, a handful of new bloggers emerged to defend the Church. Masini (2011) is an example:

The aggressive secularists are creating a belief system; or rather, another religion – that of the opinion of the majority. And whoever disagrees with this opinion, in this society that is supposed to promote tolerance and freedom of expression, is discredited, humiliated and publicly lampooned!

The Church's new online discourse may well be to represent itself as marginalised, the defender of the Catholic faith and the country's traditional values in society. On 26 September, 2012, Mgr Charles Scicluna was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Malta by the Pope after 17 years in the Roman Curia⁹². In one of his first interviews (Mallia, 2012), Scicluna admitted that the Church had to absorb the lessons of the divorce campaign and ensure a more coherent communications strategy in the future.

8.1.3 The political crisis of conscience

For Gramsci, what makes the modern liberal democratic state robust and resilient is not the coercive apparatus of political society (the legislature, the police and the judiciary) but the myriad ways in which the core elements of its self-definition and self-representation are internalised, or to some degree freely endorsed by most of its citizens – in particular those who do not belong to the social strata of the ruling or privileged

⁹² Mgr Scicluna served as Promoter of Justice at the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, which was led by then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger before he became Pope. He had a frontline role in uncovering some of the most difficult abuse scandals that came to light in recent years.

groups. The litmus test of the strength and stability of the State is “the dialectical unity between government power and civil society” (Buttigieg, 2005, p.43): the process of hegemony is about the practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling group not only justifies and maintains its dominance but manages to secure the active consent of those over whom it rules. To do this, the ruling group must allow for “a space for public opinion that is, or appears to be, free of coercion” (Fontana, 2006, p.37). Within this sphere of civil society, ideas circulate and world views are formed “freely” so that when these views and ideas reaffirm or endorse the basic principles underlying the existing social, economic and political arrangements, they do so (or are seen as doing so) more or less spontaneously, providing further legitimacy for the incumbent power. The maintenance of power through consent is dependent upon such relentless repositioning of the relationship between rulers and ruled, and the flexibility of the ruling power to respond to new circumstances and the changing wishes of those it rules. As Ray Williams (1977, p.112) observes, hegemony:

does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not all its own.

The political parties adopted different tactics after the referendum result to conserve their hegemony, under the microscope of the blogosphere’s more erudite representatives. The PL tried to take credit for the result and capitalise on the PN’s defeat; AD complained that its contribution to the divorce victory, as the only party with a declared pro-divorce position, was being ignored by the media; and the PN eased itself into another crisis, despite announcing its intent to re-embrace and reach out to its more liberal factions. PL Leader Joseph Muscat’s first speech after the referendum result is rich in rhetoric and attempts at social classification which is at the heart of political hegemony.

The people have not only voted in favour of responsible divorce legislation but they have underlined the secular nature of the state. But this decision also signifies the birth of an era where political parties can no longer expect to tell the people what to do. Malta has a new generation of voters who acted independently of the political parties. People have a choice between a confessional party that expected to dictate matters to the people and the Labour Party that listened to everyone without dictating. The Labour Party is the home of liberal-minded people (Sansone, 2011).

What at face value appears to be a magnanimous text is actually replete with claims and assumptions, aimed at both securing a tactical advantage over the PN and renegotiating a relationship with a seemingly more liberal electorate. These claims may be challenged: a) the vote was a reaffirmation of the secular – despite 47% of voters voting against the proposal, and an unknown quantum who may have been unaware or did not equate their vote to the secular state issue; b) Malta has a “new generation of voters” who break with the notion of a real or imaginary “past” where political parties told people what to do – and yet it is still engaged with political parties like the PL to represent its best interests in a defined future; c) the PL has proven its ‘liberal’ credentials by not taking an official position on the matter (although the PL leader had indeed stated that he would be voting in favour of divorce); and d) the PN is equivalent to a dictatorial “confessional party” – the term assumed to be in the public vernacular, while the PL is equivalent to an inclusive, listening party, “the natural home of everyone”.

Zammit (2011b) points to the political brinkmanship of the two main parties and attempts to texture the equivalence. The PL’s reluctance to take an official position on the divorce issue and avoid upsetting the Church is equivalent to the PN’s decision to create an official alliance with the same Church:

Both parties are suffering the consequences of the Spineless Coalitions they formed in the desperate attempt to garner the relative majority that gives them the coveted crown. The King got his crown but none of them can wield it in the interests of its people.

Zammit highlights the parties’ equal propensity to set up a coalition with the Church; how neither of them had the moral conviction to challenge its power in the attempt to retain their own hegemony; and then focuses on the relation of difference with the citizen – a veritable disconnect between political and civil society. There is also a subliminal reference to “common sense” – even the common good – in how the political is acting against the interests of its people.

If the PL could frame the referendum result as a victory, the PN’s difficulty in extracting itself from its Catholic ideology and campaign alliances was manifested in a set of statements that led bloggers to believe that Malta was heading towards “nothing

less than a constitutional crisis” (Friggieri 2011e). The Prime Minister, having initially provided assurances that the outcome of the referendum result would be respected, announced that PN MPs would be allowed a free vote on the divorce bill to “safeguard the common good” and respect “the conscience of those for whom it is not possible to approve the law and who have to abstain or vote against” (Debono, 2011c). The Emeritus President, Eddie Fenech Adami wrote that MPs were under no obligation to move ahead with enacting divorce law on the basis of a referendum result, and suggested that the issue could be postponed till the next election:

I have always maintained that moral issues should not be decided on the principle of democratic majorities but, rather, on the principle of what is morally right. Malta has repeatedly found itself at the crossroads of civilisations throughout history and yet managed to maintain its identity as a Christian nation (Times of Malta, 2011).

As the Prime Minister who took Malta into the EU and a living symbol of ‘modern Malta’, Fenech Adami’s treatise on Christianity as a national ideology that supersedes democratic majorities clearly resonated with the PN hierarchy. The belief that a crisis of historicity still had to be resolved along the known and trusted paths of the past, irrespective of any referendum result, indicated that the PN’s dilemma with personal conscience and moral issues extended beyond the Prime Minister’s personal zeal and moral conviction. On 3 June, 2011, Minister Austin Gatt announced his intent to vote against the divorce bill:

I am against divorce, have voted no and will vote no in Parliament because for me it's a matter of conscience and conscience is not an elastic band that changes with vote levels (Peregin, 2011a).

The repetition of the word “no” is meant to position Gatt both as a political and moral authority - unwavering and consistent as a citizen voter, and as a legislator “in Parliament”; in tune with his conscience, which is stronger and impervious to an external vote. The deployment of relations of meaning inclusion (hyponymy) is observed where “being against divorce” is the opposite of the “elastic band.” Gatt followed with another contribution which is preoccupied mainly with the “aestheticization” of his public identity as a strong politician (Harvey 1990, in Fairclough 2003, p.183). Even in the apparent defeat of implementing an unsavoury

result, the discourse is still manipulative, emphasising the power, authority and moral superiority of the social agent as a member of a collective:

We have committed ourselves to seeing that a result that we do not like is implemented. Rest assured the Divorce Bill will be assured a majority as the Prime Minister promised. We will do it our way, without the need to be preached at or being taught lessons by people who have nothing to teach us (Gatt, 2011a).

If Gatt's discourse is typical of hegemonic meaning-making, the blogosphere recognised it as such. On the same day Gatt's letter was published in *The Times*, Caroline Muscat wrote the following on her Facebook wall and linked back to her blog post of 7 March, 2011:

Austin Gatt insists that he will vote against the will of the people on the Divorce Bill in Parliament – it's in line with his undemocratic stand before the referendum. If he can't serve the people, he should step down.

Muscat is typical of bloggers who use social networks and micro-blogging sites as inbound links to blog posts, extending the longevity of archived blog posts through timely updates on Facebook and Twitter. It is uncertain if Gatt was aware of what Muscat wrote, but her followers would have been. Again, there is reliance on intertextuality in the inclusion of other voices; in this case, there is a reference to the politician's "undemocratic stand before the referendum" and the pingback to the old blog post.

The PN's decision to allow a free vote in parliament instead of endorsing the referendum result spurred the Mazzun team to continue blogging. By 5 June, 2011, a week after the referendum results, the text on the blog's 'About Us' page was replaced and the masthead changed to show a picture of the Prime Minister in parliament with the text "divorced from the will of the nation". Mazzun lauds its own "contribution" to the referendum result and its exposure of "the web of interests, hidden agendas and power structures of those who were against the introduction of divorce in our country". There is a sense of history in the making by referring to the date that the blog was set up "on the first day of the referendum campaign". At face value, the blog was repositioned as the online mouth-piece for a secular movement with "a progressive agenda that can enable us to close the gap with other EU countries in terms of rights and standard of

living”. The perennial desire for modernity associated with EU membership is mixed up with support for “progressive ideas” and “progressive agendas” – slogans subsequently adopted by the PL. The use of the word “we” gives the blog a more institutional, political bent and a sense of self-importance; the blog is increasingly starting to incorporate an advocacy tone. Nevertheless, the blog’s PL sympathies did not prevent it from using relations of equivalence to compare the PN’s refusal to accept the referendum result with the PL’s refusal to accept the EU referendum result in 2002 – another case of history repeated - and to berate MPs of both sides of the house who decided to abstain against “the will of the people” as in this post (Mazzun, 2011a):

Cowards! This is the description that best fits those MPs who intend to abstain in voting on divorce legislation. We prefer it if an MP says that he can never agree with divorce, votes against and then resigns from Parliament, rather than an MP who thinks that he is going to save his ass by first being militant against divorce (and not simply indicating his view) and now intends to abstain. And we are looking at both sides of the house rather than the Nationalists!

The independent media and the blogosphere were unanimous in suggesting that parliamentarians that had a problem voting in favour of divorce should resign (Debono, 2011d; Bonello, 2011). The discourse shifted to political strategy, and the systems of alliances within civil society that keep political parties in power. Falzon (2011a) portrays the PN as a party taken over by individuals “holding rather pathetic and obsolete ideologies”, traits which he contrasts with the PL, led by a politician with an innate ability for craftiness, flexibility and opportunism. Falzon describes the new PL leadership style as a “feet-on-the-ground sort of enterprise....a quality and a way of doing things which is not uncommon in Malta... especially in the villages”. Caruana Galizia (2011b) blogged relentlessly about the PN’s seeming inability to repair the damage to its hegemony, accusing the Prime Minister of “strangling the party” by planning to “vote against the will of the people” and allowing “loony fringe” to make “its way to the centre”:

A position against divorce is not just a position against divorce. It’s a ruddy great label that says you live in another century and are authoritarian and paternalistic, that you want to control what others do and that you even think that what they do is somehow your business. When you surround yourself with people who think exactly as you do, you end up thinking that you’re right all the time, even when it is so very obvious to others that you are heading at 100mph for a concrete wall.

The intertextuality of the text, with the voices of unknown ideologues isolating the Prime Minister from the will of the majority of voters, is echoed by Mifsud Bonnici's (2011) post, who attributes the PN's crisis to its unconditional, historic alliance with the Church which transformed it into a "confessional party" operating as a "messenger for the clergy" and run by a "circle of leadership that has become too small to be representative of the electorate". PN-friendly bloggers rallied to warn the party that it risked becoming an echo-chamber of religious zealots and lobbied for the removal of 'religio et patria' in the party's emblem. Echoing Mario Vella's (2011) blog post about the politics of alliances, Caruana Galizia wrote that rather than being "the much-touted 'coalition of liberals and conservatives'", the PN has remained in power for many years by being a historic coalition of actual Nationalists and former supporters of the Strickland Party and their descendants. The Prime Minister's misunderstanding of "who votes for his party" was making this coalition tenuous:

What we are seeing now within the Nationalist Party itself and among its supporters, and it is unmistakeable, is the two mindsets in direct, head-on conflict. The socio-cultural split in Malta is real and not imaginary, and the Nationalist Party has to carry on accommodating it or shrink back to what it was before the 'Sliema *Stricklandjani*'⁹³ joined it (Caruana Galizia, 2011g).

The media pundit and PN sympathiser Lou Bondi (2011d) was equally uncomfortable with the PN strategy:

It won six of the past seven elections by being a broad church, cobbling together a shifting and wobbly coalition of economic, social, religious and cultural forces. The PN was never a liberal party and highly unlikely to become one. Yet it was always the welcoming home of genuine liberals. If it starts to make them feel like unwanted guests rather than household members, as it did over the divorce issue, it would be signing its own electoral death warrant.

The association of the PN with "a broad church" is a subliminal way of associating the party with the root of problem (the straightjacket alliance with the Church). Bondi is concerned that the hard-line position on the divorce issue and subsequent lack of

⁹³ Sliema is Malta's premier and most socially-elitist town. By juxtaposing the town with 'Stricklandjani' – that is, former supporters of the Strickland Party - Caruana Galizia is highlighting how the PN risked losing support from predominantly English-speaking people who traditionally favoured linkages with the UK, and would therefore never feel comfortable within a party that resorted to religious zealotry.

flexibility to renegotiate its traditional internal alliances risked fracturing other party coalitions within civil society - which is what made the liberal 'church of practice' possible and left the PN in power for so many years. It is a lament for hegemony in trouble, and a call to action to renegotiate relationships before the litmus test of an election.

In a post called 'The hunt for the Liberals,' Muscat (2011c) observes how the crisis of ideology leading to "a growing disillusion with politics", despite political parties' best efforts to affirm or re-establish their liberal credentials. Muscat believes political manoeuvring is simply leading to cynicism, "the opposite of what a social liberal agenda sets out to achieve":

If politics is seen simply as 'buying' consumers in a political marketplace, it will soon lose all coherence, and hence, in the longer term, it will lose all credibility. Pure manoeuvre replaces attempts to reflect values. The country needs democratic reform to address the inadequacies that are the result of these two parties' control of political processes. The 'liberals' they are now targeting will influence which of them gets the reins... it is now time for the 'liberals' to voice their demands and articulate the change they want to see. If they don't, the political parties will do it for them and the only change that will be seen will be in language, not policies.

As a former journalist, Muscat instinctively adopts the largely semantic "strategies of manipulative discourse" (van Dijk, 2006, p.376) in her text. Her reference to the "buying [of] consumers in a political market place" sets the tone for the politics of manipulation, where "political processes" merely result in "inadequacies". The intertextuality is indirect in that we do not know the source of the claim that there is a "growing disillusion with politics in Malta": it may well be imaginary or simply an articulation of Muscat's own views of the ongoing political crisis. Her hope for counter-hegemony is vested in genuine liberals overcoming cynicism to seize the hegemon's moment of weakness and open up the spaces for re-negotiation. This requires the articulation of demands for social change in an alternative, coherent discourse that may influence the network of practices (or social order) before the discourse of political manipulation readjusts. Muscat understands that the opportunity for citizens to renegotiate hegemony is temporal. In the absence of a broad movement capable of challenging the existing order of discourse, the balance of forces will

inevitably shift back to the dominant class which re-establishes its hegemony on the basis of a new pattern of alliances (Simon, 1987).

In a text that exemplifies the dialectic relationship between discourse and other social practices, James Debono (2011b) describes how the PN's political will to invest in the socio-economic aspects of modernisation was never matched by a corresponding will to renew ideology:

The opening up of markets, increased consumerism, media pluralism and the growth of the leisure industry, along with the party culture throughout the 1990s also gave the impression to many of us who grew up during those times that Malta was gradually changing and becoming more like the rest of the world. In many ways, these economic and social changes could well have paved the way for greater secularisation. One expected the ideological superstructure to respond to changes in the social and economic infrastructure of society. But the standard answer was: "it's not yet the time for these things".

In this post, the Marxist superstructure model is used to signpost the lack of progress on secularisation despite the advancement of the socio-economic base. The blogger believes there has been a conscious, paternalistic decision by the political to discourage the generation, circulation and operationalisation of knowledge that could have facilitated the process to the promised land of secularisation. The inclusion of reported speech helps the reader associate the lack of political buy-in with an external 'voice'. Instead of social change along the lines of "the rest of the world", the discourse that could have fuelled such social change was short-circuited by Christian ideology.

As the political parties sparred over their liberal credentials in the run up to the parliamentary vote on the divorce bill, bloggers described the incumbency of bi-party polarisation as a system that can never be uncomfortable with the very notion of a liberal civil society. Polarisation necessitates the exclusion of the historic 'other'; Malta's voting system also effectively neutralises the possibility of a third party such as AD having parliamentary representation. A moral, civil rights issue like divorce merely exposed the real limitations both parties have in embracing liberal ideologies. These two posts by Debono and Zammit are insightful:

The liberal agenda is much longer than divorce....In its wider sense liberalism is a frame of mind alien to both major parties in Malta. In fact the very two party system militates against

political liberalism which seeks to limit majority rule (Debono, 2011e).

Our parliament is designed around – and bends to – the will of a duopolistic anachronism. Once the divorce issue hit the fan it exposed the fundamental weakness of both parties: contemporaneously. No matter how much a “wobbly coalition of economic, social, religious and cultural forces” you can cobble together, no matter how far you can go with the oxymoronic faux progressives it is blatantly impossible to retain a semblance of coherence when faced with a clear-cut decision on a “moral issue.” The battle for the emancipation of the Maltese citizen is far from being won (Zammit, 2011m).

On 25 July, 2011, the divorce bill was carried by a majority in parliament, despite Prime Minister Gonzi and other MPs voting against the bill, and it became law on 1 October, 2011. The first divorce in Malta was granted on 21 October, 2011. Many perceive Gonzi’s stewardship to have been dented for the sake of his personal Catholic ideology. In November 2011, the PN published a manifesto, with ten concepts charting its vision for the future. The first of the ten concepts, entitled “Our roots” demonstrates the difficulty the party has in reclaiming its European Christian-Democrat credentials and distancing itself from the “confessional party” tag it earned during the divorce referendum:

We are not a confessional party or belong to the Church and well recognise that the State and the Church are separate and that one cannot dictate to the other. These values are part of our roots. They are the values that inspired us in all our initiatives throughout our political course so our country and reach its objective as a sovereign, independent and European state. These values continue to inspire the politics we embrace and implement.

The fact that the PN felt obliged to spell out its democratic credentials and disclaim its ‘confessional party’ tag is indicative of the difficulties the party has in managing the damage of the divorce campaign. In 2012, the party continued to deal with internal conflict, triggered by the revolt of backbencher MP, Franco Debono, complaining of party oligarchy and demanding reform. The blogosphere continues to track back to the divorce issue as symptomatic of the party’s inability to renegotiate its dented hegemony and consider the values and priorities of those it leads:

The real cause of the crisis in the PN is to be found in the divergence of ideas and positions on public policy issues,

specifically divergences on divorce legislation and the implementation of reforms. On both issues GonziPN's hand has been forced, with the unpalatable consequence that the party hierarchy has been made to look weak. In attempting to expose the views of another, one is forced to make one's own view appear infallible and absolute, which is a procedure altogether to be avoided if one is making a specifically non-evaluative investigation (The Maltese Pamphleteer, 2012).

By March 2012, both the PL and PN set up think-tanks committed to re-engaging with civil society⁹⁴. In another attempt to retain its hegemony, the PN is also softening its position on the notion of the common good to a more individualised version, possibly paving the way for a less militant Catholic ideology. Like any hegemonic institution, as it attempts to retain power, it is visibly engaged in a process of compromise, and an ongoing adaptation of its existing system of alliances to the changing conditions and activities of the opposing forces.

8.2 The invasion of the blogosphere

Although both parties have refrained from making official statements on their social media strategy, soon after the referendum result was announced, the PN started to invade the blogosphere. The majority of new bloggers had clear political connections: sons of ministers and PN media personalities, local councillors and party activists. A handful (such as 'A Nick Review') were set up with monikers, only for the blogs to be deactivated after several months of intense activity and replaced by others. In one of her final columns for *The Malta Independent*, on 28 August, 2011 columnist Cassar (2011e) equated this invasion of the blogosphere to the unleashing of "pit bulls", with the assumption that the decision to unleash the new bloggers was taken by central government or its agents. In 2012, the PN also set up a digital media strategy team headed by Dr Gege Gatt, the IT Minister's son. The internal organisational changes and the proliferation of new blogs indicate that the PN decided to mobilise in preparation for an early general election in 2013.

The new-style partisan, political blogging focused on a relentless attack on the PL leadership and policies, and a defence of government policies when compared with

⁹⁴ I was invited to join both the PN and PL's think-tanks, although I am unsure as to whether this was due to my work as a strategist or a digital media academic. On 2 March, 2012, I was invited to discuss the issue of online civil activism with MEP Dr Simon Busuttil, appointed by the Prime Minister to lead a process of re-engagement with civil society.

previous PL administrations – primarily during the 1970s and 1980s, and the short-lived government of Alfred Sant from 1997-1998. The divorce crisis did not feature in any of the new discourse, but some elements of citizen engagement were retained, such as the use of reworked imagery to lampoon PL MPs or known PL sympathisers. Blogs such as “I Love Malta”, “Matt’s Blog” and “Pawlu’s Pub” (run by Minister Austin Gatt’s younger son Paul) are a throwback to a discourse associated with newspapers under direct political ownership - a genre chain that continues in the tradition of partisan TV, radio and print. The texts’ orientation to difference is to accentuate polemic and conflict in an open struggle over power, with the PL represented as the adversary waiting to take over the PN’s hegemonic crown. What these blogs have in common with the counter-hegemonic blogs of the divorce crisis is that they are still dependent on news originating from the mainstream media collateral for their sources – primarily news items on TV, *The Times* and *Malta Today*. What is different is that they are inevitably less reflective and unashamedly partisan: what may have started as a defensive strategy is increasingly becoming a new avenue for political broadcasting by the political activist. It is too early to determine if this type of partisan blogging is effective in mitigating the damage to the PN hegemony after the divorce debacle or whether it can aspire to influence the dominant discourse online - but the blogs were noticed by both the mainstream and the incumbent blogosphere. Claire Bonello (2011), a columnist on *The Sunday Times*, was particularly critical of the way the PN appeared to have lost any sense of “moral high ground” and “dived into the filthy gutter where they fling mud at their opponents”. In the post-divorce era, the political discourse is now incorporating “hate blogs which spew out a stream of scurrilous rumours, half-truths, and distortions”. She sees parallels between the PN blog discourse and a notorious, long-running radio phone-in programme by Emanuel Cuschieri, a PL party activist:

While Cuschieri’s radio programmes had anonymous callers phoning in and hinting at all sorts of scurrilous rumours about the Nationalists, the blogs set up by the PN propaganda people have anonymous commenters or those hiding behind a pseudonym, and spitting out all sorts of scurrilous rumours about anyone who isn’t a Nationalist lackey, online. The latest person to follow in the Cuschieri tradition is Lou Bondi.

The comparison of the new PN blogs to Cuschieri’s old radio show is an example of historicising discourse, leveraging on popular media culture to quickly draw parallels using relations of equivalence. The text is rich in interdiscursivity, where the voices of

“anonymous callers” on the radio now take the form of “anonymous commenters” on PN blogs: the medium is different but the political rumour-mongering is unchanged. The comparison of Cuschieri to Lou Bondi, a media talk-show host on PBS is equally poignant. Bondi was the most high-profile ‘new’ blogger of the summer of 2011, starting his blog on 2 July, 2011. For five months, Bondi’s anti-PL blogging dovetailed with the blogs of Borg Cardona and Caruana Galizia, including frequent warnings to Prime Minister Gonzi to distance himself from the damaging alliance with the Church.

The new bloggers adjusted to the ‘always-on’, asynchronic affordances of the medium under the gaze of the incumbent blogosphere. Cassar (2011f) marvelled at PN “media people suddenly being gripped by the irresistible urge to set up their own blog in the middle of summer”, traditionally not a period associated with political activity. Zammit (2011i) believes that the increased politicisation of the blogosphere will lead to further polarisation and contestation rather than a new public sphere:

The blogs, the blogosphere and the mainstream media comment boards are one way of gauging our reactions to the main events in our lives. They also provide another testing ground. They are a microcosmic reflection of the manner in which our society operates: with its little battlegrounds for prima donnas, with the pushing and shoving for cornering tiny markets and perceived centres of power, and with the constant battle in which the loudest, noisiest and most lewdly entertaining tends to win the public’s baying approval. Welcome to the 21st century Colosseum.

The reflexivity in the Maltese blogosphere and Zammit’s influence on new bloggers with ‘political’ aspirations can be traced in the following excerpt from a post by Andrew Azzopardi (2011), an academic and presenter of a weekly radio-show, who started to blog on 1 July, 2011. Here, Zammit’s “21st Century Colosseum” is incorporated two months later to reflect the new blogger’s discomfort with the conflict of the read/write web:

It’s becoming one big arena, gladiators *sive* bloggers waiting for their turn to have a go at smashing each other with their keyboard instead of the sword or lance....and the people are all set with their thumbs – ready to give a thumbs up or a thumbs down depending on how many blood arteries go bust.

The difficulty media people such as Azzopardi, Cassar and Bondi find in blogging has much to do with their assumption that the medium is simply an extension of their mainstream media persona (on radio, newspaper and TV respectively). They are broadcasters in search of a new audience, struggling with the always-on, two-way backchannel of instant feedback, not just from fans (and party supporters, in the case of Bondi) but also from unknown individuals and people hiding behind monikers. For instance, the blogosphere tracked back to an old YouTube clip of Bondi referring to Maltese bloggers as ‘*pcielaq*’ on TV – “senseless gossipers” (Zammit, 2011c). Bondi (2011d) in turn appears to speak for the crop of recent new ‘political’ bloggers when he laments the immediacy of the medium. He believes that pressure to provide an immediate response contributes to a lack of reflection and logical debate in online discourse:

It is as if people want government by instant opinion. A political decision or event is reported online and within minutes you have a scroll of fully-formed, categorical opinions. No ifs or maybes in sight. Now democracy was invented precisely to allow opinions to clash, thereby producing a healthier, more open society. But the assumption of classical democratic thought always was that opinions are rationally formed and based on facts. The social media are shattering this assumption.

The blogosphere remains fertile ground for former print journalists like Josanne Cassar, Matt Bonanno and Caroline Muscat, spurred by a mix of ego, public relations management and personal ideology. Instead of being ‘silenced’ once they lost access to their mainstream media platform, their blog posts regularly switch between personal diary and citizen journalism - watching, commentating, reporting and mediating with a more personal tone, no longer encumbered with professional codes of conduct and editor guidelines. What they have lost in journalism accreditation, social capital and ready access to news stories has been gained in a greater freedom to voice an opinion and advocate a cause.

Nevertheless, blogging remains difficult to manage for those in the public limelight. On 30 November, 2011, Bondi blogged a “last post” in which he announced that the blog’s popularity had “complicated life” in his day job, producing and presenting Bondi+ on PBS. On the same day, *Malta Today* wrote that behind Bondi’s decision to stop blogging was a direct order from the Minister in charge of public broadcasting (Vella, 2011). The PL had also complained to the Broadcasting Authority that Bondi’s blog

was blatantly partisan and broke the code of ethics imposed by PBS on its staff, including external producers. Bondi's decision to stop his blog was met by much mirth in the blogosphere, including some satisfaction that blog activity was being taken more seriously by the mainstream. Caruana Galizia (2011j) was an exception in blogging of her "sadness", and her feeling of "being alone again among the bush-beaters and the circuitous-speakers".

In April 2012, the PN launched a new portal on the MyChoice.Pn domain, incorporating a blog which is activated on registration and links to the party's community presence on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Positioned as a strategic tool in the run up to the general election, the site's user-friendly design and social media functionality signify a renewed attempt by the party to engage with civil society. To date, the portal has been used for regular webinars with the Prime Minister and a high-profile competition to solicit ideas from citizens in return for a chance to win an iPad and spend a day with (and as) the Prime Minister. Billed as "Be Prime Minister for a day", the competition attracted over 2,000 applicants and followed a reality-TV format, with the eventual winner (adjudicated by a media panel, including a journalist from *The Times*), filmed on a day with the PM on 19 June, 2012 and with content embedded on a dedicated blog (blog.pmforaday.com) and on the party's YouTube Channel. The blogosphere reacted with derision, accusing Government of using *Big Brother* tactics to distract citizens from the ongoing political crisis (Zammit 2012; Sammut, 2012; Mifsud Bonnici, 2012). The PL's response was to launch a blog (Gonzi.pn) as "a commemorative calendar charting the government's failures and how the Government's decisions affected businesses and families". On 5 August, 2012, PL Leader Joseph Muscat answered questions from nine hand-picked participants in a Google Hangout.

While the blogosphere was adjusting to the new entrants, the old disruptive bloggers retreated into silence. This may be due to a number of reasons, including the lack of a visible opponent or cause to fight. Zammit was a lone exception. On 15 January, 2012, he announced that he would no longer publish his column on the *Malta Independent on Sunday* so he could concentrate exclusively on his blog, as a counterweight to what he perceived to be an invasion of the blogosphere by bloggers with a partisan agenda. In March 2012, he redefined his view of the state of the Maltese blogosphere:

(Blogs). They're not a political party but they're evolving too. We are in a positive boom phase with more blogs than you could care to count (or read in a day). Expect to find more of the short-lived instruments – the *lunga manu* of party propaganda. Expect to be surprised that notwithstanding what is now a long internet presence (at least five years of growing internet readership) we will find that users (mostly readers) have trouble coming to terms with the immediacy and interactivity of the net. Most importantly the ability of your average voter to use his meninges to sieve through the information shot in his direction is about to be severely tested (Zammit 2012b).

8.3 Conclusion

This chapter analysed the different attempts by the institutions to renegotiate their hegemony in the months after the announcement of the referendum result. The Church, having first blamed social media for its defeat, eventually absorbed the fact that it had lost the consent of a significant portion of the populace, and recast itself as a victim of a changing, aggressive culture. Its repositioning is as a solid, traditional mainstay of society, providing stability in times when core values are changing. Its hegemony may have been severely dented, yet the institution may yet survive as the proverbial social glue of the nation, the 'common sense' of a nation that has yet to find its identity. The two main political parties reacted differently out of necessity. The PL represented itself as a moral, secularist champion, leveraging on its leader's pro-divorce views. The PN's ideological crisis continued beyond the referendum, culminating in the Prime Minister and several senior MPs voting against the bill on the basis of personal ideology. Nevertheless, by summer 2011, the PN had mobilised to occupy the blogosphere, using formal instruments such as a new social portal and PR and deploying new bloggers to infiltrate online discourse. It also made public commitments about its inclusive ideology and the secular state in a bid to distance itself from the damaging confessional party label. The original blogosphere, after an initial period of euphoria, retreated into sardonic commentary, observing the short-termism of the new PN blogs⁹⁵, and the political opportunism in both parties seeking to reclaim their liberal credentials while using disruptive tools for one-way political broadcasting.

⁹⁵ Pawlu Gatt.com, a blog run by one of Austin Gatt's sons, reroutes to mychoice.pn as at 30 October, 2012.

Chapter 9. Discussion and Conclusions

This study indicates that blogging, in conjunction with other media practices, contributed to a moment of historicity in Malta through the introduction of divorce legislation. It also brought to the attention of hegemonic institutions the emergence of an alternative discourse, seemingly free from the influence of traditional information gate-keepers. Hall (1998, p.443) says that we can observe cultural change at work as “the active destruction of particular ways, and their transformation into something new”. At stages in history some cultural forms and practices are driven out of the centre of popular life and actively marginalised while new ones take their place. Foucault, who sees discourse as a system of representation rather than semiotics, describes this violent, radical discursive rupture with the past as an “episteme”, the ensemble of discursive practices, formations and relationships at any one time (Mills 1996, p.62). Foucault (1991, p.55) writes that the episteme of a period is not:

the sum of its knowledge, nor the general style of its research, but the divergence, the distances, the oppositions, the differences, the relations of its various scientific discourses: the episteme is not a sort of grand underlying theory, it is a space of dispersion, it is an open and doubtless indefinitely describable field of relationships.

This concluding chapter discusses the challenges and options for blogging to continue to contribute to a new discursive formation in Malta, “new discourses with the power and authority, the ‘truth’ to regulate social practices in new ways” (Hall, 2001, p.74). It levers on the visible, ongoing strategic adjustments by hegemonic institutions and citizens in their ongoing relationships with digital media (and blogging in particular) as tools of cultural change, and reflects on whether the success of the divorce campaign was a one-off, or indicative of further disruption to come. It concludes with suggestions for further research that can contribute to the emerging field of critical new media theory, particularly within the hyperlocal context.

9.1 The hybrid always-on panopticon

In the immediate period after the peaceful, democratic resolution of a long-standing, socio-cultural issue that used to marginalise the country from the outside world, the

notion of citizen surveillance may appear to be anachronistic. During the divorce crisis, the blog was successfully deployed by the former audience as tactical, resistance media (Downing, 1990), facilitating alternative discourse and linking like-minded individuals outside the mainstream ideology. The corollary is that the Church in the 21st century may be an easier target to attack than the opaque institution of government, political parties and their agents in civil society.

The findings of this study indicate that a major obstacle to a new citizen discourse and social change is a mix of institutional offline and online surveillance cultures: these, together with the small size of the country and powerful institutions, provide a formidable barrier to the inculcation of a new episteme. We need to understand, as Hall (1987) does, that the temporal disruption of the normal functioning of the old economic, social, cultural order provides an opportunity for its reorganisation, refashioning and modernisation: blogging's effectiveness in one socio-cultural struggle may not necessarily contribute to a new social order.

While Malta's political regimes since 1987 have avoided giving the impression of being authoritarian, there can be little room for cyber-utopianism in a society which still retains the resilient, hegemonic institutions and intricate capillary networks of nepotism, patronage, and political clientelism (Boissevain, 1974; Hirczy, 1994; Mitchell, 2002; Monteforte, 2012; Sultana & Baldacchino, 1994). It would be naive to presuppose that a power bloc that operates through its influence in civil society will not consider updating tried and tested practices of propaganda, surveillance and social coercion, or appropriating two-way technologies for the surveillance of citizen discourse, particularly after this become louder through the megaphone of the read/write web.

Surveillance-based, disciplinary power has been a major tool in social control throughout the history of postmodern Europe, and is particularly effective when "deployed within the communities and corporations small enough to make surveillance reciprocal, ubiquitous and comprehensive" (Bauman 1997, p.5). In Malta, surveillance culture is inculcated in a popular culture of obedience to a higher authority and actively promoted by education and religious and political institutions. Boissevain (2004, p.255) writes that "the public voice [has] been muted by what might be called 'the hierarchy of infallibility'. This is an attitude that combines fear of established authorities with a passive acceptance of the legitimacy of their decisions and, above all, avoidance of open

criticism and, thus, confrontation. This might appear contradictory in view of the deep political polarisation in the country - yet not if it is framed in terms of a world view that is inculcated by the unquestioning obedience demanded by both the Roman Catholic Church and the various colonial regimes which for centuries dominated Malta and, more recently, by the unquestioning loyalty demanded by the two dominant political parties (Boissevain, 1990). Baldacchino's (2002, p.194) treatise on the issue of Malta's national identity is also of interest, since he observes that in island nation-states, identity is not automatic, but can be seen as:

the outcome of a formative cultural process that involves a struggle, even if only psychological or virtual, with an external 'other'. In the absence of any such referent, a sovereign island state may have little inducement towards developing a territorially based nationalism.

In the absence of conflicts with external 'others', Malta's national identity remains locked in the safety of *internal* conflicts with the polarised internal 'other', bounded by lines of rhetoric and discourse set up by the two political parties (Monteforte, 2012). A fragile national identity based on a reaffirmation of polarisations can only but thrive in a surveillance culture. As Giddens (1985, p.181) explains:

Surveillance as the mobilising of administrative power - through the storage and control of information - is the primary means of the concentration of authoritative resources involved in the formation of the nation-state.

Malta's size and polarised political culture facilitate micro-surveillance of citizen behaviour on a national scale. In a 1996 interview, Boissevain (in Vella, 2006), was particularly scathing:

People here know much about each other, and so they want to hide their actions from others. So there is a fear of retribution and that is why there is acceptance of the authorities taking decisions. Hierarchy comes within a package of family networks, friends-of-friends networks, and other realities of interaction within the city-state that Malta is.

Indeed, one could almost equate surveillance to "popular surveillance", at a par with Hall's (1998) notion of the "popular", since it is part of "common sense" that citizen profiling is an ongoing process compiled by a variety of public and political actors with an interest in partisan allegiances, likely voting habits and ultimately, hegemonic power.

Hirczy (1995, p.258) observes how “partisanship in this polarized polity is so pervasive, ingrained and linked to class ideology and locality that [voting] preference patterns are known by street”. Despite the introduction of data protection legislation, it is common knowledge that the collection of information on citizens is intensified before and during voting in a general election, European Parliament elections and public referenda⁹⁶. In a scenario where a citizen’s constitutional right not to vote may easily be interpreted as an act of protest, it is equally common for disenfranchised citizens to ‘spoil a ballot card’ in protest rather than choose not to vote altogether, in order not to leave a potential audit trail of intentions. Such practices may also account for the high percentage of voters in elections.

This context inevitably resonates with Foucault’s vision of the disciplinary mechanism in modern society, constructed by borrowing from Bentham’s architectural figure of the panopticon:

This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in all events are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the centre and periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchical figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead - all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism Foucault (1977, p.197).

Surveillance culture is inculcated in the public consciousness in Malta, and continues to thrive because it operates with the active consent of citizens, who are brought up to believe that it exists to serve their best interests. In an increasingly individualised but polarised society, surveillance is the legitimate price to pay for the potential benefits of clientelism, which are typically triggered when political power is secured after an election. Hegemony also thrives because of the pervasive discipline-mechanisms of panopticism promoted by the leading institutions: these, in turn, remain actively engaged in their exercise of power by “making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come” (Foucault 1977, p.209). The notion of

⁹⁶ For instance, after a vote by ballot, the Department of Information (DOI) furnishes all political parties with data that includes details of citizens who have not collected their voting cards, or failed to exchange a voting card for a ballot sheet on the date of voting. It is not inconceivable to imagine that this information is then merged with the parties’ proprietary intelligence on voting patterns and party allegiances, developed by agents in every village, to account for ‘lost votes’ after an election.

being watched by a superior authority is not just restricted to political institutions, but embedded in education practices (Mayo, 2007; Borg, 2006), and the Catholic doctrine. For instance, in the run up to the divorce issue, Clyde Attard, the promoter of the “Kristu Iva, Divorzju Le” (Jesus Yes, Divorce No) billboard campaign, reminded voters of their accountability to higher authorities and visibility as members of the Catholic faith: “You will be alone in the polling booth on Saturday, but Jesus will be with you and he will be watching you” (Laiviera, 2011).

Simon (2005, p.4) observes how the panoptic machine makes citizens visible, and “hides the operations (the motives, practices and ethics) of the supposed viewer,” but also notes that the panopticon is not so much a vision machine as:

an ordering machine; a kind of sociomaterial assemblage for sorting and arranging social categories and individual persons so that they can be seen and understood.

In Malta, panopticism operates in tandem with other modes of social control, not just within the framework of clientelism and blue-red polarisation, but also in more subtle ways. For instance, the Maltese education system incorporates a cash stipend for students aged 16 and over, to encourage tertiary education. This practice can also be seen as a form of hegemonic control through which the state nurtures young people to accept cash handouts from a benevolent higher authority - in a similar manner to the way ‘favours’ are bestowed by politicians to citizens under the clientelist system. Attempts at discussing a phasing out of the stipend system by the short-lived PL administration of 1997-98 were met with student protests.

In considering how a new episteme may take root in Malta’s polarised, popular culture where surveillance is part of social order, we would need to ask: firstly, after the divorce referendum result, are there any visible changes to the traditional panopticon operated by the Church, the political parties and the media?; secondly, if surveillance culture is necessarily tied to the threat of retribution, assuming the institutions are still in a position to act in a coercive manner to conserve their hegemony (even as a last resort): what forms could such “institutional retribution” take in 2012?

In an interview (Aquilina, 2011), the historian Henry Frendo observes how little has changed in Malta since Boissevain (1990) wrote about a culture of “fear in the bones”

and the reluctance of citizens to ask questions - a characteristic that Caruana Galizia (2009a) attributes to family upbringing and education. Yet Frendo also describes the divorce referendum result as “revolutionary” since it goes “against the presumed norms of the guidelines of a Maltese lifestyle, against the Catholic morality that tends to be a Maltese way of life”. He interprets the result as an indication “that people are less prone today to being told how to think or what to feel – whether by church hierarchy or party leaders”, although he leaves the caveat that time will tell if the referendum “made history”. Nevertheless, the Church continues to operate as a grassroots cultural force through its networks of religious groups in all walks of civil society, and provide essential pastoral services, such as the management of homes and institutions for disabled people. The provisions of the Constitution and the various concordats remain in place, and it continues to exert significant influence over the national education curriculum and schooling, through the direct ownership of schools or pastoral influence over the operations of private schools. To conclude that citizens are less influenced by political discourse (and potentially less fearful of retribution by political institutions) because of the referendum result is similarly premature, particularly since the ruling party continues to have access to coercive measures, even if these are indirect. There are already indications that these were exercised soon after the result of the referendum. In June 2011, Josanne Cassar, the features editor at the *Malta Independent*, founder of Moviment Tindaħalx, who was openly critical of the PN’s position during the divorce campaign, was made redundant. Cassar (2011h) attributes this to individuals close to the Government threatening the paper with a loss of advertising revenues unless she were removed. In October 2011, Matt Bonanno, a trainee journalist at *The Times*, was allegedly dismissed for using Facebook to alert a university student about Minister Austin Gatt’s attendance of a university event⁹⁷.

On 17 October, 2011, Sammut used her blog on *Malta Today* to draw attention to the way “critical voices” in the mainstream media were facing retribution. According to Sammut, the “most malleable” journalists were co-opted by the governing party”; those who weren’t were either dismissed, delegated “insignificant roles” or “brutally attacked, discredited and ridiculed in malicious blogs on the internet and by other subtle and not so subtle means”. The process Sammut describes is reminiscent of what Gramsci would call “tactical movement” or a “war of movement” by the state and its agents:

⁹⁷ On the day of the Minister’s visit, the student used offensive language against the Minister to protest about the state of the new bus service (see *The Times*, 5 October, 2011).

As critical voices are being weeded out from the mainstream media, their views are being ghettoised and they are either migrating to the internet, to a few newspaper spaces or to the media of the Labour Party. Government strategists are hoping that out-of-sync voices will be lost in the cacophony of online comments and so they will end up reaching a very limited audience.

The attempts by agents of the hegemony to marginalise critical discourse that had infiltrated into the mainstream media indicate how optimism on the greater tolerance of alternative views may have to be tempered. The Church, in 2011, may have been a ‘soft target’; the ruling party, with its influence on the media and business interests associated with it may be less malleable. The blogosphere has also been muted - albeit for different reasons. The Malta Pamphleteer (2012) writes that Malta remains “a society in which divergence from convention is equated with a fault in character” while Reasoned Rants (2011) observes that Malta “is a country where the number of things you can’t do threatens to exceed the number of things you can do”.

In 2012, the panopticon appears to be quickly learning from the lessons of the divorce debacle to turn its gaze elsewhere, specifically online. While the Church may be an anachronistic institution without a natural disposition to engage online, the political establishment shows every sign of using technology for increased surveillance of citizens.

9.1.1 Online surveillance

Morozov (2011) challenges the dominant Western reductionist models of political and social change facilitated by information-sharing over the Internet. His main argument is that rather than destroy authoritarianism, information made available over the social web is actually being used to play an instrumental role in enabling “propaganda, censorship, and surveillance, the three main pillars of Orwellian-style authoritarian control” (ibid., p.82).

The biggest challenge to blogging as an alternative discourse - whichever genres and styles it wishes to embrace - is likely to come from the affordances of the technology itself. Foucault (1977, p.199) sets out the requirements to assist a human supervisor in panoptic surveillance:

mechanisms that analyse distributions, gaps, series, combinations, and which use instruments that render visible, record, differentiate and compare: a physics of a relational and multiple power.

The read/write web probably exceeds Foucault's requirements for detailed surveillance of citizens activities and information exchanges; or Giddens' (1990, p.6) treatise that "the control of information and social supervision is fundamental for the administration of the modern state". A recent EU-funded project led by Fuchs (2012) raises concerns on Deep Packet Inspection (DPI) surveillance technologies - not just on their privacy and data protection impact, but on broader societal and ethical impact assessments. Search engines, blogging platforms (such as Tumblr and Blogspot), Twitter and social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn and Foursquare all use data caches to track citizens' online behaviour: thus variables such as search queries, 'likes' and numerous forms of user-generated content form the basis of a citizen's digital footprint and eventual social profiling. Marwick (2012) describes the examination of other people's online content, and looking at one's own content through other people's eyes, as "social surveillance", the result of an increasingly strategic set of choices made by citizens before they choose which personal information to disclose and share with others. Although she distinguishes social from traditional surveillance along three axes (power, hierarchy and reciprocity), she believes its effects and modification of behaviour are common to traditional surveillance.

The possibility of being constantly monitored and recorded is part of normal life in most wired countries. Yet Malta's size and nascent online culture facilitate the "digital enclosure of personal information" whereby "interactive technologies generate feedback about the transactions themselves" (Andrejevic, 2009, p.1) by collecting digital data on citizens' online social relations, locations, interactions, viewing habits and communication practices. Citizen media is also "evidence-producing media" (Lauer, 2012, p.578) in providing an information feedback loop of interest to private companies such as Google and Facebook, but also to hegemonic actors. The periphery of the blogosphere and social networks can already be monitored anonymously, asynchronously, on a 24 x 7 basis, as predicted by Rheingold (2002, p.188) in his "always-on Panopticon". In the same way that voting habits and partisan allegiances are profiled in towns and villages, street by street, citizen online behaviour is

increasingly under the gaze of the political blocs. According to Biwwa (2010d), in Malta:

Any ludicrous belief in freedom of speech is both moot and ridiculous. You can't write whatever you want, be it your blog, your Facebook account or your anything really. Ok, I'll fix the statement, you can write whatever you like, ridicule whoever you want and name and shame those who deserve to. But if you want to retain a degree of employability, you won't.

Fear of offline retribution is not just limited to a litigious culture. It is also about becoming a social pariah through black-listing or online character assassination on government-friendly blogs. Social vilification was a recurring theme in the interviews conducted during the course of this study, with Maltese bloggers identifying Daphne Caruana Galizia's blog "The Running Commentary"⁹⁸ as the most likely threat. 'Daphne'⁹⁹ is part of the popular vernacular, and cuts a singular figure in the Maltese blogosphere, with public perception of her blog seemingly divided between fearless citizen media and a virulent, unashamedly partisan soap box that forms part of the PN propaganda machine. The blog is unique in the large number of user comments it attracts, the vast majority of which use pseudonyms and monikers; and for the blogger's propensity to respond to individual comments, creating a back-channel of reflexive commentary. Zammit regularly refers to the blog as "The Runs"; in 2010, a blog called "Taste your own medicine" was set up with the stated objective of countering Caruana Galizia's blog with hyperbole and abuse. The blog style is radically different from Caruana Galizia's columns for *The Malta Independent*¹⁰⁰ in that it mixes advocacy journalism and citizen surveillance with liberal publication of photographs and texts appropriated from Facebook profiles, which she uses as "indicators" of society and individual citizen malpractices. Caruana Galizia takes a fairly wide interpretation of what defines citizens as being in the public domain (and hence fair game for criticism and personal attacks), extending this group to relatives of members of parliament, people with known or suspected allegiances with the PL, and institutions such as *Malta*

⁹⁸ According to Elexa, Daphne Caruana Galizia's blog was the most popular blog in Malta on 28 August, 2012.

⁹⁹ 'Daphne' is used interchangeably with 'DCG' by bloggers and online commenters to refer to Daphne Caruana Galizia.

¹⁰⁰ Daphne Caruana Galizia also publishes a popular monthly lifestyle magazine ('Taste') that is distributed for free with *The Malta Independent on Sunday*. Cassar claims that Caruana Galizia is extremely influential in that paper's operations, since her magazine and regular columns have a direct impact on advertising revenues and print sales.

Today which are often openly critical of Government. In turn, *Malta Today* regularly accuses Caruana Galizia of being privy to Government information sources, with her blog operating outside the norms of traditional journalism. Caruana Galizia (2011f) continues to reject accusations of collusion with the PN:

The Nationalist Party doesn't pay me to write this blog. Nobody does. I don't need payment because it doesn't cost money. The only people who pay me for my writing are those at the newspaper I work for, and they're not politicians. They pay me because I keep their readers entertained.

When *The Sunday Times* (2012), in an editorial on the changing media landscape, criticised "certain journalists" who use the Internet for "character assassinations", Caruana Galizia (2012) responded the following day with a post titled "The Sunday Times believes we should only invade the privacy of private persons who are vulnerable or dead." 'Daphne' continues to be as much a figure of admiration as someone to be feared, not just because of her connections with hegemonic institutions, but also because she represents an online version of "naming and shaming" that until recently could only happen behind closed doors, and which now finds renewed impetus in the blogosphere. Zammit (2011c), a frequently target, describes this process as "denigration by implication and spurious association".

Caruana Galizia's mix of gossip, opinion, analysis, surveillance, coercion and entertainment continues to influence the perception of 'blogging' in the Maltese public psyche. Fools Cap (2010) blames Caruana Galizia's blog for "the debasement of public discourse in Malta" but also acknowledges that it provides "some form of release in a society which tends to be artificially formalistic in its approach to public life". The release from the old mediated discourse can nowadays be found not just in blog posts and Facebook timelines, but in the user comments on online news portals, to the extent that the popular Maltese vernacular makes no distinction between citizens who manage a blog, and those who post opinions online on *The Times*. In Malta, people who post an opinion online are referred to as "bloggers", a derogatory term tantamount to people who spend time online engaged in discourse that has little or no substance. The political blog invasion that started in summer 2011 continues unabated, albeit in a more covert manner and involving less high-profile personalities. While Caruana Galizia represents a clearly-identifiable online surveillance system within Maltese society, its more insidious elements may be found in the less-visible activities of search engine

optimisation experts and co-opted bloggers in the direct employ of political parties, whose objective is to identify, listening to and eventually disrupt counter-hegemonic discourse. Cassar (2011a) believes the increasing number of anonymous comments and fake online identities is a symptom such practices.

For boyd (2012), the online space worldwide is incorporating a “culture of fear” that finds fertile ground in the attention economy amplified by social media. In Malta, the fertile ground is already in place through the operations of the institutions and inculcated in popular culture. The Malta Observer, a blog started in February 2012 by an expat, provides one example:

The reason for being anonymous is that The Observer does not want to be a victim of hate; there are always people who misinterpret and misunderstand statements regarding their beloved country.

Any nascent alternative discourse will inevitably have to adjust to the pressures of popular culture to ensure conformity and consent on what constitutes ‘discourse’ for the sake of social order in a hyperlocal community - in the same way that it will have to adjust to operating in the full gaze of online surveillance operations. Foucault (1977) says the panopticon also has a role of amplification, arranging power and strengthening social forces. The very same online space which empowers citizens with mass-self-communication tools may eventually be subsumed by the amplification of offline and online surveillance culture. We must also not forget Bauman’s (1992, p.163) warning:

To the strong, bold and determined, the patronage state feels like a most sinister rendition of the Weberian ‘iron cage; yet to many weak, shy and lacking in will it may also feel like a shelter.

If discordant online voices are perceived by political institutions to pose a serious threat to institutional hegemony, we may well start to see more militant action against bloggers. There have already been calls by MPs and the Church media (Borg, 2012) to tighten up the regulation of online discourse. On 22 July, 2012, former EU Commissioner John Dalli (2012) complained that blogs were being used to attack him. Although he did not specify which blogs, an online search reveals the activities of bloggers such as Ellul-Grech (2011) and Caruana Galizia, as well as malicious comments on the online fora of newspapers.

In 2012, the renegotiation of hegemony in the online space is an ongoing process of action and resistance, a dialectic between actors in civil society: watchers are being watched, with no clear winners and losers, but in the full knowledge that the new panopticon is in place, where those in power “have made it their priority to harness the potential of mass-self-communication in the service of their specific interests” (Fenton, 2012b, p.141). Any new discourse that challenges power is not about seeking some form of “absolute truth” but “of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time”(Foucault, in Rabinow, 1991, p. 75). The digital citizens of Malta are negotiating a terrain that is transiting from “private-by-default, public-through-effort” to one that is “public-by-default, private-with-effort” (boyd, 2011). In this cacophony of new voices, the new episteme remains vulnerable to being marginalised by the megaphones of bloggers on the payroll of the hegemony, or seduced by the social media-friendly political portals such as mychoice.pn. The very threat of coercion alone may leave citizen protests in Malta rooted in the “virtual”, neutralising the risk of actual, offline protest movements and political engagement. This situation resonates with Fiske’s (1994, p.253) warning that moral totalism and a culture of “total surveillance” may lead to the hegemon confining “as many of us as they can to our cultural and geographic enclaves”. Irrespective of the potential for the social web to be deployed towards certain ends, ultimately its use will always be impacted by its cultural context. Malta may simply be, as Johnson (2007) suggests, in the early throes of a new hegemonic moment rather than some post-hegemonic movement. Yet, if history is to be an indication of what may lie in the future, in the age of gatwatching, produsage and online surveillance Malta may well construct its own hybrid system of power and resistance: not quite Foucault’s (1980) multi-directional model, which refuses to “function in the form of a chain” but circulates, “deployed and exercised through a net-like organization”(ibid., p.98); not quite the old, trusted institutional model with agents of the hegemon who infiltrate all walks of civil society in the name of social order and the common good.

9.2 The new hybrid media

In 2009, a scholarly work entitled “Exploring the Maltese media landscape” devoted just one chapter (Sant, 2009) out of twelve to media and the Internet. Three years later, traditional media outlets are engaged in visible changes in organisation structures and editorial practices that appear to be a direct reaction to the perceived opportunities and threats of the social web. These changes partly mirror those being made in other countries, where the notion of ‘the media’ as a privileged site for accessing and understanding a common world are being constantly undermined by technological, social and political dynamics (Couldry, 2009). In Malta, the most significant threat posed by blogging to the operations of hegemony is through its ongoing influence on the discourse of the mainstream independent print media. It is through this sublime process that the media’s historic ties with the troika of the two political parties in the Church are being weakened, with a corresponding erosion of its own hegemonic operations. Nevertheless, this is a period of transition, since changes to mainstream media editorial policies will inevitably trigger further adjustments, renegotiations and vigilance by the institutions.

The hyperlocal situation in Malta is facilitating what Chadwick (2011) calls a “hybrid media”, built upon the interdependence of old and new media, and their associated technologies, genres, norms, behaviours and structures. In the relentless push-pull relationship between blogging and journalism where the information-producing communities of journalists and bloggers are merging, the debate on whether blogging is “journalism” increasingly appears superfluous (Robinson & de Shano, 2012). If anything, the debate needs to shift to what constitutes journalism in the middle of a process of disruption of information production and a restructuring of societal information production hierarchies (Domingo & Heinonen, 2008). Deuze (2005, p.458) cautions against “any definition of journalism as a profession working truthfully, operating as a watchdog for the good of society as a whole and enabling citizens to be self-governing”: such a definition would not only be naive, but one-dimensional and nostalgic. The notion of accountability journalism and journalism for the public good seems burdened with a similar nostalgia for some golden age of journalism. The trusted ‘objective’ journalists (who supposedly remain outside of events and report only ‘facts’) and ‘advocacy’ journalists (who aim to bring about change by reporting on events in which they take part) are being taken into uncharted territory through a new

form of journalism that is in turns, moral, aggressive, polarised and specialist (Wiesslitz & Ashuri, 2012). Blogging is yet another component in a hybrid and dynamic information network whose structures and influences change depending on the way in which a variety of actors choose to behave and collaborate to constitute a particular kind of online press (Lotan et al, 2011).

In the hyperlocal, where the target readership is typically around 500,000 (about the size of Malta's population), there is a real risk that local print journalism may disappear altogether, and without any caveats that print may be replaced by some form of online citizen journalism. Yet, the hyperlocal may also develop into media landscapes dominated by a handful of media outlets that continue to lever on socio-economic barriers to entry to operate as quasi-hegemonic entities. In Malta, we are in the early days of an uncertain yet seemingly irreversible metamorphosis of media; where a national mass media telling an invisible audience what it needs to know has been part of the formation of the modern nation-state, but suddenly appears at odds with people attempting to use social media for "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2007). Journalism cannot be free from the influence of existing social practices (Atton 2008) any more than it can remain immune to alternative journalism creating "a more active public" and moving the boundaries of what used to be defined as "professional news" to be consumed and taught in journalism education (Forde, 2011, p.20).

As citizen and old journalism continue to hybridise in search of "credible journalism" (Roberts, 2012), this study is caught in a moment of historicity and transition. The majority of Maltese bloggers remain diarists, with no citizen journalism aspirations: yet every time bloggers comment on, remix, link to and publish posts "on matters of civil importance" or conduct "random acts of journalism" they are, by accident or design, engaged in "journalistic acts" and mediating, irrespective of how fragmented these actions may be (Jones & Himelboim, 2010, p.285). As Lovink (2007, p.25) observes, "situating blogging between 'online publishing' and the intimate sphere of diary keeping brings into question the already disturbed separation between what is public and what is left of privacy".

The hybridisation underway in the English-language news organisations in Malta remains primarily motivated by turf-protectionism and communicative capitalism rather than some new-found liberal ideology, although the preferential treatment the Church

enjoyed from media outlets appears to be a thing of the past (Borg, 2012). The power of incumbency and brand, in the case of *The Times*, has been enough to make it the dominant force for online advertising revenues, but print sales are stagnant and *Malta Today* remains an irritant because of its propensity to embrace alternative voices, bloggers and subjectivity in its reportage. In November 2012, *The Malta Independent* launched its new portal, with the clear intention of trying to secure a share of online readership. Competition is also quickening the news cycle, albeit at the expense of accuracy and quality of reporting. Once the mainstream media has broken a news item, the discourse on blogs and social networks facilitates long-tail, in-depth analysis, through the activities of producers and gatewatchers. These become the equivalent of a 'second-order newsroom' or a 'cyber-newsroom' where citizens report, produce, counter and repair the news content of journalists online (Robinson & DeShano, 2012). The fluidity and transparency of this approach puts more emphasis on the publishing of information than the closed culture of editing and filtering processes associated with traditional news organisations. Even in the hyperlocal, social media is starting to accentuate journalism's traditional lack of personal contact with readers (Regan, 2003).

In 2012, news editors at *The Times*, *Malta Today* and *The Malta Independent* remain pliant to the pressures of politicians and the Church for column inches, but increasingly vigilant in monitoring opportunities that may meet the readers' demand for alternative views and news entertainment. The backchannel of commentary on their portals together with blogs and Facebook, are regularly scanned for free content; social channels are in turn used by the media to distribute news content and interact with audiences on the social web, thus "mixing vertical and horizontal communication modes" (Castells 2007, p.247). Blogging and mainstream media journalism are thus locked in ongoing dialectic practices, fuelled by a watching game that transforms popular discourse. Bloggers' produsage and gatewatching, while seemingly passive activities, are contributing to a reflexive system of commentary, interpretation and notation that is in turn reincorporated in subsequent mainstream media reportage and blog posts. What until recently was considered to be "counter-hegemonic discourse" and marginalised by the mainstream media is starting to permeate journalism under the guise of infotainment. Nevertheless, the relationship between bloggers and the media remains uneasy, with the occasional blog post critical of the mainstream's appropriation of social media practices. The makeover of *The Times* portal in April 2011 was met with typical derision as "nothing more than a standard blog set up for 2011" (Zammit,

2011). Some bloggers pride themselves in showing “the august pages of *The Times* and other media outlets of sound repute” to be the work of “junior journalists” who spend “undue amounts of time 'researching' on Facebook” (Villains out shopping, 2012). The extent to which the mainstream media are also monitoring the alternative space is illustrated in the following. On 4 January, 2012, Biwwa wrote a blog post that criticised a *Times*’ report of a double murder that used images lifted from Facebook profiles:

That is not reportage. Daphne takes photos from Facebook and creates a story around them. Are you media lot emulating Daphne? I thought you already had a story to report here after all.

The Times’ editorial of 8 January, 2012 makes two key points: first, it acknowledges that “the media landscape has changed” with “the rise of citizen journalism”, which it equates to “a bigger voice to minorities and the disenfranchised”; second, it explains that bloggers are not privy to the resources and networks enjoyed by professional journalists:

A clear demarcation line is crucial. Bloggers, indeed most citizens, are often not equipped with contacts and information available to reporters at established media institutions. It is unfair to accuse the entire ‘media’ of insensitivity, when organisations like *The Times* have long learnt to draw the line between fact and gossip. The public, too, has to differentiate between posts made by the public, and professional reporters doing their job.

The Times’ “demarcation line” is an example of a logic of difference and typical of mass-media defensive discourse. It also reflects the discomfort of the institution at a stage when it is increasingly permeable to the disruptive, alternative discourse of the social web. The core arguments are at best simplistic, reminiscent of the arguments discussed in Chapter 3: a) blogging is about online gossip while the media does facts; b) blogging is about posts produced by the (amateur, unpaid) public while journalism is the work of (trained, paid) professional reporters.

Bloggers make no claims for the moral high ground; indeed, their authority is derived from the “idiosyncrasy and honesty of self expression [rather] than from the observation of ethical journalistic standards” (O’Neil, 2006, p.7). The corresponding claims for the hyperlocal media’s journalistic independence, fact-finding, and professional reporting remain suspect because of issues related to size, political affiliation, economies of scale

and trust, not least the direct or indirect ownership of the media outlets¹⁰¹. Editorial decisions are inevitably influenced by the communicative capitalism demands of stakeholders, advertisers and readers. As Fuchs (2010, p.175) observes, “production is only possible based on reception and distribution”: if reception stops, there is no further need for production. Much more sublime are the “hidden relations of power” (Fairclough, 1989, p.49) associated with mass-media discourse, because of the one-sided, top-down nature of the various media. Hobbs (2008) suggests we lever on Stuart Hall’s (1997) treatise of Foucault’s understanding of representation to understand the parallels between mainstream reportage and blogging in that the ‘subject’ is produced *within* discourse, and cannot stand outside power/knowledge as its source and author.

The media texts produced by journalists operating under industry codes of practice (that value objectivity, balance and public interest) are attempts at “a discourse” within particular “regimes of truths”. They are inevitably a subjective way of interpreting the truth of a news event through a particular discursive world view. As blogging continues to increase its influence on media texts, it will disrupt and undermine the discursive practices of the journalist which have the power to ‘make true’ particular regimes of truth. Rather than dealing with the familiarity of one-way broadcasting, the hegemon now must negotiate with a discourse which starts to circulate in a less predictable, regulated and consensual manner. It is not just blogging that contributes to this disruptive regime, nor is it simply restricted to print media: YouTube disrupts TV, Photoshop disrupts billboard campaigns, and online satire re-mixes and in turn re-invents attempts at political hegemony. The size of the internal market exacerbates the crisis of mainstream media in Malta, forcing media outlets to compete for the morsels of advertising in a bounded community already vulnerable to the global economic downturn. Within this context, where publication on a blog used to lack the credibility and permanence of print – a trend some writers associate with Foucault’s notion of the materiality of discourse (Hook, 2001; O’Farrell, 2011) - the mainstream media institutions are forced to not just acknowledge, but also embrace the subjectivity of the “non-material” citizen discourse that circulates from one digital medium to the next, and is consumed from one mobile device to another. The caveat, in the hyperlocal, remains

¹⁰¹ The ultimate ownership structures of independent media outlets not directly owned by a political (or politically-affiliated) institution remain obscure. The majority stakeholder in Allied Newspapers, the publisher of *The Times*, is the Strickland Foundation, with a 78.5% stake. Dr Mario de Marco, a PN Minister, sits on the Foundation’s board. *Malta Today* is co-owned by a founder of the Green party, Alternattiva Demokratika, and the former CEO of the PN’s TV station, Net TV. Standard Publications Ltd, publishers of *The Malta Independent* is a consortium of local business interests.

the following: without the all-pervasive presence of “old media”, citizen media would stutter, trapped as it is in the relentless cycle of gatewatching and produsage, and in the insular desire for increasing stocks of individual social capital. The hybrid media in Malta is locked in the incestuous relationship between the old and the new: the old media, still in denial, disparage the new which is being appropriated in the hope of reinvigorating hegemony; the networked individualism of new media disrupts the old through commentary on blogs and social networks and yet still desires recognition and appropriation from the old and familiar.

If a new episteme is to emerge in Malta, it may well be through the new discursive formations within old media. The news discourse in media outlets may be shaped and influenced by institutions and cultures, yet the very institutions and cultures as non-discursive practices are also shaped by discourse. It is still too early to assume that this will inevitably lead to social change through a more participatory, democratic or less hegemonic media. Nor may we assume greater “citizen participation” if we associate participation with its use in participatory democracy theory, rather than the reductionist notion of participation as user creation, curation, circulation or critiquing of content (Fuchs, 2008, 2011). What we may observe in Malta is a moment of sustained renegotiation of media hegemony, which renders political hegemony momentarily vulnerable as it determines a strategy to implement with two-way citizen online discourse and a less pliant independent media. The push for any “market-based fragmentation” of the media also has to overcome the resistance of centralised “media-related myths and rituals” (Couldry, 2009, p.437), as well as the historic barriers of market size, economies of scale and political polarisation. These realities of media inequalities will continue to limit the number of sustainable media outlets in Malta, particularly if these seek to exist without the tacit or covert support of ecclesiastical or political hegemony. Old gatekeepers will also masquerade as new gatekeepers. Rather than glocalisation and the reinvention of hyperlocal journalism (Baines, 2010), or the journalism for the public good advocated by McChesney & Pickard (2011), Malta’s brand of hybrid media appears to be producing a “new type of technology-enabled, not-quite-journalism” (Chadwick, 2011, p.9). The result is a visible lowering of journalism standards¹⁰²; greater pressure to break news and sensationalise; fewer attempts at fact-

¹⁰² In October 2011, the editors of the *Sunday Times* and *Malta Today* filed criminal law suits against each other, only for the papers to agree to drop the law suits in October 2012. Attempts at updating the Press Code of Ethics and the structure of the Press Ethics Commission failed because of a poor response from media newsrooms, leading Sammut (2011) to accuse Maltese journalism of lacking the maturity and

checking and rational discourse; and basic errors of judgement (Schembri, 2011). In the current media landscape in Malta, the nurturing of online commenters on media portals and surveillance of the blogosphere becomes vital for the survival of cash-strapped media outlets. It also locks the latter into a preference for infotainment over news. .

Opinions on the future of politically-owned media outlets and advocacy journalism are divided. Bondi (2011c) longs for more advocacy journalism in the style of Caruana Galizia, but regrets the way in which politically-owned TV stations have contributed to further polarisation instead of pluralism and ethical reporting. In 2009, Sammut found some merit in the partisan media as an “alternative public sphere driven by resilient working class media and other channels of resistance” but admitted that citizens were tiring of the strong advocacy journalism tradition, that showed little signs of adapting to an “evolving social landscape” (ibid., pp.97-98). In 2011, she wrote of a poisoned information system, with anti-institutional media under attack from political strategists, a rapid decline of public trust in the media and little room for civil society to drive its own agendas as all issues were steadily becoming bitterly polarised. Although politically-owned media is an echo-chamber that is neither economically sustainable nor strategic (Sciberras, 2010), both parties appear locked into the zero-sum game of proprietary media for the foreseeable future because of the fear of losing attention space to the historic adversary.

The hyperlocal appears to be caught in another historic media moment: between the “weakening influence of elite, traditional media as a singular power in influencing issue interpretation within networked political environments” (Meraz, 2011, p.107) and the realisation that the nascent online space in a polarised environment risks being occupied by hegemonic institutions, despite the best efforts of networked individuals. The political invasion of the blogosphere is not merely a defensive strategy against the immediacy, subjectivity and disruption of the ‘independent’ blogosphere; it is a concrete reaction to a more ‘citizen-responsive’, less malleable, independent print media. Political blogs are likely to become an increasingly pervasive tool through which political hegemony seeks to influence popular discourse, in the same way that it continues to seek to influence public service broadcasting and the independent print media. In the hyperlocal, the nurturing of fragmented, plural, online private spheres

professional standards needed to justify self-regulatory structures. Borg (2012), while continuing to blog on *The Times*, believes that there as many media “professionals” in the field as “big headed and self-opinionated dilettantes”.

may actually play out to the benefit of political hegemony. Lone discordant voices might be easily drowned out in the ‘noise’ of new partisan blogs. Rather than citizens empowered as political and media watchdogs, alternative discourse may remain safe and marginalised in its online enclave, away from the workings of power in civil society.

A new order of discourse may come about, but it may not be significantly different to the hegemonic discourse of old, despite a less pliant, more permeable, more citizen-responsive media. We may simply be experiencing another period of adjustment of hegemony, not social change.

9.3 Reinventing blogging

With the Maltese blogosphere under political surveillance and a tentative hybrid media adapting to the demands of communicative capitalism, the hope for a new episteme remains in the online discourse of individual citizens, rather than some organised movement within civil society.

9.3.1 The holy grail of modernity, self-identity and ideology

The death of former Prime Minister Dom Mintoff in August 2012 triggered a wave of online diatribe and blog wars. As the country prepares for a general election in 2013, the Maltese blogosphere risks being stifled by enclaves of sovereign media (Lovink in Bowler, 2008) or self-referential media (Mancini, 2012), with citizens engaging only in horizontal information-exchange in an amplified echo-chamber. In Malta’s polarised setting, any meaningful or thoughtful online discourse may be drowned out by heckling and spin - a scenario likely to be welcomed by political hegemony since it replicates the operations and spectacle of ‘real life’ politics.

The challenge blogging presents to political hegemony is however more subtle. In an egocentric world, blogging resembles a process of “self-examination through interaction with others” (Brake, 2009, p.172), tantamount to Foucault’s (1988) technology of the self. One of the recurring themes of the discursive struggle for divorce has yet to be resolved: it is the dialectic between the struggle for late modernity and self-identity. It

can be traced in the odd blog post, the running commentary on newspaper portals and blog-like musings on Facebook timelines. The day after the referendum result, *The Times* (2011) reported Deborah Schembri, the Chairperson of the ‘Yes’ Campaign, as saying that “We are as European as we were yesterday, but finally we have recognised that we are”. In typical postcolonial fashion, identities have to be positioned in relation to a wider context and dynamic (Miller & Slater, 2000). If modernity and identity are the “affirmation of autonomy against every traditional or social authority” (Pippin, 1991, in Feenberg, 2002, p.162), the desire for space and individuality may be the slow burn of blogging in Malta for the coming years - and the real threat to the workings of political hegemony. Online discourse renders visible the ongoing struggle of citizens with the dilemmas of self-identity (see Giddens, 1991, pp.187-201)¹⁰³. Blogging by Maltese citizens is also indicative of an ongoing attempt to resolve such dilemmas by preserving a coherent narrative of self-identity through lives “in media”, rather than “with the media” (Deuze, 2012). In Malta, with perennial issues of identity extending to the nationless state, the discursive process indicates that the desire for the “outside” and the modern did not stop with divorce. Subjects that were previously taboo, such as IVF¹⁰⁴, same-sex marriages, child molestation, public officer corruption and abortion are being tentatively included as news items in mainstream media, and then go on to mobilise reflexive discourse in the forums, blogosphere and Facebook in particular.

Yet, even if we consider the ongoing, online discourse as an indication of citizens’ desire for a more modern, individualistic, cosmopolitan and pluralistic society (Briguglio, 2011b), a number of concerns remain about the potential of this discourse to become a regime of truth, drive social change and open up fissures within political hegemony. Rather than operating as social networks, blogs resemble “fiefdoms” where the blogger occasionally allows externals to comment (O’Neil, 2009, p.170). The Maltese blogosphere is no more a public sphere than it is the locus for logical debate.

¹⁰³ Giddens identifies four dilemmas of the self: a) *Unification versus fragmentation*: the reflexive project of the self incorporates numerous contextual happenings and forms of mediated experience, through which a course must be charted; b) *Powerlessness versus appropriation*: the lifestyle options made available by modernity offer many opportunities for appropriation, but also generate feelings of powerlessness; c) *Authority versus uncertainty*: in circumstances in which there are no final authorities, the reflexive project of the self must steer a way between commitment and uncertainty; and d) *Personalised versus commodified experience*: the narrative of the self must be constructed in circumstances in which personal appropriation is influenced by standardised influences on consumption .

¹⁰⁴ In July 2012, a draft bill on IVF named “Embryo Protection Bill’ was proposed for debate in parliament in autumn 2012. The hostile reaction to the Bill by both Church and Gay Rights groups indicates another crisis in the making.

El-Nawawy & Khamis (2010, p.234) observe a similar pattern in a study of blogging in Egypt: “a general lack of rational–critical debates, reciprocal deliberations, and communicative action as envisioned by Habermas”. Blogging fails to meet the requirement for communicative rationality through debate; nor can the blogosphere be posited as a well-defined, pre-existing domain or communicative space. At best, blogging is about the overlapping, uncoordinated collection of conversations, an always-incomplete representation that must constantly be performed. This method of narrative propagation inevitably centres discussion on a small number of topics. The Maltese blogosphere is fraught with civic narcissism – a preoccupation with the self that is self-directed, although not necessarily selfishly motivated¹⁰⁵. *The Times* forums and discussions on the odd Facebook page, while spaces for public discourse, are more likely to see diatribe, racism and polarisation than reflection.

Without empirical data, it is imprudent to assume that alternative discourse in the echo-chamber and in concert with friends will necessarily migrate into the mainstream. The divorce issue provided bloggers with a moment of historicity, and a concrete opportunity for a direct challenge to Catholic-hegemonic discourse. However, attempts to infiltrate and influence dominant political discourse through blogging is likely to meet resistance from citizens who have a vested interest in the polarisation and clientelism on which the ‘political’ thrives. It may also not be possible for many citizens to imagine an alternative to the red-blue divide (Monteforte, 2012). Nevertheless, we may wish to consider Fairclough’s belief that discourse may contribute to sustainable social change if it migrates from representations of how things are, and have been, to *imagining how things might, could or should be*. Fairclough maintains faith with the discourses, even when these are representations of “imaginaries”, since these too:

may be enacted as actual (networks of) practices – imagined activities, subjects, social relations etc. can become real activities, subjects, social relations, etc. [and] may also come to be inculcated as new ways of being, new identities (Fairclough, 2003, p.208).

¹⁰⁵ Sunstein (2001, 2007) coined the term ‘The Daily We’ not just in response to Negroponte’s ‘The Daily Me’ to describe blogging as a virtual daily newspaper customised for an individual’s tastes – but to highlight also the risk that blogging, rather than exposing citizens to new ideas, simply reinforces the digital echo chambers of homophily and information cocoons. Conversely, narcissistically-motivated, subjective blogs can still have a democratising impact by challenging the established public agenda – albeit in an anarchic form as opposed to rational discourse (Papacharissi, 2009, p. 238).

If we subscribe to the notion that social life is reflexive, then the very act of people writing aloud, alone, together, may yet be capable of triggering a reflexive dialectic process between inculcation and enactment. The caveat is that there is nothing inevitable about the dialectics of discourse, since a new discourse may come into an institution without being enacted or inculcated, or may be enacted without ever becoming fully inculcated.

The possibility for the new discourse to be inculcated in Malta is finely poised: between hope in the (accidental) workings of the emerging hybrid media as the means of diffusion and eventual enactment of the “imaginaries,” and lingering doubts about the resilience of the habitus and “the social constraints on the natural propensity of language ‘hybridity’” (Myles, 2010, pp.34-35). Bourdieu’s (1995) work on the distribution of powers within the social space, the relative position of social agents (such as bloggers) within the space and their ‘symbolic power’ finds currency in Malta’s polarised society, social systems of clientelism and respect for institutional hierarchies. Yet Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999, p.104) are critical of Bourdieu, arguing that in totally subordinating language to social forces, and reducing symbolic struggle to “people acting with the single motive of accumulating capital” he ignores the crucial issue that linguistic capital per se, in the form of discourse as representations of social processes and relations, is part of the struggle for the constitution and classification of social (field) relations.

The findings of this study indicate that blogging is recognised as a legitimate form of cultural production in Malta; a practice that is gaining in symbolic power in the cauldron of society and its political hawks because of a mix of hyperlocal issues such as size of community and existing or aspirational social capital of individual bloggers, where a text may become political, sometimes beyond the bloggers’ intentions. The blog’s natural lack of symbolic power (due to the loss of face-to-face clues) is being mitigated by the “blog” becoming part of the vernacular and “blogging” a symbol for aspirational modernity and self-identity - even if blogging in popular discourse is associated not just with essay-type writing on a blog, but with citizen commentary on newspaper portals and idle talk on Facebook.

Writing about Zimbabwe, Moyo (2011, p.750) suggests that if blogging is to contribute to radical change, it needs to:

move the centre, from the mediated grand narratives of the national elite to the self-articulated and self-published small narratives of ordinary people and articulate a different world view and orders of reality as reflected in their content.

In Malta, we are at a very early stage in the existence of hybrid media practices and cannot determine if the “authorial subjectivity” (Siapera, 2008) of blogging fuelled by issues of modernity and self-identity will influence the order of discourse or the “common sense” at the hub of social structuring that legitimises and sustains domination. Yet if the current hegemony is to be resisted through a new order of discourse, a new hegemony needs to be first imagined before these imaginaries can eventually be enacted as networks of practices. Inevitably, any discussion on imaginaries must address the thorny issue of blogging and ideology in the Maltese context. For Eagleton (1991, p.222), ideology is an organising social force, a matter of concrete discourse where power impacts upon certain utterances and inscribes itself tacitly within them. It is not just:

Any form of discursive partisanship, 'interested' speech or rhetorical bias... It aims to disclose something of the relation between an utterance and its material conditions of possibility, when those conditions of possibility are viewed in the light of certain power-struggles central to the reproduction (or also, for some theories, contestation) of a whole form of social life.

The findings of this study indicate that blogging met Eagleton’s ideology criteria during the divorce crisis. However, this does not necessarily mean that blogging in Malta is now more ideological as a consequence. Indeed, Eagleton believes that ideological effects tend to be generated by institutions rather than subjective states of being. The divorce issue rallied disparate bloggers to resist the discourse of a mainstream ideology, and there was a visible surge in the number of new blogs once the divorce issue was resolved. Yet the number of blogs with socio-political interests remains disproportionately small. In this ideological vacuum, Zammit (2011i) sees analogies with Žižek (2011)’s belief that “(the people) express an authentic rage which is not able to transform itself into a positive programme of socio-political change”.

The pioneering bloggers did not reactivate their dormant blogs after the divorce crisis. In May 2011, Il-Mullah, owner of the Satiristan blog and Facebook group was hopeful that a small movement was congregating around satire, as an antidote to mainstream

media discourse and political hegemony: as Schembri (2011) noted at the time, “a population that laughs at you is not one you can manipulate”. Yet on 28 June, 2012, Il-Mullah announced that Satiristan was taking a leave of absence:

Politics has now invaded social media. TV, radio, billboards and more are not enough. .. The experiment has failed. What is on the internet is never going to migrate to the street.

There is nothing novel in bloggers who write for no pay eventually burning out because of the “incessant feeding and maintenance” of the blog machine that becomes “an end in itself” (Lowrey et.al, 2011, p.256). However, Satiristan’s post resonates with other bloggers lamenting the failure of blogging to lead to meaningful change, civic protest, political activism, a better Internet. Friggieri (2012) continues to blame complacency and polarisation, and a general attitude that there is no alternative to those who hold power. Bloggers who are not visibly in either of the two political camps are mistrusted as public intellectuals or “wankellectual” or just ignored (Zammit, 2011j). Bloggers’ organic intellectual credentials remain at best, suspect, particularly if we consider that Gramsci’s hope was for “ideological struggles through a political strategy which involves a long and uneven struggle over the hegemony of the dominant group” (Hall, 1996, p.32). Former bloggers continue to hold a particularly bleak view of the blogosphere. Sandro Vella (2011) blames the bloggers’ dalliance with the media:

I did not want to change the political system. I wanted to save the Internet! Before it got polluted by the mainstream...You cannot disrupt the system once you become part of it.

On 10 March, 2012, Zammit celebrated seven years of blogging by inviting pioneer Maltese bloggers to contribute a guest post. Kenneth Vella is representative of posts lamenting the passing of a once elite, literary practice that has become “almost mainstream”, appropriated by media personalities and those in search of gratification through online commentary:

From a medium that was partly exposed yet still shrouded in obscurity, except for the few who know about it, it has become a medium that pretends to be free, dominated by the few who are known to the many...Nowadays a blog has become a simple comment on a TOM (Times of Malta) article. Today’s “blogger” is happy he has been given a voice as he does not need to wait days before his letter to the editor is published; the moderators can publish a comment within an hour, two at most!

In the meantime the former blogs of the elite crepuscular are no doubt turning in their graves (Vella, 2012).

Blogging in Malta has an identity crisis: confused with the “free-for-all” commentary on *The Times*¹⁰⁶ portal that guarantees citizens a national audience for a day or two; appropriated by agents of one of the two parties in preparation for the inevitably vitriolic campaigns leading to the next general election; kept alive by numerous young diarists, seemingly ambivalent about matters of ideology, community building or social change; and reliant on a small number of upper middle-class professionals with media or political affiliations for “alternative discourse”. It struggles to be a virtual public space because it cannot quite liberate itself – either from the resilient polarisation that dominates the Maltese socio-political public sphere; or the strong media institutions it often chooses to lampoon.

In the absence of a common enemy, blogging as a counter-hegemonic practice risks becoming a mix of push-button activism and vanity publishing; pockets of resistance to be consumed by the mainstream media and the political hegemony as indications of “the imaginary”, but with little chance of being enacted or inculcated in real-life politics. The democratic promise of the blog may perhaps be located in a new relationship between the political subject and the political process, through which the political subject becomes autonomous, and yet remains connected. This hybrid approach positions blogging somewhere between the product of the isolated rational individual of liberalism and the passive fragmented member of the mass-mediated society. Blogging’s contribution to the political process may remain indirect, enabling subjects to act in ways that question or alter crystallised and inequitable forms of power (Siapera, 2008). Bloggers who are interested in engaging with questions of power are more likely to reveal the tensions between their ‘private’ and official capacity, despite lingering concerns that the collapse of the private-public dichotomy simply leads to a banal, apolitical public sphere (Kambouri & Hatzopoulos, 2007); and encourages a politics of solitude rather than one of public reasoning (Barber, 2003).

To contextualise: disruptive bloggers in Malta have much in common with Moyo’s (2011, p.758) description of political bloggers as “moral reformists” interested in “liberal counter-hegemonies” but with little inclination to “attack the entire edifice of

¹⁰⁶ On 10 October, 2012, *The Times* introduced an online comments policy, signalling the paper’s intent to regulate discourse. See <http://www.timesofmalta.com/comments>.

the ruling elite” since they too consider themselves to be an elite. Disruptive blogging in the age of hybrid media is not for everyone: the blogger is a networked individual with a mix of transliteracy and networking skills - a desktop activist and multimedia broadcaster rolled into one. It is no wonder that the successful activation of weak ties online may be a higher priority than a concrete political ideology. The gatewatchers and producers may be efficient at horizontal information social exchange, but utterly ineffective in imagining an alternative “political”.

Moreover, media scholars remain deeply divided on the dialectical relationship between new media technologies and the participatory practices that the technologies enable. Chouliaraki (2010) levers on Foucault’s (1982) dual economy of freedom and constraint to describe this dialectic in terms of a ‘democratisation of technology’ and a ‘technologisation of democracy’.¹⁰⁷ Fuchs (2011), Curran (2012) and Fenton (2012a) believe that although social technologies have energised activism and online protest, they are largely ineffective in revitalising participatory democracy and remain embedded in the structures of capital accumulation, with a small number of organisations benefiting at the expense of the many. At best, they may be an irritant to political hegemony, but are no substitute for nurturing and executing a political strategy of representation. Feenberg (2012) takes a less hard-line position, by suggesting that we study the Internet as an incomplete technology, where it can yet become the terrain of a class struggle. Since technologies are the products of social actors whose interests and worldview influence their form and use, as long as the Internet remains ‘open’ and a true network, it will remain open to political usages¹⁰⁸.

¹⁰⁷ “Democratisation of technology” addresses self-mediation from the perspective of the empowering potential of new media technologies to invent novel discourses of counter-institutional subversion and collective activism. It focuses more explicitly on non-institutionalised sites with minimal formal regulation, such as blogs. “Technologisation of democracy” addresses self-mediation from the perspective of the regulative potential of new media technologies to control the discourses and genres of ordinary participation and, in so doing, to reproduce the institutional power relations that such participation seeks to challenge. It focuses on institutionalised sites, such as museums or journalism, that recontextualise ordinary voices along the lines a ‘hierarchy of systems of expression’ (see Chouliaraki 2012, p.227).

¹⁰⁸ According to a Pew Research Center study published on 19 October, 2012, about 66 per cent of social media users in the USA (or 39 per cent of all American adults) have used those platforms to comment about political candidates and issues. Younger users are more likely to post their own thoughts about issues, post links to political material, encourage others to take political action, belong to a political group on a social networking site, follow elected officials on social media, and like or promote political material others have posted (see Rainie et.al, 2012).

In the hyperlocal we therefore face a dilemma: if bloggers are reluctant to imagine alternative political ideologies or engage in political activism, can the continued, widespread use of the blog as a ‘technology of the self’ still play a role in shifting the balance of power, as Saeed (2009) suggests, from the core to the periphery - or at least bridge the burgeoning gap between the two? Can the very act of being able to ‘say everything’ online, irrespective of the ideology of the discourse, still contribute to counter-hegemony and legitimise the social actors as the ‘accidental political’? Senft (2008, p.117) may offer a way out of this conundrum:

One way to assert the political importance of the personal is to move away from a preoccupation of why something is so towards a more rigorous analysis of how certain behaviours network into a naturalized version of 'the way it is'.

9.3.2 Reflexivity and entertainment on the Isle of MTV

The findings of this study indicate that blogging in Malta is becoming the product of self-mediated reflexivity. Self-mediation is tantamount to online public performance where the “textuality of such publicness [is] discursive but not necessarily narrative” (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 227). ‘Blogging’ in the Maltese vernacular is increasingly about the spectacle of comments, gossip, spats and insults that resides in the online forums of *The Times*. For the majority of citizens, blogging is only commentary, although the recent invasion of the blogosphere by ‘the political’ is raising awareness that there is more to ‘real blogs’ than Caruana Galizia’s ‘Running Commentary’. The trusted hyperlink, the mobile device and its apps and the national obsession with Facebook position the blog as an essential component of a hybrid media ecosystem, where mediated and self-mediated spaces are powered by the reflexive drive of entertainment.

In ‘Modernity and Self Identity (1991), Giddens states that contemporary life is reflexive because people tend to alter the way they live on the basis of ‘expert’ knowledge and advice. In the early 21st century, the interactive and asynchronous affordances of the social web stimulate mediated reflexivity, where the information exchange is unlikely to be predominantly in the form of ‘expert’ knowledge: one of the lasting by-products of the read/write web may well be a re-definition of what it means to be “an expert”. Dean (2010) is a fierce critic of the culture of “whatever blogging”, which she asserts leads to inevitable circuits and loops of reflexivity, the decline of

symbolic efficiency and addiction to entertainment¹⁰⁹. There are elements in Dean's theories that concur with the key findings of this study. The blogosphere in Malta is reflexive, and this was put to good use as a form of rhizomatic media during the divorce crisis. The hybrid media system relies on networks that are affective and addictive. As the fulcrum of communicative capitalism, but also as civil society institutions with a history of supporting political hegemony in Malta, mainstream media organisations are increasingly caught in the endless loop of reflexivity that becomes the very form of capture and absorption: 'news' is increasingly more social, subjective, opinionated and tabloid (Camilleri, 2012): the permeability of the mainstream media is "not necessarily contributing to thinking, but to inane entertainment" (Schembri, 2011) or infotainment.

Recently, Dean (2012) reiterated that she sees no opportunity for the reflexivity within the blogosphere and social citizen media to migrate into political action. The politics of networked media is, at best, a sterile practice synonymous with awareness, where political action is seamlessly integrated with consumption and entertainment - the end result being radical content rather than form. The size of the hyperlocal, however, throws up contradictory indications relating to popular culture and political polarisation that require triangulation of Dean's theories before they are accepted. At face value, the divorce crisis was a moment of historicity where radical online discourse *did* contribute to concrete political action. The corollary is that since May 2011 there has been a visible surge in the self-reflexive excesses of entertainment on blogs, social media and media forums. Maltese bloggers, lacking the time to create their own stories, remain in reactive, produsage mode and hence 'follow' the lead of the mainstream¹¹⁰. In Malta, 'breaking news' is still determined by *The Times* and *Malta Today*, yet rapidly hybridised, because of journalists' propensity to dip into the well of blogs and Facebook timelines for citizen reactions. Blogging, as part of the hybrid media ecosystem, reflects

¹⁰⁹ When situated in a logic of drive, blogs are objects that are addictive, difficult to avoid, "elements of an inescapable circuit in which we are caught, compelled, driven" (Dean, 2010, p.40). Rather than tools of self-identity and empowerment, Dean believes blogs contribute to a dissolution of identity, rendering citizens incapable of critique: "a completely reflexive self is as incompatible with democracy as reflexive self-governance is with fully reflexive subjects" (p.13). For Dean, blogs now function as "displaced mediators" (p.29) since they access key features of communicative capitalism: a) an intensification of mediality in reflexive networks, where people 'communicate about communicating'; b) the emergence of "whatever beings", who do not belong to anything in particular, and c) the circulation of affect (as networks generate and amplify spectacular effects).

¹¹⁰ One can see parallels in a recent empirical study on Chinese bloggers (Hassid, 2012) which found that blogging may be both a "pressure cooker" on issues where bloggers get ahead of journalists that allows people to express their discontent or simply a non-violent "social safety valve" where the mainstream media set the agenda, in a marginalised medium.

this tendency: at times calling for engagement on some civic issue in the news; and at others engaged in the exhibition of the self (Lovink & Rossiter, 2005) where private discourse is rendered increasingly public, permanent and data-mined by the operations of communicative capitalism and political hegemony.

Consumed by the reflexive cycles of likes, shares, comments, reposts and repins, blogging in Malta has not become the hotbed of alternative subculture or citizen journalism, yet its very contradictions, immediacy and celebration of individualism and self-expression renders its very presence uncomfortable to a political hegemony used to a monopoly on public discourse. Mitchell (2002) is correct when he writes that we have to move away from the prescriptive analysis associated with the public sphere as an 'entity' towards a more descriptive, ethnographic approach focusing on 'public culture', which is more likely to reveal the quirks and idiosyncrasies associated with the hyperlocal. If, as Rosenberg (2009, p.300), claims, blogging serves "as our culture's indispensable public square," our attention must shift to the system of power which has been appropriated by institutions and inculcated in hyperlocal civil society. Only in this way can the blog's potential as a relatively new tool of empowerment be understood.

If the blogosphere exists as a network, it exists as an affective network where individuals may yet aspire to become "vehicles of power" engaged in weaving an alternative "net-like organisation" (Foucault, 1980, p.98). In a country still dealing with postcolonial issues and with a history of repression of free speech, blogging is an important act of self-mediation, where the power to speak out is intuitively recognised as "an enactment of citizenship" (Chouliaraki, 2010, p. 228). Blog discourse may be mundane and not overtly political, yet the public practice of self-presentation is an important break with a not so distant past, and may yet lead to a blurring of the divide between the 'Net' and the 'Self', between alternative discourse online and that accepted as the mainstream offline. Doubts remain if it will lead to some form of collective identity and social action.

Political hegemony remains vigilant of developments in the popular, participatory culture and adjusts. As Hall (1981, p.235) argues, the meaning and value of popular culture is contingent on history – what for one moment is a site of resistance is a site of incorporation at another: "[t]his year's radical symbol or slogan will be neutralised into next year's fashion; the year after, it will be the object of a profound cultural nostalgia."

We may have the tools with the potential to disrupt the incumbent media power with an alternative media built as a horizontal and many-to-many system of information exchange, yet we remain locked in the old way of imagining media power and authority. The notion that old systems of media authority would be abolished and replaced by new, open, democratic alternatives has yet to materialise, since new forms of old domination have emerged on the Web (O’Neil, 2009). As the empowering effects of alternative media becomes more widely appreciated, and as new methods and technologies become more accessible, they will inevitably just become mainstream. Instead of citizen empowerment, citizen media may be simply leading us to ambivalence. Citizens who keep themselves entertained in their online echo-chambers may not pose a serious challenge to the status quo: virtual protests on political and social issues have to date not translated into offline activism (Grech, 2012). If an entire nation is busy with the reflexive circuits of entertainment, we can assume that the hegemony may even encourage such practices, as a means of renegotiating consent within civil society. If the overall level of online discourse loses any semblance of symbolic power, the blogosphere and the hybrid media would become easier to manage as displaced mediators. The PN initiative ‘Be a prime minister for a day’ may be considered in this light; as the active, cynical encouragement of the reflexive cycles of entertainment, worthy of Postman’s (1985, p.89) observation that all subject matter may be presented as “entertaining”. Malta’s Millennials¹¹¹, like their European contemporaries, risk becoming typical postmodern consumers unable to distinguish between the simulated illusions of the media and the harsh realities of capitalist society (Harvey, 1990). They may not seem to be politically engaged but demonstrate a passion for online entertainment and consumerism: the political hegemony can actively nurture and manage this passion, even with inane ploys such as ‘win an iPad’ competitions. As Gramsci (1971, in Fontana, 2002, p.165) argues, “popular beliefs and similar ideas are themselves material forces” on which a cultural struggle can be constructed “to transform the popular mentality and to disseminate philosophical innovations”.

There are two distinct challenges that political hegemony may have difficulty in navigating. The first, as discussed in this and earlier chapters, is the increasingly

¹¹¹ Also known as ‘Generation Y’, and refers to people born between January 1977 and December 1997 (Tapscott, 2009).

ambivalent position of the English-language newspaper media towards their historic hegemonic allies. *The Times* appears much less sympathetic to the Church's agenda (Borg, 2012). Significantly, the ongoing instability of the PN government (due to the dissent of three backbenchers) has provided the mainstream media with the opportunity to continue with the trend observed during the divorce crisis whereby opportunities to lampoon public figures are maximised. The Church, as the first bastion of hegemony, was overwhelmed not just by rage and alternative discourse, but also by parody, satire, imagery and the creation of a rhizome media. In the blogosphere, the doyenne of online entertainment, Caruana Galizia, now has to contend with the equally-inflammatory discourse of maverick backbencher Franco Debono¹¹². Young politicians may be setting up blogs and Facebook pages to counter their weakening influence on non-party media. Social media may yet afford an opportunity for a re-presentation of the self to more social actors, prepared to incorporate 'entertainment' as a means of reaching out to a more distracted, reflexive audience.

The second challenge is less obvious, yet may be more insidious in the long term. Young people worldwide appear to be attracted by rhizomatic politics while visibly disengaging from state politics (Fenton, 2012a). Karatzogianni & Robinson (2010) believe an orientation to rhizomes leads to political approaches that emphasise diversity, the liberation of desire and freedom to live in different ways. An example is the Occupy Wall Street protest movement, which operates as a decentralised, horizontal network of small groups and individuals, whose philosophy appears to be focused more on securing consensus, inclusion and sustainability than political victories (Rushkoff, 2011; Gerbaudo, 2012). Boler (2012) observes how young people have come to see 'democracy' as a term that is nearly synonymous with 'capitalism'. They rarely distinguish between their on- and offline lives; what is 'social' bleeds almost indistinguishably into what is 'political.' Östman (2012) is representative of recent studies suggesting that the expressive, performative and collaborative features in young people's user-generated content can promote political participation.

As a system, the rhizome has little to do with the binary, hierarchical and institutionalised politics of patronage and antagonism in Malta. Neither do young

¹¹² In June 2012, Debono, in a veiled attack on Caruana Galizia, said the country needed to be reminded that it was not run by blogs, but Parliament (Sansone, 2012); he followed up by launching his own outspoken blog on 16 July, 2012. Pullicino Orlando, marginalised by the PN after the divorce campaign, continues to make extensive use of his Facebook page for political diatribe.

Maltese appear to embrace a culture of public protest, with the odd exception (such as an NGO-organised protest against government's support of ACTA on 11 February, 2012). Nevertheless, it is unlikely that Malta's young people will remain unaffected by global youth culture. There is no such thing as pure cultures, only hybrid ones (Mayo, 2007) and young Maltese are likely to continue with a uniquely-local process of cultural hybridisation (Grixti, 2006) as they negotiate the dialectics of modernity, self-identity and EU citizenship. At some juncture, citizens' concern that the dualism of Maltese party politics is "retrograde, primordial and tribal" (Monteforte, 2012, p.15) may translate into consistently lower-than usual voter turnout, a trend interpreted by *The Times*, in 2008, as "the coming of age of political maturity" (ibid). The politics of confrontation have served the PL and PN well since independence, with citizens consenting to the bi-polar system of representation as something deep-rooted and inseparable from the Maltese spirit (Friggieri, 2007). The nightmare scenario for political hegemony is young people who buy into the politics of non-representation emerging in new media precisely because it is the politics of the Internet, "a politics of affect and antagonism" (Fenton, 2012a, p.169). Rather than continuing to subscribe to the trusted, confrontational system of democratic representation, young people may simply start to disengage from two-party politics altogether. This imagined scenario is both contradictory and contingent: democratically-elected institutional power being eroded by the interaction and horizontal information flows between citizens, by discourse that is as likely to be mundane and obsessed with entertainment as it may be radical and ideological. It is reminiscent of Foucault's (1977) decentralised "capillaries of power" that flow between networks and individuals¹¹³.

The ruling class in a democracy must take seriously the priorities and values of those it governs, even if it has to embrace parts of their world views as its own. The hegemonic bloc must be porous to the demands of those whose consent it requires to remain in power, even if this occasionally means giving voice to the aspirations of those in whose name it rules (Jones, 2006). It is within this context that the PN tries to reinvent itself from a confessional party to a listening party. Both parties attempt to lever on the self-reflexive characteristics of technology to inculcate binary representations of truths, since their existence remains tied to partisanship and institutionalised conflict. They will mix their strategy and supplement monolithic discourse on their proprietary media

¹¹³ In Italy, the "Movimento Cinque Stelle" or M5S political movement set up by comedian Beppe Grillo, emerged from a populist attempt at direct democracy

with online entertainment ‘on the blogs’, with the new prerogative to be hyperlinked, retweeted, shared and commented on. The immediate future will also be influenced by SEO experts for data-mining and neuroscientists for the fine-tuning of new campaigns on political portals and blogs. The politics of patronage appears to be preparing to disrupt the politics of the rhizome.

In 2009, Lauri correctly predicted that Malta was about to enter a stage of rapid and social transformation as a result of increased take up of new media, with processes like persuasion, free speech, knowledge acquisition, democracy and citizenship taking on a new dimension. In 2012, Malta appears poised at a critical moment of ongoing technological disruption, media hybridity and cultural ambivalence. Blogs, like other social media, remain “shaped more by the wider environment in which they are situated rather than functioning as an autonomous force transforming society” (Curran et al. 2012, p.180). Technology and popular culture in the hyperlocal remain locked in an unfinished dialectic.

If today we had to look for cultural symbols to represent the nationless state of Malta, we could consider the annual *Isle of MTV* event as the most appropriate: imported, glocal, state-funded, hybridised and performed in a space that has hosted the state visits of two Popes and numerous mass political rallies in as many decades. A resilient political hegemony and an online space that remains fertile ground for communicative capitalism and political appropriation - as well as a space from which hegemony may be challenged and resisted by texts, albeit liable for misinterpretation, appropriation, censorship - may still find the medium to circulate.

Young Maltese people are growing up with the notion that social media automatically provides them with a voice, an element of micro celebrity and a branded self (Senft, 2012): what would have been deemed ‘revolutionary’ media to their parents is simply a technology of the self. Like their contemporaries (Theocharis, 2012), they do not appear to need to reflect on these issues, or issues of online privacy. They are probably not old enough to worry about retribution, careers or the workings of hegemony in institutions and their agents in every walks of civil society. They seem ambivalent about the traditional institutions, unless they are rooted in the social: interactions on the social web are a public display of the subjective side of citizenship (Turkoğlu, 2012). Yet since technology is never neutral (Feenburg, 2002), the choices people make about

technologies will inevitably have political implications. Like their foreign contemporaries, young Maltese people increasingly live *in the media* (Deuze, 2011). The episteme in Malta is unlikely to be inculcated via reflection, public debate or street protests. It may well happen in the reflexive slow-burn of the hybrid media via the instant gratification of entertainment genre chains.

Nevertheless, the desire for social change in the hyperlocal needs to be imagined before it can be inculcated. It needs to be driven by the cultural search for modernity and self-identity until a new generation stops yearning for it and finally breaks with the bounded, insular past. In Malta, the risk is that the seductions of the online echo-chamber for entertainment and narrow-casting may prove more powerful than the desire to engage in political ideology and social activism, leaving the online space open for appropriation by traditional power blocs. The promise remains that the emerging hybrid citizen media will empower a new generation to grow ambivalent to attempts at surveillance and hegemonisation by political institutions¹¹⁴. For the time being, blogging has a critical role to play as a producer of what Fiske (1992, p.161) calls popular social difference, enabling citizens “to oppose and disrupt the organized disciplined individualities produced by the mechanism of surveillance, examination and information”. Citizen journalism is not inculcated in Maltese culture but there *is* a greater awareness of the existence of disparate voices and that these have access to self-publishing tools to challenge political hegemony. Issues related to size and place, amplified by media and social surveillance and smart mob culture make it more likely that such discordant voices will find an audience. This does not mean that they will be incorporated or legitimised: but *they will be heard*.

In the bounded public sphere, it may be more useful to refocus on participation in the broad meaning of the concept of the political; that is, as a process where social actors involved in decision-making processes are positioned towards each other through power relationships that are to some extent egalitarian (Carpentier, 2011). In this manner, we may also see the blogosphere as a site of contestation, where citizens can express their opinion freely without any fear of coercion or control by the state. This is no

¹¹⁴ On 21 August, 2012, in a feature entitled “Politicians struggle with social media” in *The Times* (Peregin, 2012), blogger Mifsud Bonnici marvelled at the proliferation of memes mocking party billboards and indicated the ongoing dialectic between traditional politics and citizens: “With traditional media being so saturated with politics, this is the voters’ message to the politicians: that they’d rather not take politics too seriously”.

Habermasian public sphere framework of articulate politics through debate and consensus: it is a new space of subjectivity and political conduct (Siapera, 2008).

If a new episteme is to emerge in Malta, it may have to root from the online discourse of ambivalence, reflexivity and entertainment. This discourse needs to be more resilient than the best efforts at coercion by hegemonic institutions. It has to continue debunking politicians who send emails to their constituents, calling for a crusade. It has to lampoon the attempts by political hegemony to co-opt new media. It has to find a way of moving the political from the familiar bi-polar battleground into the unfamiliar territory of the rhizome. It may perhaps be the only way that Malta will secure the politics, hybrid media and citizen discourse that it needs in the 21st century.

9.3.3 Beyond this research: reflections on some possible directions

This study set out to investigate claims about the disruptive potential of blogging in a cultural context with a history of institutional resistance to change. Like any ethnographic research, it could have taken different paths, not least due to decisions made at critical stages of the research journey. I wished to let the empirical openness of the participants' own views and subjectivities take centre stage: the very act of speaking out in Malta's polarised culture renders the texts political, subversive and counter-hegemonic - even if at times, the social actors were engulfed by rage rather than some notion of rational political commentary. I agree with Kaun (2011, p.168) when she says that being political presupposes "engagement, struggle and taking unpopular positions to maintain and strengthen democracy": the bloggers whose discourse I studied quickly shaped up for a conflict.

Somewhere between the confrontational past and the individualistic future, we are at a generational tipping point in Malta where there are narratives that are very much still in the making, and need further investigation. Fuchs (2011) is correct in advocating a need for more rigorous critical theoretical reasoning on what actually constitutes 'participation' on the social web, and that we need to return to social theory and participatory democracy theory to close the gap. I disagree with him in that he sees value only in large-scale alternative media research projects, associating small-scale local alternative projects with "psychological self-help initiatives without political relevance that are more bourgeois individualist self-expressions than political change

projects” (ibid. p.322). We need more research on the political use of the social web in the hyperlocal precisely because issues of size and social capital actually appear to facilitate citizens’ strategic use of the social web as alternative media and tool for socio-political change. There is much to be learnt from observations in the micro-lab of the hyperlocal that can be rendered invisible to larger-scale contexts. What is urgently required is that we move away from the “revolutionary / normalization dichotomy” since what is revolutionary in one context is at best mundane, or the normal workings of democracy, in another (Wright 2012, p.257). The same applies with the ongoing obsession with technological determinism: technology may not determine human behaviour as much as it influences and constrains political action, particularly when it is used as tactical media (Renzi, 2008). Studying the hyperlocal exposes how issues of culture, tradition and institutional power remain as important for social change as the pervasiveness of technology in everyday life. There is a need for more nuanced, hybrid theories, and a rejection of the increasingly polarised views propagated by the utopian and technology-sceptic camps.

The findings of this study raise a number of related issues which deserve to be the subject of further research. The hyperlocal also presents rich opportunities to observe trends on a micro-level, which can lead to the development of theories to be tested within comparable or dissimilar contexts. The following list merely presents some pointers for further investigation:

- **The hybrid media ecosystem model.** A key finding of this study is the emergence of a hybrid media ecosystem in the hyperlocal, where blogging appears to be interfacing seamlessly with the mainstream media as well as social networks (primarily Facebook), microblogs (Twitter), online video sites (YouTube) and other social media touch points. There is scope for further research, using Malta for empirical data, to develop a model that charts the increasing permeability and dialectic relationships between old and new media. Such research can build on the findings of this study and previous work (such as Schechner, 1985; Hiler, 2002; Bowman & Willis, 2003; Kietzmann et al, 2011; Schumann and & Luong, 2011) in exploring how mainstream and alternative media systems are being used in a new media ecosystem for both horizontal and vertical information exchange systems. Models could develop a set of variables to be used to determine the efficiency of such systems to disseminate information and even operate as a potentially counter-

hegemonic system. Evans (2002), leveraging on Condit (1994) has developed an interesting model that illustrates the role of mediators in a hegemonic system, focusing on differentiated power relationships with regards to the larger society and with regard to each other. During the course of this study, I observed several examples of information exchanges that triangulate Evans' schema, as the various social actors collaborated to resist the hegemonic discourse and quickly developed their own counter-discourse on several platforms. More investigation is needed on the importance of and tensions between proprietary and generative platforms.

- **Mapping out the Maltese blogosphere.** One of the ancillary outputs of this study is a comprehensive list of active blogs. The size of the local blogosphere means it is feasible to develop detailed profiling, not just of the blogosphere, but also of the composition of social networks. Weltevrede & Hammond (2012) have developed a high-level model for the Dutch blogosphere that includes the nodes of the blogosphere with other social media. A similar project would be every feasible for the Maltese blogosphere to illustrate and study convergence culture over a period of time.
- **Comparative studies.** This study is grounded in an analysis of a set of online texts collected during a specific period. Its key findings can be followed up with studies that could involve the collection of similar data over a different period of time; and use different (quantitative or mixed) methods for both collection and analysis. The corollary is that a similar project could be developed to observe online discourse during another bursty period of data production, such as a general election.

It would also be interesting to conduct a comparative netnography of bounded communities of a similar size to that of Malta. Case studies of, for instance, small island states, would be useful in obtaining a better understanding of how the processes of digitisation and remediation take place within different cultural contexts of a similar size. To break with technological determinism, more detailed empirical case studies are required that engage with the way economic, political, and social issues are enmeshed in apparently technological platforms. Areas of research could include comparative studies on the use of blogging as a counter-hegemonic tool with other small island states and cities; comparative studies investigating collaboration, participatory democracy and freedom of information exchanges in

island states; and the mapping of contemporary civic activism and the use of new social media in specific locales.

- **Political blogging in the hyperlocal.** While the growth of blogging in other countries has slowed down, in Malta the medium is gaining in popularity. The recent take-up by social agents with connections to political hegemony provides an opportunity to compare political blogs in the hyperlocal with those in larger jurisdictions. Specifically, we need to go beyond counter hegemonic and oppositional discourse to determine whether political blogging does lead to social change and shifts in power. Capitalism has proven time and again that it has the capability of co-opting oppositional forms (Orlowski, 2011).
- **The use of Maltese in blogging.** The majority of blogs in Malta are written in English: I translated relevant blog posts that were originally written in Maltese without much thought, since Malta is officially a bilingual country. However, the use of Maltese in blogs is on the rise and appears to be tied to the perennial issues of identity and ‘the self’ where, for example, the use of Maltese is a symbol of differentiation from the ‘other’ – expats, the tourist who visits the islands and so on. There are opportunities for scholarly work that can lever on critical discourse analysis techniques and use semiotics to explore issues of social class, empowerment and cultural marginalisation.
- **Studies on the political potential of ‘whatever blogging’.** I conclude this study with several questions that may be answered with further CDA studies: Can ambivalent discourse still be political, counter-hegemonic? Do citizens feel more empowered to use this new discourse for social change? Is there some way that bloggers’ discourse is becoming more mainstream – hegemonic? Can this discourse – even if it is just discourse of entertainment - displace the archaic language of the Church or the polarised language of the political? Can dominant hegemonies seamlessly incorporate alternative discourse such as to render it ineffective - or even mainstream? Can rhizome politics start to flourish in cultures that have not historically facilitated horizontal information exchanges, as a direct consequence off mass take-up of social technologies? Studies drawing from anthropology and related fields would be particularly useful in these contexts.

My hope is that in the absence of a significant number of ethnographic studies on the impact of the use of new media on systems of hegemony in the hyperlocal, this study can be used in other ethnographic settings to develop comparative understandings. As Turkoğlu (2012) notes, if critical media literacy is to theoretically frame the participation of citizens through the media, we need to develop a sustainable understanding of the transformation of the world, not just within a structured and sterilised academic sphere but within the social world itself, including its banalities.

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Volume II

Appendices

Appendix 1

Glossary

Blogroll refers to the list of links to blogs selected by a blogger, and featured prominently on a blog.

CPM is an acronym for ‘Cost per mile’, used in online advertising jargon to represent the cost per thousand impressions. If a user has a CPM of 5 cents, then the user knows that 1,000 displays would cost 5 cents and 5,000 displays 25 cents.

Context refers to the social, economic, cultural and political setting surrounding individuals, within which they are embedded and involved in a dialectical relationship. The emphasis here is not on context as exclusively physical space, since within these settings, one can discern various contexts within which behaviours, attitudes, perceptions, and meanings occur, and are influenced. Contexts are therefore understood here as “social constructions” and not exclusively “physical locations” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.39).

Community is an elusive and contested term used in daily interaction with rather different interpretations – the only consensus is that it concerns people (see Ferlander, 2006; Lawthom & Whelan, 2012). A popular definition would refer to an actual place, and a set of social relationships and interactions between people or a way of delineating a quality of life. With the advent of the Internet and the social web, the definition is not confined by geographic boundaries, and increasingly associated with the notion of online communication and social networks: Putnam (2000) argues that communication is a prerequisite for community. Community is now also associated with the workings of communities of interest and communities of practice (where people unite to mutually engage in joint enterprise and develop and share a common repertoire of resources), activation of weak and strong ties and some sense of solidarity when pursuing a common cause – although boyd (2006) believes that the online community is likely to become an egocentric notion with individuals constructing their social world through links and attention. The online community may therefore also be temporal, vulnerable to the whims of networked individualism and connections with others, as well as difficulties with sustaining relationships online.

Counter-hegemony refers to attempts to challenge ‘common-sense’ ideas (ideologies) of power blocs who rely on hegemony as a means of securing consent within civil society. In the “cultural sphere, conventional and dissident meanings – ideologies – can coexist in popular culture, media, styles of dress, dance, and so on” (Bailey et al., 2008, p.159). The very totalisation of hegemony and its complex and ever-changing nature, creates opportunities for opposition and resistance, rendering the system vulnerable. The replacement of force and repression with consent and relative freedom in advanced capitalist societies enables an informed citizenry to openly challenge the values, attitudes, beliefs, norms, and assumptions embedded in the dominant culture (Moen, 1998).

Culture is a complicated term and there exists no single definition. Giroux (2004, p.62) describes culture as “the primary sphere in which individuals, groups, and institutions engage in the art of translating the diverse and multiple relations that mediate between private life and public concerns”. Culture is therefore “the ground of both contestation

and accommodation informed by the way power is used in a given society” (Giroux, 1981, p.27) that is ‘the primary terrain for realizing the political as an articulation and intervention into the social, a space in which politics is pluralized, recognized as contingent, and open to many formations” (2004, p.62). In this study, culture is emphasised as a site of resistance (Escobar, 1995). Fiske (1989) frames culture as the constant struggle for the production of alternative meanings from our social experience: in this study, those struggles are crystallised by counter-hegemonic blogging and the production of online texts as an attempt to resist, transform and challenge the mainstream discourse of incumbent power blocs. This study remains conscious of the lack of recognition of the dialectic relationship between technology and culture. For instance, Hine (2000, p.9) has called the internet a “cultural artefact” or “a place where culture is formed and reformed.” Castells (1996, p.328) also believes that since “culture is mediated and enacted through communication, cultures themselves, that is our historically produced systems of beliefs and codes, become fundamentally transformed, and will be more so over time, by the new technological system”. This research remains cautious of the cultural transformation claims associated with technological determinism. Perhaps the most relevant reading of culture is Rheingold’s (2012) who defines culture as “everything that humans are not born with but need to learn from other humans or from media”.

Gatekeeping is the practice of selection exercised by specific media actors (individuals or organizations, often within a professional context), with the objective of reducing the amount and protecting the quality of the information passing through the ‘gate’, based on criteria established by the media system itself. As McQuail (1994, p.214) notes, the gatekeeping framework is “largely based on the assumption ... that there is a given, finite, knowable reality of events in the ‘real world’, from which it is the task of the media to select according to appropriate criteria of representativeness or relevance”.

Gatewatching is the observation of the output of news publications and other sources, in order to identify important material as it becomes available (Bruns & Jacobs 2006, p.16). ‘Gatewatching’ resonates of the role of ‘gatekeeping’¹¹⁵ advocated by mainstream media in its role as the Fourth Estate (Bruns 2005, p. 11). ‘Gatewatcher’ blogs therefore create new waves of information that are diffused through a combination of broadcast diffusion and the “media contagion” of person-to-person information dissemination (Marlow 2005, p. 37; Lotan et al., 2011). According to Lovink (2007, p.14), the “gatewatcher” is placed inside a hermeneutic circle, in which ‘news’ is taken as a given, and then interpreted.

Hypertext denotes text composed of blocks of words (sometimes called a ‘lexia’) (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms link, node, network, web, and path. The multiplicity of hypertext, which appears in multiple links to individual blocks of text, calls for an active reader (see Landow, 2006, p.2). As a radically new form of technology and publication, hypertext’ is usually traced back to Vannevar Bush’s 1945 essay ‘As We May Think’, although the term was coined by Theodor H. Nelson in 1965. In 1970, Nelson described hypertext as “on-sequential writing - text that branches and allows choices to the reader, best read at an interactive screen...a series of text chunks connected by links which offer the reader different pathways (Nelson, in Landow, 1996, p. 2). Landow (2006) says that “conceptual systems founded on ideas of

¹¹⁵ Gatekeeping refers to a regime of control over what content is allowed to emerge from the production processes in print and broadcast media by media controllers (journalists, editors, owners) for release to audiences.

center, margin, hierarchy and linearity” must be replaced “by ones of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks” with hypertext denoting “text composed of blocks of text - a lexia - and the electronic links that join them” (p.3).

Ideologies are representations of aspects of the world which contribute to establishing, changing and maintaining relations of power, domination and exploitation. Eagleton (1991, p.222) believes that ideology is a matter of 'discourse' rather than of 'language' - of certain concrete discursive effects, rather than of signification as such. It represents the points where power impacts upon certain utterances and inscribes itself tacitly within them. Within this study, the analysis of texts deals with their effects on power relations in society; how they may be enacted in ways of interacting (through genres) and inculcated in ways of being or identities (in styles). Textual analysis (and particularly the assumptions in texts) is an important aspect of ideological analysis and critique, provided it is framed within a broader social analysis of events and social practices (see Eagleton, 1991; Fairclough, 2003).

Meme is an element of a culture or system of behaviour passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means. Within internet jargon, it means an image, video, etc. that is passed electronically from one Internet user to another, with frequent modifications and remixes along the way.

Page Rank is what Google uses to determine the importance of a web page. It is one of many factors used to determine which pages appear in search results.

Permalink is an abbreviation for 'Permanent Link'. A permalink is a URL that links to a specific web posting. Permalinks are most commonly used for blogs, which are frequently changed and updated. They give a specific web address to each post, allowing blog entries to be bookmarked by visitors or linked to from other websites. Using a permalink to define the location of each posting enables blog post entries to be retrieved via search engines and bookmarked.

Pingback is a link to items in other blogs within a blog post.

RSS Feed is a special form of XML (an HTML-like text format) that displays posts to blogs and other sites such that these can be accessed as independent units by other applications and services and searched or displayed in contexts outside of the pages they were originally placed on.

Rhizome is an organic metaphor developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) to describe a heterogeneous, non-hierarchical and ever-changing network. A rhizome has the characteristics of connection and heterogeneity: any point of a network of rhizomes can be connected to anything else in the network, and must form such connections. Any point of a rhizome can be connected to any other point, but the points are not necessarily connected. Since there is no unity to serve as a pivot, a rhizome might be easily ruptured, but it will regenerate since it is an adaptable map with multiple entryways. As networked structures, rhizomes are frequently contrasted with aborescent (tree-like) or hierarchical structures. The notion of the rhizome has recently been used to capture the mobility and contingency of the organisational frameworks that characterise alternative media. It is also being associated with the emerging, individualised politics of protest embodied in protest movements such as the 'indignados' protests in Spain and the Occupy Wall Street movement (see Gerbaudo, 2012 and Karatzogianni & Robinson, 2010).

Tagging is the practice of assigning keywords to individual blog postings (and other online content) to enable the original author or other users to categorise that content.

Technologies of the self are described by Foucault (1988, p.18) as processes which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality. Blogging, as a process, can also be equated to be a technology of the self.

Trackbacks are records of web addresses of sites that have linked to a blog.

Web 2.0 is a term coined by Tim O'Reilly to describe the second generation of web-based communities and hosted services that evolved after the 'dot.com' crash of 2001. The technologies underpinning the hosted services can loosely be grouped into the following categories: wikis, blogs, micro-blogs, photo-sharing sites, slide-sharing sites, real search syndication (RSS), social networks, social bookmarking, podcasts, video-sharing and instant messaging. Web 2.0 is distinct from Web 1.0 in that its sites are interactive and allow users to do more than just retrieve information: it includes a social element where users generate and distribute content, often with freedom to share and reuse. Social networking sites such as YouTube, Facebook, Tumblr and wikis allow users to create, edit and link web pages easily, and folksonomies (such as Flickr and Diigo) allow users to collaboratively create and manage freely-chosen keywords or tags to annotate and categorise content (Creeber and Royston, 2009). O'Reilly and Battelle (2009) insist that one of the fundamental ideas underlying Web 2.0 is that successful network applications are systems for harnessing collective intelligence. The absence of a set of standards as to what Web 2.0 actually means has led to criticism that it can radically suggest different things to different people. Tim Berners-Lee, the originator of the Web, has questioned whether one can use the term in any meaningful way at all as many of the technological components of Web 2.0 have existed since its early days.

Appendix 2

Blogging: functionality, history and genres

2.1 Core functionality

When the blog was first introduced, its credentials as a powerful two-way Internet communications tool were attributed to a mix of criteria that distinguished it from other communications media at the time, in that it was: a) publishable; b) findable; c) social; d) viral; e) syndicable; and f) linkable (Scoble & Israel, 2006). Despite the evolving definitions of what constitutes a blog, the medium remains associated with a periodically updated, web-based chronological publication supporting a mixture of writing forms that frequently accommodate user comments, forming a veritable mirror of life (Zahari, 2007).

The following updated list includes the primary technical functions which are commonly associated with the blog. This functionality is no longer the exclusive domain of the blog since several elements can now be found in social networks such as Facebook, micro-blogging sites such as Twitter and hybrids such as Tumblr:

- a) The base unit of a blog is a post. Every post has a title or headline, and a body, where the main content of the post is inserted.
- b) Posts are updated frequently or periodically and published in reverse chronological order. Every post has a date and time stamp to record when the post is published, though this facility can be disabled by the user.
- c) A blog has access to an archiving system organised by date and category.
- d) Blogs generally include a feedback mechanism whereby readers can ‘comment’ on the blogger’s posts and subjects: this asynchronous interactivity distinguishes blogs from other static websites - but also from social networks such as Facebook that facilitate real time engagement through chat and talk.
- e) Individual posts often include hyperlinks within the body text. Links to other online sources that the blogger visits and recommends may also be presented on the home page as a list or a ‘blogroll.’
- f) Blogs are characterised by instant text / graphic publishing, offering users a choice of design templates with a number of standard features. Templates can also be

- edited by the end user, and often provide the option to add ‘widgets’ or stand-alone applications that can be embedded a page where the user has rights of authorship.
- g) Tags can be inserted onto each post, enabling blogs to be filtered by attributes such as date, category and author.
 - h) Every post has its own specific, unique web address or ‘permalink’, enabling bookmarking and linking from other online collateral.
 - i) Every post can enable trackbacks or pingbacks – links to other sites that refer to the specific post.
 - j) Most blogs are primarily textual, although it is now customary to have photography, videos, graphics, music and audio inserted in a blog post.
 - k) Posts are usually written by a single person, although collaborative blogs produced by more than one blogger are also popular. Blog functionality usually provides the option to invite and add more than one writer.
 - l) A blog administrator can also manage access and permission levels when there is more than one contributor to a blog.
 - m) Blogs can be hosted by dedicated blog hosting services, or they can be run using blog software on or web hosting services.

2.2 A short history of blogging

Jorn Barger introduced the word ‘blog’ into the lexicon, when he used the term “weblog” as part of the title of his site ‘Robot Wisdom: a weblog by Jorn Barger’ on 17th December 1997. The term ‘weblog’ was already in use by the early 1990s, but in a different context – as a log of visitor data accessible by a technical person administering a Web server. Barger’s updated list of links to other sites he had visited and recommended was similar to early link-driven sites that were later to be recognised as blogs, such as Dave Winer’s ‘Scripting News’ which also started out as a list of links to website and sparse commentary. In April or May 1999, Peter Merholz, an information architect, used the term ‘we blog’ in the side bar of his home page ‘PeterMe.com’: the term was eventually shortened to ‘blog’ with the weblog editor or author referred to as a ‘blogger’ (Blood, 2000). The word ‘blog’ was quickly embraced as both an activity and a communication form once Pyra Labs called its launch product ‘Blogger’.

Blogs began around 1996-97, during what Lovink (2008) describes as the second euphoric phase of the Internet. In practice, the collaborative environments of the 'read/write web' at the root of blogging have existed on the Internet since the 1980s, when the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), a computer conferencing system was set up in 1985 by Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant. What started out as a dial-up bulletin board and changed into a forum with the evolution of the Internet and led to the coining of the term 'virtual community' by one of its members, Howard Rheingold (1995). Early digital communities like the WELL used a system called Usenet that allowed many users to subscribe and contribute to specific topics of discussion and upload or download new contributions whenever they wished (Ryan, 2010). By the early 1990s, what used to be military networks had morphed into Internet forum software and eventually the global Internet.

Scott Hall (2006, p.30) refers to blogging as "the stepchild of the open source movement." Indeed, the origins of blogs have much in common with the 'hacker ethic' at the hub of counter-culture led by Stewart Brand and the Whole Earth network with his Whole Earth Catalog¹¹⁶ (Turner, 2006). Blogging, like the WELL, has links with two conceptual frameworks from the 'Catalog' era with which to explain user interactions online: the 'gift economy' and the notion of a community of linked minds. The WELL's gift economy consisted of the constant exchange of potentially valuable information without expectation of immediate reward, other than "the promise of future information exchanges" (ibid. pp.156-157).

Early blogs reflected the simple scheme of the World Wide Web Servers page, whereby newcomers would be added to the top of the list, and the return visitor would immediately see the latest information without having to scroll down the page. This concept of stacks, borrowed from computer science, led to data structures in which each new addition is piled on the top, pushing down various items. A stack of news and information is therefore a page in which the last thing that the publisher adds is the first thing that is displayed. This design, present at the Web's creation, would keep reasserting itself like a genetic trait, turning up at critical points in the Web's development.

¹¹⁶ The Whole Earth Catalog was a counterculture catalogue published by Stewart Brand between 1968 and 1972, and occasionally thereafter, until 1998 (Turner, 2006).

Although Berners-Lee's first browser was a tool that could facilitate reading and writing, the browsers that followed did not support two-way engagement. It was more difficult to write program code for a tool that could both read and write and Netscape became the standard for quick browser roll-out. The first web experience for most newcomers therefore became an act of media consumption: browsing, surfing and plain reading.

As the Internet boom peaked in 1999, blogs did not secure much media attention as they were not perceived to have obvious e-commerce functionality or monetisation potential. Early blogs such as 'Justin's Links'¹¹⁷ at links.net and Dave Winer's "Scripting News"¹¹⁸ started out as lists of links with minimal text. In April 1999, *The Cluetrain Manifesto* was published online, comprising 95 theses. Although aimed at marketing professionals and advertising creatives working within the corporate world, and without specifically mentioning weblogs, *Cluetrain* captured the zeitgeist of the time. It directly associated 'the market' with online "conversations", a place where people communicate in "language that is natural, open, honest, direct, funny and often shocking" and where "hyperlinks subvert hierarchies." Several theses resonate of the early blogger ethic of subjectivity, individuality, honesty, and openness – and bloggers, in turn, embraced the *Cluetrain* as a means of rallying against bureaucratic impersonality, widely discussing and linking to the online document. *Cluetrain*'s vision of a teeming global exchange of ideas working to disrupt institutional barriers was "in perfect sync with the conversations that bloggers were beginning to have" (Rosenberg, 2009, p.169).

The mass-breakthrough for blogging came in August 1999, with Pyra Labs¹¹⁹ deployment of *Blogger*, a free tool for automating and updating of personal weblogs, followed by a hosted blog service named Blogspot. Blogger provided 'friction-free'

¹¹⁷ Justin Hall started his blog in 1994. He was called 'the founding father of personal bloggers' in an article on the New York Times (Rosen, 2004).

¹¹⁸ Scripting News was launched in April 1997, consisting of links to Web sites of interest to Winer, and shared with minimal commentary. Winer is a software developer, entrepreneur and writer and pioneer of outliners, content management systems, RSS and podcasting. Since 2009, Winer is collaborating with New York University journalism professor Jay Rosen on "Rebooting the News," a weekly podcast on technology and innovation in journalism.

¹¹⁹ Pyra Labs was co-founded by Evan Williams and Meg Hourihan. *Blogger* was originally perceived to be a free, easy to use tool that would encourage users to purchase the full Pyra App. *Blogger* was initially intended to be used with an existing website and domain name. In early 2002, Blogger started to generate revenue streams through the launch of Blogger Pro service and opt-out fees. In February 2003, Pyra Labs was acquired by Google under disclosed terms. Evan Williams left the company in October 2004.

technology and “transformed blogging from an arcane pastime for Web insiders into a mass-market, anyone-can-play phenomenon” (Rosenberg, 2009, p.102). While Blogger appealed to the Web’s early adopters who owned domain names and wished to arrange their own hosting arrangements, Blogspot wedded the simplicity of push-button technology and intuitive interface to the free-and-easy model of hosted blogging services. By late 1999, content management tools such as Pitas, Groksoup and LiveJournal also started to gain in popularity, providing users with the facility to set up and host a blog for free, on the provider’s own servers. In March 2000, Blogger included “permalinks” in the form of a code for each blog post that enabled other websites and bloggers to link back to a specific post – later expanded by the Movable Type¹²⁰ platform with each individual blog post being allocated its own separate web page as a permanent home with a unique address to which links could point.

The introduction of web syndication technology called Really Simple Syndication (RSS)¹²¹ in 1999 turned blog posts into a “feed” or stream of data updates that users could subscribe to and keep up with using a program called an RSS reader. Being able to quickly scan the list of subscriptions for updates in the reader meant that users now had a system that highlighted whenever a blogger posted something new. RSS also meant that in one swoop, blogs morphed from transient jottings and became data, acquiring legacy. Moveable Type’s platform automatically produced an RSS feed from posts.

Blood (2000) credits the free-form posting interface of Blogger¹²² in particular as conducive to the shift from filter-style to the more essayistic, personal-style blogging. The 9/11 attacks in 2001 sent more users Blogger’s way as people embraced the service as a means of sharing emotions (Rosenberg, 2009, p.125). On 3 September, 2001, Movable Type was launched, targeting experienced bloggers from 2001. In 2002, Six

¹²⁰ From the launch of version 1 in October 2001, *Movable Type* became popular with experienced bloggers or those who wanted to get superior functionality to that afforded by Blogger. Although Movable Type was proprietary, the system was offered for free to personal users. In 2002, *Six Apart* was set up and offered blog hosting through a service called TypePad.

¹²¹ The first version of RSS, RDF Site Summary (later known as RSS 0.9) was launched in March 1999 by Netscape for use on the My.Netscape.com portal. RSS formats were preceded by several attempts at web syndication that did not achieve widespread popularity. This version became known as RSS 0.9. In July 1999, Dan Libby of Netscape produced a new version, RSS 0.91, which simplified the format by removing RDF elements and incorporating elements from Dave Winer’s Scripting News syndication format.

¹²² Blogger’s slogan in 2000 was ‘push button publishing for the people.’

Apart, the company operating Movable Type, also started to offer blog hosting through a service called TypePad.

In May 2003, WordPress, an open-source program led by Matt Mullenweg, a nineteen year-old programmer, was released as a fork of b2/cafelog.¹²³ As an open source project, WordPress experienced rapid user growth, leveraging on Six Apart's introduction of fees for the commercial use of Movable Type platform in 2004. Mullenweg levered on the disgruntlement of the blogging community and the goodwill of the open source movement of software developers assembled around WordPress to rapidly close the gap with Movable Type. Merriam-Webster named "blog" their word of the year for 2004 on the basis that it was the most searched-for word on their online dictionary in that year. By 2006, blogging's popularity was also being fuelled by the mainstream's media interest in the medium.¹²⁴ On 12 December, 2007, Movable Type was relicensed as free software under the GNU General Public License.

As at the time of this study, blogging technologies have evolved into sophisticated content management systems, offering users with a choice of hosted and self-hosting solutions. As of 6 November, 2012, WordPress version 3.4 has been downloaded more than 23 million times. There are over 57 million WordPress publishers, and WordPress blogs are written in more than 120 languages.¹²⁵ WordPress's array of plugins, widgets and themes, user-friendly interface and robust architecture continues to set it apart from competitive platforms. Blogger operates on Google's server platform and provides seamless integration with Google collateral such as Picasa and Google Docs. Six Apart continues to maintain Movable Type as a system to be installed on a user's own web server, with TypePad as its hosted blog service. Hybrid options are also available: LiveJournal incorporates both a hosted blog service and community features; Drupal and Joomla are sophisticated open-source content management systems that support large-scale websites, blogs and community sites.

¹²³ A version of WordPress's 'history' is available at <http://codex.wordpress.org/History>.

¹²⁴ The 25 December, 2006 cover of Time magazine featured a flat-panel computer screen naming "You, yes you" as the Person of the Year. A 2006 Pew Internet and American Life Project (2006) report concluded that the most popular topic among bloggers was "me."

¹²⁵ As at 6 November, 2012, <http://wordpress.org/download/counter> provides a WordPress download counter and <http://en.wordpress.com/stats/> up to date WordPress statistics.

It is easier to incorporate other forms of media such as audio, visuals and video into the blog, and to post directly from mobile devices. The increased simplicity of posting content to the Web was highlighted with the emergence of ‘light blogging’ tools in 2010, aimed at facilitating users to publish “found things very quickly and at the click of a button” (McManus, 2010), also through the use of e-mail as an additional input interface. As an asynchronous type of communication in which text still predominates, blogs increasingly feature extensive use of embedded graphics, photography, videos and podcasts - the popularity of Tumblr, the market leader of light blogging tools, is a testimony. Table 9 is a snapshot of leading blogging platforms in November 2012:

Blogging Software	Technology	Ideal for
WordPress	Open source, hosted and self-hosted options, free. Written in PHP and MySQL. Comprehensive content management system, capable of supporting scalable solutions from single user to entire portfolio of blogs with multiple users overseen by a primary administrator. According to Pingom.com, WordPress powers over 49% of top 100 blogs in Technorati list.	Essay-type writing, content-rich blogs with numerous free and premium themes and widgets available.
Blogger	Proprietary, hosted, free.	Personal blog.
Blog.com	Open source, hosted, free.	Personal blog.
Drupal	Open source, self-hosted, free. Comprehensive content management system. Written in PHP.	Communities.
Expression Engine	Subscription-based, hosted. Feature rich, powerful and flexible platform. Like Movable Type, it supports multi-site publishing capabilities across multiple domains or even sub domains.	Functionality-rich blogs.
Joomla	Open source, self-hosted, free. Comprehensive content management system. Similar to Drupal.	Essay-type writing.
Movable Type	Open source, self-hosted, free. Offers options for users to purchase support or commercial, education, or non-profit licenses, which come with support contracts, author limits, and unlimited blogs.	Essay-type writing.
Penzu	Subscription-based, hosted. Focused on blogger privacy options.	Personal journal and online diary.
Blogdrive	Proprietary, hosted, free.	Personal blog.
Blogsmith	AOL-owned system. May be released as a subscription-based system in the future.	Essay-type writing.
LiveJournal	Subscription-based, hosted.	Essay-type writing.
TypePad	Subscription-based, self-hosted.	Essay-type writing.
Tumblr	Light, micro-blogging tool, web-based, free	Short-form blogging. Supports posting of quick text, images, videos, links, quotes

		and audio.
Posterous Spaces	Light-blogging tool, web-based, free. Acquired by Twitter on 12 March 2012. Allows users to use their own domain on a site hosted by Posterous, by pointing the DNS listing for the domain or sub domain to a Posterous account.	Ideal for mobile blogging. May be integrated into Twitter at some stage.
SquareSpace	Proprietary, web-based, commercial model based on volume.	Bloggers looking for modular design.

Table 9: Leading blogging platforms in 2012

Functionality which used to be associated with blogging, such as content upload and development and status updates, is now also incorporated in the core functionality of micro-blogging and social networking sites. When it was first introduced in 2006, Twitter¹²⁶ was positioned as a means of an individual using an SMS service to connect with a small group of people. Users could post 140-character statements or ‘tweets’ and choose a set of friends to ‘follow’, similar to subscribing to an RSS feed. As a social network, Twitter revolves around the principle of followers: when you choose to follow another Twitter user, the user's tweets appear in reverse chronological order on your main Twitter page. Users post status updates from the Web as well as smart phones and other mobile devices. Twitter’s reputation as a powerful ‘micro-blogging’ tool was built on a number of similarities to blogging: friends’ messages appear in reverse chronological stream in the browser window or mobile device screen; hyperlinking is a means of sharing and curating content; and tweets are public by default, each with its own unique web address.

Both Facebook and Google have encroached Twitter’s micro-blogging territory. Facebook’s Timeline is tantamount to micro-blogging without the 140 character limit, and visible to networks of friends, and their own networks. Elements of Google’s short-lived Google Buzz (a short-lived social networking and messaging tool launched in 2010) were integrated into the company’s web-based email program Gmail and eventually into

Google+, Google’s social networking platform. LinkedIn, a professional networking service, also includes status updates. Tumblr, Plurk, PingGadget, Beeing, Jaiku and identi.ca also incorporate blogging features.

¹²⁶ Twitter is ranked as one of the 10 most visited websites worldwide by Alexa's web traffic analysis at August 2012. There are numerous management tools for adding and monitoring online content and conversations including Tweetdeck, HootSuite, and Seismic: these third party applications account for more than 50% of tweets (based on analysis of 500 million tweets by Sysomos) and also shorten URLs to enable text to fit within 140-character limit of the medium.

It is impossible to determine how many blogs are in the blogosphere. Blogs are regularly abandoned within weeks of set up, or set up to be active for a short duration - for instance by marketers or spammers. As the Internet is distributed, there is no central counting house for blogs, making them hard to track (Rettberg, 2008). According to Tapscott and Williams, in 2008 there were “over 50 million blogs, 1.5 million blog postings daily, and a new blog created every second” (p.40). Another search engine, BlogPulse¹²⁷ claimed to be tracking 149 million blogs as at November 2010. In June 2011, Technorati, an Internet blog search, claimed to be indexing 164 million blogs (as compared to 3 million in 2004). Technorati’s annual ‘State of the Blogosphere’ also provides an online snapshot of the blogosphere based on responses to the influential site’s internal survey. According to the site, two-thirds of bloggers are male. 65% are aged 18-44. Nearly 50% of bloggers surveyed were graduates and more affluent than the general population. The average blogger has three or more blogs and has been blogging for two or more years.

2.3 Blogging genres and motivations

The first generation blogs were primarily online diaries, with people keeping a running account of their personal lives, and linking to websites of presumed interest such as traditional media outlets or other blogs (Keren, 2006). Rosenberg (2009) provides a history of pioneer bloggers, including Justin Hall, Dave Winer, Jorn Barger, Evan Williams, Meg Hourihan, Josh Marshall, Robert Scoble, Nick Denton, Jason Calcanis, Boing Boing and Heather Armstrong. According to studies (Herring, Scheidt, et al., 2005; Lenhart & Fox, 2006; Lomborg, 2009; Nowson & Oberlander, 2007; Papacharissi, 2007; Schmidt, 2007), the medium continues to be associated with the personal, journal and subjective forms of writing. While the journal blog may evoke images of the solitary personal diary, it also facilitates interaction with other bloggers and readers, thus allowing for the emergence and sustaining of communities of shared interests and subcultural identification (Hodkinson, 2006; Wei, 2004). According to Technorati (2011), self-expression and sharing expertise continue to be the primary motivations for bloggers, with 70% of all respondents saying that personal satisfaction is a way they measure the success of their blog.

¹²⁷ BlogPulse was shut down on 13 January, 2012.

As blogging has become more pervasive, blogs tend to be perceived to be a genre of computer-mediated communication that can be evaluated in terms of content and structure. For Gurak (2006) blogs are both a technology and a genre: a technology in the sense that conventions such as format, layout and linking are standardised; and a genre because they invoke certain forms of discourse and shape the outcome of the text. These conventions invite a visible, global, standardised sense of ‘self or a form of “life-writing”’ (Keren, 2006, p.7). Evan Williams, the co-founder of Blogger and Twitter, has been quoted as saying that the characteristics of blogging are ‘frequency, brevity and personality’ (Turnball, 2001, in Rettberg, 2009) – characteristics embedded in both his ventures.

Rettberg (2008) argues that the modern-day interpretation of what constitutes a blog refers to both the medium’s characteristics (as described earlier) and the genre. She identifies three main styles or genres of blogging: a) personal or diary-style blogging; b) topic-driven blogging and c) filter blogging. In the latter case, bloggers serve as "intelligent filters" for their publics by selecting, contextualizing, and presenting links of particular interest for that public (Rheingold, 2011). Herring et al.’s (2004) study of the contents of 357 random blogs identifies three sub-genres according to the purpose of the blog: personal journals, filters, and k(nowledge)-logs; personal journals were found to be overwhelmingly most common. They distinguished genres on the basis of the blogger’s relationship to the content produced. Personal journal content, being the blogger's thoughts and internal workings, was likely to be ‘internal’ while filter content focused on world events, online happenings, etc., was likely to be external to the blogger. Topic-driven blogging may contain both internal and external content, and is likely to involve more essay-style writing. There is clearly overlap between these genres – for instance, in the way that personal blogging inevitably filters the material encountered on the web according to interests and tastes (Tryon, 2009).

The categorisation of blogs into genres and contexts is an ongoing trend in current research, and associated with an attempt at greater sophistication in studying online discourse (Bruns & Jacobs, 2006). Bhargava (2007), for instance, identifies 25 basic styles of blogging. Schmidt (2007) proposes an analytical framework to compare blogging practices, arguing that different individual and situated use of the blog format is framed by the three structural aspects of rules, relations, and code. While blogging initially referred to a technological platform that allowed for easy and rapid updating of

web content, increasingly it has come to refer to both a broadcast and a literary form (Sullivan, 2008). As blogging has gone mainstream, recent research has also focused on niches, particularly political blogging (Ekdale et al. 2010; Keren, 2010; Pole, 2008; Siapera, 2008). Karpf (2008) believes that the term ‘blog’ refers to a wide range of disparate activities that are problematically grouped together. In his study of 25 US political blogs, he proposes a four-part typology that separates blogs on the basis of software platform design features and imbeddedness within existing institutions of authority¹²⁸. In researching political bloggers’ texts, Keren (2010) has also proposed a typology of online modes of bloggers’ discourse¹²⁹. Research has also addressed the issue of motivation for blogging. Huang et al. (2007) identify five such motives in seeking information, providing commentary, participating in community forums, documenting daily life and expressing oneself. They conclude that information creation and consumption and social interaction are the impetus for all blogging efforts, a view supported by other research (e.g. Johnson et al., 2007; McKenna & Pole, 2008).

Within this desire to segment (or pigeon-hole) blogs and their content, boyd (2006) has been a discordant voice. She believes that seeing blogs as a genre “obfuscates the efficacy of the practice and the acts of the practitioners. The use of metaphor to capture sub-genres introduces problematic methods for evaluating blogging.” For boyd, blogs must be conceptualised as both a medium and a bi-product of expression - that is, both in terms of culture and practice. She suggests that it is more useful to focus on frameworks in which we can start to understand how blogging has blurred the lines between orality and literacy, corporeality and spatiality, and public and private spaces.

Despite their credentials as an early form of social networking, in practice blogs allow limited exchanges (in the form of comments), while the author retains ownership of, and ultimate control over, the blog’s content (Savolainen, 2011). Reader comments are

¹²⁸ Karpf (2008) identified four distinct types of blogs: a) Classic b) Community c) Institutional and d) Bridge. The blog types were developed on what he claims are the two primary forces that expanded the ‘blogspace’ – a) ‘open authorship’ in the form of community blogs (such as the dailykos.com) and bridge blogs (such as the Huffington Post); and b) ‘closed authorship’ in the form of traditional personal and organisational reputation blogs (including media blogs). Karpf uses ‘blogspace’ instead of ‘blogosphere’ to maintain conceptual clarity. While the blogosphere refers to a network of blogs tied together through static and dynamic hyperlinks, blogspace refers to the types of blogs that can inhabit the blogosphere.

¹²⁹ Keren’s (2010) typology is based on a view of political bloggers as public intellectuals. Bloggers are classified by three variable accounting for their online discourse: structure, style and content; and make up for eight ‘ideal-types’ of public intellectual bloggers: 1) Civilized; 2) Egghead; 3) Contentious; 4) Pretentious; 5) Pristine; 6) Noble Savage; 7) Adolescent; 8) Mass Man.

generally focused on what the blogger actually writes (Brake, 2009). Bloggers perceive their blogs as though it is “their home” and readers are considered to be guests or visitors and expected to “respect the sovereignty of their host” (boyd, 2006, p. 634).

2.4 Blogging’s uncertain future

The globalisation of the Internet has been mostly invisible for the dominant Anglo-American Internet culture (Lovink, 2007). English language content on the Web has dropped well below the 30% mark, and the majority of Internet traffic is increasingly in Spanish, Mandarin and Japanese. This picture gets further complicated taking into account the ‘cross media’ potential of the nearly five billion mobile phone users and 1.7 billion people on the Internet (ITU, 2011), blogomania in Iran (Sreberny & Khiabany, 2010), South Korea possessing one of the densest broadband infrastructures, and the slow-burn persistence rise of Chinese bloggers in the face of censorship and regulation from the Chinese government (MacKinnon, 2007). The potential of blogging and other web 2.0 tools as organisation tools was very much in evidence in the so-called Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 (Sedra, 2011).

The uncertainty about the state of blogging is not just limited to statistics and demographics. Traffic to the two most popular blog-hosting sites, Blogger and WordPress.com, is reportedly stagnating while Facebook and Twitter continue to grow exponentially. Blogads, which sells advertising them, says media buyers’ inquiries increased nearly tenfold between 2004 and 2008, but have grown by only 17% since then (The Economist, 2010). The global user uptake of Facebook and the pervasiveness of micro-blogging have led media pundits (Denton, 2010) to declare that blogging is dead. Two reports (Lenhart et al., 2010; Zickhur, 2010) by Pew Internet and American Life indicate that since 2006, the use of blogs by teens and young adults has decreased while simultaneously rising among older adults. According to Zickhur, “the act formally known as blogging seems to have peaked,” since Internet users “are doing blog-like things in other online spaces”.

The challenge to blogging is technological and conceptual. The proliferation of the mobile internet is empowering citizens to use their mobile devices as technologies of cooperation and reputation (Rheingold, 2002) - but also limiting the input space for more reflective text. The popularity of Tumblr as a ‘mobile-friendly’ blogging software

is indicative of this. If blogging is about maintaining an online journal or sharing links and photos with friends, services such as Facebook and Twitter focus on speed and simplicity, leveraging on the popularity of smart phone applications. Maintaining an orthodox blog requires thought and commitment as opposed to trading brief messages with friends and updating a status on Facebook or Twitter. Social networks are oriented towards real-time response, where the mere change of a detail in a user's Facebook profile, a comment on a friend's timeline, the attendance of an event, the upload of a photo, or some interaction with a friend is enough to automatically generate a news item that is added to the top of the user profile. This is tantamount to an automatically-generated blog post, where the story is narrated or reported by Facebook instead of the user. Denton (2010) believes that content generated in this manner remains "personalised, comprehensive, filtered by the reader's social network and inevitably cheaper to produce than blogs dependent on the aggregation or production of original content". Within this narrow-casting context, young and time-poor people may indeed be exchanging 'macro' blogging' for microblogging with status updates. Compared to the social topography of social networks like Facebook or Twitter, the taxonomy of the orthodox proprietary blog may start to resemble "a limbering old beast next to its little offspring" (Rosenberg, 2009, p.234). Lovink (2007, p.42) believes that "the social aspect of blogs will be phased out and developed elsewhere into other products, leaving the blogs to perform the introspective duty of the online diary".

Nevertheless, if social networks, micro-blogs and other emerging media are to update and challenge the blog as an effective online tool for information exchange, they should be looking towards improving on the blog's core functionality. Specifically, it is still too early to determine whether social networks are contributing to more efficient blogging, 'dumbing down' the activity to a non-reflective version, or simply helping transform blogging into a more reflective practice. Jenkins (2006, p.13) distinguishes between 'media' and their delivery technologies, on the basis that delivery technologies may become obsolete and get replaced while media evolve¹³⁰. Social networks and microblogs provide immediacy, but currently do not provide a user with the same legacy and 'interface with the past' that the orthodox blog provides. Navigation

¹³⁰ Jenkins (2006, pp. 13-14) refers to a media model developed by Lisa Gitelman that differentiates between a) the medium as a technology that enables communication and b) the medium as a set of associated 'protocols' or social and cultural practices that have grown up around that technology – essentially cultural systems. While delivery technologies come and go all the time, media persist as layers within an ever more complicated information and entertainment stratum. Rather than being displaced, 'old media' are shifted by the introduction of new technologies.

through the equivalent of social network archives is difficult. The other major weakness of Facebook and Twitter as some form of universal citizen information platforms is that interactions are happening on a single organisation's server and database – on a single site. Both are proprietary platforms owned by well-funded corporates seeking to monetise technologies they provide for global user-generated content. Tim Berners-Lee (2010) provides a sombre warning on the closed silo of content being nurtured by large social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn. By walling off information posted by their users from the rest of the Web, Berners-Lee says these sites make it difficult for users to retrieve their data on another site. Unlike blog posts, each piece of information does not have a URL so connections among data exist only within the 'closed' taxonomy of the site. As users add more data, lock-in occurs, with the social-networking site becoming a central platform without the user having full control over their information in the system. Berners-Lee believes that as this kind of architecture gains widespread use, the Web risks becoming fragmented, jeopardising the single, universal information space and open standards that have underpinned the rapid development of web services in recent years. Twitter appears to be following the same route by indicating it may soon ban third party clients that interface with the software, potentially creating a closed archiving system (BBC, 2011).

Within this context, the blog, as an aggregator and archive or mashup of text, photo, audio and video content, remains as versatile, 'open and personal' a medium as the user chooses. The deployment of a blog on a proprietary domain, for instance, enables users to define themselves more within their own blog as opposed to a social network, where they are much more likely to be defined by others. Despite the increasing integration of the blog within the taxonomy of web 2.0 infrastructure, the medium retains its unique, authorial identity and power relationships - including the power to monitor, delete or block commenters - or even turn off commenting altogether.

Blogging may well become the domain for a more reflective type of engagement: more essay-type writing, more in-depth analysis and niche-interest reporting, the habitat for writers, aspiring journalists, copy-writers and diarists. *The Economist* (2010) believes that the future for blogs may be special-interest publishing, with networks of blogs linked within languages and countries, with each language-group in turn containing smaller pockets of densely linked sites. Rosenberg (2009) writes eloquently about his belief in the longevity of blogging as an expression of individuality and collaboration.

Blogging uniquely straddles the acts of writing and reading; it can be private and public, solitary and gregarious, in ratios that each practitioner sets for himself. Solis (2010) believes that blogging will persevere as “a place where context, thoughtfulness and continuity are rewarded with inbound links, retweets, bookmarks, comments and likes”. Blogs will remain as the hallmark of expertise and opinion – the digital library of our intellect, experience, and vision. Their longevity outlasts the short-term memory of Twitter or any other micro network. Although blogs no longer enjoy the novelty factor, they remain the natural evolution of the lighter publishing methods, because at some stage, publishers need more than 140 characters to express themselves, or greater flexibility than what is possible in Facebook’s generic chrome. Facebook and Twitter don’t replace blogs; they “traverse, extend, and include them” (Dean, 2010, p.36). According to Zarella (2010), ‘blog’ is still one of the most retweeted words on Twitter. In the same way that tablets are regenerating the news business (Knight, 2011), it is conceivable that the blog will make a similar comeback because of the improved reader interface provided by tablets.

The future of blogging may well depend on the permeable nature of the medium, and the hybrid media solutions that may develop around it. With this evolving ecosystem: microblogs will empower those with a voice to easily share their perspective without the emotional and time commitment required of blogging; micromedia will serve as the bridges between the events, observations, and social objects that bind us. The blog may remain as the multimedia repository for more deliberate discourse (Waugh, 2011). This study subscribes to Lomborg’s (2009) view that focusing one’s attention on blogging’s political, cultural, social and economic practices is likely to be more productive than propagating technology output analysis. Within this context, the migration of some activity from orthodox blogs to other platforms may simply be another stage in the evolution of blogging activity. The blog’s hybridisation with other social media, and the ‘blurring at the edges’ between blogs, micro-blogs and social networks may simply be another stage leading to “better blogging”.

Appendix 3

Deconstructing Hegemony

Blogging's potential for disruption is highly dependent on the historic, economic and socio-political context within which it is practised. This Appendix introduces the theory of hegemony as proposed by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) to provide a background to the way institutions operate in Maltese civil society. Hegemony in Malta is all-pervasive, tantamount to what Williams (1977, p.100) describes as

lived experience...a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute because experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives.

Gramsci's theory of hegemony was developed within a search for the ideal conditions for revolution in early twentieth century Fascist Italy and a rethink of the theoretical and conceptual base of Marxist political thought, especially its understanding of power and the state following the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Although the political and economic conditions in Europe are now radically different from those in Gramsci's times, and the mass and popular workers movement for which it was originally developed no longer exists, hegemony remains a popular theoretical and conceptual framework for an analysis of the intricate connections among the cultural, political, and economic roles of given segments or strata (Buttigieg, 2005).

As a political concept, hegemony has a long history in the Russian socialist movement, with Gramsci claiming that the foundations of the "concept and the fact" of hegemony were laid by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov or 'Lenin' (1870-1924) (Gramsci 1971, p.381)¹³¹. Gramsci's hegemony is especially prefigured in the work of ancient Greek thinkers (Fontana, 2006, p.24). At first reading, the term is synonymous with 'moral and philosophical leadership': the Greek word 'hegemon' means 'leader', 'guide', 'prominent power' or 'dominant state, person or ruler' and is widely used to denote political, social or individual dominance over others.

¹³¹ The term was also used by Plekhanov and other Russian Marxists in the 1880s to denote the need for the working class to lead an alliance with the peasantry in the overthrow of Tsarism. Within this context, the Russian working class, in alliance with the peasantry, would act as the leading (hegemonic) force in the bourgeois-democratic revolution for the overthrow of the Tsarist autocracy (see Simon 1982, p.23).

Early in the *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci (1975, pp.57-58) describes how “the supremacy of a group manifests itself in two ways - as “domination” and as “intellectual and moral leadership.” In another section, he writes that hegemony is:

the ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production. (Gramsci 1971, p.12)

Hegemony is a struggle for “moral, cultural, intellectual and thereby, political leadership over the whole of society – between the ruling class and, as the principal subordinate class, the working class” (Bennett 1986, p.220). It is a dynamic, subtle and relentless process rather than a static system, structure or body of thought, where hegemonic arrangements "have to be actively constructed and positively maintained” (Hall 1996, p.424). Since the hegemonic process is permeable and never complete, it also provides opportunities to create the space to challenge, resist, limit and alter the dominant discourse (Williams, 1977; Mayo, 2005; Smith, 2010).

As a political theory, hegemony is frequently deconstructed into sets and subsets of key concepts (Simon, 1982; Jones, 2006). Howson & Smith (2008, pp.2-3) say this is necessary not just because of theory complexity, but to facilitate an analytical framework that: a) shows the nature and operation of each concept; b) shows the relationships these concepts have with each other; c) enables their application to empirical analysis and, through this, the explication of the complexity of hegemony.

Figure 9 illustrates the interconnections between four key related concepts discussed in this section:

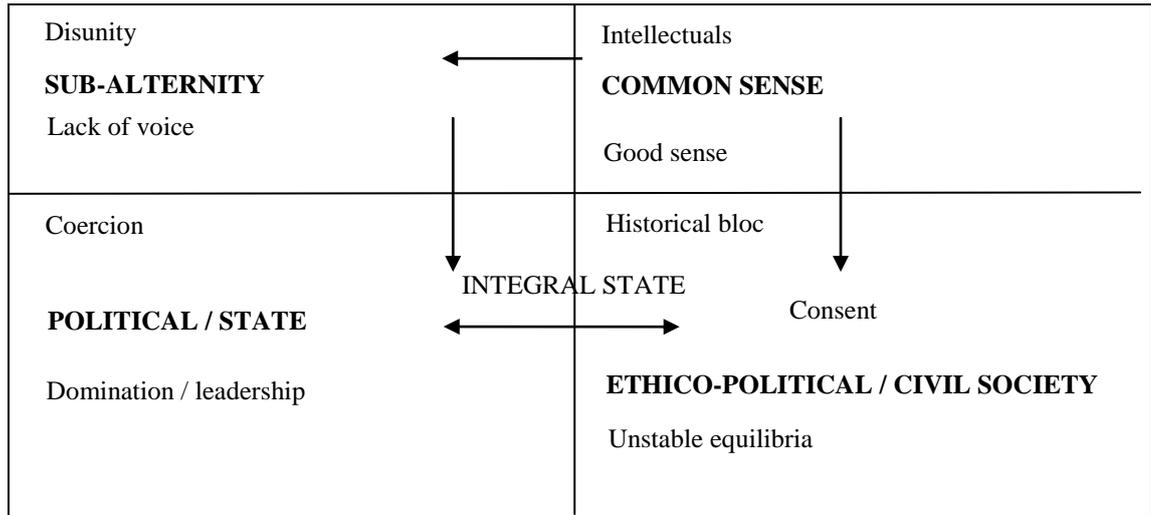


Figure 9: The relentless process of hegemony and the operation of coercion and consent (adapted from Howson & Smith, 2008).

3.1 Culture and ideology

As a strategy for social change, hegemony inevitably deals with both culture and ideology: Bennett (1986, p.221) describes this dialectic process as follows:

To the degree that it is implicated in the struggle for hegemony... the part played by the most taken-for-granted, sedimented cultural aspects of everyday life are crucially implicated in the processes whereby hegemony is fought for, won, lost and resisted – the field of popular culture is structured by the attempt of the ruling class to win hegemony and by the forms of opposition to this endeavour.

Definitions of culture are as wide as they are nuanced: Williams (1983, p.90) provides two definitions that resonate with the struggle for popular culture that is at the core of this study. The first refers to “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group”; the second frames culture as “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity.” Hall (1997, p.2) builds on the second concept to describe culture as “whatever is distinctive about the way of life” of a people, community, nation or social group – the production of shared meaning and signifying practices:

Culture... is not so much a set of things... as a process, a set of practices. Primarily, culture is concerned with the production and exchange of meanings – the ‘giving and taking of meaning’ – between the members of a society or group.

If hegemony is a struggle for popular culture, then it must operate in the realm of ideas, in the “minds of men” (Gramsci 1971, p.367). The human being is an *active subject*, and the structures of human life do not exist separately from the thinking of them, and so the question of consciousness, the nature of human subjectivity, is essential to understanding society as it is, and what it can become. Culture is best understood as thought in action, a means by which people are proactive in understanding their place within the reality within which they live (Crehan 2002, p.73).

Gramsci’s notion of hegemony as cultural practice breaks from Marxist ideology¹³², since culture is not simply the expression of underlying economic conditions. Whereas Marx posited a base / structure conception, with civil society being the ‘superstructural’ site of historical development (but ultimately ‘determined’ by the base), Gramsci argues that civil society is the essential proactive terrain of historical development. Rather than the economic base determining the operations of an ideological and cultural superstructure in civil society, the ‘ideas’ are contemporaneous, emerging in civil society, so that man acts on structures rather than structures act deterministically on man (Smith, 2010). The relationship between base and superstructure is thus both reflective and dynamic: culture, politics and the economy are organised in a relationship of mutual exchange, a constantly circulating and shifting network of influence (Jones, 2006). Gramsci (1971, p.367) writes that:

Structure ceases to be an external force which crushes man, assimilates him to himself and make him passive; and is transformed into a means of freedom, an instrument to create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives. To establish the ‘cathartic’ moment becomes therefore, it seems to me, the starting point for all the philosophy of praxis.

Thus, it is the active subject who recognises and pursues the end, and who operates within the superstructural phase, using the structure itself as an instrument. The structures of human life do not exist separately from the thinking of them, and so matters of culture - the question of consciousness, the nature of human subjectivity – are essential to understanding society as it is, and what it can become. The structure is no

¹³² In the working of Marx and Engels, ideology refers to the manner in which society assumes the ideas and interests of the dominant class. Ideological power is understood as essentially unidirectional, from capitalist class to subordinate classes. Rather than the quest for ideological resistance, Marx and Engels call on the working class as the vehicle for the transformation of economic and political structures (Excerpts from *The German Ideology* pp. 246-261 in Feuer, 1989)

longer the subordinating moment of history, but it becomes the subordinate one (Bobbio 1979, p.34).

Ideology is the foundation upon which hegemony is constructed: it is the social practice that represents what Gramsci refers to as 'conceptions of the world' and crucial in sustaining relations of power (Kenway 1990, p.177). Its relationship to power is that it legitimises the differential power that groups or institutions hold and as such it distorts the real situation that people find themselves in. As a concept, however, hegemony extends and enriches the notion of ideology, lending a somewhat abstract term a political cutting edge "in its refusal to equate consciousness with the articulate formal system which can be and ordinarily abstracted as 'ideology'" (Williams 1977, p.109). Eagleton (1999, p.115) says that it is with Gramsci that the crucial transition is effected from ideology as a static 'systems of ideas' to ideology as lived, habitual social practice – the inarticulate dimensions of social experience as well as the workings of formal institutions. Compared to ideology, hegemony is dynamic, having to be constantly renewed, recreated, defended, modified and renegotiated. It is inseparable from the overtones of struggle and resistance and inevitably relational.

Hegemony provides an integrating framework in which both sets of issues – a) the structuralistic stress on imposed culture; and b) the culturalistic stress on constructed and spontaneously oppositional culture – are likely to be addressed and worked through in relation to each other (Bennett 1986, p.222). As Hall (1987) notes, hegemony is no more an exclusively ideological phenomenon than politics is a mere area which simply reflects already unified, collective political identities. The 'economic' remains a decisive factor in any political struggle, as does the incumbent power bloc in the form of the 'state' – but these operates in conjunction with other forces of cultural power in civil society. Politics is a domain for a more sublime struggle where particular attention has to be given to relations in civil society to produce particular forms of power and forms of domination.

Gramsci therefore

- challenges the simplistic opposition between domination and subordination or resistance and recasts class hegemony as *ideological domination* - the process of transaction, negotiation and compromise that takes place between ruling and

subaltern groups (Jones, 2006: 10). As a concept, hegemony leaves room for alternative readings, oppositional codes, and practices. Culture is an integrative process that consists of processes of bottom-up invention and top-down incorporation, of collective meanings, rules, and values (enculturation) (Fuchs (2008, p.93). Ideology is deployed to sustain the hegemonic processes that take place in the superstructure of civil society.

- conceptualises hegemony as a process that is *dialectical and communicative in character*, involving attempts by various groups to articulate systems of meaning that are actively taken up by other groups. If hegemony is about the development of a “collective will” through “intellectual and moral reform” (Gramsci 1971, pp. 60–61), this reform depends on “the ability of one class to articulate the interests of other social groups to its own” (Mouffe 1979, p. 183) and is achieved through “the colonization of popular consciousness” (Grossberg, 1984, p. 412).
- exposes the intricate circulating *connections* and shifting networks of influence among the cultural, political and economic roles of given segments of the population, without abandoning the issue of class or the struggle of the working class. For Gramsci, social change which leaves the condition of the working class fundamentally unaltered is no change at all.

3.2 Coercion and consent

Gramsci (1971 p.124, 170)¹³³ writes about the dual perspective of political action, where the state (or a class and its representatives) exercises power over subordinates through a mix of “force and consent, authority and hegemony, violence and civilisation... agitation and propaganda, tactics and strategy”. As a theory of political and ideological leadership, hegemony challenges simplistic, top-down models of power through force, focusing instead on how a group secures domination over another through a subtle but pervasive system of attitudes, beliefs, values, alliances and

¹³³ This echoes Machiavelli’s metaphor of the centaur that embodies the dual nature of power – the ‘dual perspective’ in political action that must characterise the revolutionary party and State. The successful prince, according to Machiavelli, is part beast, part human, where only one dimension of the beastly part - that characteristic of the lion - involves domination through violence and threats. Equally important for Machiavelli are the characteristics of the fox-guile and cunning - and the Centaur’s human dimension, which crucially involves inspiring respect as well as fear and exhibiting qualities of mercy and kindness, forthrightness and piety as long as these do not convey weakness to subjects or impede decisive action. The lesson Gramsci took from this orientation is that hegemony is more than domination; it also requires leadership, which includes moral and intellectual dimensions (see Cunningham 2006, pp.566-7; Gramsci 1971, p.170).

morality: as a system of power, hegemony is only successful if it secures the active consensus of subordinated groups and classes (Bocock 1986, p.11). Coercion is only used by the dominant group as a last resort. In an ideal scenario, the dominant group can present its own interests as also being in the best interests of society as a whole, and leads in an atmosphere of social stability once subordinate (or subaltern) groups actively support and subscribe to the values, objectives, cultural and political meanings which bind them to, and incorporate them into the incumbent power structures (Storey 2008, pp.79-80). Hegemony becomes a relation between ruling classes and other social forces, where ideological domination is maintained through a process of transaction, negotiation and alliances (Smith 2010, p.10). Within a context where social actors actively consent to their own domination, hegemony becomes a system of power for the organisation and maintenance of such consent through political and ideological leadership (Fontana, 2006; Haugaard, 2006). It is “the ruling class’s consensual basis within civil society” (Adamson 1980, p.141).

Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is often criticised as being overtly classist, with people belonging to identifiable groups irrespective of whether they are aware of this or not. The litmus test for power is the ability of a socio-economic group to gain and reproduce consent around its political agenda (Borg 2005, p.59). Strong states rule almost exclusively through hegemony, with minimum conflict, as a means of formulating and organising consent (Ives 2004, p.2): only weak states need to resort to the threat or use of violence and force at their disposal.

3.3 Civil society

The formations in civil society propping up the state operate as a network of cultural and ideological institutions, special-interest and pressure groups, socio-cultural practices and state-funded bureaucracies. Examples are the civil service, universities, colleges, schools, libraries, voluntary associations, clubs, political parties, religious groups (notably the Catholic Church), trade unions and other cultural organisations. Situated between state and the economy, they play a central role in the process of social control whereby power remains conveniently invisible and disseminated through the texture of social life and naturalised as habit, custom and spontaneous practice (Eagleton, 1991). Although typically thought of as private or non-political, civil society institutions tend to operate as economic and material forces, with access to a complex

system of mass media, educational and scientific institutions, devised to “construct, generate, communicate, store and retrieve knowledge and information” (Fontana 2006, p.38).

By focusing on civil society as the primary realm where hegemony is exercised and analytically separating it from the market and the State, Gramsci is able to conceptualise power as a consensual, non-coercive, and contested process. It is however important to note that Gramsci’s understanding of civil society is different to contemporary discourse on the subject, where civil society is theorised as a separate sphere from the state – tantamount to an autonomous zone of free thinking that stands in opposition to the state. By inference, civil society becomes a sphere for the creation of ideas on a level playing field, beyond the reach of government control wherein ideas are freely exchanged, promoted and contested and where NGOs and social movements are formed to take on an activist role typically on behalf of ‘the ‘oppressed, marginalised and voiceless’ and hold government accountable for its actions.

Buttigieg (2005, pp. 35-37) is particularly scathing about such narrow, contemporary definitions, particularly in the conflation of civil society with popular oppositional movements that on the one hand oppose the incursions of the state (in the sense of government or political society) and of economic society, and on the other hand, provide the necessary conditions to impel political society and the economy in the direction of greater freedom and egalitarianism. Buttigieg believes this leads to a false understanding of the complex dynamics of power relations within, among and across states; an oversimplification of the immensely intricate, interdependent relations between society (or “the people”) and government (or the State); and in a reductive understanding of the myriad connections and divergences among the various elements that constitute civil society – a misdiagnoses of the operations of power and of the resilience of the very forces one presumably wants to combat.

3.4 The integral State, subalternity and the historic bloc

Gramsci’s theory of hegemony reassesses the role of the state and its influence and operations in civil society, and arguably develops a more realistic concept of ‘the withering away of the state’ than that conceptualised by classical Marxism (Adamson 1980, p.167). Marxism-Leninism advocates that since power is concentrated in the

state, revolutionary strategy must focus on the working class capture of power before the construction of socialism can begin. Gramsci instead believes that power is best understood as a relation; and that the social relations of civil society are also relations of power, which is diffused throughout civil society as well as being embodied in the coercive apparatuses of the state. The political struggle of the working class for socialism cannot be confined to the winning of state power, but has to be extended to the whole of civil society. The achievement of control over the state is only part of the transition to socialism - it is necessary to win a substantial measure of hegemony in civil society as a condition for gaining control over the state.

In practice, Gramsci's enlarged concept of the modern state has three intertwined elements - political society, civil society and the economic sphere --that are only separable for methodological or heuristic purposes (Bocock, 1986; Buttigieg, 2005). Within its narrow meaning, the state is synonymous with "governmental-coercive apparatus" (Gramsci 1971, p.265). In the broader interpretation the state is retheorised as: "political society + civil society...hegemony armoured by coercion" (Gramsci 1971, p.263). For Gramsci, therefore, civil society is an integral part of the state: far from being inimical to the state, it is in fact, its most resilient constitutive element. The integral state includes both the functions of social hegemony and political government:

the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules (Gramsci 1971, p.244).

What distinguishes hegemony from domination is precisely this symbiotic relationship between the government (identified with 'the State' in mainstream political theory) and civil society - a relationship that cannot be analysed in any meaningful way if one presumes civil society as being separate from or necessarily opposed to the State (Buttigieg, 2005; Howson & Smith, 2008). Since civil society is an integral part of the state, it follows that the intricate, organic relationships between civil society and political society enable certain strata of society not only to gain dominance with the state but also to maintain it, perpetuating the subalternity of other strata (Buttigieg, 1995). Within this hierarchy, subalternity is about a disconnection from or a lack of political autonomy – the ability to use politics for your own interests. A study of hegemony focuses on the relationship between powerlessness and power, and therefore

on subalternity – the underprivileged strata of society that lack political autonomy. In Gramsci's time these were identifiable as groups such as peasants and the proletariat. But Gramsci also argues that subalternity exists on a broader scale, including people from different religions or cultures, or those existing at the margins of society. The lack of political autonomy in subalterns ensures that subalternity is locked in civil society, and that civil society continues to be marked by antagonisms and disunity, whether they are organised around “party, trade union [or some other] cultural association (Gramsci 1975, Q25§4). Subalternity remains a disunited antagonism attached to these various forms of organisation until they become unified, and this unification cannot occur and become power until they became a ‘State’ (Howson & Smith, 2008).

The manner in which the hegemonic group establishes and maintains its dominance is through the creation of a hegemonic social structure or ‘historical bloc.’ Levy & Egan (2003, p.806) identify two interconnected meanings to the term: a) the alliances among various social groupings; and b) the alignment of material, organisational, and discursive formations which stabilise and reproduce relations of production and meaning. The ability to mobilise an effective alliance requires not just economic concessions but also intellectual and moral unity through discursive frameworks that actively constitute perceptions of mutual interests. This configuration of societal groups, economic structures and ideological superstructures enables the historical bloc to exercise hegemony through the coercive and bureaucratic authority of the state, dominance in the economic realm, and the consensual legitimacy of civil society. A hegemonic class combines the leadership of a block of social forces in civil society with its leadership in the sphere of production (Simon, 1982).

3.5 Organic intellectuals

Gramsci betrays his own bourgeois intellectual leanings by rooting his political model of hegemony in a system of political representation that tries to fuse the interests of intellectuals, the working class and the peasantry. For Gramsci (1971, p.350) “every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educational relationship”. Education in its widest context represents the sphere where the prefigurative (anticipatory) work for a transformation of power must take place (Mayo, 2011).

A successful hegemony is an intellectual process that requires organisation and leadership of a class. The change agents that “prepare the groundwork, operating as the vanguard of the group that aspires to seize government power” are described as organic intellectuals (Sassoon 1987, p.134). Although Gramsci says that every individual has the capacity for intellectual endeavour, to be a ‘philosopher’ engaged in the historical process, an active agent capable of action, only certain men and women have in society the *function* of intellectuals. Each class creates ‘organically’ its own intellectuals, which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields (Adamson 1980, p.143; Storey 2008, p. 82). Organic intellectuals therefore emerge from a rising class to tease out those progressive elements contained within the class’s common sense. They provide vertical and horizontal mediation between political and civil society and provide, or challenge, the cement of civil and political society, operating in conjunction with the ideological structure of material and institutional structures throughout the social formation (Kenway, 1990).

While ‘education’ as a sphere would include scholars, writers and other men of letters, Gramsci extends the role of organic intellectual to anyone whose social function is to serve as a transmitter of ideas within civil society and between government and civil society. Organic intellectuals are therefore likely to work *within* institutions: in a capitalist system, they are not just the specialists of management and industrial organisation, economists, engineers, doctors and lawyers, but also journalists, publishers, educators, media personnel and people associated with what is now called the creative or culture industries. In Gramsci’s time, the subaltern proletariat under capitalism would recognise as organic intellectuals all those striving to create a new proletarian culture as well as production functionaries in a narrower sense, such as shop foremen, machine technicians and trade union economists. Gramsci’s focus on organic as opposed to traditional intellectuals is based on the belief that the working class needs to develop its own theoreticians from within as opposed to traditional intellectuals with no organic ties to a rising class. As a class matures into a position where it can begin to assert its power economically, socially and politically, Gramsci believes it becomes increasingly important to” supplant traditional with organic intellectuals” (Adamson 1980, p.144).

3.6 Strategies for an alternative hegemony and discourse

Buttigieg (2005, p.41) believes that without a thorough knowledge of the “intricate, wide-ranging and capillary operation of the prevailing hegemony” it is futile to try and devise strategies for supplanting it. Power is a state actively internalised by the oppressed as a form of ‘common sense’ in the domain of civil society. The success of hegemony is founded on the consensual process wherein citizens take on the dominant ideology of the leading group as ‘common sense’, in that it corresponds to their own needs and best interests. It is the non-contemplative response of popular masses to historical events, drawn from official conceptions of the world circulated by the ruling bloc. Yet, common sense still offers a deeply-held guide to life, directing people to act in certain ways and reject other modes of behaviour as unthinkable and unacceptable. Part of Gramsci’s contribution to political theory has been to deconstruct how the common good serves the interests of a ruling class; and to articulate how progressive elements of common sense – ‘good sense’ - may be teased out by organic intellectuals to form the basis of a new form of progressive politics. Gramsci is under no illusions that to transform ‘common’ into ‘good sense’ represents a significant challenge – particularly as civil society is saturated with attempts to police the boundary between the desires of the dominant and the demands of the subjugated, even at those moments when the ruling class or group can no longer generate consent (Buttigieg 2005, p.52). It is simply the start of a process of resistance, not the conclusion of a successful political strategy.

Gramsci called the strategy that could bring long-lasting change in power structures a “war of position” – a type of trench warfare as opposed to an all-out frontal attack (war of manoeuvre) on the dominant power (Sassoon, 1987). The objective of the strategy is to fracture the ideological consensus - a long process in which meanings and values become the object of the struggle within the superstructure or cultural sphere. A successful hegemony involves an educational discourse that ensures buy-in into the dominant group’s agenda; Gramsci calls instead for the collaboration of intellectuals and subaltern groups wherein the hegemony of the dominant classes is dismantled and a new hegemony is forged.

It is possible to operationalise the key elements of Gramsci’s war of position strategy in the 21st century for a study of disruptive blogging on a Mediterranean island – despite

the obvious challenges of historicity. This can be done by focusing on some of the key points in his thinking on counter-hegemonic strategy¹³⁴:

- An alternative hegemony needs to be attained *before* a complete revolution is secured - one that brings to power a coherent class formation, united behind a single economic, political and cultural conception of the world. Radical change requires work – “a reconnaissance of the terrain and an identification of the trench and fortress represented by the components of civil society” (Gramsci 2007, p.169).
- A war of position needs careful planning by organic intellectuals if it is to be sustainable. It is “concentrated, difficult, and requires exceptional qualities of patience and inventiveness” (Gramsci 1971, p.239). It is specifically directed at winning over civil society and the active consent of the masses to the goals of the revolutionary bloc by presenting an alternative intellectual, cultural and moral agenda vis-à-vis the current hegemon. Only if a movement is consciously and actively constructed will an “organic crisis” – a rupturing or divergence of the structure and superstructure – allow the counter-hegemonic force its opportunity to supplant the dominant or ruling elites.
- Gramsci does not call for a frontal attack to seize power. Civil society in Western capitalist formations is much more developed than the predominantly feudal pre-1917 Russia, the site of the first socialist revolution (Mayo, 2005). Indeed, Gramsci’s strategy for hegemony originates from his study of the failures of the frontal assaults or ‘war of manoeuvre’ that characterised revolutionary Marxism, and served only to reinforce and strengthen the repressive apparatus (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 229-246).
- There is no choice in the terrain or the mode of struggle for those interested in counter-hegemony. In a liberal democracy, the struggle must happen *within civil society* since, far from being a threat to political society, civil society actually reinforces the hegemony. Direct confrontation does not threaten the rule of the leading groups as long as their legitimacy is rooted in civil society.
- The war of position expands the terrain of civil society by focusing on the need for social organisation and the development of cultural predominance. The cultural realm is crucial to the exercise of social power: domination and stability can be

¹³⁴ Gramsci never used the specific term ‘counter-hegemony’. It was probably first used by Roger Simon (1982).

maintained since it has popular support, but can also serve as the foundation for, and impetus towards change.

- When Gramsci writes of the ‘end of the state’ he means the end of the ‘class state,’ of the ‘internal division of the ruled.’ Gramsci’s ideal remains “a state without a state”, an “ethical state” or “a regulated society” (Adamson 1980, p.168). Gramsci is not consistent in his description of ‘the state’ (Mayo, 2011). When formulating the war of position, however, it is clear that his reading of the state is not as the ‘integral state’ but as a central, powerful organisation that can articulate the different areas of contestation and antagonism into a regime of rule – that can plan, urge, incite, solicit and punish and conform the different sites of power and consent into a single regime (Hall, 1987, p.20).
- When Gramsci writes of ‘revolution’ he refers to a process of expanding the hegemony of the working class - of the building up of a new historic bloc – rather than a sharp rupture at a single moment when state power passes from one class to another. The transition to socialism consists of two distinct processes a) interacting with one another - the growth of working-class hegemony; and b) the transformation of the state into a socialist state. The concept of civil society as the sphere of class and popular-democratic struggles, and of the contest for hegemony between the two fundamental classes, adds a new dimension to Marxism. It develops very significantly the Marxist theory of political power and of the revolutionary process.
- The war of position is relentless and never complete. If it leads to a situation of ethico-political hegemony, then the maintenance of this hegemony is an on-going process, an “organic becoming” (Howson 2005, p. 129). If aspirational hegemony, or ethico-political leadership, occurs through consensus, then this is a consensus won in the realm of ideas as much as through material practice.

Power does not necessarily need to be reduced to class relations. Post-structuralists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985) have questioned the notion of ideology, proposing instead a more complex view of how social knowledge is organised and disseminated in modern democracies, and how this has consequences for social action. Their focus is on the micro-social dimensions of power, and how power can operate through multiple discourses that are taken up by subjects in wide-ranging sites and not just limited to the factory floors. They argue that the Left is in crisis because of its outdated faith in the working class as a ‘universal’ class that can liberate everyone. An expansive hegemony

cannot conceive of politics solely in terms of binary politics but it must reach out to a range of social groups, identities and movements such as feminism, ethnic and sexual minority rights and green movements. Foucault's work on the power of historically-particular discourses, as legitimised by regulatory frameworks, together with Laclau & Mouffe's (1985) theories on the politically discursive process can provide valuable insights on how discourse is used by individuals to understand their own identities and position in civil society and develop their own strategies of resistance. Foucault (1978, pp.100-101) insists that discourse is both the means of oppression and resistance:

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowances for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a power of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines it and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it

If we accept that meaning is temporal – that though it is inscribed in the material conditions of existence it can still, “change over time, appropriate old signifiers and carry new connotations” (Bailey et al. 2008, p.17), then we should also accept that there is room for a language of resistance to be produced and for universal meaning to be contested, challenged and even changed through a blogging strategy. Gramsci's theory of hegemony is frequently used in conjunction with other theories to explore how certain discourse becomes accepted and internalised as the common sense, within the ideology of the dominant bloc, and how other discourse gets excluded. Laclau & Mouffe (1985) provide an even more radical reading of Gramsci's theory than Foucault by advocating that the entire cultural field is discursive – in fact, the meaning of every material object (from a grain of sand to the human body) is articulated within discourses so that there is nothing in nature itself that determines the being of an object; the same applies to systems such as the ‘economic order’ (Leurs, 2009). For Laclau & Mouffe, there are no objective laws that divide society into particular groups: the groups that exist are always created in political, discursive processes (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p.154). In a struggle for social power, everything can be approached as discourse. While clearly identifying that the struggle for meanings occurs in civil society, and that it is possible for people to envisage alternative ways of organising society, Gramsci

retains an element of essentialism by acknowledging the importance of the economy and the division of society in classes.

Appendix 4

A brief history of Malta and its institutions

4.1 The permeable fortress

Some understanding of Malta's history is essential in a study of this nature, which deals with matters of relations and ideological struggles and where the perspective of the participant observer of online discourse cannot be excised from historicity.¹³⁵

Metaphorically speaking, Malta has never been an island and “never immune to domination and influence from foreign nations and cultures” (Mayo 2007, p.7). Malta's sense of self-importance in the world context is rooted in its rich history and reputation as a strategic, island-fortress. The islands have been populated since prehistory¹³⁶, and were occupied and colonised in turn by the Phoenicians (800-218 B.C., for the latter 250 years of this era by the Phoenician principle North African Colony, Carthage), the Romans (218 B.C.) and subsequently by the Arabs, the Normans and the Spaniards, the Order of St. John of Jerusalem¹³⁷ (1530 to 1798), the French and the British.

The islands' geographical position at the cross roads of the Mediterranean is regularly cited as the *raison d'être* for this sequence of “primarily strategic” colonisation (Mitchell 2002, p.9). During the Second World War, Malta's position was crucial in resisting the Italian and German forces and on 15 April, 1942, the Maltese were collectively awarded the George Cross for gallantry, further cementing the significance

¹³⁵ Foucault's (1972, p.93) use of the term ‘discourse’ refers to the material verbal traces left by history, and argues that the self is historically constructed, rather than a naturally produced and universal structure common to all times and cultures.

¹³⁶ It is generally recognised that the first Neolithic men to establish themselves in Malta probably came from Sicily late in the fifth or early in the fourth millennium B.C. for there are marked similarities between the earliest cultural phase of the Sicilian Neolithic (Stentinello) and that found in Malta (Ghar Dalam) (Blouet 1967, p.28). The seven megalithic temples on the Maltese Islands dating back to 3200 B.C are said to be the oldest free-standing stone monuments on the world and arguably the most impressive monuments of European prehistory (UNESCO – see <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/132>).

¹³⁷ The Order of Saint John of Jerusalem of Rhodes and of Malta (SMOM) came to Malta in 1530 and transformed Malta into a military base in the fight to contain Ottoman expansion (see Blouet 1972, pp.49-158). It was during this period that Malta resisted the attack of the Ottoman invaders, further cementing Malta's ‘Europeaness’ as ‘defenders of Christendom’ (Mitchell 2002, p.28). In 1798 Napoleon besieged Malta and expelled the Order from the archipelago. The French were to rule the islands for two years, but were then taken unawares by a Maltese uprising; it was at this point that a Maltese delegation sought help from the British (Castillo, 2006).

of Malta's contribution to European history, not only as the defenders of Christendom, but now also against the North African campaign, in the mindset of the Maltese.

The British offered limited participation in decision making to the Maltese, provided that they did not interfere with their military and strategic aims. This strategy provided the space for the emergence of a local elite who were able to participate in the local political process¹³⁸; but also fuelled a perennial belief that the British deliberately kept the Maltese poor and ignorant, because it served their interests. Malta finally gained independence in 1964, but remained within the British Commonwealth with Queen Elizabeth II as the head of state. As Baldacchino (2002) highlights, Malta's move towards independence was the "second best option after attempts to secure full integration by the Malta Labour with Britain had failed" (ibid., p.195). Malta became a republic in 1974, replacing the Queen¹³⁹ with a president appointed by parliament: it was the first time, dating back to prehistoric times, that the Maltese were to be responsible for governing their own islands, ending a national biography of colonisation.

Outside influence has not been limited to the colonizers of Malta. Given Malta's restricted land mass and limited natural resources, the island has relied on its physical location to capitalise on tourism and transshipment (amongst other industries) to generate economic income. However, during times of economic hardship and in order to relieve itself of overpopulation¹⁴⁰, Malta experienced mass emigration, particularly after the Second World War when the islands had the highest emigration rate in Europe (Jones, 1973; King, 1979; Attard, 1983). More Maltese live outside Malta than those living on the island¹⁴¹. Most of the foreign community is British, but there is a growing sub-

¹³⁸ This Maltese aristocracy traditionally and linguistically associated itself with Italy. During the 1900's a policy of unity with Italy was the intended eventuality and was actively pursued by the Nationalist Party (PN). During the Second World War, a number of PN leaders proclaiming fascist sympathies were exiled to Uganda by the colonial government (Frendo, 1979, 1993).

¹³⁹ Today Malta forms a part of the Commonwealth of Nations.

¹⁴⁰ Given its ideological aversion to birth control (influenced by the Roman Catholic Church), Malta experienced a very high birth rate. Between the 1940's and the 1960's the average family had between six to ten children (King, 2009).

¹⁴¹ Maltese communities can be found across the globe as transnational social spaces that have maintained strong relations with 'home'. Emigration has played a vital part in the history of Malta: after the Second World War, the islands had the highest emigration rate in Europe (Jones, 1973). From 1945 to 1979, almost 140,000 Maltese citizens left the island (from a population of around 300,000) (Attard, 1983). By the 1980's, emigration had slowed down (Thomson, 2006); however, the effects of such

Saharan community, most of whose members are Muslim. In recent years, there has been a steady inflow of British and Swedish expats who work in the online gaming sector, and foreign professionals leveraging on favourable tax incentives. Maltese society has traditionally prided itself on being open and welcoming to foreigners – possibly the outcome of colonisation and economic dependence on seasonal tourism.

The political divide in Malta has contributed to periods of turbulence in Malta's post-Independence history, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. In 1987, a neutrality clause was inserted in Malta's Constitution, locking the country to a policy of non-alignment and refusal to participate in any military alliance (Malta Constitution, Chapter 1. (3)). This clause remains in place to date although it is increasingly questioned because of factors such as Malta's membership of the EU, immigration influxes, the demise of Communist hegemonic blocs, new world orders and global terrorism threats. The Libya crisis in early 2011, followed by the United Nations Security Council adoption of resolution 1973 (2011) authorising a No Fly zone and use of military force against Libya, was a reminder of Malta's strategic importance and political vulnerability. After many years of pursuing a 'special' political and economic relationship with Libya, Malta found itself torn between pressures to protect Maltese business interests in Libya and its responsibilities towards the EU as a full member state, and the UN. Increasingly, the EU is perceived as another hegemonic, if arms-length, entity that Malta needs to be aligned to in its pursuit of socio-economic independence.

4.2 The Church in Malta

The Christian apostle Paul is believed to have been shipwrecked in Malta in 60 A.D. The story is documented in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 27:39-42) and narrates Saint Paul's three month stay in Malta. It was during this stay that the Roman Governor of Malta (later to become St. Publius) and many of the Maltese are said to have converted to Christianity (Blouet, 1972). The importance of this event in the mindset of the Maltese cannot be underestimated: Castillo (2006, p.28) notes how "the devout Maltese are proud to claim that their faith goes back to the apostle Paul, who is the Patron Saint

population movement left a mark not only on the Maltese migrants themselves, but on the receiving countries wherein many 'Maltese communities' continue to thrive, such as in Australia, the UK and the US) and those that remained behind. Mass emigration not only freed up space in the local labour market, ensuring a higher level of employment for those who remained, but Malta also received a source of income from the Maltese emigrants, in the form of remittances, that became invaluable in the economic survival of the Maltese nation.

of Malta”; Buhagiar (2007, p.1) equates the “tenacious belief of the Maltese” to “the forging of their national identity” (Buhagiar, 2007, p.1). The welcome speech by the President of Malta, His Excellency Dr. George Abela, on the occasion of the arrival of Pope Benedict XVI to Malta in April 2010 captures this notion best of all:

St. Paul is therefore generally accepted as having sown the first seeds of evangelisation on this land and of having led its people to their first encounter with Jesus... This means that the people of our Islands were fortunate enough to have received the good news of the Kingdom of Heaven even before the first gospel is believed to have been written. This was a definite moment in our history which has to be viewed not only in its historical and religious perspective but also in its moral and cultural implications because it laid the ethical and intellectual foundations of our State. It gave Malta a new identity: a Christian identity which gradually replaced the pagan, polytheistic culture into a Christian one (Abela, 2010).

In the 20th century there were two politico-religious crises coinciding with constitutional amendments to give more power to secular politicians and the Church’s demonstrating clear political intent in preserving its own power and sphere of influence (Pirota, 2009). In 1921, the British recognised the Roman Catholic Church as the established religion of the country (Frendo 1991, p.201). In the same year, the Church party (Unione Political Maltese) led the first ever coalition government while a clergyman, Michael Gonzi became one of the founders of the Malta Labour Party (MLP) – a short-lived experience, possibly to establish formal links between the Church and the emerging Workers movement. In 1928, clerical-senators blocked the pro-British government led by Lord Gerald Strickland with the knock-on effect that the British prohibited the clergy from contesting elections. In the early 1960s, in the run-up to the country’s full independence from Britain in 1964, Michael Gonzi, now the Archbishop triggered a politico-religious crisis by excommunicating MLP politicians and threatening people who voted for the MLP with interdiction. The Church’s fear was that the MLP would strike a deal with Britain for full integration, denting its hegemony as the sole, legally-recognised religion on the islands. Gonzi repeatedly insisted that no political development could be contemplated on the island, without first providing guarantees for the Church’s privileged status as moral torchbearer (Vassallo, 2009). Malta’s absorption into the machinery of the United Kingdom, with limited representation in Whitehall, would inevitably strengthen the Anglican/Protestant presence and influence on the island, and foster a culture of permissiveness in Maltese

civil society. In 1958, the Labour government resigned, and the 1947 Constitution was suspended. Gonzi openly criticised Mintoff's integration proposals and denounced violence and riots by Labour supporters; Labour party newspapers criticised the Church leadership. The Diocesan Junta, formed of lay Catholic organisations such as Azzjoni Kattolika and MUSEUM, was set up. The Junta soon became the Church's secular arm in the struggle against Mintoff. On 31 July, 1960, the MLP, which was already an affiliate member of Socialist International, announced it had joined AAPSO (Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Organisation). Since the Church regarded AAPSO as a Communist front, Archbishop Gonzi regarded the MLP's membership as proof that his fears about Mintoff representing a Communist threat for Malta were well founded. The Pastoral Letter for Lent of 1961 categorically condemned the MLP's affiliation with AAPSO. The actions taken by Archbishop Gonzi were extreme: sabotaging the Integration referendum, excommunicating the Labour Party executive, imposing sanctions on party newspapers and making it a mortal sin to vote Labour. General elections were overshadowed by these ecclesiastical sanctions and the MLP lost the 1962 and 1966 elections. In the 1980s, the Church was again involved in a bitter battle with the Labour Party on the issue of church-school funding, triggering street protests and violence.

Nevertheless, to date the Church retains a privileged position in Maltese society, leveraging on early dissemination of ideologies through the education curriculum, its structural relationships with successive administrations and the operations of Catholic intellectuals through which it secures legitimacy for the dominant Catholic culture in the country (Borg, 2006).

4.3 The media in Malta

Media structures tend to reflect the societies in which they are found: they are the result of the economic, cultural, political, historical, religious and geographical landscape of the country (Lauri, 2009). In Malta's case, the media is the "connective tissue of society" (Shirky, 2010, p.54) in that it has developed in symbiosis with the primary political and ecclesiastical institutions (Borg, 2009). The media model which has predominantly evolved in the Maltese Islands is the Polarised Pluralist Model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), also called "Mediterranean," with a particular penchant for advocacy journalism, a strand of commentary-based reporting that supports specific issues and

political organisations (Sammut, 2009). The history of the media in Malta is dominated by its deployment as a tool towards of political mobilisation and ideological expression. Maltese politicians spearheaded the struggle for freedom of the press as part of their struggle for greater freedom from the British colonialisers (Frendo, 1994). Book and press censorship was abolished in 1839 and was followed by a rapid increase in the number of papers published in English, Italian and later Maltese. Pre-independence, political parties played an important part in the development of the print media, reflecting the political scenario divided between the pro-Italian and the pro-British movements, with the need for advocacy journalism stronger than commercial or normative journalism. Freedom of the press and the development of commercial media industries generally came late, as it was difficult for the media to develop as autonomous institutions. *The Times of Malta*, the most widely-read and arguably influential newspaper in Malta, was founded in 1935 and published by the now defunct Progressive Constitutional Party. Maltese radio began in the mid-1930s, partly to counter Fascist propaganda broadcasts from Italy.

Television in Malta was launched in 1962, five years after Malta started receiving TV signals from Italy. Public broadcasting services, particularly radio and TV, are associated as tools of influence and power, and mirror the country's turbulent history. In 1974, the Maltese Government took steps to buy out all Rediffusion Company property in Malta, and in February 1975, after the company refused to pay terminal benefits to its employees, the General Workers Union (GWU) organised a week-long employee sit-in that led to Government passing a law in parliament to legitimise the employee's action and paved the way for the re-organisation of the broadcasting stations into a local public corporation known as Telemalta (Sacco, 1985; Bartolo, 1986). Although nationalisation signalled the end of foreign and Church control over Maltese public broadcasting, the period between 1975 and 1987 is dominated by politicians' conviction that influence over the media structure denotes clout, and hence "where party hegemony is reproduced through various processes that influence the social organization and production of news" (Sammut 2007, p.73). The PN Opposition accused the PL of using *Xandir Malta* (Malta Broadcasting) for audience indoctrination and partisan propaganda and demanded a radio broadcasting license, a request dismissed as a joke by the Labour Government (Zammit Dimech, 1987). This prompted the PN to boycott the public broadcasting channel, leading to a sudden loss of advertising revenue and credibility with at least half the national audience. After the

1981 election which resulted in a new term for the PL among accusations of gerrymandering (the PN having won a majority of votes but not enough parliamentary seats to take control, the PN started clandestine TV broadcasting from Sicily. Even when the PL jammed TV transmissions, the PN continued to broadcast through radio stations that were named *Radio Onda Resistenza* (Resistance Wave) and *Radio Liberta'* (Radio Liberty) (Azzopardi, 1996). Once the PN took power in 1987, it was the PL's turn to accuse the government of the day of interference with public broadcasting.

The rapid changes Malta underwent in the seventies also impacted print media. In 1978, the Labour Government passed a law prohibiting the use of the words 'Malta' and 'Nation' from the title of publications, institutionalising Labour's view that the opposition newspaper *In-Nazzjon Taghna* (Our Nation) and *The Times of Malta* were "anti-Maltese, anti-national and always siding with foreign interests" (Bartolo, 1986, p.43). *The Times'* conservative views and frequent criticisms of the policies of the Socialist Government made it "a quasi-independent mouthpiece for the Church, the PN, the West and free enterprise" (Helsinki Human Rights Report, 1985; in Bartolo, 1986, p.54). On 15 October, 1979, *The Times* buildings in Valletta suffered extensive damage in an arson attack, after a PL demonstration against an attempt on the life of the Prime Minister.

There are currently four dailies and 11 weeklies published in Malta - two dailies and five weeklies are published in English and the rest are published in Maltese¹⁴². Borg (2010) identifies *The Times of Malta*, *The Malta Independent*, *Malta Today* and its Maltese language stable mate *Illum* as the only newspapers reflective of the Liberal Model, which tends to produce items which are more information-oriented and less of a commentary. Neither the *Malta Independent* nor *Malta Today* has managed to dent *The Times'* influence on Maltese society or its share of print and online advertising revenues. The appointment of a new editor and deputy editor at *The Sunday Times* in 2007 has led to a gradual departure from the tacit support of the paper for conservative views and causes spearheaded by the PN and the Church. Nevertheless, *The Times* remains committed to middle class values, the free market and public service.

¹⁴² Appendix 5 is a snapshot of the primary media in Malta as at June 2012. All Maltese language papers are owned by the large institutions except the Sunday tabloid, *Illum*, published by Media Today since the end of 2006. The General Workers Union has been publishing *It-Torċa* since 1944 and the daily *L-Orizzont* since 1962. The PL publishes a Sunday, *Kulhadd* as its official paper. The PN publishes the daily *In-Nazzjon* since 1970 and the Sunday *Il-Mument* since 1971. *Il-Ġens* and *Lehen is-Sewwa* are the two Catholic weeklies.

The advent of private broadcasting in 1991 could have triggered modernisation and commercialisation. Instead, the first private broadcasting licences were granted to the two major political parties and the Catholic Church: Malta to date is the only European democracy that allows political parties to privately own radio and television stations, amplifying an already polarised political culture (Sammut, 2007). Cable TV was introduced in 1992 and satellite TV is widely-watched. The PN and the PL operate fully-fledged broadcast, print and online media operations as part of their communication strategy to retain or secure power (Bugelli, 2005). AD, the green party, with no access to mainstream media outlets, relies on the Internet and social media to extend the political debate beyond the two-party system. Nevertheless, the parties' media systems are loss-making ventures and increasingly perceived to be simply a means of preaching to the converted (Sciberras, 2010). The polarisation of the political landscape has left the two parties with media collateral which does not necessarily result in increased votes if locked up for propaganda and partisan purposes. In the case of TV, there are additional problems in terms of resources and audience size and reach. High-production costs, the preference of native broadcasters for cheap foreign programs over local productions with no possibility of export are some of the commercial factors that have led to media stagnation. This stagnation is also reflected to an extent with the so-called English language 'independents', where news agendas often advance ownership interests (Laughey, 2009), and key business stakeholders have affiliations with political and ecclesiastical institutions. Overall, news agendas need to advance ownership interests and English language newspapers retain their power as tools of the hegemony as they are still perceived to have "an appreciable influence on voting patterns in Maltese politics" (Bugelli 2005, p.8). The Maltese media therefore continues to be referred to in mildly disparaging terms (Borg, (2003) calls it a "Babel"), despite the aspirations of some journalists within the independent media to operate as a watchdog in a liberal-pluralist context. While Maltese journalists pay lip-service to professional ideology, most do not believe objectivity is feasible. Since debate is dominated by the bi-partisan agenda, discourses that are framed outside this realm are cynically viewed and so journalists have difficulties asserting their independence.

The extreme polarisation of Maltese media has defied professional ideology. Print remains influential in Malta, demonstrating elements of what Seymour-Ure (1974, in

Sammut 2007, p.16) coins “press-party parallelism” to describe the degree to which the structure of the media system is parallel to the party system¹⁴³.

¹⁴³ Media-party parallelism is more likely in small nations, especially in those with a stable two-party system, since a small circulation, low newsprint consumption, and cheaper labour enable these to survive far more than in advanced industrialized economies, where the minimum circulation needs to be much higher, and there is a historical dependence on advertising revenue. So while small-scale conditions prevented printing capitalism from taking root as in the Anglo-American model, in Malta, it secured the feasibility of the partisan press and the hegemony of the primary institutions in the media.

Appendix 5 The Media in Malta

Newspapers in Malta

Newspaper	Ownership	Language	Frequency	Readership¹⁴⁴
Business Today	Independent	English	Weekly	Not divulged
Times of Malta	Allied Newspapers Ltd	English	Daily	54,000-68,000
Sunday Times of Malta	Allied Newspapers Ltd	English	Weekly	100,000
The Malta Business Weekly	Standard Publications Ltd	English	Weekly	Not divulged
The Malta Independent	Standard Publications Ltd	English	Daily	2,000
The Malta Independent on Sunday	Standard Publications Ltd	English	Weekly	6,000
Lehen is-Sewwa	Church	Maltese	Sunday	Not divulged
Malta Today	Media Today Co. Ltd	English	Weekly	6,000
Malta Today Mid-Week	Media Today Co. Ltd	English	Weekly	Not divulged
Il-Ġens	Church	Maltese	Weekly	Not divulged
Illum	Media Today Co. Ltd	Maltese	Weekly	4,000
In-Nazzjon	PN	Maltese	Daily	9,000-12,000
Kulhadd	PL	Maltese	Weekly	9,000
Il-Mument	PN	Maltese	Weekly	18,000
L-Orizzont	General Workers Union	Maltese	Daily	19,000-27,000
It-Torċa	General Workers Union	Maltese	Weekly	27,000

TV Stations in Malta

TV Station	Ownership	Language
TVM	Public Broadcasting Services	Bi-lingual
Net	Media Link Communications (PN)	Bi-lingual
Super One	One Productions (PL)	Bi-lingual
Smash	Smash Communications Ltd	Maltese
Favourite Channel	Independent	Maltese

¹⁴⁴ Data as per Media Warehouse survey, 12 April, 2012.

Radio Stations in Malta (nation-wide)

Radio Station	Ownership	Language	Frequency
89.7 Bay Radio	Independent	Bi-lingual	89.7 MHz
Calypso	Independent	English	101.8 MHz
Campus FM	University of Malta	Bi-lingual	103.7 MHz
Capital Radio	Independent	Bi-lingual	88.7 MHz
Malta's Magic	Independent	English	91.7 MHz
Maltin Biss	Public Broadcasting Services	Maltese	106.6 MHz
One Radio	PL	Maltese	92.7 MHz
Radio 101	PN	Maltese	101.0 MHz
Radju Malta	Public Broadcasting Services	Maltese	93.7 MHz
Radju Marija	Church	Maltese	102.3 MHz
RTK	Church	Maltese	103.0 MHz
Smash Radio	Independent	English	104.6 MHz
Vibe FM	Independent	Maltese	88.7 MHz
XFM Malta	Independent	English	100.2 MHz

Online Media in Malta

Website	Domain	Ownership	Language
Di-ve	www.di-ve.com	Digital Interactive Ltd	English
INewsMalta	www.inewsmalta.com	PL	Maltese
Times of Malta	www.timesofmalta.com	Allied Newspapers Ltd	English
The Malta Independent	www.independent.com.mt	Standard Publications Ltd	English
Malta Today	www.maltatoday.com.mt	Media Today Co. Ltd	English
Kulhadd	www.kulhadd.com	PL	Maltese
L-Orizzont	www.l-orizzont.com	General Workers Union	Maltese
It-Torċa	www.it-torca.com	General Workers Union	Maltese
Malta Right Now	www.maltarightnow.com	PN	English
Malta Star	www.maltastar.com	PL	English
Newsbook	www.newsbook.com.mt	Archdiocese of Malta	Maltese
The Malta Business Weekly	www.maltabusinessweekly.com.mt	Standard Publications Ltd.	English
The Church in Malta	www.maltadiocese.org	Archdiocese of Malta	English

Appendix 6

Bloggers in Malta

The following is a list of Maltese or Malta-based bloggers who were blogging during the period of this study (July 2009 – October 2012).

Blog Name	URL	Genre	First Post	Notes
A Cosmetic Affair	ACosmeticAffair.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	14 February, 2009	Charlene is a make-up artist.
A Nick Review	AzzopardiNicky.com	Topic-driven	28 October, 2011	Anonymous blog, although attributed to a Nicky Azzopardi. Has pro-PN leanings, despite moniker of 'Thoughts on Maltese Politics'.
A Splash of Cola	SplashOfCola.blogspot.com	Personal	12 May, 2010	Colette Formosa's blog.
Accidentally, Kle	AccidentallyKle.com	Personal	29 December, 2007	Diary blog of Maltese expat, living in Kent, UK.
Alan Paris	AlanParis.wordpress.com	Personal	15 July, 2010	Blog of graphic designer and actor.
Alexandra Aquilina	Alexandra-aquilina.blogspot.com	Personal	20 February, 2011	Blog of designer and psychology student.
Alex Grech	AlexGrech.com	Personal	11 September, 2004	Sporadic posts.
Alison Bezzina	AlisonBezzina.com	Personal	9 October, 2008	Also blogs on Times of Malta collateral.
Alison Bezzina	Timesofmalta.com/articles/author/22	Personal	17 March, 2009	Alison Bezzina's blog on the Times.
Alison Dee	AlisonDee.wordpress.com	Personal	6 October, 2009	Diary blog of Alison Gatt, aspiring opera singer.
All about G	AllaboutG.blogspot.com	Personal	28 October, 2005	Giselle Borg Olivier is an aspiring copywriter.
Amato Design	AmatoDesign.wordpress.com/	Personal	20 October, 2009	Andrea Amato is a mechanical engineer.
Amor de Girasol	AmordeGirasol.blogspot.com	Personal	3 December, 2011	Ruth Scicluna is a student blogging about fashion and makeup.
Andrew Azzopardi	AndrewAzzopardi.org	Personal	1 July, 2011	Blog of academic turned media personality
Andrew Borg Cardona	Timesofmalta.com/blogs	Personal	08 February 2008	Lawyer with PN credentials and regular Times columnist.
Andrew Sciberras	Andrew-sciberras.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	7 May, 2008	Sporadic posts. Young, left-wing intellectual and aspiring lawyer.
Anecdotes from Malta	AnecdotesfromMalta.blogspot.com	Personal	6 April, 2009	Blog mainly deals with food matters.
Antoine Cassar	AntoineCassar.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	6 August, 2008	Excerpts and links from writer's books.
Anton Sammut's	AntonSammut.com	Topic-driven	5 September, 2007	Excerpts and links from writer's books.

books				
Beauty She Wrote	BeautySheWrote.info	Topic-driven	05 July, 2011	Elle is a British expat living in Malta.
Belt Vella	BeltValletta.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	02 June, 2010	Photo blog run by Pawlu Mizzi.
Better than Prozac	BetterThanProzac.wordpress.com	Personal	25 September, 2010	Roberta Buhagiar's blog. Created when blogger decided to deactivate her Facebook page
Bis-Serjeta'	Bisserjeta.hsara.com	Topic-driven	29 April, 2011	Parody blog run by Matt Bonanno, former Times of Malta journalist.
Boffism	Boffism.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	15 April, 2011	Lara Boffa's Blog. Mainly blogs about fashion
BondiBlog	LouBondi.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	02 July, 2011	Lou Bondi's Blog. Media personality. Claims to have given up blogging.
Camilleri Mark	CamilleriMark.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	03 March, 2012	Mark Camilleri is the former editor of Ir-Realta', a left wing magazine.
Carla Vella	CarlaMaree.com	Personal	T5 September, 2006	Posts mainly relate to online marketing.
Carmel Caccopardo	CarmelCacopardo.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	29 January, 2008	Blog of AD member.
Carmen Sammut	MaltaToday.com.mt/blogs/user/carmen-sammut	Topic-driven	16 June, 2010	Academic and media specialist.
Caroline's Fashion Styling	CarolineStyling.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	22 May, 2011	Caroline Paris's fashion blog
Caroline Muscat	MaltaToday.com.mt/en/contributor/blogs/blogs/caroline-muscat	Topic-driven	27 August, 2010	Caroline Muscat is a former Times of Malta journalist. Her regular blog is My Voice.
Charlo Bonnici	CharloBonnici.com	Topic-driven	19 January, 2012	Blog of PN MP.
Christopher Bezzina	ChristopherBezzina.com	Topic-driven	28 June, 2010	Gay, Christian Blog.
Claire Commando	ClaireCommando.livejournal.com/	Personal	19 September, 2006	Blog of Claire Bonello, a law student
Claire's Online Chronicles	ClaireCommando.wordpress.com	Personal	01 October, 2010	Blog of Claire Bonello, a law student
Daniel Schembri Blog	DanielSchembriBlog.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	07 October, 2011	Blog on atheism and social theory
David Friggieri	MaltaToday.com.mt/blogs/user/david-friggieri	Topic-driven	27 October, 2010	AD spokesman and academic and early blogger.
Davinia Hamilton	DaviniaHamilton.com	Personal	28 April, 2010	Blog of former Times of Malta stringer.
Dawramejt	Dawramejt.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	29 March, 2010	Antonio Olivari appears to have switched his attention to Gandir Malta, a page on Facebook which takes a sardonic look at the media.
Denis Scicluna	DeniseScicluna.blogspot.com	Personal	17 December, 2007	Blog about creative arts.
Desperate Kitchen Goddess	DesperateKitchenGoddess.blogspot.com	Personal	15 May, 2011	Susan Victoria Attard's culinary blog.

Din Mhix Tazza	DinmhixTazza.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	30 July, 2012	Collaborative project on women in Birgu.
Discriminate Thinker	Discriminate.Thinker.com	Topic-driven	16 October, 2012	John Spiteri Gingell's blog.
Dyna's Random Blog	Xdynax.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	26 May, 2010	Beauty blog.
Enrique Tabone	EnriqueTabone.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	19 December, 2010	Jeweller & contemporary artist's blog.
Ewe and Me	EweAndMe.blogspot.com	Personal	20 March, 2010	Rachel Agius is a copywriter.
Fairly Odd Blog	FairlyOddGirl.blogspot.com	Personal	10 February, 2010	Poetry blog.
Fejn jidhol Peppi	FejnJidholPeppi.blogspot.com	Personal	21 June, 2011	Personal blog of media personality Peppi Azzopardi, of Xarabank fame.
Fool's Cap	Burningbin.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	03 January, 2006	Sporadic, thoughtful pieces, many of them on the state of the media, by anonymous blogger.
Foxx Malta	FghoxxMalta.wordpress.com	Personal	13 February, 2011	Anonymous rants about the state of the nation.
Franco Debono	FrancoDebono.com	Topic-driven	16 July, 2012	Maverick PN backbencher's blog
Free Islander	FreeIslander.com	Topic-driven	28 November, 2011	Aron Mifsud Bonnici's blog. Lawyer for GWU, PL activist, photographer and overall creative.
Fr Joe Borg	TimesOfMalta.com/blogs	Topic-driven	14 November, 2007	Weekly blog from media academic, blogger on TimesofMalta.com, former communications consultant to the Church, and writer.
F'Rokna	Frokna.blogspot.com	Personal	23 October, 2007	Sporadic blogs from Jean Paul Borg in Maltese.
Garnaw	Garnaw.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	23 August, 2011	Liberal political commentary, often critical of the PN
Gege Gatt	GegeGatt.com	Personal	23 October, 2011	Personal blog from Gege Gatt, technologist and PN activist
Gege Gatt's Posterous	GegeGatt.posterous.com	Personal	19 March, 2010	Photoblog from Gege Gatt
Gorg Mallia	GorgMallia.wordpress.com	Personal	27 March, 2012	Gorg Mallia is an academic and cartoonist
Gourmet Worrier	GourmetWorrier.com	Topic-driven	15 December, 2008	Nanette Johnson is a Maltese-Australian. Cooking and lifestyle posts.
Guzi Borg	GuziBorg.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	26 December, 2011	Blog with PN leanings.
Hannah and the World	HannahandtheWorld.blogspot.com	Personal	14 February, 2011	Hannah is an English 24 year-old raised in Malta and now living in Ireland
Hekk Hu	HekkHu.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	07 October, 2011	Anonymous blog with liberal views.
Heritage Malta blog	HeritageMalta.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	01 January, 2011	Official blog of Heritage Malta.
ICT Law Malta	ICTMalta.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	29 September, 2010	Dr Antoine Ghio's blog on ICT law issues.
I love Malta	IloveMalta.tumblr.com	Personal	14 November, 2011	Blog from 50 something year-old with PN leanings.

Il-blog ta' Carm Mifsud Bonnici	CarmMifsud Bonnici.blogspot.com	Personal	23 June, 2008	PN politician's blog
Il-blog ta' George Pullicino	GeorgePullicino.blogspot.com	Personal	7 September, 2007	PN politician's blog
In the Vestibule	IntheVestibule.com	Personal	3 May, 2011	Bertrand Borg's blog. Journalist working for Times of Malta.
Ir-Realta'	Ir-realta.org/articles	Topic-driven	4 February, 2010	Blog pieces from online political magazine.
Isle of Man to Malta	IoMtoMalta.blogspot.com	Personal	13 August, 2010	Kriston Bradshaw's blog.
Is this your periscope?	Ityp.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	2 February, 2011	Thom Cuschieri's blog, featuring his cartoons.
It has just come to Light	AronMifsud Bonnici.com	Personal	21 March, 2010	Aron Mifsud Bonnici's blog. Lawyer, photographer and overall creative.
IT News	ITNews.com.mt	Topic-driven	30 October, 2007	Jes Darmanin's technology blog
It's a Women's World	ItsAWomensWorld1.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	15 January, 2012	Jackie Bartolo's fashion blog
J'Accuse	Akkuza.com	Topic-driven	10 March, 2005	Jacques Rene Zammit's blog. Lawyer, prolific blogger, founder of BlogsofMalta, based in Luxembourg. Interested in range of socio-political issues.
James Debono	Jamesdebono.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	22 January, 2009	Regular blogger. Journalist with a Masters in History. Describes himself as a Radical Democrat.
James Debono	Maltatoday.com.mt/en/contributor/blogs/blogs/james-debono	Topic-driven	08 June, 2010	James Debono blog posts for Malta Today.
Jamin Galea	JaminGalea.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	01 August, 2009	Jamin Galea's design blog
Jes Camilleri	JesCamilleri.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	12 July, 2010	Maltese blogger based in UK, primarily reviewing theatre in London.
Joseph Masini	JosephMasini.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	03 June, 2011	Young blogger with Catholic views. Editor of Radju Katidral.com.
Joshua Zammit	JoshuaZammit.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	24 May, 2011	Organisation specialist. President of Malta Employers Union.
Jurgen Balzan	Jurgenbalzan.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	29 October, 2008	Sporadic blogger. AD sympathiser.
Keith Vassallo	KeithVassallo.net	Topic-driven	15 March, 2011	Keith Vassallo's blog
Kermenoo's Weblog	Kermenoo.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	25 June, 2008	Reuben Scicluna's blog
Kronaka f'Malta	JohnPisani.net	Topic-driven	19 January, 2007	Crime journalist's blog
Lara's Beauty Bible	Larasbeautybible.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	23 June 2010	Blog on beauty matters
Le Meridien Malta	LeMeridienMalta.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	24 November, 2009	Hotel's blog
Life Unplugged	MyUnpluggedLife.blogspot.com	Personal	30 December, 2009	Leanne's blog.

Lisa Falzon	Lisa-Falzon.com/blog	Topic-driven	23 September, 2008	Artist's blog, primarily visual
Lonely in Malta	LonelyinMalta.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	03 April, 2011	Mildly activist blogger.
Ma Fleur Cherie	ma-fleur-cherie.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	05 September, 2009	Marisa's fashion blog
Malcolm Tortell	MalcolmTortell.com	Topic-driven	03 January, 2011	Psychotherapist with world views.
Malta's Amateur Youtubers, Bloggers, Vloggers and Artists	Maltaamateurbloggers.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	20 December, 2011	Aggregator blog for creatives using blogs and videos for non-commercial purposes
Malta - Moving on, up and away	Joeandharryabroad.wordpress.com	Personal	18 May, 2010	Expat blog, tracing move to Malta.
Malta Girl	MaltaGirl.typepad.com	Personal	1 May, 2002	Rebecca Buttigieg is one of Malta's earliest bloggers. Used to blog on Live Journal in the past.
Malta Inside Out	MaltaInsideOut.com	Topic-driven	3 February, 2009	Regular posts on visiting, living and working in Malta.
Malta Living on the edge of Europe	79664664.com	Topic-driven	1 November, 2009	Blog about green issues.
Malta News Online	MaltaNewsOnline.com	Topic-driven	15 March, 2011	News blog run by Gerald Fenech.
Malta Rants	MaltaRants.com	Topic-driven	16 July, 2011	Unknown blogger. Focus on social issues and citizen engagement.
Malta.cc	Malta.cc	Topic-driven	5 October, 2008	Brochure-ware posts.
Malta Observer	MaltaObserver.blogspot.com	Personal	14 February, 2012	Expat's blog.
Malta-exposed	Malta-Exposed.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	6 December, 2009	Anonymous blog about the state of the nation.
Malta u l-politika	MaltaPolitics.com	Topic-driven	5 December, 2006	Anonymous blog by PL supporter.
Maltese Married Catholic Priest	Maltesemarriedcatholicpriest.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	16 September, 2012	Daniel Bartolo is a former priest, blogging about religious values.
Malteser Living in England	MalteserlivinginEngland.blogspot.com	Personal	29 December, 2011	Steffi is a 23 year-old living in Stoke.
Manuel's Mumbblings	ManuelsMumbblings.blogspot.co.uk	Topic-driven	7 January, 2011	Manuel Mangani is a social worker.
Marie's Cuisine	Mariecp.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	1 August, 2010	Marie-Claire Pellegrini's food blog.
Mark Biwwa	MarkBiwwa.com	Topic-driven	30 April, 2010	Mark is a copywriter and plays in a heavy metal band.
Mark Mintoff	MarkMintoff.com	Topic-driven	16 December, 2010	ICT developer's technical blog
Mark Montebello	MarkMontebello.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	07 March, 2004	Mark Montebello is a priest, philosopher and media personality. Often portrayed as a maverick within the Roman Catholic Church.

Mark Sammut	MarkAnthonySammut.blogspot.com	Personal	26 January, 2011	Telecoms engineer and PN member of Gudja Local Council.
Matthew Vella	MaltaToday.com/mt/blogs/user/matthew-vella	Topic-driven	16 June, 2010	Editor of Malta Today.
Matt's Blog	MattBorgi.com	Topic-driven	08 December, 2011	Matt Borg is 21 year-old lawyer with PN affiliations
Mazzun (or Il-blog tal-Mazzun Malti)	Mazzun.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	11 April, 2011	Blog set up during the divorce campaign. Now operates as anti-government blog.
MelaHart's blogging adventures	MelaHart.wordpress.com	Personal	06 January, 2009	Melanie Hart's blog. Uses photography to occasionally post opinion pieces.
Merill Eco Tours	MerillEcoTours.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	07 April, 2011	Blog of eco-tourism company
Michael Azzopardi	Michael.Azzo.com	Topic-driven	15 November, 2010	Michael Azzopardi is a freelance graphic designer, based in London.
Michael Briguglio	Mikes-beat.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	11 April, 2006	AD Chairperson, academic and drummer.
Michael Briguglio	MaltaToday.com/mt/en/contributor/blogs/blogs/michael-briguglio	Topic-driven	25 August, 2010	Michael Briguglio's blog on Malta Today.
Mill-Gardjola	Mill-Gardjola.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	12 May, 2009	Religious blog by anonymous blogger
Mona Farrugia	PlanetMona.com	Personal	5 April, 2009	Opinionated blogger primarily writes about restaurants and life in Malta.
Motherhood: the good, the bad & the stinky	Motherhoodthegoodthebadandthestinky.blogspot.com	Personal	19 December, 2011	Rosalind Meli's blog. Primarily on parenting.
Mouthwatering Vegan	MoutwateringVegan.com	Topic-driven	17 July, 2010	Miriam Sorrell's food blog.
Moviment Progressiv	Movimentprogressiv.blogspot.com/	Topic-driven	17 July, 2012	Blog by PN supporters lampooning the PL.
Much Ado about Noting	MuchAdoAboutNoting.com	Topic-driven	10 August, 2011	Miram Calleja's healthy living blog.
My Say Malta	MySayMalta.com	Topic-driven	15 August, 2012	Blog soliciting political contributions from politicians and citizens under a 'right to reply' code.
My Unsolicited Opinion	KarlAgius.com/opinion	Personal	05 July, 2010	Karl Agius's blog
My Voice	CarolineMuscat.com	Topic-driven	24 August, 2010	Former journalist with the Times and activist.
No Junk, No Soul	Rangoonruns.appspot.com/	Topic-driven	01 October, 2010	Allan Gatt's blog. Anarchic, disruptive musings.
Normal Vella	NormanVella.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	21 June, 2011	Norman Mifsud is a media personality, working on Xarabank.
Olive Oil and Heart	OliveOilandHeart.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	20 June, 2010	Lara Beans' food blog
Patrick Attard	PatrickAttard.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	31 December, 2007	Daily posts by engineer, academic and gay activist. Blogs on gay issues.

Pawlu's Pub	Pawlugatt.com	Topic-driven	06 December, 2011	Posts by Paul Gatt, son of Minister Austin Gatt.
Quo Vadis	AlexSaliba.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	17 April, 2010	Blog of Alex Saliba, law student and secretary general of PL Youth Forum.
Ramona Depares	RamonaDepares.com	Topic-driven	28 August, 2011	Blog of features journalist.
Ramona Depares	TimesOfMalta.com/blogs	Topic-driven	21st February, 2012	Ramona Depares's blog on the Times.
Randomness	JoTabone.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	27 October, 2009	Photo blog run by Jo Tabone
Raphael Vassallo	MaltaToday.com.mt/blogs/user/raphael-vassallo	Topic-driven	16 June, 2010	Former journalist with the Times and activist.
Reasoned Rants	ReasonedRants.com	Topic-driven	20 November, 2009	Anonymous blog on atheism from Anglo-French resident.
Re-vu	Re-vu.org	Topic-driven	28 May, 2011	Granta-type collection of blog posts, focusing on socio-political issues
Rightly So	Rightly-so.com	Topic-driven	24 August, 2010	Richard Muscat Azzopardi's photo blog and odd musings.
Robert Callus	RobertCallus.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	22 July, 2008	Social worker with AD sympathies.
Rouge Reveries	RougeReveries.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	6 September, 2010	Tiziana Gauci's fashion blog.
Running Commentary	DaphneCaruanaGalizia.com	Topic-driven	02 March, 2008	Daily posts. Prolific blogger and Journalist for Malta Independent, using blog as alternative media system. Blog originally set up to review the last election.
Rupert Cefai	Bertoons.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	11 March, 2008	Rupert Cefai's cartoons
Satiristan	Satiristan.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	13 May, 2012	Unique blend of satire.
Saviour Balzan	http://maltatoday.com.mt/en/contributor/blogs/blogs/saviour-balzan	Topic-driven	16 June, 2010	Managing Director of Malta Today
Serious Simplicity	RichardMuscat.wordpress.com/	Topic-driven	1 September, 2007	Maltese Developer, living in the UK
Seriously Virtual	SeriouslyVirtual.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	25 March, 2010	Vanessa Camilleri's academic blog
Stefy Puglisevich	blog.stefy puglisevich.com	Personal	3 October, 2009	Pictorial blog for make-up artist
Stephanie Casha	Scasha.com	Topic-driven	7 October, 2010	SEO and e-marketing blog.
Steve Bonello Cartoons	SteveBonellocartoons.com/blog.html	Topic-driven	18 July, 2011	Showcase for Steve Bonello's work
Strawberry Gashes	Strawberry-gashes.net/	Personal	22 January, 2007	Teenage blog of 'Afef'.
Taste Your Own Medicine	TasteYourOwnMedicine.com	Topic-driven	21 March, 2010	Blog targeting the online and offline activities of Daphne Caruana Galizia.
Tberfil	Tberfil.Blogspot.com	Topic-driven	04 February, 2011	Paul Mizzi's blog
Tea and Rain	TeaAndRain.Blogspot.com	Topic-driven	12 December, 2011	Collaborative blog between Roberta Bellizzi and Keith Borg Micallef.

The Defiant One	KeithChircop.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	20 February, 2008	Socio-political blog by Keith Chircop.
The Fish in Malta	The-fish-in-malta.blogspot.com	Personal	02 May, 2009	Abby Easby's blog. Expat observations of Malta.
The Heckler	WayneFlask.com	Topic-driven	27 May, 2004	Wayne Flask's blog.
The Malta Chronicle	TheMaltaChronicle.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	06 April, 2008	Granta-type collection of blog posts, focusing on socio-political issues. Revived for Divorce campaign. Managed by Jacques Rene Zammit
The Malta Pamphleteer	MaltaPamphleteer.Wordpress.com	Topic-driven	03 June, 2009	Very sporadic, but learned political blog
The Rubber Bodies Collective	Rubber-bodies.com/blog	Topic-driven	21 October, 2009	Blog of theatre group
The Secret Rose	Esorterceseht.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	02 July, 2009	Sarah Micallef's fashion blog.
The Wizard of Gobbledygook	RantingsImaginings.Blogspot.com	Topic-driven	12 July, 2009	Teodor Rjelic's blog. Mostly literary work.
Toni Sant	tonisant.com/blog	Topic-driven	25 April, 2004	Blog has gradually morphed into a music blog showcasing weekly podcast of Maltese music.
Underwire Overdrive	DaviniaHamilton.tumblr.com	Topic-driven	13 February, 2011	Davinia Hamilton's Tumblr
Victor Calleja	VictorCalleja.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	13 June, 2010	Victor Calleja also blogs on the Times
Victor Calleja	TimesOfMalta.com/blogs	Topic-driven	21 February, 2012	Victor Calleja's blog on the Times
Victor Galea	VictorGalea.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	27 January, 2008	Blog of AD activist. Writes mainly about issues in Gozo.
Villains out shopping	Villiansoutshopping.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	15 January, 2012	Charles Cassar is a lawyer based in London
Viticulture and wine-making in Malta	Viti-malta.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	8 September, 2011	Blog on wine-making in Malta
Wayne Hewitt's blog	WHewitt.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	12 October, 2011	Blog of PN activist. Describes himself as humanist involved in politics.
Words are heavy	DaviniaHamilton.com	Personal	28 April, 2010	Davinia Hamilton is a former Times Of Malta stringer.
Words make us different	KurtSansone.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	1 January, 2009	Sporadic blog posts from Times of Malta stringer
Working with Light	WorkingWithLight.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	11 March, 2010	George Saguna's photo blog.
WP Mayor	WPMayor.com	Topic-driven	25 November, 2010	Jean Galea's technical blog on WordPress.
Yvonne Ebejer Arqueros	YvonneEbejerArqueros.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	24 November, 2008	Blog of AD activist.
Xejn Gdid	XejnGdid.wordpress.com	Topic-driven	24 June, 2012	Anonymous blog run by PN activist
Zaqqu Mimlija	ZaqquMimilija.blogspot.com	Topic-driven	03 April, 2006	Food blog.

51 Weeks of Madness	51wksofmadness. blogspot.com	Personal	07 January, 2012	Daniel is a 22 year-old intent on studying overseas.
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Appendix 7

Bloggers with media affiliations

Blogger	Mainstream Media Affiliation	Status
Andrew Azzopardi	PBS Radio	Hosts a weekly radio programme. Runs own blog since 1 July 2011.
Peppi Azzopardi	PBS TV	TV media personality. Briefly ran a blog from 21 June to 28 July 2011.
Alison Bezzina	Times of Malta	Blogs on TimesofMalta.com since 17 March 2009 and on own blog since 9 October 2008.
Matt Bonanno	Times of Malta	Former Times of Malta journalist. Runs own blog since 29 April 2011.
Lou Bondi	PBS TV	TV media personality. Briefly ran a blog from 2 July to 30 November 2011.
Fr. Joe Borg	Times of Malta & PBS	Former Chairman of PBS Editorial Board. Blogs exclusively on TimesofMalta.com since 14 November 2007.
Andrew Borg Cardona	Times of Malta	Blogs exclusively on TimesofMalta.com since 8 February 2008.
Josanne Cassar	The Malta Independent	Former Features Editor, made redundant soon after result of divorce referendum.
Mike Briguglio	Malta Today	Blogs on MaltaToday.com since 25 August 2010 and on own blog since 11 April 2006.
Daphne Caruana Galizia	The Malta Independent	Regular columnist, runs own blog since 2 March 2008.
James Debono	Malta Today	Blogs on MaltaToday.com.mt since 8 June 2010 and on his own blog since 22 January 2009.
Ramona Depares	Times of Malta	Blogs on TimesMalta.com since 21 February 2012 and on her own blog since 28 August 2011.
Mona Farrugia	Times of Malta	Former Food Critic at Times of Malta. Blogs exclusively on own blog since [blog disbanded]
David Friggieri	Malta Today	Blogs exclusively on MaltaToday.com.mt since 27 October 2010.
Caroline Muscat	Malta Today	Former journalist with Times of Malta. Blogs on MaltaToday.com

		since 27 August 2010 and on own blog since 24 August 2010
Carmen Sammut	Malta Today	Media scholar and former PBS journalist. Blogs exclusively on MaltaToday.com.mt since 16 June 2010.
Raphael Vassallo	Malta Today	Former columnist with Times of Malta. Now blogs exclusively on MaltaToday.com.mt since 16 June 2010.
Matthew Vella	Malta Today	Blogs exclusively on MaltaToday.com.mt since 16 June 2010.
Jacques Rene Zammit	The Malta Independent	Weekly columnist left the paper on 15 January, 2012 to focus solely on blog, which has been online since 10 March, 2005.

Appendix 8

Divorce in Malta timeline

The following is a summary of the milestones in the divorce crisis, and is adapted from Peregin (2011c).

3 August, 2008

Having just been elected Labour leader promising to front a Private Member's Bill on divorce once in government, Dr Joseph Muscat says he would act even quicker if a free vote from both sides is guaranteed. He describes a referendum as "passing the buck" and an "irresponsible failure".

12 June, 2010

Alternattiva Demokratika calls on MPs to start debating divorce, since they planned to debate cohabitation.

6 July, 2010

Nationalist backbencher Jeffrey Pullicino Orlando surprises the country with his own Private Member's Bill based on Irish legislation. Dr Muscat calls for "consultation" and promises a free vote. Prime Minister Lawrence Gonzi, a former head of the Catholic Youth Legion, says he is against divorce and that the public should be given chance to express itself.

7 July, 2010

After a meeting of the PN parliamentary group, Dr Gonzi says there is no mandate for a parliamentary debate by the 69 MPs since neither of the two political parties in parliament had mentioned divorce in their electoral manifestos. Any decision on divorce legislation would have to be taken by the electorate.

11 July, 2010

President Emeritus Eddie Fenech Adami insists divorce should not be decided through a referendum.

14 July, 2010

Dr Pullicino Orlando calls for the Bill to be discussed in Parliament by January but says this is a suggested time frame not a deadline.

29 July, 2010

The PN executive committee holds first of several meetings on divorce. Discussion begins with the aim of taking a stand.

8 August, 2010

A survey by The Sunday Times shows 40 per cent are in favour of divorce and 45 per cent against. A referendum is favoured by 58 per cent.

11 August, 2010

The Labour Party says it is "open" to holding a referendum but wants the debate to focus on specific legislation.

11 October, 2010

According to Dr Pullicino Orlando, Dr Gonzi promises that a referendum should be held in 2011, after the Bill is discussed in Parliament.

15 October, 2010

Dr Gonzi says that it is too early to speak of referenda.

18 October, 2010

Dr Muscat asks Dr Gonzi to give his MPs a free vote and says his MPs could speak freely about divorce.

24 October, 2010

A PN spokesman confirms Nationalist MPs will have a free vote in Parliament, pointing out Dr Gonzi has always said people should decide freely according to conscience.

13 November, 2010

A pro-divorce movement ('Iva') is launched, with politicians from all three political parties, chaired by family lawyer Deborah Schembri.

16 November, 2010

Dr Pullicino Orlando cites legal advice saying a referendum could be held before parliamentary vote. A clause linking it to a referendum could be included in his Bill at "second reading" stage.

6 December, 2010

Dr Muscat meets the pro-divorce movement and says a "no vote" in a referendum would not stop him from "trying again" in the future.

15 December, 2010

Labour MP Evarist Bartolo and Dr Pullicino Orlando jointly present a new divorce Bill, with amendments which better tailor the Irish law for Maltese legislation.

12 January, 2011

The anti-divorce movement is launched by financial services lawyer André Camilleri and says divorce makes marriage redundant.

23 January, 2011

Dr Gonzi says he wants the divorce issue resolved this year and promises not to "play games". He adds the electorate must vote.

26 January, 2011

Nationalist minister Austin Gatt threatens to resign from Parliament if the PN takes a pro-divorce stance and begins campaigning against divorce.

27 January, 2011

PN sources say Dr Gonzi proposed a February parliamentary debate followed by a referendum in summer. Dr Gonzi later slams "speculative" reports.

28 January, 2011

Youngest PN backbencher Karl Gouder comes out in favour of divorce.

30 January, 2011

Dr Fenech Adami calls for the PN to take a stand against divorce.

9 February, 2011

The PN publishes a draft motion: the party is against divorce because it does not promote family values but leaves the doors open to dissenters. It says a divorce referendum will only be held if the draft Bill is approved.

12 February, 2011

The PN adopts the anti-divorce motion. Dr Gonzi says parliamentary procedure was a “straitjacket” and a parliamentary vote will have to be held before the referendum. He confirms he will vote down the Bill before it reaches the public. Labour accuses him of breaking his promise and says the party will be on the public’s side.

14 February, 2011

Just before a Labour press conference, Dr Gonzi issues a statement saying he would accept a Labour motion to hold a referendum if the question proposed is clear and specific. The Labour parliamentary group presents a motion to hold a referendum on divorce based on three main points contained in the Bill.

16 February, 2011

In a House Business Committee, the government refuses to guarantee that the motion will start to be discussed within a week. The PL says it has a parliamentary majority and calls for a vote but the Speaker refuses this request. Dr Gonzi then says the debate can happen the following week.

17 February, 2011

Dr Gonzi meets his parliamentary group individually to tell them he wants the question to be a simple yes or no to divorce. Dr Pullicino Orlando says he would campaign against a yes vote if this were the case. Dr Gonzi sends a letter to Dr Muscat advising he wants the question changed and that a referendum will be set for 28 May.

19 February, 2011

Dr Muscat refuses to change the question but accepts the date.

21 February, 2011

Dr Gonzi warns the referendum question paves the way for “no-fault” divorce.

23 February, 2011

A three-week divorce debate about the motion begins in Parliament. Throughout the debate, Jesmond Mugliett and Dr Pullicino Orlando say they will vote in favour of the motion. Mr. Gouder says he will vote against. All Labour MPs say they will vote in favour.

6 March, 2011

The Sunday Times publishes a survey showing 58 per cent would vote in favour in a referendum if asked the question proposed by the PL. Only 43 per cent would vote in favour if the question simply solicits a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer to the current question.

7 March, 2011

The anti-divorce movement says it will begin lobbying MPs against the “loaded” referendum question being proposed.

16 March, 2011

Dr Pullicino Orlando and Dr Mugliett vote with all Labour MPs in favour of the motion. Divorce referendum set for May 28.

28 May, 2011

Voting on divorce referendum.

28 May, 2011

The Bishops of Malta and Gozo issue an embargoed statement to the press¹⁴⁵ (till 20.00hrs, when voting would close). This is interpreted as a veiled attempt at an apology for the aggressive campaign. *Malta Today* decides to break the embargo and publishes the statement online.

29 May, 2011

With a turnout of 72 per cent, 230,518 valid votes were cast with the Yes vote obtaining 122,547 preferences (53.2 %) and the No vote obtaining 107,971 preferences (46.8 %).

20 June, 2011

Divorce bill published in Government Gazzette.

13 July, 2011

Divorce bill approved. Prime Minister votes against.

25 July, 2011

Divorce legislation approved. Prime Minister votes against.

1 October 1, 2011

Divorce law comes into effect.

1 October, 2011

First divorce granted in Malta.

¹⁴⁵ <http://maltadiocese.org/lang/en/news/message-from-the-bishops-after-the-referendum-on-divorcemessagg-mill-isqfijiet-wara-r-referendum-dwar-id-divorzju>

Appendix 9

Visuals from divorce campaign



Image 1: Malta Today Divorce Referendum Blog



Image 2: Caption reads ‘Malta should be proud that it is the world exception in valuing the family - The No Movement’



Image 3: Mock Poster by Aron Mifsud Bonnici, shared on blog and Facebook. Reads: “1.1 billion people retain their Catholic faith in countries where divorce is legal. Divorce is a civil right. Vote Yes”.



Image 4: Mock Poster by Aron Mifsud Bonnici, shared on blog and Facebook.



Image 5: Mazzun About Us Page on launch. Caption links 1961 Interdiction with 2011 divorce.



Image 6: We only have one soul. No to divorce.



Image 7: Poster reads "Jesus Yes Divorce No"



Image 8: Photoshop spoof of No billboard. Caption reads "Lemmy Yes The Rest No."



Image 9: BBC Coverage of divorce referendum 27 May 2011



Image 10: Citizen poster reacting to Bishops' apology on 28 May 2011. Distributed on Facebook.



Image 11: Divorzistan YouTube meme, shared extensively on rhizome media



Image 12: Mazzun decides to remain active beyond divorce campaign lifespan.

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THE TIMES
Tuesday, June 14, 2011

Archbishop Cremona says challenge is to give Caesar what is Caesar's...



Archbishop Paul Cremona Photo: Photocity, Valletta

Archbishop Paul Cremona has urged the faithful to pray to the Holy Spirit to help them get over their disappointment or anger over the outcome of the divorce referendum.

Mgr Cremona said during Sunday's homily to mark Pentecost that their challenge was, in Christ's words, to "give Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's".

The Catholic community should be recognised by its wish, "in the name of our dear people", to give to God what belongs to God by living according to His teaching and by proclaiming His Word.

"Are you ready to give the Lord what belongs to him in our secular society?" he asked.

After the divorce referendum, this year could be a special one for the Maltese Church, the Archbishop added.

"I feel we can tell God that we tried our best, in line with our mission as a Church, not to let divorce mark marriage and our family in Malta," he said. **Mgr Cremona said Malta found itself in a social reality where marriage and families were affected by an aggressive culture, as shown on social media.**

"We have realised that, now, Christians who made a profound choice for Christ cannot live comfortably but have to challenge themselves, their family, and those around them to live according to the Gospel."

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Image 13: Archbishop blames social media for divorce referendum defeat



Image 14: Malta Today, 1 June, 1011. Religious lay group unapologetic after anti-divorce campaign.



Image 15: Tweet from Mark Biwwa, October 2011.