THE CREATION OF AN INTERNET PUBLIC SPHERE BY THE INDEPENDENT ELECTORAL COMMISSION

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ABSTRACT

A prerequisite for a healthy, sustainable democracy is an informed citizenry that partakes in the democratic process. This line of thought can be drawn back to the work of Habermas (Habermas, 1989:49). Accordingly, such active engagement necessitates communication to transpire between a citizenry and its chosen representatives as to sustain the democratic process. This also suggests that citizens should be able to participate in the communication process.

Consequently, in recent years much discourse on the media and democracy correlation has focused on the potential role that the internet could play in the furtherance of democratic values. Optimistically, a virtual political public forum in which matters of general political concern are discussed could enhance political participation and the consolidation of political rights. The Habermasian public-sphere model incorporates three key elements, which could be applied in this context: persons should have universal access to the sphere, the freedom to express diverse opinions, the freedom to receive diverse opinions and information, in addition to the freedom of participating in the public sphere without interference from state or mercantile imperatives (cf. Habermas, 1989).

A qualitative content analysis of the web site of Elections Canada showed that the supposedly non-operational public-sphere model could be recovered within a new media context such as the internet despite the fact that the inherent interactive nature of the internet was not fully exploited by Elections Canada.

Against this background, the assumption was made that the public-sphere's concepts could also be applied in the context of a developing democracy and accordingly that the sustainability of the democratic system could be further consolidated. The Electoral Commission (IEC) was chosen as a case study, since it is constitutionally mandated to establish a democratic South African society. The creation of an internet public sphere could therefore be one of the ways in which the IEC could contribute to this consolidation process.

Through extensive content analysis, it was established that the organisational web site of the IEC was mainly expended as an information dissemination and organisational image-profiling tool. As a result the web site was did not focus on participatory communication. Universal access to the web site was also rather restricted, resulting in limited web site participation to voters from specific socio-economic, cultural, and language backgrounds. It was discovered, nevertheless, that some of the contents available on the web site could at least facilitate "offline"

participatory democracy and public opinion formation. Therefore, although the web site did not implement all of the normative prescriptions of the public-sphere ideal, voters were able to retrieve valuable electoral information that would assist them in capably participating in electoral democracy.

Key words: Citizenship; content analysis; democracy; democratisation; development communication; digital democracy; Habermas; Independent Electoral Commission (IEC); Information Age; internet; new media; participation; participatory approach; political communication; public-sphere theory; and virtual public sphere.

OPSOMMING

'n Voorvereiste vir enige legitieme, volhoubare demokrasie is 'n ingeligte burgery wat aktief aan die demokratiese proses deelneem. Dié gedagtelyn kan teruggeneem word na die werk van Habermas (Habermas, 1989:49). Onderliggend hieraan is dat kommunikasie 'n belangrike rol speel om demokrasie te fasiliteer en in stand te hou. Dit veronderstel verder dat burgers deel aan hierdie kommunikasieproses behoort te hê.

Diskoers rondom die verband tussen media en demokrasie het die afgelope paar jaar begin fokus op die potensiële rol wat die internet kan speel in die uitbouing van demokratiese waardes. Die optimiste voer aan dat 'n virtuele publieke forum, waartydens sake van algemene politieke belang bespreek kan word, politieke deelname asook die konsolidering van die burgery se politieke regte kan versterk. Veral drie van Habermas se konsepte kom in hierdie verband ter sprake: universele toegang tot die publieke sfeer, vryheid om openbare mening te vorm en te debatteer, asook dat die publieke sfeer behoort te funksioneer sonder die inmenging van administratiewe of kommersiële invloede (Habermas, 1989).

'n Kwalitatiewe inhoudsanalise van Elections Canada se webtuiste het getoon tot watter mate bogenoemde konsepte van Habermas grootliks op 'n webwerf toegepas kan word om 'n virtuele openbare sfeer te fasiliteer. Die grootste leemte was dat die interaktiewe aard van die internet nie ten volle benut is nie.

Teen hierdie agtergrond is die aanname gemaak dat hierdie konsepte ook toegepas kon word binne die konteks van 'n ontwikkelende demokrasie en so kon bydrae tot die volhoubaarheid van die demokrasie. Die Verkiesingskommissie (OVK) is as gevalle studie geneem, aangesien die grondwet bepaal dat die OVK verantwoordelik is vir die vestiging van 'n demokratiese samelewing. Die skep van 'n virtuele openbare sfeer kan 'n wyse wees waarop die OVK sodanige bydrae kon maak.

Aangesien die OVK se webwerf hoofsaaklik as 'n inligtingverspreidingsmeganisme en 'n bemarkingshulpmiddel aangewend is, was die fokus dus nie op deelnemende kommunikasie nie. Algemene toegang tot die webwerf was ook beperk. Gevolglik was webwerfdeelname beperk tot kiesers vanuit spesifieke sosio-ekonomiese, kulturele, en taalgroeperinge. Daar is egter gevind dat van die webwerf se inhoud tog deelnemende demokrasie en openbare meningvorming kon fasiliteer. Ten spyte daarvan dat die webwerf nie aan al die normatiewe beginsels van die publiekesfeermodel voldoen het nie, was kiesers tog bemagtig om

waardevolle inligting vanaf die webwerf bymekaar te maak wat hulle sou kon gebruik vir demokrasie deelname.

Trefwoorde: Burgerskap; deelnemende benadering; demokrasie; deelname; demokratisering; digitale demokrasie; Habermas; inhoudsanalise; Inligtingseeu; internet; nuwe media; ontwikkelingskommunikasie; OVK; politieke kommunikasie; publiekesfeerteorie; virtuele publieke sfeer.

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PART I

Contextualisation and theoretical background

CHAPTER ONE

Orientation, research questions, and research objectives

"Getting the politics right" is a precondition of rising prosperity as well as the liberty, security, and services for which all people yearn (Sandbrook, 2000:1).

1.1 INTRODUCTION

South Africa celebrated its tenth year of democracy in 2004 following the implementation of the new constitution in 1993 and the hosting of the country's first fully democratic elections in April 1994. Notwithstanding the laudable transition from apartheid to democracy, this changeover does not imply a fully-fledged democratic society. Although regular elections are vital to any bona fide democracy, these have to coincide with the fostering of a democratic political culture to ensure the sustainability of the democratic system. History has shown that in many cases democratic transitions in Africa did not lead to sustainable democracy, as formal structures and constitutions are not a guarantee for democratic practices (Lodge, 1999:1-17; Mattes, Keulder, Chikwanha, Africa, & Davids, 2002:4).

If democracy is going to be sustainable, society must rather reflect a culture in which democratic values and practices are adopted and maintained. It is therefore widely accepted that one of the many preconditions for an authentic, participative democracy is an informed citizenry. The correlation between the informational role of the media and a democracy therefore frequently figures at the centre of effecting ways by which to consolidate a potentially responsible public. In this regard, the assumption is that the media, traditional and innovative, as well as those structures that control public communications, have a crucial function to fulfil.

Particularly, the assumption of this study is that the Independent Electoral Commission[1] (IEC) of South Africa could realise the above-mentioned normative instruction. The IEC states in its vision and mission avowal that, as the electoral management body, it intends to strengthen the South African constitutional democracy by securing the right of every eligible South African voter to put down on paper his or her informed political choice by means of a just and free electoral system (IEC, 2002a). Although the media industry is not directly governed by the state or public

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1 Note: In 1994, the Independent Electoral Commission was established to manage the country's first democratic elections. The original commission disbanded after the 1994 elections. However, in 1996 the Electoral Commission was established in terms of the Electoral Act as a permanent, public body. The agency retained its original logo and name, and for this reason, the Independent Electoral Commission is hereafter referred to as the IEC.

agencies, some measures of control oblige South African public institutions in serving the public's "right-to-know" as well as the "right-to-be-heard". This study assumes that these measures of control could be animated through institutions such as the IEC and its efforts in consolidating the developing democracy in South Africa. Apart from sustaining a legitimate electoral system, the IEC could perhaps also secure the democratic system in the broader sense by establishing its organisational web site as an internet public sphere of critical-reflective public opinion formation and political engagement.

Media theorists argue that as we live in the ostensible "information age" – in which human rights such as the right to freedom of expression and the right of access to information take precedence – those who govern communications, ought to steer clear of the "old media" practices of one-way broadcasting and linear information dissemination practices. Instead, it is argued that the media industry and representative political structures need to become truly democratic by adapting to the new interactive style of modern-day communication (Tambini, 1999:307). As the new "world currency", information is said to empower individuals in becoming politically active citizens by strengthening good governance through the presence of "wired democracy", "e-democracy" or "digital democracy" on the internet. Rather than standing *in line* (emphasis added) during election times, citizens should be encouraged to go *online* (emphasis added) and engage interactively in political debates with governing structures whenever they require (cf. Naudé, 2001:6; Ocitti, 1999:25). (See Section 1.8.2.4 for further clarification on the concept "interactivity".)

In consideration of these arguments, one could restate the goal of human development in a democratic society: in order to attain a decent standard of living, an individual must be able to participate in the rule of law and the life of his/her community (UNDP, 2002:13). Optimistically, the argument holds that stimulated political participation, as an end in itself, could protect and in due course improve the lives of those who endure dire socio-economic and political life circumstances.

Derived from the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas's analysis of the liberal public sphere, supporters of "digital democracy" propound that political debates amongst citizens, and between citizens and governing structures, could be relocated from the coffee shops, town halls, and other traditional political spheres to the electronically defined locale of the internet (Dahlberg, 2002; Ferdinand, 2000:6; Rola, 2000; Thorton, 2002:12). (Also, refer to Section 1.8.2.5 for further discussion on technological determinism.) Their contention is that the size of a modern-day nation-state inhibits direct interaction between governments, public structures, and their electorates. Consequently, the ideal of Anthean democracy – where citizens once gathered in physical public places, such as town squares, to debate political issues of concern – seems to

be rather passé in the context of the newly fangled "information age". As an alternative, adherents of the "information age" assert that the creation and utilisation of a virtual, internet forum could perhaps reinstate democratic values such as popular political participation and direct interaction between all of the political actors that comprises a modern democratic regime (Ferdinand, 2000:6).

Within this framework, the aim of this study could tentatively be described as an investigation into the manner in which the web site of the IEC could function as a virtual extension of the Habermasian public-sphere ideal of public opinion formation. Before a more extensive description and contextualisation of the problem statement, research questions, and related research objectives are given, the development of South Africa's democracy, the role that informed voters play in an incipient democracy, as well as the development of the internet in South Africa are briefly addressed.

1.2 CONTEXTUALISATION

1.2.1 Democracy in South Africa

The democratisation trend that emerged on the African continent during the early 1990s is often described as the "third wave" or "new wave" of democracy that swept away authoritarian regimes or single-party states, restoring them with democratically appointed governments and administrations (Tettey, 2001:133). On 26-29 April, South Africa too officially commenced its process of democratisation by calling on the previously disenfranchised majority to vote for a new political dispensation in the country's first free and fair elections. As a result, South Africa made a transition from the apartheid regime to a democratic system in which democratic values such as political participation, freedom of expression, freedom of association, and universal suffrage were advocated (Rebehn, 1999:15; Reynolds, 1999:11,182). Not only did the country manage its first democratic elections, which secured political inclusion for all citizens, but also in 1996 accepted a new constitution that endorsed social and economic equality for all South Africans.

While first elections are usually appreciatively accepted as the first stage of democratisation, Sandbrook (2000:4-5) and others (cf. Giliomee, 1995; Reynolds, 1999: 22-23; Van Vuuren, 1995; Garcia-Rivero, Kotzé, & Du Toit, 2002:163-164) caution that a second phase of democratisation need to be implemented before the actual *consolidation* of a democratic organisation could come about. This step requires the formation of a political culture in which democratic norms and behaviours facilitate popular approval of *and* trust in "formal institutions of democratic competition and governance". For this reason, there seems to be consensus that as a rule second elections highlight the legitimisation or the consolidation of a democratic system

(Taylor & Hoeane, 1999:135,139). In 1999, the IEC executed the country's second round of general proportional representation elections. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.2 and Chapter 6, Section 6.3 for a breakdown on the role and position of the IEC in the South African democracy.) At present (2004), South Africa is ten years into democracy and celebrated a decade of equality by again running a third round of general elections. Considering the country's past performances in terms of elections, South Africa thus indeed appears to be reinforcing the democratic tradition.

Then again, in spite of the country's political changeover and its continued commitment to electoral democracy, the South African government is still confronted with successfully managing the democratic consolidation process in the face of numerous socio-economic developmental challenges. Several analysts (Butler, 2000:191; Maloka, 2001:228) in fact contend that democracy cannot truly develop in dismal circumstances of, inter alia, economical insecurity, and disregard of human rights, deficient infrastructure, or disproportionate access to basic public services. For the purposes of the present study, the assumption is that the creation of a knowledgeable electorate is just one of the many contributing factors to achieving a sustainable South African democracy. (This argument is reasoned more comprehensively in Chapter 2, Sections 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.)

1.2.2 The public sphere and the informed electorate

As pointed out earlier, the strengthening of the democratic tradition entails more than solely the practice of electoral democracy. Reynolds (1999:23) explains that "one can consider democracy as enduring" only once the "political sphere" of participation becomes the threshold by which all citizens could compete in a democracy, and accordingly hold ruling structures liable for their public practices.

The underlying assumption, corresponding to the public-sphere theory, is that public institutions should attempt to augment existing democratic procedures and routines by recovering active citizen engagement in electoral politics. This in turn necessitates the creation of a vigorous civil society that would be able to participate capably and conscientiously in the democratic process, as suggested in this study for example through electoral participation. The public sphere thus involves an unrestricted domain in which citizens could discuss analytically matters of common concern that would eventually affect the public good (cf. Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004:315-316; Habermas, 1989). The public sphere also means that voters would be exposed to voter and electoral information that could be beneficial to the quality of political discussions. Ultimately, through public discursive participation, citizens could then make certain that the

democratic system is truly receptive to the welfares and will of the public. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5 for a complete delineation of the principles of the public-sphere theory.)

For that reason, technophilliacs suggest that political communication and interaction in cyberspace could rejuvenate the outmoded Habermasian public sphere in which political activity takes place (Ferdinand, 2000:8; Ott & Rosser, 2000:137). (See Section 1.8.2.5 for a discussion about deterministic perspectives concerning the role of new media technology in society.) Conversely, dystopians and technorealists aver that the internet exhibit too many social, cultural and technical barriers, which will obstruct its utilisation as a substitute public sphere (Barnes, 2003: 329; Poster, 2000). (Chapter 2, Section 2.4 discusses the impediments and solutions to internet access in South Africa.)

It was nonetheless suggested that the IEC could perhaps fashion a more knowledgeable South African electorate and stronger social capital by expending its web site as an internet public sphere. Certainly, voters that are more competent in motivating their political choices could more likely influence election outcomes; hence, better select political representatives that advocate their interests in public office, as well as increasingly influencing policy-decision making practices made but such officials. A self-motivated, strong civil society is thus a crucial contributing factor in deepening the maturing South African democracy. In order to test this assumption, the public-sphere theory was evaluated in context of a developed democracy in which the relationship between the political system, political process, and the political culture is more established and matured. The web site of the Canadian electoral management body, Elections Canada, was thus analysed in order to determine how it was used as an internet public sphere in support of the ideal democratic culture. (Also, see Chapter 4, Section 4.2.3.3.)

Before the problem statement of this study is put forth, the next section deals briefly with the development of the internet in South Africa. (Chapter 2, Section 2.4 narrates more exhaustively the current state of the internet in South Africa.)

1.2.3 The internet in South Africa
The first network/database connections in South Africa were established by academical institutions. Connections were created between Rhodes University and the University of Cape Town, and between the University of Natal, the Potchefstroom University, the University of the Witwatersrand, and the University of Pretoria. Following these initiatives, the South African Foundation for Research and Development set up a restricted university network called Uninet. With the political climate changes that commenced at the start of the 1990s, this network was up-linked with the internet in the United States, and in 1993 the internet in South Africa fixed to the global commercial domain (Naudé, 2001:29, Vennard, 2002:44).

The number of individual internet users in South Africa, including those who have access via corporate networks, reached almost 1 million at the end of 1998. It was estimated that this number reached 3.28 million at the end of 2003 (World Wide Worx, 2004).

It would also seem as if new communication technologies or new media systems, such as the internet, have made their mark in the economical sector of society as well. As a result, the notion of "e-commerce" (electronic commerce) has been at the centre of global discourse on how to effectively link consumers and clients with potential service providers. In South Africa the so-called "e-commerce debate" has resulted in a Green Paper which aims to involve all relevant stakeholders in the industry to maximise the performances and benefits of such an electronic endeavour. It is believed that despite the poor record of accomplishments of international initiatives, a growing presence of local mercantile web pages are stimulating online transactions (i.e. supply chain automation). Moreover, e-mail is now widely considered as a *de facto* business communication tool, especially among small and medium sized enterprises. (See Section 1.8.2.3 for a description of electronic mail.)

In view of the arguments offered in the preceding sections, the problem statement of this study is now put forward.

1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

By claiming to be the South African public's constitutional guardian of democracy and political rights, the IEC has the additional task of ensuring that the citizenry's constitutional rights are further consolidated through whatever best delivery means possible. Within the context of the purported information age, it follows that every South African citizen has the right to access information pertaining to elections and the democratic electoral system through public electronic platforms such as the internet. Hence, since 1999, publishing the IEC's web site on the WWW offers electors the prospect to exercise their lawful political rights and shaping informed decisions as to how the electoral system supports democracy in South Africa.

The research concern addressed in this study is therefore: *How could the IEC consolidate the South African democracy by creating an internet public sphere?*

1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Several research questions arise from the background sketched and the above general research question:

1.4.1   What are the salient theoretical concepts that underpin the Habermasian public-sphere theory?

1.4.2　　How is the Habermasian public-sphere theory put into practice on the web site of an

electoral management body in a developed democracy?

1.4.3　　How does the IEC put the Habermasian public-sphere theory into practice on its web site?

1.5 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The general objective of this study is to determine how the IEC could consolidate the South African democracy by creating an internet public sphere.

With regard to the research questions, the objectives of this study are to determine:

1.5.1　　The salient theoretical concepts that underpin the Habermasian public-sphere theory.

1.5.2　　How an electoral management body in a developed democracy put the Habermasian public-sphere theory to practice on its web site.

1.5.3　　How the IEC put to practice the Habermasian public-sphere theory on its web site.

The participatory communication theory and the public-sphere theory will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3 in order to create the theoretical background of the above-stated research objectives.

1.6 CENTRAL THEORETICAL ARGUMENT

The study relies on the following basic arguments:

- According to the Habermasian public-sphere theory, private individuals must continuously reflect critically on themselves and the state within a public environment as to develop public opinion through rational debate that could ultimately guide democratic decision-making processes (cf. Habermas, 1989; Webster, 2002:163).

- The Habermasian theory of a civic sphere could be applied to the creation of a new, virtual public sphere, which has the potential of reinvigorating political participation and contributing to the development of a democratic culture.

In Chapter 3, these basic arguments will be delineated into several theoretical statements. (See Sections 3.5.4.1, 3.5.4.2, and 3.5.5.1.)

In the next section, the research method employed in this study is explicated in order to illustrate how the research objectives were reached.

1.7 METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

1.7.1 Analysis of Literature

An extensive literature study was undertaken, concentrating on books, periodicals and newspaper articles, conference papers, and internet resources. The literature study aimed at outlining the various salient elements and characteristics of the internet and its functions. The purpose was to determine how the internet encourages democratic interests and political participation. A literature survey of the theoretical concepts such as the Habermasian public-sphere theory and bottom-up participatory communication was done to support the empirical aspects of the study.

Although the IEC and other institutions have emphasised the potential of the internet as development media in a newly established democratic dispensation, there exists a huge gap within the field of development communication research concerning "e-democracy". To date only two postgraduate studies could be found which investigated diverse aspects of democratisation, participation, and social change through a medium such as the internet (cf. Vennard, 2002; Osborne, 1997). However, these studies considered "e-democracy" within the field of political studies and failed to deal specifically with the process of development and democratisation within the South African experience.

Databases: EBSCOhost, Nexus, Repetorium SA: Business Periodicals, Humanities and Social Sciences Indexes, SACat, FPL Catalogues.

1.7.2 Empirical study

The case study focused on the IEC, since it is mandated by the Constitution to endorse democracy through whatever means possible, which could conceivably include an electronic platform such as the internet. Qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews were utilised as the two main methods of investigation. In addition, as to augment the theoretical assumptions introduced in Chapter 3, Sections 3.5.4.1, 3.5.4.2, and 3.5.5.1, the web site of Elections Canada was also evaluated according to the Habermasian public-sphere theory as to determine how political participation occurred via the internet in an advanced, developed democracy such as Canada.

1.7.2.1 Method 1: Content analysis

Qualitative content analysis was conducted on the IEC's web site as well as its Canadian counterpart, Elections Canada. (Refer to Chapter 4, Sections 4.3 and 4.5.2 for a detailed discussion on qualitative content analysis.)

1.7.2.2 Method 2: Semi-structured interviews

The researcher interviewed the various programme directors and senior staff members of the IEC involved in the establishment and management of the organisation's web site as to uncover their interpretation of how the web site could be used in support of democratic ideals. Interviews were not conducted with the users of the IEC web site, as this study investigated the link between the IEC personnel's perspectives of the Habermasian public-sphere theory, and their interpretations and implementation thereof on the IEC web site. (See Chapter 4, Section 4.4 for a description of semi-structured interviews. Also, refer to Chapter 4, Section 4.5.3 for the procedures that were followed during the conduct of the interviews. Additionally, *Text box, 4.1* contains the list of questions that were put to the interviewees during the semi-structured interviews.)

1.7.2.3 Internal reliability of the research

To ensure internal reliability, source and method triangulation was done (cf. Christians & Carey, 1989:368; Du Plooy, 1995; Hsia, 1988:288). In terms of source triangulation, various employees of the IEC were interviewed as to uncover their varied perspectives and specific insights regarding the IEC's use of an organisational web site. Additionally, method triangulation was applied by using different techniques in the gathering of data for analysis. These methods included, as already discovered, qualitative content analysis of the IEC and Elections Canada web sites, as well as the conduct of semi-structured interviews with higher-ranking IEC personnel. A detailed explanation and motivation of the research methods will follow in Chapter 4.

The following sections explain concepts frequently used by professionals and academics when referring to the concept of the purported "information age". Before these concepts and their contexts receive further attention, the concept of the "information age" will be described.

1.8 DEFINITION AND CLARIFICATION OF CONCEPTS RELEVANT TO THIS STUDY

1.8.1 The context of the "information age"

Within the post-industrial society, as well as within the framework for prosperity and growth organisation, the notion of an "information society" has gained significant public and political eminence (Van Audenhove, 1999:15). Attention to this new-fangled era is not reserved to any one discipline or science in particular. Rather, as the new catchphrase of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, it permeates diverse spheres, for instance media studies, cultural studies, social sciences, political sciences, academical debate, and even common-day conversation. Besides, as a topic it has been placed on the political and policy agendas of the

developed as well as the developing world, albeit the term and its applications often receive disparate and sometimes vague elucidations and definitions (Webster, 2002:8).

As alluded to earlier, commentators increasingly speculate about contemporary times as being distinguishable from all erstwhile periods – supposedly, by the defining feature termed "information". In fact, many observers have been so taken with the idea of an "information age" that countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Germany have been branded as purported information societies. The defining element, "information", then quickly evolves into grander concepts such as the aforementioned "information society", the "e-society", and the "weightless economy". Subsequently, this so-called "Global Information Society" (GIS) or "Global Information Infrastructure" (GII) seems to herald the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) that have pioneered the era of globalisation (Aldridge, 1996:190; Webster, 2002:2-3; Van Audenhove, Burgelman, Nulens, 1999:388; Main, 2001:83).

But what does the "information age" signify? Although pundits are disparate in their interpretation of what information actually involves, and ultimately how it defines our society, it is evident that the existence of an "information age" cannot be denied. Academics such as Van Audenhove (1999:15) and Webster (2002:8-9) argue that the term may be contextualised within the fields of technology as well as within the spheres of the economical, the occupational, the organisation of space and time, and the cultural domain. These analysts enlarge that what these disparate definitions do have in common is the belief that a new kind of qualitatively distinct social system is emerging because of the quantitative changes occurring in information delivery and production.

Additionally, Webster (2002:26-28) announces that analysts often fail to incorporate a sixth, often neglected classification into the set of definitions on the "information society". This particular explanation defines the current age as one in which theoretical knowledge takes prominence. Frequently referred to as the "knowledge society", it is maintained that academics, researchers, professionals, and society, progressively make decisions based on reflective exercises as informed by pre-existing knowledge resources. Risk-assessments are no longer merely dictated by the standards of nature and tradition; rather, it is said that the qualitative character of information determines the character of the current age.

Implicit to the conceptualisation of *and* the talk about an "information age", is the expression "communication/information revolution". As a widespread and accepted description of modern-day society, many theorists argue that ICTs have altered the structure and functionality of the global economy to such an extent that recent transformations correlate with the profound progresses and advancements that occurred during the industrial revolution (McQuail, 1994:87).

In other words, drawing on Manuel Castells conception of information capitalism, Malina (1999:34) argues that ICTs have affected the post-Fordism society and the global economy in such a manner that modifications in information production and processing have culminated in the new "information economy". Increasingly the modern world economy predicates its activities on the trade and investment of information as a valued commercial resource. As Jonker (2001:96-97) reports, worldwide monetary decision-makers are associating improved decision-making exercises to efficient, cost-effective ICT-generated systems, mechanisms, and practices.

Similarly, in the fields of computing, broadcasting and telecommunications, the pace and conceptualisation of information delivery patterns have altered seriously. With more individuals transacting interactions via ICTs, present-day publics are exposed on an almost daily basis to mounting quantities of information, which cover processes from many different spheres. Through the creation of digital information networks – as inspired by the spread of ICTs – admission to global, mass-mediated information resources has been extended to public and private spheres worldwide. Access to macro news services, multinational communication agencies, distribution networks, and sophisticated satellite transmissions have accordingly weaved a digital, optical fibre-wired communication and information network (Naudé, 2001:2; Webster, 1995:19).

The result is that in the present day, individuals are gradually more capable of communicating or retrieving speedily vast volumes of information flows from literally anywhere in the world, provided they have access to an ICT such as a personal computer or a mobile telephone, which connect to the larger system – the internet. The dissemination of information, therefore, is no longer constrained to the linear flood of data between two computer terminals manned by so-called privileged end-users such as academics and scientists. Moreover, on an almost daily basis, existing information networks are improved upon and their capacities are inflated to carry growing amounts of information. Subsequently, the "information age" is characterised by the growth and interconnection of different networks. Additionally, the notions of convergence and integration, not only on a technological level, but on also relating to societal activities, mark the advent of the "information age" (McQuail, 1994:88).

To characterise further the "information age", several additional elements, and concepts will now be clarified.

1.8.2 Concepts of the "information age"

1.8.2.1 The processes of globalisation and convergence

Considering the founding of a so-called information age, Jordaan (2001:80) justly warns that many observers, for a wide variety of intents and purposes, misrepresent this convergence

process or "globalisation" phenomenon; hence, globalisation often suffices as the guilty party for many societal and global ills. For the purposes of this study, one of the more conventional definitions of the term will be used. This chosen description holds that the process of globalisation refers to the idea that the spatial and temporal dimensions of our world are diminishing to the extent that we live in the McLuhanian global village envisaged some thirty years ago (Littlejohn, 1989:255, McQuail, 1994:136). It is believed that new technology such as ICTs facilitate the process of globalisation as they are often structured on a global level, for instance telecommunication infrastructures; hence defying the restrictions of time and space.

1.8.2.2 The internet[2]

Naudé (2001:6) continues that the internet is just one of many such digital data networks, often metaphorically referred to as an "information superhighway", which combines the conditions of interpersonal/face-to-face communication with the features of mass communication in many different applications. According to Kennedy (1995:264-266) this includes the original Arpanet as conceived in 1969. A few of the applications of the modern-day internet include electronic mail, news groups, bulletin boards, listserv discussion lists, and the World Wide Web (WWW).

In its most rudimentary configuration, the internet is described as a decentralised network of networks linking thousands of computer networks with one another through a process called *packet switching* (December, 1996:17; 23). This technique allows individual computers to communicate with one another by means of software protocols, specifically Transmission Control Protocol (TCP) and Internet Protocol (IP). Millions of computers are linked via telephone lines (connected to internal or external modems) to one-another through millions of different, alternating network paths. The code that makes the design of web pages possible is known as *hypertext mark-up language* (HTML). The language that makes it possible for the user to move speedily and effectively from one document to another with associated information, amid the option to return to the original document, is known as *hypertext* (Berners-Lee, 1999:27-28).

The invention of the WWW, as an internet application, is then described as a hypertext information system that allows access to, and the production of contents stored on every web

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2 An exhaustive explanation of all the services and applications of the internet is not the aim of this study, however, for a more complete discussion of the history of the internet, how it operates, and its various applications, see the following resources:

Berners-lee, T. 1999. Weaving the Web: the original design and ultimate destiny of the World Wide Web by its inventor / Tim Berners-Lee with Mark Fischetti. San Francisco: HarperSanFransico.

Friedheim, W. 1999. A web of connections: a guide to history on the Internet. Boston: McGraw-Hill College.

Naudé, A.M.E. 2001. Interactive public relations: the World Wide Web and South African NGOs. Potchefstroom: PU vir CHO. (Thesis – PhD.)

document as gathered on a host computer (Leer, 2000:13; McLaughlin, 1996:54). Information can be converged in the form of text, sounds, still or animated pictures, and graphics. By using technologies like Netscape Navigator or Internet Explorer – commercially available internet browsers – the WWW is made more user-friendly and attractive to users.

Still, the internet is not a universally available or accessible technology. The majority of South Africans endured decades of racial discrimination, which translated to socio-economical, cultural, and political discriminatory practices and circumstances. (See Section 2.4, Chapter 2.) Hence, the current South African government faces the challenge to eradicate these disparities in order to secure universal access to the internet. Additionally, as these real-space inequities may continue to subsist in the virtual realms of the internet, new committed, multi-disciplinary approaches need to be put in place in order to secure the democratic utilisation of the internet.

1.8.2.3 Electronic mail

Electronic mail (e-mail) is the oldest and one of the most popular forms of web services. December (1996:19) explains that via electronic mail gateways, internet users can trade e-mail with various other non-internet users on networks such as FidoNet, BITNET (Because Its Time Network) and UUCP (Unix-Unix Copy Protocol) as well as with numerous commercial services such as AOL (America Online), Delphi, Compuserve etc. E-mail allows users to attach video, text, and audio files to e-mail messages (Vennard, 2002:47).

1.8.2.4 Interactivity[3]

Interactivity is perhaps the most distinctive trait of the internet. In contrast to the design of "traditional media" such as the press and broadcasting media which habitually supports the linear model of communication (i.e. television and radio), it is alleged that the internet facilitates a more dialogical variety of communication between the producer (writer) and the user (reader) (McQuail, 2000:133-134). Rafaeli (quoted by Van Dijk, 2000:47) identified three dissimilar levels of communication: two-way (non-interactive); reactive (or quasi-interactive) communication, and fully interactive communication, which implies that all communicating (inter)actors respond to one-another. This "added value of responsiveness" between communicators allows the actors to converse as if their interaction occurred under the conditions of a real-space encounter. This interchangeable relationship of *producer-user* permits the exchange of diverse opinions and experiences between actors and hence creates a "feedback loop" between actors. It must be

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3 For an authoritative and expert delineation of the interactive characteristics, dimensions and functionalities of the internet, refer to: Naudé, A.M.E. 2001. Interactive public relations: the World Wide Web and South African NGOs. Potchefstroom: PU for CHE. (p.40-54).

noted, however, that interactivity is not merely a medium trait, but includes the relational aspect of role alternation. Newhagen and Rafaeli, (1996:6) therefore defines interactivity as:

[T]he extent to which communication reflects back on itself, feeds on and responds to the past.

This implies that participants communicate with one-another based on their responsive, reciprocal reactions to the content or material of previous communications. Thus, interactivity suggests communication is premised on message interdependence. However, without shared analysis and knowledge of (inter)actors' discourse contents, interactivity remains weak. Therefore, reciprocity is needed to augment interactivity to it highest level by allowing co-operative communication to transpire between actors, since it facilitates the awareness and understanding of varied communicated perspectives. Moreover, Naudé (2001:7) and Van Dijk (2000:48) report that the degree of interactivity is at its highest during a face-to-face communicative situation, which implies that online political communication must be complemented by face-to-face interaction.

It must then be understood that although the internet could be an interactive medium by design, it does not necessarily qualify all internet communication as being *interactive*. Nevertheless, online political communication suggests that interactivity creates the feedback loop indispensable to effective discussion of subject matters of a political nature between different political participants. As communicator roles and power are negotiable, the internet exhibits the potential (via the features of feedback, message interdependence, and reciprocity) to encourage effective political and social dialogue between participants by reinforcing participatory communication (Naudé, 2001:45; 47). (Also, see Chapter 3, Sections 3.4.1, 3.4.2, and 3.4.3. for a complete discussion on the participatory communication theory.)

One can therefore speculate that within the context of a developing South African society the construction of an "interactive-democratic" media system or internet public sphere, in the Habermasian sense, could ensure that all citizens are afforded the opportunity to act as message receivers as well as producers (Louw, 1993:252). By creating an "ideal speech situation" (ISS) (discussed in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.7.2) – a domain in which reciprocity is upheld – the internet could suffice as the space in which democratic communication occurs that could possibly encourage the equal redistribution of socio-economic and political rights. (This argument will be presented once again in Section 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.)

Apart from these clarifications on technological applications, it is necessary to reflect on some of the thornier theoretical perspectives of the "information age". For the purposes of this study, it should be noted that certain perspectives concerning new media technology and its influence on a society exist. These technologically deterministic views will now be explored succinctly.

1.8.2.5 Technological determinism[4]

As should be understood by now, technologies such as the internet are swiftly permeating into all spheres of society. For this very reason, as argued in the previous sections, theorists are currently observing an "information age". Accompanying this observation is the conviction that the internet could have significant consequences for millions of individuals and institutions around the globe. However, the challenge in theorising the information society, and the impact that this era will have on various human practices and contemporary institutional restructuring, depend largely on disparate, technological deterministic viewpoints (Kellner, 2000; Naudé, 2001:9, 12).

Within the communication sciences, for instance, there exists the common practice to link up prevailing technologies with already existing communication theory (McQuail, 1994:86). As a result, connected to each innovative technology is a set of preconceived ideologies that exhibit their own biases towards the use, content, and the configuration of such new technological developments as the internet. Faithful to this mechanistic tradition, analysts therefore regularly attempt to link particular communication technologies to impending social change in either an excessively optimistic (*technophilliac*) or an unwarranted derogatory, pessimistic (*technophobic*) fashion. These varied belief systems[5] tend to tie communication revolutions to social revolutions in very explicit terms.

Utopians would have it that almost all socio-political, economical, and cultural facets of human lives are moulded by technology (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant, & Kelly, 2003:2-3). As the "new space" of countercultures and political practices, optimists declare that the internet, and its application the WWW, could act as facilitators of social change. These so-called "digerati" (intellectuals who boost new media technology; for example politicians such as Al Gore and Tony Blair and theorists such as Alvin Toffler) equate positive societal change with the utilisation of ICTs. These proponents refer to the internet as the new Habermasian public sphere in which democratic discourse could take place in an egalitarian and emancipatory manner (Dahlberg, 2001, Tambini, 1999:309).

Conversely, dystopians such as *political economists* and *social constructivists* contend that the internet could sustain dehumanising and suppressive practices. Devoted to the arguments of

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4 This study does not intend to present the internet as the most appropriate form of communication for democratisation. It does however seek to pinpoint some of the alternative characteristics of the internet which could further the cause of democracy.

5 This description of the various worldviews on the information society is by no means meant to be an exhaustive account. This discussion is however meant to inform critical reflection and discussion on the potential usefulness of the internet in society and should serve to feed the remainder of this study's argument.

philosophers such as Baudrillard and Marcuse, detractors argue that the WWW provides spectacle and entertainment instead of information exchange and educational debate (Webster, 2002:228; 243; Poster, 2000). Similarly, the argument of political economists adds that the utilisation of technologies is related to very specific socio-political and socio-economical relations. (See section 2.4.5.) Tied to the neo-Marxist belief of *capitalism*, these proponents emphasise that communicative actions occurring on the internet will simply mirror social and political affairs as they happen in real-space capitalism (cf. Castells, 2000; Vennard, 2002:49; Webster, 2002). These theories, however, fail to acknowledge the emancipatory, progressive aspects of the internet by overstressing the influence of market and state forces in the workings of the internet.

In view of these arguments, and the assumptions offered in Section 1.1, the presumption is that internet application such as virtual forums, chat rooms, and information rich web pages could fashion online communication spaces in which participants could exchange political opinion, obtain political information, and discuss political topics. Such "ideal speech situations" support rational, critical discussion that is vital to the continuation of a legitimate South African democracy (cf. Habermas, 1984).

Clearly, all of the above stated opposing, single-factor approaches fail to incorporate cultural and social contexts into the equation and tend to follow discourse around the topic of the information society in extremist manners. Kellner (2000) and Barnes (cf. 2003) suggest that one must rather examine both the malpractices and the progressive emancipatory potentials of the internet. They propound that the internet can be used in service of progressive social change and democratisation provided the "domination aspect" has been sufficiently theorised. Once its is realised that technology is used by dissimilar people for disparate reasons in varied contexts, one could commence to formulate a more inclusive strategy on how to utilise the internet in service of democratisation. By implication, such a strategy should synthesise the interconnections of the political, economical, and social spheres with one-another in order to circumvent adopting a one-sided approach when studying a multi-faceted medium such as the internet.

1.9 STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

In order to improve the readability of the study, it was divided into three separate but interrelated components.

Part I constitutes the general theoretical contextualisation of the study. Therefore, Chapter 1 introduces the problem statement, the related research questions, and the intended research objectives of the study. This chapter describes certain concepts of the "information age" that are

applicable to the stated research problem. The succeeding chapter, Chapter 2, presents additional clarification on the notion of the "information age" with specific reference to the South African circumstance and examines how the internet could be used for deliberative democratic purposes. This assessment is also placed in context of the restrictions that could confront internet utilisation in South Africa as well as possible remedies to such obstacles. The specific theoretical arguments that inform this study are put forward in a literature review in Chapter 3. With reference to three, specific theoretical statements, it is argued that a public space of open, critical-reflective public opinion formation could fashion a politically informed and active electorate for improved citizen participation in a democracy.

Part II constitutes three distinct, but interconnected chapters. Chapter 4 discusses and motivates the research methodology and research design applied in this study. The applicability of the qualitative research approach is explained and an explanation of the specific research techniques, qualitative content analysis, as well as semi-structured interviews is given. In Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, the results yielded during the empirical analysis are described and interpreted. Chapter 5 presents the analysis on Elections Canada's web site, whereas Chapter 6 deals with the observations and interpretations of the IEC's web site.

The last component of this study, *Part III*, Chapter 7, presents the conclusions of this study. The chapter layout of the study is therefore as follows:

a) **Chapter 1:**   Orientation, research questions, research objectives.

b) **Chapter 2:**   Digital deliberative democracy: the South African context.

c) **Chapter 3:**   Theoretical approaches to development communication: the Habermasian public-sphere theory.

d) **Chapter 4:**   Research methodology and design.

e) **Chapter 5:**   Analysis and interpretation of Elections Canada's web site.

f) **Chapter 6:**   Analysis and interpretation of the IEC's web site.

g) **Chapter 7:**   Conclusions and recommendations.

1.10 CONCLUSION

The role of communication in development has long been premised upon top-down, manipulative communication strategies. However, nowadays society demands that development communication should incorporate the notion of empowerment and equality for it to be ethical and effective. Within the "information age", it is believed that the internet's distinctive interactive characteristics could allow information and knowledge sharing to occur according to

the basic principles of participatory communication; thus, participants could partake in the pursuit of the collective public good via an electronic platform such as the internet.

This introductory chapter gives an overview of the context in which research on interactive communication for development was conducted for this study. The overall objective of this study is to determine how political participation in South Africa can be boosted via an internet public sphere, more specifically, via the IEC's organisational web site. In view of that, the next chapter will give a brief introduction of the organisational origin and development of the IEC after which attention will be afforded to the context in which ICTs such as the internet are applied within the South African developing democratic circumstance. This particular chapter serves as a backgrounder on how the IEC could use its web site as an internet public sphere in which political participation occurs.

CHAPTER TWO

Digital deliberative democracy: the South African context

In the South African context specifically, 'participation', 'development', and 'media/communication' need to be worked into a single programme for building a post-apartheid society with democratic (and more equally distributed) power-relationships (Louw, 1993:241).

2.1 INTRODUCTION

As illustrated in the previous chapter, Section 1.8.1, the concept of an information society has become a catchword not only in developed democracies, but also in those countries still on the road to consolidating democratic practices and values. A brief introduction to the history, role, and position of the IEC, within the relatively young and developing South African democracy, is presented in this chapter. This account is followed by a contextualisation of how the South African as a developing democracy fits to the notion of the "information age".

Whereas South Africa did officially celebrate its transition from apartheid to democracy in 1994, representative structures and government continue to face the public's demand for the fulfilment of basic human rights, for instance equal opportunity of political participation, as well as the satisfaction of basic human needs and wants such as *inter alia* access to basic education and sufficient health care services. Accordingly, civil society requires that better access to representative political and public structures, recovered public accountability of such organisations, and a narrowing of the disparity along class lines be sufficiently addressed and ameliorated. Following from this, researchers, professionals, and policy-makers continually face the challenge of managing public needs efficiently in the hope of augmenting the South African development process.

In light of these challenges and the perspective of an ever expanding "information society", it follows that some of the South African public's developmental exigencies could be met and satisfied by way of public access to innovative communication channels such as the internet. As suggested in the introductory quotation of this chapter, and arguments offered in the preceding chapter, mediating structures are necessary which will allow the citizenry to voice its concerns and demands. Only once South African civil society can voice its public opinion and accordingly pressure public practice, can representative structures be held accountable for their policy-decisions, and in due course achieve successfully social and economical progress. (This argument's theoretical foundation will be explored fully in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.)

In order for public opinion to be taken into consideration by public and political representatives, government and policy-makers must explore variables that might restrict and enhance the use of

the internet as a substitute public sphere in which critical-reflective public will formation occurs. Although the internet may offer South Africans the unique opportunity to increase the sustainability of the development and democratic processes, universal access to the internet and the utilisation thereof still require earnest reflection and priority by official decision-makers.

This chapter will consequently examine South African regulatory polices that may enhance the use of the internet and other ICTs for political participation. Attention will also be afforded to the informational role of the media in a democracy with the aim of better informing the argument of using the internet as an alterative public sphere. The next section will now provide background on the establishment of the IEC as one of the mainstays of the South African democracy. Against this background, challenges and opportunities, within the South African development circumstance, that face the possibility of deliberative digital democracy will be explored.

2.2 THE INDEPENDENT ELECTORAL COMMISSION

The functioning of the IEC is explained against the vision, mission, functions, and historical origins of the organisation. (Also, see Chapter 6, Section 6.3 for further background information on the IEC.)

2.2.1. Historical origins, vision, and mission of the IEC

The Independent Electoral Commission was established in terms of the provisions of the interim Constitution of 1993 (IEC, 2004a). With sixteen individuals appointed as commissioners, the IEC was mandated to conduct South Africa's first fully democratic elections during the period of 26-29 April 1994. The elections, effected under a system of proportional representation, were conducted at the national level (the Senate and the National Assembly) in addition to elections held in all of the nine provincial legislatures. On 11 October 1996, the interim constitution was replaced with the newly adopted South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996 section/article 181(1f)), which instituted the new, permanent Independent Electoral Commission (cf. South Africa, 1996a:99.)

The IEC, with its national headquarters in Pretoria, is thus a permanent, publicly funded body constructed in terms of the Electoral Commission Act (no. 51) of 1996 (South Africa, 1996b). In terms of this act, the IEC is one of six autonomous state bodies[6] established in support of constitutional democracy and is accountable only to the South African constitution and to the

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[6] The other autonomous state bodies include The Public Protector, The Human Rights Commission, The Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities, and The Commission for Gender Equality, and the Auditor General (cf. South Africa, 1996a:99).

parliament. Presently, it is the IEC's vision to, among other things, reinforce the South African democracy through the management of free and fair elections whereby the electorate is enabled to exercise its informed, political choice (South Africa, 1996a:103; South Africa, 1996b). As the officially authorised and self-articulated promoter and guardian of the South African democracy, the IEC's mission necessitates the fulfilling of, to name but a few, the following objectives:

- *Dividing the country into voting districts;*
- *Making logistical arrangements for elections;*
- *Registering eligible voters;*
- *Ensuring the smooth running of voting; and*
- *Counting, verifying, and announcing the results of elections.*

While the IEC's constitutional responsibility is to manage the electoral system and the execution of frequent elections at all levels of government, electoral legislation also instructs the IEC to encourage voter education among the electorate (South Africa, 1996b). The electoral act also describes the tasks of promoting "knowledge of sound and democratic electoral processes" among the electorate, and "the development of electoral expertise and technology in all spheres of government" as part of the IEC's terms of office.

2.2.2 Management structure

In terms of the current executive structure of the IEC, five individuals are appointed as commissioners for a period of seven years. This appointment process is principled on transparency and openness in accordance with the Electoral Commission Act, no. 51 of 1996, section 5 and 7 (South African 1996b). Under this act (See Section 9(2)) commissioners may in no form or manner endanger or injure the "perceived independence...or the credibility, impartiality, independence or integrity of the Commission".

Presently (2004), Dr. Brigalia Bam heads the Electoral Commission alongside advocate Pansy Tlakula, who heads the daily administration of the IEC as the chief electoral officer and accounting executive. The organisation is divided into several departments; each supervised by senior departmental managers (IEC, 2002b; IEC, 2002c).

In view of the problem statement, offered in Section 1.3 of the previous chapter, this study consequently concentrates on how participatory political communication may be accomplished via new media public spheres – the organisational web site of the Independent Electoral Commission [http://www.elections.org.za]. More expressly, this study seeks to examine how the IEC could advance levels of political engagement via the establishment of an internet public sphere. Conceivably, such a web sphere, in which political activity is encouraged and

maintained, could ultimately strengthen public participation in public affairs by allowing the South African electorate to keep ruling structures in check and inform such organisations on the policies needed to achieve social change and progress (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003:33-34). Theoretically-enthused criteria will attempt to evaluate whether the IEC's web site could appropriate the Habermasian public-sphere ideal, which supports the notion of public deliberation between citizens and public structures. (See Chapter 4, *Table 4.1* for a list of the criteria developed for the qualitative content analysis of the IEC web site. Furthermore, refer to Chapter 3, Section 3.5.3 for a complete account of the basic principles that underpin the Habermasian public-sphere model.)

The remainder of the chapter describes and contextualises the correlation between the informational role of the media and the sustainability of a developing democracy. This chapter also deals with the "information society" within the South African context.

2.3 DEMOCRACY, DEVELOPMENT, AND DIGITAL INTERACTIVE POLITICS

2.3.1 Democracy and the media

As established in the preceding chapter, the media are customarily said to enact an assortment of indispensable, socially responsible roles within civil society. Tettey (2001:136) says that the belief in free and diverse information flows within a democratic society is not a novel one. As Habermas (1989:60) tells, since the early eighteenth century the media has acted as the *fourth estate* of public life by guaranteeing a space or a public sphere for critical-rational, political debate among a citizenry and its ruling structures. This belief system professes that there is a distinct relationship between a society's political arena and the "health" of its public life. This relationship is apparently mediated via societal media configurations (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000:159).

According to the Habermasian thesis – explained in detail in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.2 – especially the printed press made it possible during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for "ordinary people" to access information and to express their own political points of view. Moreover, in recent decades the broadcasting media – i.e. television and radio – have been glorified in this manner as well. According to this confidence, some of the obligations the media exhibit toward society are setting up standards of informativeness, accuracy, truth, and balance through a system that allows for the expression and reflection of diverse perspectives (De Beer, 1998:19). The media, in reporting on the political process, then augments the process of democracy by acting as an information resource that facilitates deliberation among a polity and its governors. Why then is the practice of deliberation so essential to the democratic ideology?

Simply put, policy makers and voters work through problems via deliberations. Voters and policy makers debate with one-another on societal policy issues and welfares of political and public matter (Tambini, 1999:315). Once the latter process is completed, voters are empowered to make a choice between various political projects and programmes, which correspond to their unique interests and wellbeing. Via this publicity function of the media, a polity can voice their concerns, which in turn, may pressurise and influence the decisions of political and economical leaders that could affect the community's actual life circumstances. This process of public deliberation should then be understood as a social learning experience that operates as a problem-solving mechanism. Therefore, several analysts propose that deliberation amongst different political entities should be the focus of active political citizenship, since it uncovers the bonds between democratic communicative practices and the social learning process. Alternatively, as Louw (1993:244) explains:

Housing is important, but so too is democracy. A participative media infrastructure (and the training to use it) represents, in the long run (sic), a greater guarantee of housing for all: by empowering people with democratic communications, all would have access to make their demands heard on an on-going basis (for housing, jobs, schools, etc.)

Even so, as stated by Tambini (1999:317), just because citizens and administrators have shared interests it does not suggest that they will come together in a collectivity of organised political agency. To be more precise, they must be aware of one another's existence and influence. Traditionally, political parties or social movements have sought to exploit the mass media to gain a platform for their own political narratives and special interests. As communication recourses, the mass media are used to mobilise people and political identities; hence, the mass media fulfils another salient role within a democratic society; *public will formation* or *public will organisation.* Through this exercise, the media encourages participation in the political process among a polity, which may guide soon-to-be political action.

On the other hand, recent views in media and communication studies maintain that the so-called traditional spheres of debate are deformed by a multitude of detrimental factors. Tambini (1999:309) tells that the refuse of especially the public service broadcasting model (PSBM) can be compared to the decline of the Habermasian public-sphere model. (See Section 3.5.5 for a discussion on the decline of the liberal public-sphere model.) Theorists argue that the regulatory ideals of freedom of speech, impartiality, public service, and universality of access are defunct given the current crises of the public service media industry. Instead of sufficing as platforms of public reflection, it is claimed that forces of commercial interests, deregulation, and fiscal stresses have overtaken democratic ideals such as authentic participatory, public

communication. Consequently, these public spaces of public expression are believed to be on the decline and the likelihood of democratic communication via traditional systems is supposedly significantly reduced (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000:161).

As a result, many analysts nowadays contend that the field of political and public communication must adapt to the advances that occur in the field of new communication technologies. It is expected that these innovative modalities could possibly revitalise the media's role in a democratic society (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000:155).

2.3.2 Deliberative democracy in cyberspace

Consequently, in the context of the pre-stated "information age", one must realise that alteration of the social, political, and the technological realms may have significant effects on how the media is regulated in service of the public good. In addition, one must critically asses these effects in light of numerous deterministic arguments contained by such a premise. (See Chapter 1, Section 1.8.2.5.)

Provided this counsel, Tambini (1999:309-310) would have it that the old linear, hierarchical broadcasting model of one-to-many is no longer applicable in an age where communicative power could be decentralised to innovative modes of technology such as the internet. Rather, the argument holds that democratic deliberation can now be located within the context of interactive media that will allow veritable participatory deliberation. As expounded in previous sections, adherents opine that new media have intrinsic values and unique architectures that could enhance communication with citizens (Tettey, 2001:136). Through reciprocal interactivity, decentralisation of power, and the ability to debate and challenge diverse opinions, proponents suppose that ICTs foster participatory democracy in terms of establishing communicative equality among administrators and citizens (Van Dijk, 2000:44).

The ICT evolution could certainly pioneer new forms and levels of political interaction between citizens and community development organisations, public institutions, and governments, as well as among citizens themselves. Greater access to, as well as the use of ICTs, is believed to promise greater influence on those who render public services, and those who occupy themselves within the realm of political activity (Ott, 1998). Once equitable and affordable access to ICTs becomes a reality, it may possibly empower citizens to disclose freely diverse ideas about solving universally commonly identified problems, which could allow them to shape new relationships for idea generation, artistic expression, and even enterprise development. Furthermore, ICTs could also reinforce the effectiveness of government programs and service

delivery because of (inter)active citizen involvement in politics and governmental practices may become more transparent, effective, responsive, and publicly accountable.

For these above-stated reasons, many adherents theorise that the internet – innately decentralised and interactive in nature – is the new, alternative public sphere of public deliberation, liberated from state and commercial imperatives. Following from this, the IEC's organisational web site could also be put to use as a web sphere in which the public interact with ruling structures as to ensure that the democratic system is authentic and responsive to public needs and demands.

Nevertheless, given the already-stated thesis that the internet is part of a larger arrangement of social processes and networks, one must reflect on how these elements may influence the structural character of the internet as a communicative platform. In the next section, attention will be afforded to the possible impediments to an internet discursive design as well as the possible solutions to such obstacles within the South African situation.

2.4 RESTRICTIONS AND SOLUTIONS TO A DIGITAL DISCURSIVE DESIGN ON THE INTERNET: THE SOUTH AFRICAN "INFORMATION SOCIETY" CONTEXT

In view of the emancipatory "information age" thesis, those who govern media bodies, as well as those in charge of political orders, need to adapt to the new interactive style of modern-day communications. Discourses and debates once reserved to the realms of the traditional media must now transpire in context of new media such as the internet. Accordingly, topics of socio-economical, infrastructural, and regulatory aspect command serious attention in such discussions. The current reformation of global communications infrastructures therefore has a political element to it (Tambini, 1999:306).

Thus, if new media are to erode the old, restrictive political hierarchies and replace those with egalitarian ones, one needs to address troublesome issue such as access to ICTs. Moreover, issues of design and control of new media channels become salient leitmotifs. However, there exists a massive chasm between the *haves* and the *have-nots* within the global context, including within South Africa itself, as well as the country's relation to the rest of the globe. This dichotomy of access to ICTs is habitually referred to as the "digital divide". It describes a situation wherein the developing world generally lags behind the developed world in terms of exploiting new communication technologies because of limited access to such technologies. As (Severin & Tankard, 1988:287-288) elucidate, limited access has created a skewed GII and hence a rift between "information rich" societies in the Northern hemisphere and "information poor" societies in the South is created, which could create a "knowledge gap" between the two

divides. According to this hypothesis as mass media or public media systems permeate a society, citizens within the higher socio-economic status group will tend to obtain information via these media systems at a much faster rate than persons with lower socio-economic standing. Accordingly, the knowledge gap between the two rankings might increase over time and as a result, lower socio-economic persons may be left behind in the development process, since these persons cannot fully articulate or address their specific developmental needs as they lack sufficient access to information and viewpoints.

2.4.1 Infrastructural and fiscal constraints to access

For the reason stated above, Tettey (2001:137) regrets the lack of enabling circumstances and environments crucial for access to *and* (emphasis added) use of ICTs on particularly African soil. The World Bank (2000) found that as the world's second largest continent, Africa is the world's least computerised continent. Jensen (2002) estimates that only one in every 130 individuals has access to a computer. Additionally, in fact only 1 in 160 uses the internet – in contrast with the world average of one user out of every 15 individuals and 1 out of every 2 users for North American and European countries.

Northern Africa in company with South Africa is responsible for nearly 1.5 to 2.5 million of all African internet users. Currently, it is estimated that only 3.28 million South Africans have access to the internet (World Wide Worx, 2004). Access to the internet is further hampered by lack of hardware (computer equipment, reliable telephone lines and modems) and software (programmes, browsers etc.) (Vennard, 2002:51). In addition, because of international bandwidth scarcity, the costs of communication and information services and provisions remain unaffordable to the majority of South Africans. In fact, Luxembourg's 400 000 inhabitants share more international bandwidth between them than Africa's 760 million habitants where access to the WWW is usually restricted to e-mail services only (ITU, 2002:6). Moreover, in South Africa, those who own and use the internet have incomes seven times higher than the average national income. Therefore, the utilisation of the internet mirrors the *haves* and the *have-nots* dichotomy as it occurs in real life. Participation is limited to the well-off elites and hence the social capital needed for a legitimate, strong democracy is undermined, since only privileged citizens can fully expend ICTs for political and public participation. In spite of possible low internet subscription fees, the majority of South Africans cannot afford the rent of telephone lines and the lofty monthly phone bill costs associated with it. High costs, additionally, mean that South Africans do not have the physical leisure time at their disposal that is required to engage extensively in meaningful deliberation on the internet with other political actors.

Many observers propose that costs can be cheapened by creating alternative access points to the internet. De Beer (2001:145) explicates that one option, though pricey, would be to upgrade present systems to new fibre optic cables and copper wire. The most affordable solution (Richardson as quoted by De Beer, 2001:145) would then be to connect to the internet via satellite uplinks. This type of digital "backbone" is supposedly relatively quick and simple to install and offers South Africa the opportunity to "leapfrog" traditional stages of technological and infrastructural development in the fields of telecommunications and the internet (Main, 2001:85). An alternative way of circumventing the infrastructural impediment is by using cellular technology. Africa has more than 24 million mobile phone users of which almost 18 million resides in South Africa (Jensen, 2002). If cellular technology were to become cheaper and more advanced, South Africans could soon become the new generation of mobile internet surfers.

Infrastructure, on the other hand, also lacks on an individual user level; services such as cyber cafés, PC (personal computer) kiosks, and other public terminals of access are in great demand in urban areas and especially in the remote rural areas since persons do not privately own the necessary hardware and software needed to utilise the internet. By offering public terminals as points of internet accessibility, internet usage could however be reinforced. In addition, the South African government has gone to great lengths in rolling out Multi-Purpose Community Centres[7] (MPCCs) and Public Internet Terminals (PiTs) in the hope of stimulating internet use among its citizenry. Specifically MPCCs are identified as:

...[T]he primary vehicles of development communication and information programmes as they can serve as a base from which a wide range of services and products reach communities (South Africa, 2001a).

For this reason the Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) has been instructed with the task of ensuring that citizens not only have access to such public information services but also that two-way communication services are available for the public to interact with government. South Africans (UNDP, 2002:81) for instance, are offered the opportunity to engage in digital deliberation initiatives such as "reviewing policy proposals online and submit comments even before a policy issue reaches the Green Paper and draft law stages" via such MPCCs access points. Another objective of the GCIS is to provide communities with "basic training on and the use of computers", the internet and other forms of ICTs (South Africa,

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[7] Multi-Purpose Community Centres (MPCCs) combine different applications of information and communication technologies (ICTs) into telecentres or "virtual village halls". Access to telephones, fax machines, photocopiers, e-mail, and the internet offer access to governmental departments and services (South Africa, 2001a).

2001b). The availability of these public information terminals could also increase the number of internet users to an additional 200 000. It is assumed that a greater number of citizens could directly access governmental programmes and services via these MPCCs as to empower themselves to become actively involved in and responsible for their own developmental processes by obtaining and sharing information and viewpoints.

Nevertheless, universal access is not crucial or indispensable for the use of the internet as the "third space" of deliberation. As Vennard (2002:52) suggests, universal access is a legitimate and worthwhile ideal to pursue, however, those few individuals who do have access can act for the benefit of many. She reasons that in *real space*, not all individuals are heard, yet journalists, social movements, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) give expression to millions of previously unheard voices. Especially within the African oral tradition, computer literate individuals can act as interpersonal channels of information delivery to those still marginalised by infrastructural or socio-cultural constraints (De Beer, 2001:146-147). Single internet accounts also need not be restricted to only one particular user. Accounts may be swapped in such a way that multiple users access the internet via a single account. This argument ties with the African concept of *Ubuntu* – which roughly translates that people are only people through other people. The emphasis on a communal culture can therefore be employed in service of internet access and usage growths. For this reason, internet advocates maintain that "middlemen" could retain a vital role within the South African context (Ott & Rosser, 2000:141). This suggests that opinion and community leaders could access vital information on MPCCs networks and hence become the disseminators of vital information required for the consolidation of democracy and development.

Apart for the fact that South Africa should reflect on how to acquire cost-effective, appropriate technology to create knowledgeable peoples, one must also consider how to invest in human capital in order to empower individuals in applying newly obtained information (Jordaan, 2001:82). A number of restrictive social and cultural elements must be attended to in order to mitigate virtual communicative exclusion. Despite the political climate changes that commenced during the 1990s, the historical inequities of the South African society are still noticeable along the lines of race, gender, and socio-economical issues and therefore they persist in cyberspace.

2.4.2 Socio-cultural limitations on access
2.4.2.1 Literacy, language, and gender issues
Because of the above-stated inequities, many South Africans do not exhibit the "political disposition" to partake in internet interaction or deliberation (Tettey, 2001:140). One must

therefore determine the rights of access for the marginalised segments of society such as illiterates, technological illiterates, and linguistic minorities.

South Africa's illiteracy rate currently stands at roughly 14.7% (UNDP, 2002:184). However, it is also reported that more than 18.4% of South Africans older than twenty years has not had any form of schooling and that only 15.9% of this population group has had some primary schooling (South Africa, 2004a:35). (While these figures may strengthen the impression that many South Africans have the aptitudes required for using the internet, the number overlooks the fact that most South Africans are computer illiterate. Another worrying restriction is that the literacy is required in the dominant internet language of English (De Beer, 2001:144; Ott & Rosser, 2001:143). Unsurprisingly, the software and hardware designs of the internet are typically of a western or Anglo-Saxon nature and thus largely exclude African cultural needs and values. In view of that, several Africanists argue that the globalisation of new communication technologies – largely organised and implemented by transnational corporations (TNCs) – merely augment the North-South dependency affiliation. Apart from the obvious capitalistic dimension, such a dependency creates serious social and cultural consequences. The "digital divide" is not simply quantitative in nature; qualitatively access to the internet may also be limited to predetermined informational contents and designs. The belief is that neo-imperialism and marginalisation are mediated via tools such as the internet, which contributes to the negation of African socio-economic and cultural ideologies and discourses through unequally designed media representations that advance western "information capitalism" (Webster, 2002:134-135). Hence, true to the call for a "new world information and communication order" (NWICO), Africans should organise their interests and values in a manner that will preserve as well as promote the experiences of African users in the virtual world (Nyamnjoh, 1999:41). The discrepancy between design and use therefore demands serious redress.

What is more, in terms of connectivity, although South Africa is considered as Africa's "gateway" to the internet, access for women and the youth remains a cumbersome issue as it is often tied to deeply ingrained socio-economic and cultural restrictions. For the most part the internet remains dominated by Anglo, affluent, technically skilled, educated, white males whose masculine views dictate discussions in the virtual "coffee shops" or "digital villages" (Vennard, 2002:53; Ott & Rosser, 2000:141). Hence, the internet often suffices as just another forum of genderised discriminatory practices. There are however a number of alternatives that may remedy the above-mentioned exclusionary practices.

For instance, many proponents make a case for the advancement of a new generation of so-called neo-literates. They explain that potential internet end users need only acquire a minimum

level of literacy that will enable them to become active information users (De Beer, 2001:146; Tambini, 1999:321). This argument is fuelled by the fact that computer-mediated-communication (CMC) does not demand specialised familiarity of programme languages, but rather, a minimum amount of basic skills that allows browsing, retrieval and processing of information. Menu-driven and icon-based interfaces may render literacy a rudimentary restriction by building a visual language that communicates through African symbols and aesthetical values. An enabling environment should therefore rather reconseptualise the notions of literacy and computer education if internet usage is to increase. In addition, it is envisioned that the number of internet users will increase with the inception of indigenous languages in the computing world. Bill Gates, founder and chairperson of the giant programming company Microsoft, announced during a visit to South Africa that the corporation is currently developing programming packages in a number of indigenous African languages such as Afrikaans, isiZulu, Setswana, Xhosa, Sepedi, as well as Swahili (Van Dyk, 2003:11). Arguably, the African agenda will receive greater local and global prominence once commercial suppliers increase the user-friendliness of the internet. This could arguably boost better, meaningful political participation for more end users.

Cultural and ethnic exclusions can be overcome, as well, by exploiting the internet's characteristic of anonymity. Many feminist lobby groups report that women find online communication more desirable than face-to-face communication, provided a certain amount of anonymous interaction is secured (Tambini, 1999:319; Vennard, 2002:54). Female discussants can construct online identities, which better suits the context of ongoing discourses. Communication with male counterparts can therefore be managed on an equal footing as views and opinions tendered are discussed in a neutral, "degenderised" setting. Likewise, worldwide the struggle for equal, female representation on the internet is advanced by governments in partnership with women's movements. In South Africa, organisations such as Women'sNet [http://www.womensnet.org.za] strive for the political, economical, cultural, and social emancipation of women by using ICTs such as the internet as a resource for women's issues and agendas (African Gender Institute, 1998; Women'sNet, 1997). Particularly previously impoverished women are coached in the use of the internet in the conviction that meaningful information sharing may empower women to mobilise themselves for social action and better political representation.

On the topic of anonymity, Tettey (2001:147; 148) and Nyamnjoh (1999:53) caution though that in the age of globalisation and fragmentation, anonymity may degrade conversation because withheld identification negates accountability. Interaction may be restricted to emotive language

and incidents of "flaming"[8] as the right to "freedom of expression" is frequently abused or practiced according to double standards. Moreover, detractors maintain that anonymity potentially threatens interpersonal relationships, as it is no longer possible to maintain face-to-face human communication given that interaction is mediated via "uncongenial" computers screens. Moreover, Tettey (2001:148) reports that there is a tendency for censorship when libellous statements are made or expressed on the internet. Many administrators therefore argue that regulatory frameworks and policies should be put in place, which regulate virtual communications and transactions. Unfortunately, rules for deliberation often result in restrictive and draconian legislation, which limit the unrestricted discursive potential of the internet.

2.4.3 Regulatory considerations: creating an enabling environment

South African policy-makers face all of the aforementioned challenges with reference to the establishment of a South African information society. The South African government, in conjunction with organisations and media institutions in the broader societal context, should be considered as the most important regulators of media policy. The argument holds that the "type of political power" in government could affect and determine either an enabling or a restrictive media environment, which could ultimately significantly influence the consolidation of a democratic South African culture.

In the sections that follow, attention will concisely be given to some of the legislative policies and regulative authorities developed and implemented by the South African government that may be applicable to the creation of a South African "information society".

2.4.3.1 The Task Group on Government Communications (Comtask)

In 1997, then deputy-president Thabo Mbeki, appointed a task group to investigate the state of government communications within the context of the newly established South African democracy (South Africa, 1996c). The Task Group on Government Communications (Comtask) was charged with fixing possible definitions for the most appropriate communications policy within the specific developing circumstance of the country. The task group concluded in its final report that information dissemination between the three tiers of government and all relevant stakeholders could institute a knowledge-based society in which human and social capital are applied in the development process. As observed previously, MPCCs were considered as the

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[8] Flaming should be understood as when two or more people exchange insults in a public messaging. It is sometimes done deliberately to disrupt the normal flow of messages. A flame is therefore "an abusive posting" on an online discursive forum such as a bulletin board or a chat forum. Flaming could also occur via e-mail communication (Kennedy, 1995:78).

most appropriate platforms for the implementation of development communication and information initiatives. (See Section 2.4.2.) The assumption was that such centres could empower South African communities to improve their destinies by providing them with valuable, pertinent government services and development information (South Africa, 2002a). Arguably, the IEC's web site could be accessed by a great number of voters in urban as well as rural areas by means of MPCCs and PiTs.

2.4.3.2 White Paper on Science and Technology

Additionally, the South African government underscored the afore-stated sentiment by developing the South African White Paper on Science and Technology (S&T). This paper is premised on the twin concepts of the promotion of innovation *and* the arrangement of a national system of innovation (NSI) (South Africa, 1996d:10). The policy paper establishes a rudimentary vision for the development of a South African information society in which the information revolution (vis-à-vis related technologies, e.g. the internet) could benefit citizens at all societal levels in the pursuit of socio-economic development (South Africa, 1996d:7-9; 14). Additionally, the policy provides the general framework for the creation of a regulatory environment for science and technology, which values a problem-solving, democratic South African civil society. For these values to be realised the South African government places emphasis on the Lifelong Learning and Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) approaches (South Africa, 1996d:54). These approaches aim to encourage and entrench a knowledge-based and skills-equipped South African people that could expend technologies such as the internet in the developmental process. With the establishment of the IEC's electoral web site, a politically competent and responsible electorate could be created that ultimately could partake in the democratic process. By obtaining valuable information concerning the electoral system via the IEC web site, citizens could possibly appropriate public opinion and keep all ruling structures in check concerning the latter's policy and decision-making practices.

2.4.3.3 White Paper on Telecommunications Policy

Furthermore, the White Paper on Telecommunications Policy (South Africa, 1996e:6-8) underscores the provision of universal service in telecommunications and equitable access to telecommunications as crucial to the attainment of social, economical and political goals. The South African government contends that affordable telecommunication services will support not only public service delivery, but also improve participation in the democratic process through increased public information provision. In terms of legislation, the Universal Service Agency (USA) is charged with the attainment of such-mentioned goals. This white paper has therefore

been drafted in support of innovative telecommunications networks and service, for instance the internet, which could boost participatory development communication practices.

2.4.3.4 White Paper on Broadcasting

Additionally, the Department of Communications (DoC) functions as the public service division in charge of the posts, telecommunications and broadcasting sectors in the country. The department is concerned with, among other things, the public service media arm (the South African Broadcasting Corporation or SABC), the independent media regulator (the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa or ICASA) and the Universal Service Agency, in addition to the state-owned enterprises Telkom SA Limited and the South African Post Office (Pty) Ltd (South Africa 2004b:129). The policy framework of the White Paper on Broadcasting stresses the importance of the availability of broadcasting services to all South African citizens. In addition, it highlights the right to receive and impart information in addition to the entitlement to execute these rights in a culture of choice and diversity of opinions and experiences as entrenched in the Bill of Rights (South Africa, 1996a). This framework includes the availability of communication services such as the internet that might assist South Africans in their developmental processes.

2.4.3.5 The Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA)

In this respect, since 1 July 2000, the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa[9] (ICASA) has been mandated by DoC with the regulation of the South African telecommunications and broadcasting environment in the interest of the public good. This goal must be secured through the fair and accurate representation of diverse views on the South African society. Apart from regulating the telecommunications and broadcasting industries, ICASA is also charged with the licensing of private cellular service providers who include Vodacom, MTN, and Cell C.

2.4.3.6 The Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA)

Lastly, the Media Development and Diversity Agency (MDDA) aims to promote democratisation within the country through the development and implementation of a more diverse media industry (South Africa, 2002b). The MDDA intends to redress historical inequities, which may hamper access to the ownership of and the use of media channels. It sets out, to mention but a few of its priorities, to promote the role the media plays in democratisation; to transform media

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[9] The regulator was established after the merger between the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA) and the South African Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (SATRA).

ownership and access patterns, and to encourage partnerships in support of such endeavours between stakeholders at all societal levels. On the subject of new media channels, the agency seeks to support the development of South African content on the WWW and the encouragement of "small and community media's use of new media". As part of the GCIS, the MDDA is therefore of significance for this study as it is concerned with improving access to communication platforms such as the IEC web site.

2.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter provided an overview of the regulatory and infrastructural context in which internet access in South Africa is managed. It is evident from the discussion above that the South African government is attentive to the encroaching "information society" and its possible upshots for the socio-economical progress of South African citizens. Through the establishment of various government agencies and regulative bodies, this awareness is not merely partial to the formulation of policies and white papers, but also extends to discovering active strategies that would enable citizens to gain universal entry to the "information society" and experience the benefits thereof.

From the observations made, it is also apparent that internet access in South Africa is restricted because of several infrastructural and socio-economical hindrances. For the most part, marginalised groups such as women and the youth still need dedicated encouragement and assistance to partake in the benefits of the "information age" and hence continue their own developmental processes. Following from this, digital deliberative democracy can only become a reality as soon as issues of access and proper regulation of communication channels are considered and addressed appropriately. Despite the lack of universal access to the internet public institutions such as the IEC should not postpone applying its web site as a voter educative tool. Preferably, the IEC could use interactive features on its web site to create problem solving, bottom-up, and two-way learning experiences by which the South African electorate could become more responsible and politically active citizens.

Against this backdrop, the next chapter will introduce the theoretical approaches that underpin the study. The argument thus holds that a public space in which citizens could freely participate in public practice could advance not only specific development objectives, but also encourage overarching democratic ideals. Additionally, Chapter 3 will investigate the foundations of the participatory communication approach to development. Particular emphasis will be placed on the Freirean approach to participatory development communication, since this approach corresponds to some of the basic dialogical tenets of the Habermasian public-sphere ideal.

CHAPTER THREE

Theoretical approaches to development communication: the Habermasian public-sphere theory

If liberty and equality, as it is thought by some are chiefly to be found in democracy, they will be best attained when all persons alike share in the government to the utmost (Aristotle, 384 BC – 322 BC, Politics).

3.1 INTRODUCTION

At the core of modern political life lie the notions of participation and democracy. As alluded to in Chapter 1, authentic democracy is only achievable provided meaningful communication between a polity and its governing structures transpires. As the quotation above suggests, this study turns to a critical examination of how such a vision could possibly be realised.

The theoretical approach supported in this study is the democratic Habermasian public-sphere theory with reference to the participatory development communication approach to development (Habermas, 1989; Servaes, 1999). These theoretical approaches were chosen as the central orientations in terms of which the creation of an internet public sphere by the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) of South Africa will be analysed and discussed. The IEC, as briefly suggested in the previous chapter, is charged by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (South Africa, 1996a) with the task of promoting the democratisation process within South Africa.

Given this charge, the public-sphere theory developed by the German social and political thinker Jürgen Habermas addresses how democratisation may be consolidated via the concept of social and political public opinion formation and deliberation. Much interest in contemporary discourse on democratic theory has been dedicated to the potential that the Habermasian model exhibits in facilitating rational-critical debate among and between citizens, and between citizens and political structures. Another question addressed here is how the public-sphere theory fits into the conceptualisation of the participatory approach as used in developing societies. It could be argued that both paradigms share common elements that could enhance the developmental process in South Africa. Besides, Habermas's theory could serve to explicate particularly how communication on the WWW can smooth the progress of participatory development communication. It is maintained that online deliberation could circumvent the inherent limitations that modern day "traditional media", in the moulds of newspapers and television exhibit. Proponents of such a vision maintain that the unique interactive characteristics of the internet, and its related applications, could effectively rejuvenate the deliberative process needed to legitimate democracy (cf. Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001:1; Dahlberg, 2001:85).

The participatory approach was an obvious choice for this study as participation is regarded as central to the development process and democracy (Huesca, 2002:502; Servaes, 1995:46). Within this context, it is proposed that the IEC should aim at empowering the electorate to perform educated political decisions, which could in turn affect decision-making processes at all other societal levels. As Louw (1993:244) asserts, a participative media infrastructure could in the end guarantee that other developmental needs such as housing, access to education and housing amenities, to list but a few, are met. Democratisation (development of democracy) should thus be seen within in the broader context of development including social upliftment.

In this chapter, the following sections will be delineated:

- The development communication context with specific reference to the notion of social change;

- The salient elements of the various approaches to development communication including the dominant paradigm and the dependency paradigm. These will be outlined briefly, with particular emphasis on the participatory approach to development as applicable to this study; and

- The historical context of the public-sphere theory with accent on its most salient elements as applicable to this study.

The participatory theory and the public-sphere paradigm will be presented as two separate focus areas in this chapter. Although the theories share common features, exclusive treatment is preferred to facilitate rigorous theoretical conceptual investigation.

3.2 THE DEVELOPMENT COMMUNICATION CONTEXT

3.2.1 Development and development communication

Defining development is not a straightforward charge (Coetzee, 1989:17-19; Naudé, 2001:12, 14). The concept development often has semantically varied classifications. Over the years, the term development has sufficed as the conceptual framework for such concepts and processes as modernisation, Westernisation, industrialisation, nation-building, economic growth, and numerous other political, social, and cultural activities (Mowlana, 1997:185). Consequently, the relationship between development and its related communication activities is somewhat problematic.

Moemeka (1994:4) sheds light on this troublesome conjecture by describing social change as those actions utilised within *and* by a social system to negate the potential negative side effects of social and physical development. By development, he then intends that the status quo of a

societal organisation needs transformation if the group's prospects are to be met. Rogers and Shoemaker (1971:7) add to Moemeka's definition of development by describing social change as those steps necessary to manage the process of transformation as efficiently as possible. In due course, the goals of development communication and social change initiatives are congruent – recovering the quality of human interactions and people's life circumstances by modifying a system's purpose and structure from within.

In a developing democracy, such as South Africa, pressure is building on the government of the day to continue combating poverty, disregard of human rights, widespread corruption, and non-democratic policies in an attempt to substantiate and consolidate the much-celebrated democratic tradition (Seale, 2002). The democratic system is therefore constantly under strain to facilitate and continue social development and progress. This sustainable change is however only possible provided the necessary information contexts are created and communicated to the persons and communities who have become aware of the desire for change. The assumption is that if individuals satisfy their particular informational needs, they would have greater control over *and* ownership of the structures that influence their lived experiences. For the purpose of this study, the internet is imagined as a possible two-way communicative means that could inform citizens on how to better participate in public affairs that affect their destinies. Particularly, the assumption is that interactive, information-rich web sites could instruct people about how to respond to new information and subsequently inform them on how to begin to expend such newfound knowledge in appropriate, responsive ways. (Also, see Section 2.3.1 and 2.3.2.) The IEC organisational web site could be regarded as a potential tool of development communication too, since the IEC aims at encouraging sustainable electoral participation by shaping informed, competent voters that could make responsible political choices. The underlying assumption being that continued electoral participation is part of a sustainable democratic system as well, as voters choose political leaderships that will ultimately represent the public's development concerns in public practice.

This is not to say, however, that social adjustments occur without opposition. Indeed, most systems often exhibit reluctance in transforming the status quo. Moemeka (1994:11, 15-19) and Prinsloo (1998:15) warn against impeding factors such as cultural, group, and organisational norms. Still, if enough members of a system value the proposed change, structural and functional transformation of a system could occur (Rensburg, Mersham & Skinner, 1995:21).

Therefore, central to societal change or development is proper communication. It is not inferred that the one cannot subsist without the other. Rather, appropriate communication campaigns must be developed in order to consolidate the intended changes with the needs of the system

undergoing the changes more accurately. As Naudé (2001:14) reports, several researchers choose to describe the relationship between development and communication as a symbiotic one. The success of developmental programmes is then attributed to suitable communicative actions – hence the term "development communication". Wilkens (1999:51) suggests that communication initiatives are modes of social intervention that perceives some or other situation as a "social problem". Communication is therefore understood as the practice that could remedy the problem by supplying indispensable information, which could rectify the circumstances perceived as problematic. In view of the above discussions, the definition of development communication adopted for the purposes of this study entails that development is:

...[A] process that should provide people with access to appropriate and sustainable opportunities to improve their own lives and the lives of others in their communities (Melkote, 2002:428).

In terms of this study, *the assumption is then that the IEC's organisational web site could be an adequate development communicative instrument used to inform and educate the South African electorate on their political rights and responsibility to act on such intellect – that is, participate in sustainable democratic practices such as elections.* For instance, the electoral web site could possibly contain helpful voter information that might inform the voting public on how to vote for a change in representative political leaderships or government that might more appropriately address the development concerns of the public.

3.3 THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO DEVELOPMENT

Nonetheless, over the years, the world of development communication has been strewn with a complex multiplicity of *what* exactly social change and human development constitute. Development communication, as a field of study, can be delineated as a discipline that matured, and continues to expand, as an evolutionary process (Huesca, 2002:499; Mowlana, 1997:186). Each "new" stage has borrowed from its predecessor, but with marked emphasis on different interpretations of what development encompassed and how communication supported these conceptions.

As mentioned in the introductory remarks of this chapter, of particular interest for this research is the participatory approach to development communication that incorporates a normative framework to development. To grasp the context from which the participatory design materialised, and to prevent recurrences of past mistakes committed by earlier development communication theory, an abbreviated look at the historical and conceptual development of these theories are offered.

3.3.1 The modernisation paradigm of development

The modernisation paradigm was the most feted model of development after the Second World War and continued until the 1960s. Most theorists and historians consider this "dominant model" to development as the "genesis" of the contemporary development philosophy. Central to this approach was Western values such as rationality, individualism, industrialisation, objectivity, freedom, and progress (Melkote, 2002:420).

During the dominant paradigm's reign, theories were detracted from various sciences and disciplines that supported the above-stated rationale. Servaes (1999:38, 39) recounts that predicated on the sociology approaches to development, Darwin's evolution theory of biological organisms became the standard for the method of modernisation in social development. Social Darwinism gave rise to the assumption that societies can be either divided into geimeinschaft in opposition to gessellschaft, or traditional versus modern societies (Melkote, 1991:60). Usually, so-called Third World countries were typified as traditional, whereas the industrial nations of the West and northern hemisphere were juxtaposed as their modern equivalents. By emulating the evolutive development blueprint, the empathic skills, and the inherent value-normative systems of the inhabitants of the Western world, traditional societies could supposedly sequentially progress from "primitive societies" to the Western conceptualisation of modernity (Lerner, 1958-47-52; Schramm, 1964:46).

According to Treurnicht (1997:18), the modernisation theory was regarded as the Western capitalistic dream for development in the "Third World". Development theorists during the 1950s and the 1960s were convinced that the neo-classical paradigm to development could eradicate "maldevelopment" or "underdevelopment" in traditional societies. Quantifiable indicators such as economic growth, measured by a country's GNP, was deemed an imperative goal of development that would ultimately lead to the establishment of a democratic civil society.

According to Rogers (1976a:121; 1983:120) the dominant paradigm to development therefore consist of four main rudiments namely; economic growth, investment in capital-intensive technology, centralised planning, and identifying internal causes as the chief sources of maldevelopment in the developing world.

Lerner completed the conceptualisation of modernisation by identifying mass communication systems as "the great multiplier" in development – the agent that necessitated and facilitated the intended social change process (Lerner, 1958:47, 54; Nain, 2001:210; Rogers, 1976a:137). For this reason, communication was regarded as a functionality of a larger, complex system, which fulfilled varied public responsibilities – for instance, spreading Western notions of development

and progress to the "Third World". Communication in the dominant paradigm was thus applied in a one-way, persuasive, and an authoritarian fashion. Therefore, Melkote (1991:57) explains that modernisation followed the top-down model of communication, since communicative initiatives were planned at the macro, centralised level of government, thus negating communication inputs and feedback at the micro level or grassroots of society. It thus exemplified the transmission or linear model of communication by oversimplifying communication efforts for development as influential, direct efforts and influences (McQuail and Windahl, 1981:10, 13; Severin & Tankard, 1988:32).

Critical comment on the modernisation model, especially regarding the ethical component of its communication philosophy, manifested in the dependency model, which commenced during the 1970s.

3.3.2 The dependency paradigm of development

By the mid 1970s, the dominant paradigm's influence as the "most suitable" model for development began to wane. So-called Third World countries, with the most ardent supporters situated in Latin America, could no longer relate their specific developmental needs to the culturally superior and intellectually ethnocentric beliefs implicit in the "old model" (Melkote, 1991:96). Moreover, as many pundits recounted, practical experience demonstrated that the poor nations remained deprived despite the dominant model's "foolproof" mechanistic and chronological development precepts.

Out of this revolt grew an alternative theory of development, which dealt with development and underdevelopment as interrelated aspects of a continuous process (Servaes, 1995:41; Servaes, 1991:57). Treurnicht (1997:22-23) describes that the dependency theory premised itself on a political economy perspective or Marxist-oriented approach to development. This neo-Marxist theory merged with the extensive concomitant Latin American debate on development, which was sparked by the ECLA tradition (the United Nation's Economic Commission for Latin America). Out of the union of the two traditions materialised the centre-periphery theory as popularised by the spokesperson for the North American Monthly Review group, Paul Baran (1957). His thesis was mainly built on the belief that imperialist dependence, after the end of the colonial period, was to blame for the lack of development in non-Western nations. He insisted that underdevelopment was the direct product of capitalism in the developed states (Vorster, 1989:64). Rogers (1976b:215) construed that "neo-colonialism" therefore still existed as the "foreign policies" of the core, developed world that attempted to regulate the development of the nation-states at the periphery. Dependistas endorsed the "blame-the-system" policy – proposing

that development at the centre necessarily supposed underdevelopment at the periphery (Servaes, 1991:59).

The communication component in this dependency relationship was often referred to as "media imperialism", "social marketing", or the "culture industry". Within the dependency approach to development, the mass media was measured as the exogenous proponents of Western economical and socio-political values – to the detriment of media content production and distribution that addressed periphery developmental realities (Kivikuru, 1999:15; Rogers, 1976a:135). This observation prompted the establishment of the New World Communications and Information Order (NWICO) in the 1970s and the 1980s, which envisioned a new role for communication in LDC's as to achieve a new, economically just order in underdeveloped nations (De Melo, 1991:207).

Nevertheless, the dependency theory did not proffer a neat answer to the problems caused by the practices of modernisation. It too misjudged the true roots of development and maldevelopment (Servaes, 1995:42; Servaes, 1991:59). Although, as Mody (1991:26, 27) explains, it did put the issues of mass media ownerships and structures up for critical discussion, it too failed in identifying two-way communication, or dialogue between the sender and the receiver, as the necessary communicative route of true development. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a new approach to development efforts, known as "another development" or the "multiplicity theory", gained prominence.

3.3.3 Another development or the multiplicity theory of development

Towards the last two decades of the previous century concepts such as empowerment, democratisation, and participation emerged from the rubble of the earlier prescriptive, deterministic theories on development. Development priorities modified from quantitative to qualitative ideals.

A new paradigm, Multiplicity in one world, named by Jan Servaes in the mid 1980s, gave way to a new line of development thinking. This new paradigm, which is often also referred to as Another Development, addressed the challenges of community participation in development activities (Malan, 1998:61; Melkote, 1991:236). In addition, central to the discipline of multiplicity was the "human centeredness" motif of development as identified and debated by various notable international conferences, fora, and declarations.

Multiplicity, according to Kumar (1994: 86) and Servaes (1991:67), as a pluralistic paradigm, included methodologies such as the basic need-oriented approach, the endogenic approach ("there is no universal development model"), the self-reliant methodology, the ecological model,

the sustainable development approach, and the participatory paradigm of development. Accordingly, development should then be organised as a multidimensional, intricate, and dialectical process that includes elements of socio-economic, cultural, and other relative natures. Servaes adds one more principle to another development – participatory democracy. This suggests that all peoples at all societal levels should be absorbed into the process of decision-making about development policies and practices.

Multiplicity then gave rise to the conception of participation in development communication or "another communication". Whereas communication was previously conceived as a sender-oriented process, its application shifted to a receiver-oriented one. This notion supported the development of the participatory design to development. Communication for development then implied a dialogical, interactive, and bottom-up process, suggesting that successful development relies on micro level, decentralised participation in decision-making activities (Mody, 1991:20; Servaes, 1991: 68-70).

3.4 THE PARTICIPATORY APPROACH

3.4.1 Origins

During the 1970s, a grassroots-based, people-centred participatory strategy for development surfaced. The gist of this alternative model could be found in its emphasis on the primacy of culture and participation at all levels of society regarding developmental efforts (Melkote, 2002:432). In contrast to the evolutive perspective of the "old" models, Jamieson (1991:30) suggests that the "new", alternative model imagined development as an unremitting process of social change. Integral to the success of such a process was human-centred communication initiatives. Kivikuru (1999:12) avers that without participatory communication, sustainable development cannot be realised.

3.4.2 The basics concepts of the participatory model

The concepts participation, self-reliance, and dialogue are central to the alternative approach. They are here explained briefly.

3.4.2.1 Participation

Participation is a complex, dynamic and continually shifting concept and is thus a contextually bound activity. Taylor (1994:90-102) exposits that participation can be seen in seven historical contexts: Western ideology, industrial relations, populism, anarchism, community development, Western social work, and community radicalism. Accordingly, participation may find definition in numerous different methodologies. One of these approaches distinguishes between the

concepts "popular participation" and "community development". The former situates itself within the broader societal development framework by focusing on "issues of a political, economical, and social nature. The latter concept "embodies the direct involvement of ordinary people in local affairs" (White, 1994:95-97).

Participation is thus generally viewed as the "mobilisation" of people by engaging them in every aspect of their own development destinies through two-way, bottom-up learning interactions (Ayee, 1993:162-163). Moreover, it may also entail the decentralisation of government agencies and organisations, and include processes that empower the previously disenfranchised and the excluded. The participatory model therefore proposes that true participation, in contrast to pseudo participation, is an end in itself rather than a fringe benefit or a means to an end. Participation recognises the autonomy of the local community in development efforts by involving them in public affairs concerning their well-being and their future. Essentially, participation is a method of empowerment. Empowerment can be achieved by two-way, interactive, bottom-up consultation.

3.4.2.2 Empowerment

By empowerment, it is then supposed that an individual becomes attentive to a need for change – change could transpire on a personal, communal, or organisational level (Arai, 1997). This process of awareness translates into a progression of obtaining information and skills necessary for the anticipated change. However, for change to occur, knowledge should eventually transform into action. Arai (1997) explains that this can only be achieved through the process of participation, which will in turn enhance an individual's perception of newly gained knowledge and skills. Arguably, such increased levels of competency encourage individuals to put newly gained knowledge and abilities to action. Thus, the process of empowerment is carried out once the individual completes and incorporates all of the knowledge-gaining exercises into everyday activity.

Within the context of this study, emphasis is placed on empowerment on a political level. Apart from empowerment, which may materialise on the interdependent interpersonal and personal levels, empowerment on the political level is secured when individuals collaborate through collective action and become aware of their particular development needs and wants. For example, it is postulated that visitors to the IEC web site could gain relevant information and interact with one-another and the organisation in an effort to secure organisational responsiveness or accountability. It is essential to note that empowerment is a continuous, holistic process (Arai, 1997).

3.4.2.3 Self-reliance

An associated concept is the concept of self-reliance that implies that every society relies chiefly on its own strengths and resources in terms of its members' energies and its natural and cultural environment in the developmental process (Servaes, 1995:43). The South African electorate must therefore engage with one another in an environment, such as the IEC web site, that is conducive to their particular development needs. Through collective action, voters should become aware of what their role in public affairs is and ultimately, how they could influence public practice.

3.4.2.4 Dialogue

However, this is only possible if participants could dialogue with one another about the development interests that affect all concerned. Rahim (1994:122, 130) defines dialogue as a transactional process that aims at gaining improved insight into the "otherness" or "uniqueness" of all communication participants. Within the development perspective, this implies that respect for all human beings as autonomous subjects can only be obtained via a complex process of co-equal meaning productions and the exchange thereof at all levels of human communication.

One is no longer attempting to create a need for the information one is disseminating... rather, one is disseminating information for which there is a need (Servaes, 1995:46).

The dialogical concept will receive particular attention in the next section.

3.4.3 Different approaches to participatory communication in development
3.4.3.1 The Freirean dialogical praxis

The 1970s marked the rise of critical theorists such as Paulo Freire who envisioned a "dialogical" role for development communication at the micro level of society. Freire's conception of the dialogical pedagogy was captured in his seminal work *The pedagogy of the oppressed* (1972). As an analytical thinker, Freire was hugely influenced by De Chardin, Neibuhr, the existentialist Sartre, and Martin Buber.

Freire's philosophy concerns humankind's innate capability to reflect, realise, articulate, conceptualise, and choose its own plans of social action via the process of *conscientisation*. Huesca (2002:502) defines the *conscientisation* process as a level of "heightened awareness" that individuals must attain in order to partake in their development reality. *Conscientisation*, as Freire conceived it, can however only be achieved through two-way, interactive communication or dialogue between an instructor and a learner. The former must however only serve as "catalyst" in the learner's existential reflective exercise. Equipped with new knowledge,

generated during such a reciprocal exercise, learners must then devise their own plans that could liberate them from oppressive life circumstances. In addition, this dialectal relationship between action and dialogical reflection should generate original insights that necessitate their examination, alteration, and expansion through incessant exercise. This does not however suppose that reflection and awareness match action, but rather that reflective exercise could at least stimulate possible action. *Conscientisation* therefore empowers individuals by allowing them to claim ownership of the communication process instead of ingesting the elite-dominated rationality (Waisbord, 2001:442).

The dichotomy between subject versus object identities is thus negated. Hence, *conscientisation* is central to the participation theme of the participatory model. Instead of the traditional asymmetrical, linear conception of communication, dialogue is believed to be the ethical solution to effective communication within the development milieu (Huesca, 2002:502, 511). Dialogical communication, as a basic human right, is thus concerned with the collective, non-manipulative mobilisation of persons to assume responsibility in providing effective, pluralistic responses to development impediments.

3.4.3.2 UNESCO debates

Not only Freire's normative hypotheses contributed to the participatory approach. In 1977, a UNESCO-sponsored meeting in Belgrade proffered valuable input for the alternative paradigm concerning policy issues such as public access to, participation in, self-management and ownership of diverse media structures and communications enterprises (Servaes, 1999:85; 1995:41). These debates placed emphasis on institutional transformation as a gradual process, whereas the Freirean, revolutionary legacy did not tolerate procrastination. The UNESCO debates were thus conservative and more conformist and referred to the "ordinary public" in neutral terms in contrast to Freire's radical classification of the peoples as the "oppressed".

3.4.4 The role of communication in the participatory approach

Following the Freirean argument of dialogical communication, the participatory model of development was transposed to participative communication or DSC (Development Support Communication) which operates on a horizontal axis (Bordenave, 1994:44). According to this philosophy, the ultimate goal of participation is empowerment. This approach therefore signifies the humanistic notion that within the development milieu, especially micro level stakeholders should be afforded the equal opportunity to influence control over diverse communication channels and productions, which would enable them to share their development ideas. This approach also supports ready access to diverse information resources. Via these participatory

means, communities could then express and align their endogenous opinions toward implementing enhanced development efforts.

The Brazilian philosopher's contention was then that participatory communication initiates a unifying, social learning experience among a diversity of voices who reaches for a common goal – the facilitation of development (Rahim, 1994:129; Servaes, 1999:84). Apart from the participatory approach's positive upshots for development, cognisance of its limitations deserves brief critical review.

3.4.5 The participatory approach: critique and difficulties

Since this model directly addresses power rearrangements, its employment could cause power elites to fear the disruption of their status quos. In practice, the realisation of participation as an authentic democratic activity may be strewn with institutional resistance and structural hindrances (Servaes, 1995:46; White, 1994:97). Additionally, different cultural systems could exhibit dissimilar conceptions of what development encompasses and these disparities could result in conflicts of interest. As Ayee (1993:69) explicates, dissimilar cultures assign different meanings to their social life worlds and therefore to all the economical, social, political, and cultural activities and communicative activities that accompany them.

Consequently, the implementation of the participatory model may be tremendously time consuming and expensive as it requires the dedicated resolution of conflicts of interests and the creation of respect among a plurality of voices. Moreover, it is reasonable to postulate that as long as the privileged classes maintain exclusive control over the mechanisms of communication, participation will merely remain a political catchphrase for manipulative development. Huesca (2002:508) tells that often power relations function as to subjugate certain groups and subgroups of people in alignment with the development interests of the authoritative elite. Effectively, participation then translates into a means-to-an-end perspective instead of an end in itself – benefiting only the "sponsoring" development industry rather than the targeted people or community (Sonderling, 1997:41).

In conclusion, one of the most important critiques on the participatory approach is that it limits development problems to communicative dimensions. Development is a complex process and cannot be reduced to mere communication misunderstandings and mishaps. As illustrated in the foregoing arguments, communication is just one element in a multifaceted matrix of cultural, political, and social equilibriums.

The next section will attempt to examine how the public-sphere model correlates with the main tenets of the participatory approach. It will show that the public-sphere model also applies the

dialogical concept of communication to the development situation. Comparable to the participatory approach, the Habermasian public-sphere theory suggests that a developing democracy could benefit from voters who collectively inspect, debate, and review the actions and judgements of the rulings structures in a public space of unrestricted debate. Resembling the participatory communication approach's principles of participation and self-reliance, the public-sphere model imagines that individuals have the innate ability to self-articulate their concerns in a cooperative, educational manner as to discover "accepted" ways by which to achieve the public good. Certainly, South African voters could reach public opinion in a critical-reflective manner via the IEC web site and hence pressurise the IEC's administrative practices, in addition to influencing the actual outcomes of elections. As a potential internet public sphere, the IEC web site could then encourage a stronger South African political culture that upholds the democratic value of informed and sustainable electoral participation by all electors.

Closer attention will now be afforded to the Habermasian public-sphere theory. Specific theoretical statements will also be tendered throughout the remainder of this chapter, which will suffice as the guiding principles for the empirical investigation of this research.

3.5 THE HABERMASIAN PUBLIC-SPHERE THEORY

3.5.1 Introduction

Currently, one of the most articulated and discussed critical theories in media policy debates is the notion of the public sphere as borrowed from Jürgen Habermas. Arguably one of the most influential contemporary social theorists of the earlier Frankfurt School's[10] neo-Marxist tradition, Habermas's theory manifested in one of his earliest books, *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (1962).

3.5.2 The genesis of the notion of the public sphere

Habermas's public-sphere thesis owes much to the work of the Frankfurt critical theorists because his thesis developed in context of the institute's analysis of the evolution of liberal market capitalism of the nineteenth century to the stage of state and monopoly structured twentieth century capitalism (see Kellner, 1989)[11]. Published in its original German in 1962, an English translation did not surface until twenty-seven years later. The first part of the book

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[10] The Frankfurt School refers to the collective thought of those critical theorists – most notably, Theodore Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Max Horkheimer – associated with the Institute of Social Research founded in Frankfurt in 1923. From 1923 until 1942, the School was managed under the auspices of the Sociology Department of the University of Columbia, New York. In 1948, Horkheimer relocated the Institute back to Frankfurt.

11 For a detailed account of Habermas's oeuvre, see: Kellner, D. 1989. Critical Theory, Marxism, and Modernity. Cambridge & Baltimore: Polity Press.

traces the development of public opinion formation practices in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, whilst the second section revolves around the social pressures of the early part of the twentieth century that marked the augmentation of mass-mediated communication and the subsequent degeneration and demise of the public sphere.

Louw (2001:91, 92) recounts that since the mid-1980s, Habermas's public-sphere hypothesis was introduced into media policy debates by British left-wing intelligentsia who were disillusioned by the ascent of privatisation and commercialisation as sparked by the rise of Thatcherism and Reaganism[12]. The academic claimed to be most accountable in re-introducing the public-sphere theory to academical discourse is Nicholas Garnham. Garnham's contention is that the decline of the public service media – as instigated by the resurgence of capitalism – erodes the spaces available and intended for public debate and open, democratic communication. Thus, Garnham asserts that Habermas's notion of the public sphere, extensively reviewed and defended by disparate scholastic traditions over the years, recognises the process of democratic communication as a precondition for the establishment of a just, democratic society (Louw, 1993:241; Osborne, 1997:36; Webster, 20021:163). Those who speak from a position within the public sphere is said to gain emancipatory political agency as they represent themselves speaking from a position of rational, authoritative reckoning. As Osborne (1997:39-40) and Dryzek (1987:661) discern, the liberal public sphere category, though not entirely pleasing, should then rather be utilised to critically theorise the "limits of discursive interactions" in order to inspire the expansion of a model of emancipatory political practice that could invoke a multiplicity of contested public spheres.

Therefore, Curran (1991:82) contends that in view of the debates on how the media in a democratic society should be organised, a critical reappraisal of the media's role could start with an assessment of the most salient historical presuppositions of the Habermasian public-sphere theory. Summarised, Habermas insists that within the public sphere the bona fide potential exists that public discourse could be resurrected in service of participatory democracy and the establishment open-ended communicative structures. Related to this principle of political participation is the conviction that democracy is a precursor for individual self-determination and self-development as is the belief of the participatory approach to development communication. In his account of the public sphere, Habermas therefore sets out to discover the main principles, which underpin the practice of reason in public affairs. In fact, Habermas aims to illustrate that

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[12] As Boyd-Barrett (1995:230) explains, the emergence of globalised media corporations, as the result of the commercialisation and the subsequent depoliticising of media regulatory decision-making processes and systems, problematise the informational role of the media in relation to state interventionist mechanisms.

all knowledge – and subsequent action – becomes manifest through the patterns of everyday social interactions and experiences (Osborne, 1997:25; Pusey, 1987:23).

3.5.3 The theoretical tenets of the public-sphere theory

In order to advance one's grasp of the main assumptions of the public-sphere theory, one must be acutely mindful that the *Structural Transformation*[13] offers a historically specific and narrative problematisation of the alterations of the shape of public life, and political institution as prevalent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (cf. Habermas, 1989). Habermas attempts to uncover the potentially emancipatory norms that informed the bourgeoisie praxis. It combines the history of the press and the concomitant changes with the political economy of the time with theorems of what these concepts could entail for contemporary political conditions.

Following this logic, Louw (2001:93) surmises that the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere (*bürgerliche öffentlichkeit*) was a communicative fulcrum for a small revolutionary minority that emerged, as said by Habermas, around 1700. As the result of the Gutenberg-inspired media, European middle classes or burgers (*bürgers*) used the print media to contest the legitimacy of the ruling, oppressive feudal elite. In this socio-historic specific relation, Habermas (1989:85) exalts the coffee houses and saloons of the eighteenth century life, as well as institutions of political discussion such as political clubs and parliaments, as the bourgeois public spheres or spaces in which letters, novels, and journal articles were openly studied and reviewed. Habermas contends that these critical reflections – shaped in the form of public opinion – were managed on behalf of broader social interests and that these deliberations did not simply mirror the welfare of those who were physically in attendance. Habermas's position is that in Britain, Germany, and France, early economic independence – provided by property and the establishment of a free, market-based press – created new publics involved in critical political deliberation and surveillance of state activities (Curran, 1991:83). Consequently, the Habermasian theory postulates that these publics played a facilitating role in altering the relationships between the aristocracy and the business classes. As a counter-hegemonic force, the public sphere dislodged the private decision-making power of the feudal elite by acting as mediator of a novel social space between the realm of state authority and the interests of daily life in civil society. Absolutism was thus replaced by the norm of open, rational authority.

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[13] Note: In this study, *Structural Transformation* refers to Habermas, J. 1989/1962. The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society. Translated by Thomas Burger. Cambridge: MIT.

Habermas's conception of the normative "public sphere"[14], it is argued, – whether in the form of the bourgeois public sphere or in the shape of a more elaborate philosophical model on practical discourse[15] – is essentially a dialogical conception (Thompson, 1995:257). It is predicated on the principles that individuals come together in a shared local as co-equals and that they engage in reason-based discourse with one another. In this undistorted face-to-face discussions "something" approximating public opinion is fashioned. This suggests that the public sphere, in the mould of a unified public collectivity[16] can only exist if interaction occurs between private participants in a public domain.

The normative design of the public sphere thus implies a model of norms and behaviours by which the creation and the functioning of the public opinion could be secured in aid of democratic ideals. These norms include: a) general accessibility, b) the elimination of all privileges and c) the discovery of general norms and rational legitimisations (Habermas, 1964:49; Habermas, 1989:2-5, 219). Moreover, the shunning or bracketing of personal privileges suggests that a clear distinction between the social and economic realms exist. Malina (1999:25) explains that the realm of interaction constitutes a social sphere known as the *lifeworld* that operates – in contrast to the *system organisation/world* – outside of money and state interests. Throughout his historical account of the public sphere construct, Habermas aspires to illustrate the delicate balance between these two systems; hence, the ultimate structural transformation of the original bourgeois ideal.

The theory details that the ideal, liberal design was short-lived, since the dialogical communication aspect of the model was lost subsequent to the consolidation of the bourgeois hegemony or mass society (Habermas, 1989: Parts IV and V). Regardless of the thesis's inherent distrust of late capitalism, as a critical theory it presents academics and researchers

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[14] Critique on the basic premises made by the Habermasian public-sphere theory is discussed in section 3.5.6.

[15] After his conceptualisation of the public sphere, Habermas developed the theory of communicative action in a series of two volumes:

Habermas, J. 1984/1981. The theory of communicative action. Volume One. Reason and the rationalization of society. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press. 465p.

Habermas, J. 1987/1981. The theory of communicative action. Volume Two. Lifeworld and system: a critique of functionalist reason. Translated by Thomas McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press. 457p.

The theory of communicative action will be revisited in section 3.5.7.

16 The notion of the bourgeois pubic sphere has its genesis in the Hellenic tradition of stylized Greek self-interpretation of the separated spheres of oikos (private life) and bios politikos (public life). The latter expanded to the agora (market place) and other locales such as the lexis (discussions) and praxis (common action). Habermas (1989/1962:3-4, 27) explains that the conceptual base, not the social formation base of the Hellenic tradition, served as the template for the Renaissance public-sphere model. Also see:

Arendt, H. 1958. The human condition. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

with the opportunity to recover its original – perhaps somewhat non-operational – theoretical underpinnings in order to appropriate an analytical framework best suited to modern-day circumstances.

3.5.4 The role of communication in the public-sphere theory

Carpignano (1999:180) recounts that inevitably, in any discussion on Habermas's public sphere design the relationship between the "formation of the modern public and the development of a particular environment of communication..." becomes apparent. Parallel to Habermas's historical and normative assessment of the public sphere he consistently refers to the medium through which *publicity* is expressed. This medium of expression was "people's public use of reason" as mediated through the literary tradition of the bourgeois public sphere (Habermas, 1989:27, 23).

Habermas points to the use of rational critical argument in the public sphere. The medium of rationality is believed to allow one to abstract oneself from one's particular social background and interests. All claims made in the public realm are then defended, rejected, or revised through the practice of the unforced "force of the better argument" in an atmosphere free of restrictions or defining demographics. Participants gather as "common human beings" set free in their subjectivity via this equivalence of "humanness" (Habermas, 1989:54). Bearing in mind the argument that the internet supports the idea of even-handed dialogue, exponents of an internet public sphere claim that the WWW could offer an open, public space for citizens in which informed, knowledgeable public opinion can be created. The IEC could perhaps offer voters the opportunity to appropriate informed opinion if the agency's web site adheres to the basic prescription of open and free participation for all participants.

3.5.4.1 Theoretical Statement 1:

The Independent Electoral Commission should maintain a legitimate internet public sphere by ensuring that all participants could participate equally, freely, and fairly on its web site in order for them to gather electoral information necessary to make informed political choices.

Seen against this background, the formation of consensus in service of the political public sphere, public deliberations could deal with matters concerned with overseeing the activities of the state (Habermas, 1964:49; Jones, 2000:308). Through this formation of *public opinion*, the state was kept abreast on civil society's wants and needs. Public opinion is therefore defined as:

The tasks of criticism and control which a public body of citizens informally – and, in periodic elections, formerly, as well – practice vis-à-vis the ruling structure organised in the form of a state (Habermas, 1964:49).

By implication, communication in the guise of the nascent eighteenth mass media played a significant role in the execution of critical judgement that transformed into public opinion. Similar to the participatory approach to development communication, the media, as the *mediated* voice of expression, facilitated logical self-awareness and self-reflection. News and information on daily events and market goings-on circulated in the coffee houses – proffering opportunities for informed reflection and deliberation among ordinary citizens. As Habermas (1964:53, 24) explains: "for the newspaper publisher it meant that he changed from a vendor of recent news to a dealer in public opinion". Clearly, the normative mandate of the theory demands that information should be accessible (*publicity/made public*) to the public and that subject matter should not be of a restrictive kind.

As a final point, in alignment with the Frankfurt School, the public-sphere theory regards communication as the process of ongoing reflective, reciprocal deliberation in a mediated sphere and subsequently the practice thereof implies the continuous process of social change (Louw, 2001:96; Noveck, 1999:472). A communicative space within which the thesis-antithesis aspect can be negotiated is a precondition for the establishment of a legitimate public sphere. Accordingly, the participative structure of the bourgeois public sphere is in direct contrast to top-down, planned communication initiatives in service of hegemonic legitimatisation. Instead of private ownership of communicative spaces, public inspection and debate – in the guise of autonomous public bodies – could create "alternatives to one-dimensional, narrowed, manipulated, or closed communications" that rebuff citizen-driven decision-making (Louw, 2001:101; Louw, 1993:241). As observed in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2, as a decentralised information network, the internet could potentially suffice as the appropriate space of public opinion formation, seeing as the intrinsic interactive architecture of the internet could facilitate cooperative communication between ruling structures and citizens. *The assumption is that virtual forums, chat rooms, and information-rich web pages could fashion online communication spaces in which participants could obtain political information, exchange political opinion, and discuss political topics.* Such "ideal speech situations" (ISS) support rational, critical discussion that is vital to the continuation of a democracy, including South Africa's developing democratic system (cf. Habermas, 1987; Habermas, 1984).

In keeping with the Habermasian bourgeois public-sphere theory, political and public administrative decisions could be made more transparent, decentralised, and liable to public

inspection and influence via dialogical critical communication practices. This public will formation routine could then bring about participation between all parties concerned with public affairs. The IEC web site could possibly appropriate such an ideal communicative space by ensuring that voters could decide for themselves what type of information and opinions they wish to exchange via such a potential internet public sphere. Voters should have the right to freedom of choice to shape public opinion in a manner that allows for co-equal meaning production.

3.5.4.2 Theoretical Statement 2:

The Independent Electoral Commission should maintain a legitimate internet public sphere by ensuring that all participants could receive and impart diverse information, opinions, and values via its web site in order for the participants to appropriate public opinion.

3.5.5 The decline and the "refeudalization" of the public sphere

Pusey (1986:14) argues that Habermas, as a scholar of Adorno and Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School, derived his notion of the degenerate public sphere from the dialectical thesis-antithesis supposition of the critical studies. While the public spheres, in the mould of popular media, were once public fora representative of diverse interests, bourgeoisie revolutionary aspirations transformed into hegemonic control in which alternative perspectives (antitheses) on widely held ideas (theses) were negated or ignored. Accordingly, once the bourgeoisie came to power the dialectical distinction between the public and the private spheres in effect disappeared.

Regrettably, the critical publicity function of the public sphere was weakened (Habermas, 1989:140, 164, 206). As a result, this mutual interweaving of the two realms caused a process of "refeudalization" of the liberal public sphere that commenced in the late nineteenth century. "Publicity" (*Öffentlichkeit*) – intended to subject political actions to public scrutiny – translated to the practice of "staged displays" garnering public support for special interests and groups by limiting the topography of discussion themes. Commercialisation that formerly served as the precursor of considered judgement eventually ensured the decomposition of the critical functions of the public sphere. Public opinion, produced by private discussants, thus assumed the qualities of the interventionist state and the commercial mass media apparatus by measuring public engagements in the form of consumer patterns and behaviours. Public opinion transformed into an extension of public relations.

The universality claim of the public sphere, which guided greater participation in the formation of public opinion, ultimately undermined the quality of rational-practical discourse. The liberal public sphere, with its roots in the Enlightenment discourse, changed into a media-dominated

realm reminiscent of Adorno and Horkheimer's pessimistic analysis of the culture industry, in which they argued that "mass culture and instrumental reason" subjected the passive individual to "technocratic domination and totalitarian control" (Osborne, 1997: 48, 64). Hence, Habermas (1989:236) concludes that an era of "state capitalism and mass democracy" was introduced that served "arcane policies of special interests", thus counteracting the normative instruction of popular participation in public debate. The mass media had undergone a structural transformation while the literary tradition once formed the basis of analytical discourse; modern electronic means of mass communications signify for Habermas the passivity of citizens and the decline of the public sphere.

Nonetheless, Habermas (1989:232) infers that the notion of the public sphere, "preserved in the social welfare state of mass democracy", can survive disintegration/"refeudalization" by setting "in motion a critical process of public communication through the very organisations that mediatize *(sic)* it". He assumes that rival "intra-organisational public spheres" should commit themselves to the "reorganisation of social and political power in relation to the state as well as among themselves". His assertion claims that the contemporary commercial mass media, as the brokers of information and the facilitators of public will formation, must exercise authentic, open public communication if social dialogue of quality and democratic substance is to be attained. Therefore, mediating organisations would themselves have to have an internal democratic constitution in order to further the ideals of democratisation. Even so, Habermas did not offer any substantial examples of strategies or institutions in which such practices could be located. However, since the internet is considered as a decentralised medium of interactive communication, the IEC web site could possibly meet the impartiality condition that is necessary for veritable public opinion formation and participation and hence, the formation of a authentic public space. Since the IEC is a constitutionally instituted body, accountable to parliament only, public will formation might occur, at least in theory, on its web site without the meddling of mercantile or governmental influences.

3.5.5.1 Theoretical Statement 3:

For the Independent Electoral Commission to maintain its web site as a legitimate public domain of public opinion formation, the commission should manage its web site without fear or prejudice to governmental or commercial interests.

3.5.6 The public-sphere: critical debates and alternatives

Although it is possible, Osborne (1997:56-57) suggests, to fault Habermas on the historical and empirically flawed methodology that informed his original notion of the middle-class public

sphere, this study argues that these restrictions serve as the impetus to discover more egalitarian, inclusive, and democratic reconsceptualisations of the public sphere and related rational communicative practices. Accordingly, Habermas's public-sphere theory – as an essentially prescriptive disciplinary category following an exclusionary logic – received intense criticisms[17] and revisions over the years in order to expand its restrictive normative application.

Subsequently, numerous detractors claim that the theory's custom of open, rational deliberation relies too much on the idealised, structured setting of the eighteenth bourgeoisie category of the public sphere, when in fact participation and access were restricted to "urbanized, educated, propertied men" who had the leisure to partake in social deliberations (Louw, 2001:101). Contrary to Habermas's description of a public sphere premised on the validity of universality, the normative design barred, among others, the proletarian classes, female participants, and the illiterate masses. As a result, social welfares located externally to the public sphere were often not represented by those interests that were presented during critical reflections.

Nonetheless, critics should take note that Habermas remarked in his introductory notes to the *Structural Transformation* that his investigation presented "a stylized picture of the liberal elements of the bourgeois public sphere" which left behind the plebeian public sphere as a variant on the classical model (Habermas, 1989: xvii, xviii, xix). As a non-transferable historical reality, it could be maintained that the public sphere is not an actual situation but that the concept must be regarded as an idealisation of an actual historical process to which an appeal is made (Dryzek, 1987:662). Habermas concedes in his later, more matured, political writings that his original account of the public sphere must be revised in order to allow for the inclusion of flexible, dynamic approaches to popular social movements and cultural forms. Habermas could possibly have presented the public sphere as resembling an ideal type, which could inform critical practice, rather than the rigid normative ideal as has been frequently interpreted. As Naudé (2001:74) explains, the value of normative designs is that a normative theory demarcates "how things should be done or how an activity should be carried out".

Various scholars thus insist that the notion of the public must not be regarded as an abstract principle but as a "culturally-embedded social practice" of a particular historical period. Its critical principle, *publicity,* could be utilised as a normative guide to modern-day institutional transformation in service of contemporary democracy. Therefore, reconceptualisation of the normative Habermasian construct could generate oppositional social dialogues as established

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[17] For a detailed theoretical and conceptual criticism on the Habermasian public-sphere theory, see Osborne, P.A. 1997:56-100.

by alternative social and cultural movements and interpretations. In essence, the public-sphere theory concerns itself with the reactivation of public participation in the political sphere by renormatising and democratising state affairs and practices committed to the project of democratic communication. As Osborne (1997:39-40) and Dryzek (1987:661) discern, the liberal public sphere category, though not entirely pleasing, should be utilised to critically theorise the "limits of discursive interactions" in order to inspire the expansion of a model of emancipatory political practice that could invoke a multiplicity of contested public spheres.

In view of that, a substantial bulk of feminist critiques on Habermas has in recent years aimed to investigate the historically gendered design of the public sphere, and the practice of political discourse that accompanied it in bourgeois society. These scholars assert that the liberal model's exclusionary standards disenfranchised female social movements and discussants from conversing on an equal footing with their male counterparts. Joan Landes (1988) (see Thompson, 1995:254) contends that the masculine character of the public sphere was not a subsidiary characteristic, but that it was in truth deeply rooted in a set of gender biased assumptions that upheld the male rationality as the dominant standard of social dialogues.

Echoed in the criticisms of Nancy Fraser (1989) (see Thompson, 1995:254) the bourgeois tradition, while idealising a homogenous public sphere released from domination, effectively negated rhetoric capacities of contradicting values and interests. Thus, the patriarchal subjugation of female welfares overrides the Habermasian ideals of all-inclusiveness and democratic participation of female participants. Nowadays, Habermas acknowledges that oppositional social movements, such as the female perspective, have considerable structural implications for the critical recovery of the public sphere. On the other hand, as critics caution, one could remain doubtful about the extent to which Habermas has taken these gendered "ideal speech situation" issues to heart, since these concerns remain rather unmistakable in his recent reflections on the social world.

Closely related to the debate on gender equality within the public sphere, is the difficulty of literacy and education, as prescribed by the liberal model. As elaborated in Section 3.5.4, embedded within the Enlightenment principle of rationality is Habermas's idea of a literary public sphere. According to the bourgeois design, the necessary precursor to reasoned judgement is literacy. His position is that discursive subjects, engaged in political exercises, are inextricably linked to the "use of reason" as the medium of expression. Webster (2002:163) explains that persons, who gain access to pertinent information could, through thoughtful exercise, rationally consider such facts, and thereby reach collective consensus on which course of action should ensue. Consequently, illiterates and uneducated persons are silenced by this normative

qualification as they cannot effectively employ or exploit the fixed technical means/modes of social communication. The status of rationality, which Habermas believes undergrids democracy, therefore becomes problematical when discussants' educational backgrounds cannot be truly bracketed upon entry into the public sphere. Reviewers of the Habermasian thesis hence consider "communication free from domination" as a utopian claim.

Yet, Thompson (1995:257) argues that Habermas was not so much preoccupied with printed communication as such, but rather with the social relations instructed by it. His argument holds that Habermas saw the pre-eminence of the press in relation to the conversational modes of communication it established. As Habermas would have it, discussions generated by one medium – the press – would continue its lifespan and significance in another mode of communication – "the original conversational medium" (Habermas, 1989:42). Certainly, the press played a key role in the publicity function of the public sphere, but the formation of the public sphere was not formulated in relation to the press but rather corresponding to the face-to-face conversations inspired by it. Reviewers such as Osborne (1997:60) assert that the dialogical quality of the public sphere should rather be located within the speech act as created in a shared locale (a mediated sphere) as opposed to the specific, printed sphere and the related overemphasis on rational competence. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, Habermas envisioned that those who do not exhibit the competency to "speak" in the public sphere, could be represented by larger social movements and organisations that are concerned with the needs of the "excluded".

Apart from investigating the normative dimensions of access and participation, commentators have identified Habermas's formulation of the alleged corruption and the consequent neo-feudalisation of the public sphere as an additional point of contention. As indicated in Section 3.5.5, Habermas's version of the structural metamorphosis of the public sphere avers that the pursuit of profit by capitalist media, the creation of a mass consumerism culture, and the rise of institutionalism within the public sphere facilitated the deterioration of the rational functionality of the sphere (Malina, 1999:26; Webster, 2002:165-166). Habermas insists that the newspaper and television industry of the late twentieth century, as formerly reliable disseminators of information, shifted towards becoming public relations vehicles operating on behalf of the predetermined, lobbied interests of a capitalist state. According to this assessment, "manufactured public opinion" negated the autonomy of the public sphere and facilitated the mass consumerism culture of "soft compulsion of constant consumption training" (Habermas, 1989:192, 195, 217).

In contrast to this pessimistic contention, interpenetration of interests within the public sphere does not implicitly involve the obliteration of the political truth-seeking function of the sphere. Several detractors declare that Habermas is unduly distrustful of contemporary business-related mass media systems and that his interpretation of the manipulation, control, and passivity of audiences is somewhat exaggerated and far too simplistic (Boyd-Barrett, 1995:231; Osborne, 1997:63-65; Louw, 2001:101-102). As Thompson (1995:255) justifies, the process of media reception is today far "more contextualised and hermeneutically sensitive" than was originally conceived by the Frankfurt School tradition.

In addition to Habermas's pessimistic account of twentieth century mass media systems, in contrast to the idealisation of the print and journalism media of the bourgeois period, the original theory does not adequately deal with novel categories of publicness prevalent in the current electronic age. The preferred mode of communication within the classical hypothesis is interpersonal conversation between equal participants as prevalent during the eighteenth century literary society. Regrettably, as Louw (2001:102) states, today's nation-states are demographically vast, heterogeneous, and widely dispersed, making it increasingly difficult to secure genuine, dialogical participation as opposed to pseudo-participation.

Habermas has evidently not considered all the limitations of his liberal public sphere definition. The assertion that publicity is bound to dialogical, face-to-face circumstances discounts the process of globalisation, which effectively de-spatialises and de-temporalises communication and social relations of contemporary life. As Castells (2000:2-3) would have it, modern times demand "...a society in which the values of individual freedom and open communication become paramount...". Consequently, according to Habermas's account, public spheres established by the development of electronic communications media do not receive sufficient recognition as possible representative forms of critical publicity. To be more precise, Habermas misconstrues the potential that new electronic modes of communication and media such as the internet could exhibit in revitalising deliberative social dialogue.

Many scholars thus conclude that the electronic age presents communicative means and structures in the guise of evolving digital networks, which could potentially circumvent the normative prescriptions of the original bourgeois model (Louw, 2001:103; Osborne, 1997:21, 93-95). These proponents advocate for the plurality of public spheres in contrast to the notion that public opinion is manifest in only one sphere – the eighteenth century European bourgeois public sphere. For this reason, it was argued in Chapter 2, Section 2.3.2 that in the context of modern-day democratic nation-states specifically the internet could be employed to restore the public-sphere model. The argument holds that the internet, due to its innate interactive nature,

could facilitate deliberative democracy in an open, public space. This is true since the internet is a self-governed, decentralised medium that allows even-balanced public participation and public will formation. The IEC could then perhaps balance power relationships among eligible voters who participate on its web site by promoting public dialogue and will formation to occur in an unrestricted, transparent manner that includes voters from diverse demographical backgrounds. The IEC web site, as a potential internet public sphere, could conceivably overcome some of the restrictions normally associated with the public-sphere theory.

First, as suggested in Chapter 2, 2.4.2.1, criticism against the "gendered" liberal model could be rectified by exploiting the internet's characteristic of anonymity. Voters could possibly converse with one-another or participate on the IEC web site without fear of prejudiced treatment; subsequently, without apprehension that their socio-economic or educational backgrounds would have an effect on the contributions they make via the web site. Accordingly, larger numbers female voters or other marginalised groupings might more willingly engage in public debate and opinion formation exercises if privacy of identity were protected by the IEC in, for example, a web site disclaimer. Secondly, if the IEC web site is to recover the alleged redundant norms of the public-sphere model, illiterate voters should also be able to participate unreservedly in cyberspace democracy. The IEC could investigate, for instance, ways by which to encourage the creation of neo-literate voters' corps who could use the IEC organisational web site as efficiently as learned and technically skilled voters. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.4.2.1 for an explanation of the neo-literate culture.) Lastly, the IEC web site may well correct Habermas's pessimistic refeudalisation thesis, since online information flows need not be linear and "recipient-oriented". Rather, adherents of digital democracy claim that the internet could be expended to persuade voters to produce their own topics for discussion. This could also mean that public opinion gained via the IEC web site, would include more diverse, dissimilar values and opinion about public affairs.

3.5.7 The revitalisation of the Habermasian public-sphere theory

Contrary to his distrustful refeudalisation theory, Habermas recommends at the end of the *Structural Transformation* that the essential principles of individual autonomy and critical public opinion – as originally encapsulated in the liberal public sphere – could be rearranged in service of democratisation if one secures public institutions or spaces, which are internally democratic in nature. He recommends that despite the decline of the public sphere's original functionality new-fangled vehicles of rational publicity within modern mass democracies could serve to revitalise the process of public participation in political decision-making. Accordingly, Osborne (1997:79) explains that the mass media could counter the decline of rational-critical

consideration by permitting public scrutiny of media ownership and by securing wider access to communication conduits. Ideally, the media should then exhibit an inner democratic design that will allow for greater public influence in its workings.

Likewise, Habermas argues that the struggle for rational-critical deliberation should not be abandoned; conversely, as mentioned in Section 3.5.5, faithful to his refeudalisation conjecture, Habermas fails to pinpoint *how* these institutions ought to be structurally defined. His argument, in alignment with the normative critiques of the Frankfurt School, holds that under conditions of mass democracy within a modern welfare state, the normative foundations of authentic rational publicity are dispensed with by administrative and capitalistic appeals. Several detractors argue that the Habermasian public sphere analysis neglects to formulate a suitable connection between theory and practice, since no proper institutional basis or social actors for democratic transformation are suggested. These critics suggest that the critical theory of society, as constructed by Habermas and his predecessors, is defunct.

Recognising the internal shortcomings of his erstwhile critical theory, Habermas is forced to recover his faith in the rational functionality of the bourgeois public-sphere by redirecting his attention away from institutional manifestations of political freedom to that of the rational potential implicit in everyday communicative practices (cf. Habermas, 1987; Habermas, 1984). His recommitment to the ideal of rationality advances in the face of substantial censures it receives from the likes of critical theorists, analytical philosophers, anthropologists, and poststructuralists. A commonality that these critical traditions share is their contention that reason has failed to fulfil its emancipatory promise; indeed, these reviewers assert that the link between reason, progress, and modernity is an exceedingly feeble one. All the same, Habermas undertakes to revise these claims and the Enlightenment ideals of his predecessors when he delineates the "theory of communicative action"[18] in the cast of two weighty volumes. Habermas abandoned his earlier historically explicit and social-institutional paradigm, and adopted project such as:

a) an attempt to devise a comprehensive, universalistic theory of rationality emancipated from subjectivistic and individualistic principles evident in modern philosophy and social theory; and

b) an effort to construct a "two-level concept of society" in the cast of the *lifeworld* and *system* domains. (Habermas, 1984, viii). (Also, see Section 3.5.3.)

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[18] Within the scope of this research, the author can only attempt to paraphrase the intricacies of the Habermasian communicative action theory to the extent that it fits the research objectives of the study undertaken.

Frequently referred to as his "linguistic" or "philosophical turn", Habermas intends to normatise the dimensions of language and communication as units for social critique, and consequently as a basis for democratic will-formation. Habermas broaches this theme in the first volume of the *Theory of communicative action* subtitled *Reason and the rationalisation of society*. He declares that inherent in any language are norms that could be utilised for rational-critical consensus in service of political action. In line with his classical thesis of the "force of the better argument", Habermas discerns a "rationality" inherent in linguistic interaction in what he calls "communicative action". This latter rationality, he contends, could generate norms by which communicators may well categorise the nature of public bodies *and* communication practices as either democratic and oppressive *or* manipulated and distorted. Habermas's concept of communicative action will now receive succinct explanation in the sections that follow.

3.5.7.1 The Habermasian theory of communicative action

The theorist argues in favour of reasoned communication and rationalisation as the standards by which a contemporary society may be judged. His contention is that when individual citizens converse with one-another in a meaningful manner, they assume accountability for the claims and the ensuing actions they proffer. From this new standpoint of critique, he maintained that the efforts of societal democratisation and individual emancipation could be effectively augmented and fortified. Habermas (1984:286) therefore defines communicative action as an action in which:

...[P]articipants are not primarily oriented to their own individual successes; they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonise their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions.

Following Weber's thesis of social rationalisation, as well as other truncated forms of rationality, the second volume of the Habermasian theory of communicative action then develops a strategy by which contemporary society is divided into the domains of the *system* and the *lifeworld*. Within these realms, the various processes of rationalisation transpire. A division is made between the communicatively structured *lifeworld* or civil society in opposition to the *system* model, which is organised in alignment with self-regulative aspects of society (e.g. the economy). The Habermasian theory denotes the human lifeworld (*lebenswelt*) as the "natural home of communicative rationality" (Dryzek, 1987:671). For Habermas (1984:10) communicative rationality carries with it:

...[C]onnotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech...

Furthermore, as (Habermas, 1987:119) explicates, the lifeworld acts as a requisite complement to the concept of communicative action. He elaborates (Habermas, 1984:xxv; 1987:124) that the lifeworld is that social arena in which three structural components namely, culture, society, and personality receive legitimisation. Within these categories, various reproduction processes or social functions take place. These take shape in the patterns of cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialisation. What is more, these functions are embodied within the structural design of speech acts or communicative actions (propositional, illocutionary, and expressive) that in turn sanctions the "symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld" (Habermas, 1987:62-69).

The thesis delineates various contextual processes of the lifeworld. For example, when Habermas discusses cultural reproduction he envisages a process by which cultural knowledge is not only "tested against the world", dispersed, and renewed within a culture, but also within society itself. In addition, by socialisation as a medium of communicative action, he implies that individual personalities and competences are shaped which "make a subject capable of speaking and acting, that put him in a position to take part in processes of reaching understanding and thereby to assert his own identity" (Habermas, 1987:138). The significance of the communicatively rationalised lifeworld therefore is that it serves as the underpinning of Habermasian theories of ideal public participation, social self-reflexive social learning, and hence, individual and societal development (Habermas, 1984:70-71). The lifeworld's most rudimentary function is that it provides the platform for all communication, which arguably results in consensus and empathy among its members. When considering Habermas's idea of communicative action, it could possibly find a footing in an enabling environment such as the IEC's web site. *Since the public-sphere theory is premised on universality, impartiality, and the right to the freedom of receiving and imparting information, the IEC web site could fashion a public space in which authentic communicative action occurs in service of the public good.*

However, the lifeworld's critical capacities, it is averred, are under constant threat of systematic colonisation and functional integration, which could ultimately jeopardise the idealisations of the lifeworld. On the system level, integration does not take place through communication. Rather, "delinguistified media of communication such as money and power" is responsible for the systematic design of this realm (Habermas, 1987:184-185). This description implies that egocentric instrumental or strategic actions, situated within the realm of the system, are geared towards success and do not equate ethical communicative action. Distorted modes of information replace the process of communication and human control; hence, a distinct uncoupling is made with the normative viewpoints of lifeworld. Habermas suspects that the instrumental rationality or *zweckrationalität* of the social system could undermine or overlook the

strategic actions and intersubjective understandings achieved by individual actors within the lifeworld (see esp. Habermas, 1987). It is maintained that the latter is "oriented to reaching understanding" among individuals whereas systematic political and monetary dimensions disregard such endeavours.

Notwithstanding the distinct fracture in this two-level conception, the subsystem of money and power still depends on the lifeworld as a resource of reproduction. However, it is obvious from Habermas's refeudalisation assumption that the public sphere is becoming increasingly desolate as the private imperatives persist in their encroachment upon the public. Consequently, the institutional systems of power and capital delegitimise the concept of participatory political decision-making within the lifeworld. As a result, it is argued that the communicative configuration of the lifeworld must constantly push back the social pathologies (e.g., loss of meaning, cultural impoverishment, social and psychopathologies etc.) made by the social system's inexorable steering mechanisms, as these could weaken the standards of democratic consensus and moral reciprocal interaction enshrined within the public-sphere model.

Unsurprisingly, this dualistic Habermasian approach does not allow for the existence of systematic imperatives within the lifeworld. It is maintained that the system cannot operate outside its logic of money and power; attempts to democratically transform these subsystems would alter its internal apparatus and hence its functionality. Rather, it is reasoned, that the lifeworld should develop its own public sphere institutions in which all decisions can be submitted to public interactive deliberation. *Once again, the IEC web site could provide the ideal configuration in which communicative action could occur because the IEC exists as an autonomous, impartial public body. Public participation on the IEC web site would then be impervious to commercial or instrumental interests that might inhibit democratic communication between electors.*

In continuing this project to enunciate a communicative praxis for democratic discourse, Habermas proposes a social strategy that he calls the "ideal speech situation".

3.5.7.2 The Habermasian ideal speech situation

White (1979:1158-1159) notes that Habermas makes a categorical distinction between two varieties of language communications: "unreflective 'communicative action' and critical reflective 'discourse'". The latter, as the ongoing exchange of speech acts, presupposes that the committed communicators share a "consensus" premised on four universal validity claims. Moreover, these claims are intersubjectively recognised and raised by participants. Thus, by developing an informational structure similar to the ideals of the lifeworld – the "ideal speech

situation" succeeds as the platform for unlimited discourse between actors, which could defy the undemocratic practices and institutions of the current capitalistic era. Habermas proposes the "ideal speech situation" as "a theoretical reconstruction of those features of ordinary language" that can assist communicators in determining instinctively whether a consensus is forced or authentic in nature (White, 1979:1167). Thus, any agreement ascertained in such a situation "be it about empirical questions of truth or normative matters of justice, has a rational quality" (Dryzek, 1987:660). For that reason, Habermas believes that one should impute (*unterstellen*) such a situation on any speech act or conversation by way of reciprocal effort.

In appreciating the notion of the "ideal speech situation", one must recognise "speech acts" not as the word itself, but as the word as produced in a performance of a speech act (White, 1979: 1559). For this reason, a speech act is the basic unit of all communication. Habermas purports that orators share concurrence based on four validity claims: comprehensibility, speaker veracity, the truth of the propositional component, and the correctness or validity of the performance component – in other words; truth, sincerity, normative legitimacy or authenticity (Habermas, 1987:72-73). To boot, it is maintained that each speaker is able to assert validity claims by way of "communicative competence".

In fact, communicative competence acts as a precondition to the establishment of an "ideal speech situation". This skill is described as a pragmatic aptitude, which allows for the mastery of certain normative procedures required to produce well-formed utterances in the speech situation, which in turn allows speech actors to introduce and redeem validity claims. If communicators exhibit pragmatic competence and if they master the rules of interaction (role competence), an "ideal speech situation" can be established. Dryzek (1987:660) describes the "ideal speech situation" as a condition where discourse proceeds between actors whom are equal in communicative competence. Habermas's competence theory (see White, 1979:1158) aims at finding the "normative implications" of reaching consensus.

Theoretically then, the "ideal speech situation" permits communication to proceed free from domination and self-deception. Language and communication are considered unique to the lifeworld, hence the "ideal speech situation" is offered as a counterforce to the systematic imperatives of free enterprise, state power, and self-deceptive rationalities. Within the "ideal speech situation" a transparent environment exists that cultivates the equality of all contributors, the opportunity to consider and criticise a variety of thematically unconstrained expressions tendered, and the prospect of reaching consensus free from distortions based on the "force of the better argument". In fact Osborne (1997:85-86) maintains if we do not comprehend individual utterances it is because the system diminishes the communicator's communicative

proficiency. Consequently, the oppression of opinions might suggest asymmetrical power relations, limitation on access, or the use of "inappropriate language" (Basu, 1999:380). Although not within the scope of this particular study, the "ideal speech situation" suggests that persons who visit the IEC web site could converse meaningfully with one-another if they raised the previously mentioned validity claims.

Still, the proposition of an "ideal speech situation", as the scaffold for critical analysis for egalitarian public participation, has encountered serious and disparate revisions and critiques since its original inception. Many observers contend that as a critical theory, the communicative action thesis is overly philosophical and has little practical bearing on political emancipatory practice. It is important to note that critiques dealing with Habermas can be found in different theoretical traditions. However, the following segment will attempt to point out succinctly the relevant drawbacks of the theory as it applies to the research topic at hand.

3.5.7.3 Critique on the Habermasian communicative action theory

Kellner (2000) remarks that while the Habermasian linguistic theory is an innovative democratic philosophy, it is commonly considered "too universalistic and ahistorical".

It is reported that Habermas repudiates the fact that language is a socio-historical construct in possession of its own rules and customs, which may, in the fullness of time, vary significantly between, as well as within different cultural systems. Within every culture dissimilar power relations materialise which ultimately affect the utilisation of linguistic and communicative actions in service of contradicting strategic purposes. As Kellner (2000) would have it, an assortment of shifting public forces, prevalent within all cultural systems, could employ language and communication in charge of "enlightenment and understanding" as much as they could attend to interests of a hegemonic nature. In its attempts to discover universal speech norms, the Habermasian ideal of "communication free from domination" effectively eschews the social circumstances under which language and communication games transpire between participating actors in much the same way as the classical public-sphere model. (For a critical discussion on this theory, see section 3.5.6.).

As a result, cynics argue that the Habermasian communicative standard does not afford adequate attention to the notions of "conflict" and "plurality" among disparate communicating welfares; hence, the promise of unhindered dialogue is an unsatisfactory one (Basu, 1999:381; Dryzek, 1987:666; Thomas, 2001:246-247). According to this line of reasoning, verbal communication can never be regarded as a universal principle, untied from pre-existing social conditions. More exactly, as exemplified by the bourgeoisie model, the power of the "forceless

argument" is subject to other commanding averages: gender, education, class, rationality etc. As Osborne (1997:92) asserts, the Habermasian scheme does not account for the fact that the skill of argumentation is a socially unequally distributed power. Authentic consensus is, arguably, only feasible if actors presumably share a set of commonly agreed upon norms, social surroundings, and social experiences. However, the assumption is that within a modern society it is improbable that individuals from myriad cultural circumstances are to come to agreement "especially under real time constraints" as culturally designed and defined world-views and understandings are implicitly incorporated into all verbal conversations (Einsiedel, 2001:102-103).

Furthermore, as previously alluded to, communicative action presupposes "that a capacity for discourse" exists (White, 1979:1162). True to the Habermasian tradition, the condition of "ideal speech" rests on the premise that all speech actors are capable of imputing such a situation on any speech act. Subjects interact with one another based on their joint effort of recognising intersubjective validity claims. Therefore, subjects ascribe accountability to one another and the arguments expressed during interaction. White (1979:1162) continues that as a result, this supposition of accountability compels individuals to highlight a partition between subjects (communicatively competent actors) and objects (communicatively inept actors) during interaction.

Simultaneously, Palerm (2000:585 in quoting Gould, 1996 and Young, 1996) cautions that if "understanding" is regarded as the purpose of interaction other devices of prohibition may emerge, which could negate the differences of the "oppressed groups" as they are expected to set aside their differences in order to secure the "collective good". Thomas (2001:246-247) comments that although Habermas's project is undeniably concerned with the dialogical dimension of communication, it fails to sufficiently theorise "understanding the other". Hence, once could argue that the communicatively rationalised lifeworld lacks in the development of a proper model for ethical and participatory, intercultural dialogue. Habermas is unable to affirm universals in the specificities of minorities and non-Western cultures and societies as his "ideal speech situation" is conceived as a post-traditional, post-conventional (modern), post-metaphysical notion (Basu, 1999:380). Rather than being a transparent environment for discussion and argumentation, the ideal situation cultivates a status quo of inequality in terms of communicative competence. Basu (1999:382) construes that:

All of that is to suggest that the ISS [ideal speech situation] does not enable the needs, interests, and moral intuitions of all concerned to be fully present and accounted for.

Apart from these problematical conceptual insights, Kellner (2000) announces that the historical instruction of Habermas's latest project is sticky in the sense that the themes of lifeworld and system organisation, as explained in the previous section of this chapter, operate on an excessively dualistic level. According to the Habermasian contention, the only public sphere of genuine participatory communication is the communicatively rationalised lifeworld. But Habermas fails to recognise that within the contemporary context of globalisation and the information revolution, action and communication increasingly function within the arena of politics and the economy. His dualistic lifeworld/system dichotomy excludes the possibility that democratic intervention and transformation can transpire within the system world. As Kellner (2000) surmises, true to the refeudalisation view, Habermas's latest project continues to discredit the crucial social functions of the "delinguistified" electronic mass media – as utilised and transformed by active polities – in the establishment of a democratic social order. Indeed, contrary to Habermasian terms, the alternative argument holds that capital and power can be used munificently as well as progressively, whilst all sorts of dominations could reign within the lifeworld regardless of the absent systematic "steering media". Authoritative and technocratic structures thus need not be entirely overlooked in the pursuit of democracy.

An added drawback embedded within the "ideal speech situation" is its insistence on a face-to-face oriented and undistorted discursive design. (See section 3.5.6.) The dualistic separation and resolve to create an "ideal speech situation" actually denigrate alternative public spheres mediated via contemporary institutions and new media when in fact, Dryzek (1987:665) argues that the information age promises to obliterate the conviction that true democracy equates interpersonal face-to-face contact, achievable only in small independent communities. Habermas's preoccupation with uncovering the pattern of democratic deliberation and communication sidetracked his attention away from delineating how specific social institutions and movements can use electronic communication media in order to solidify legitimate political decision-making practices (Palerm, 2000:585). Moreover, this personal bias towards technology and economics leads the philosopher to discount the distinction between public spheres that are state-controlled public broadcasting systems in contrast to purely commercially based media models. Kellner (2000) insists that although the distinction between the two designs has buckled in the recent era of globalisation, the public media model continues to serve the ideal of communication geared towards public education for the common good.

Finally, many detractors believe that it is empirically problematical to analyse real, every day communications according to the Habermasian formulation (Osborne, 1997:92 quoting Poster; also see Held & Simon, 1975:140). The "ideal speech situation" is considered too utopian and is

not the only communicative space in which one could make legitimate political decisions. However, Habermas's theory can be rectified, as Osborne (1997:91) asserts, if it involves a critical and open breakdown of the nature of contemporary structures and conduits of communication. Only then will it be possible to escape the theoretical idealisation of the Habermasian formulation for the sake of practical, empirical purposes.

In conclusion, (McCarthy, 1984:405 on Habermas) many claim that the value of communicative rationality is not that it equates a norm by which to determine the good life, equate progress with, or to establish Habermas as the *telos* of philosophy. Rather, contrary to these assumptions, the Habermasian theory theoretically serves as "the fundamental concept in an interpretative framework for critical research". On a practical level, it aids in the diagnosis of "sociopathologies" in a modern society. Arguably, from these analyses researchers can then offer possible remedies to such pathologies. Hence, this argument reasons that Habermas seeks not to conceptually classify "what is rational is real or what is real is rational", but rather that he seeks to discover the actually existing possibilities for embodying rationality structures in concrete forms of life.

The theory may be open to criticisms on various levels, yet it offers a definite basis for inventive and original critical theory. Dryzek (1987:660-661) resolves that although the existence of an "ideal speech situation" is violated in the real world, it is a situation "anticipated in every act of communication between individuals". Therefore, the public sphere is an ideal to which an appeal is made and hence, Habermas insists that his theory is simply a theoretical blueprint oriented towards a practical intention. The "ideal speech situation" is a regulative idea and need not be hypothetical or completely abstract (Basu, 1999:380). It is maintained that actors should use this device when they engage into "just conversation about justice". Rather than producing norms, the ideal condition should test and legitimise norms for the sake of unrestrained consensus. For this reason, it is argued that the ideal situation can be institutionalised in that discussants presuppose and ideal set of conditions during argumentation that may be approximated.

3.6 CONCLUSION

From the discussions above it is clear that there are many disparate theories and approaches to communication for development. These range from the long-established top-down, linear conceptualisations of development communication such as "modernisation" and the "dependency approach" to bottom-up, two-way approaches, which seek to establish alternative and egalitarian environments for participatory development communication. To date, the

participatory approach to development communication is still the most widely used method in successfully bringing about social change and completing development communication initiatives. It is evident from these discussions, within the context of modern democracies, that especially the contributions of Paulo Freire and Jürgen Habermas have greatly increased researchers', scholars', and practitioners' understanding of participative development communication and democratic theory.

This chapter argued that both the participatory approach to development communication and the congruent normative public-sphere theory stress dialogical communication as central to greater participation and equality among all political actors who participate in a democracy. Given that dialogue and participation are cornerstones of any legitimate democracy, the assumption is that the liberal public sphere category, though not entirely pleasing, could be employed to critically theorise the limits of public discursive interactions with the purpose of invoking a multiplicity of contested public spheres that could create and expand a model of emancipatory political practice. According to the Habermasian thesis, the public sphere model incorporates key elements such as universal access to the sphere, the freedom to express diverse opinions, the freedom to receive diverse opinions and information, in addition to the freedom of participating in the public sphere without interference from state or mercantile imperatives. For this reason, the assumption is that this normative theory could be applied successfully within a developing democratic circumstance inasmuch as it could further solidify a political culture in which democratic values are endorsed.

This chapter therefore described the theoretical foundations of the Habermasian public-sphere theory and the participatory communication approach to development and introduced specific theoretical statements that were employed during the empirical analysis of the Elections Canada and IEC web sites. The assumption is that internet offers the IEC the chance to validate its role and position as a mainstay of South African democracy by establishing an internet public sphere in which public deliberation could occur. This is true since the unique features of the internet support the deliberative process by allowing equal, two-way communication to take place between the South African electorate and representative political structures such as the IEC.

The next chapter describes the research methodology employed in this study comprehensively. This chapter will also introduce the category criteria developed for the qualitative content analysis of the IEC and Elections Canada web sites.

PART II

Research design, methodology, and empirical analyses

CHAPTER FOUR

Research methodology and design

Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted
(Albert Einstein, 1879-1955. Attributed)

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter affords closer attention to the research methodology applied in this study. Chapter 1 (Sections 1.3 to 1.7) provided a brief outline of the qualitative research methods and design employed to address the research intentions of this study. In this chapter, these methods will be enlarged upon. A description will be given of the quality and significance of qualitative research with specific focus on the approaches chosen for this study – qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews. Attention will also be conferred briefly to the nature of quantitative research in order to define the characteristics of qualitative methodologies more efficiently.

In the previous chapter (Chapter 3, Sections 3.5.4.1, 3.5.4.2, and 3.5.5.1), theoretical statements have been developed which will be applied to the research approaches described in this chapter. As indicated in Chapter 1, Section 1.7.2, these assumptions were used to analyse the contents of the Independent Electoral Commission's (IEC) and Elections Canada's web sites. In addition, these postulations also operated during the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with senior staff of the IEC.

In this study, the research design centres primarily on the use of qualitative research methodologies since the investigation seeks to discover and comprehend the particular processes and elements of a specific development situation. The aim of the study is to determine and investigate the application of new media within the practice of encouraging political participation among the South African electorate. Hence, the chosen methodologies were selected to facilitate a deeper understanding of electoral participation in the South African context.

4.2 QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

4.2.1 The characteristics of qualitative research

Qualitative research, according to (Struwig & Stead, 2001:11), is a concept that engages mottled and numerous research methodologies, and therefore, is not effortlessly described. It should be regarded as an approach that integrates mottled theories, paradigms, and disciplines, each one exhibiting distinct methodologies and practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:6-7). Still, qualitative

research differs from the quantitative practice and hence explicit characteristics can be discerned.

As indicated by Jensen (1991:3) and Jankowski (1991:163), the qualitative tradition's thrust is located in the objective to examine meaning production as an essential part of all human activity. The focus then falls on *how* and *why* such meaning creation exercises obtain *contextualisation* within certain social and cultural phenomena (Struwig & Stead, 2001:12; Fortner & Christians, 2003:354). In contrast with the more traditional quantitative means of research, the "anti-positivist" design has developed an alternative *interpretative* methodological approach in revealing the "truth" of particular social realities

Qualitative research, in mass communication, consequently undertakes to uncover the relations between individuals, their communicative practices, and their communities instead of attempting to control such individual components. It should then be noted that the aim of an interpretative analysis is not to proffer explanations in terms of universally valid laws of *generalisation*, but preferably to empathetically understand (*verstehen*) the complexity of a particular social construct (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:101; Neuman, 2004:42). Interpretative researchers therefore accept an *idiographic* (individual) instead of a *nomothetic* approach of explanation by offering so-called "rich" or "specific" descriptions when interpreting and explaining social complexities. As a result, qualitative analysis often places emphasis on the understanding of somewhat small samples or case studies, whereas quantitative analysis concentrates on the replication and the "generalisability of findings" (Struwig & Stead, 2001:17).

In summation, the qualitative tradition intends to examine how social reality is understood, examined, experienced, and shaped by the research participants. It does not intend to quantify human behaviour according to the positivistic fashion. More exactly, it adopts a holistic research approach during investigation and interpretation exercises. In order to develop an improved appreciation of the qualities of the qualitative model the researcher must recognise that this research model then differs from the positivistic school of thought in terms of its *epistemological* (the ways of gaining knowledge), *methodological* (the research methodology used to gain such knowledge), and *ontological* (i.e. assumptions about the nature of individuals as subjects of research) arrangements (Oosthuizen, 1995:2). These arrangements will now be considered more carefully.

4.2.2 The nature of qualitative research

Given the historical development of the anti-positivist movement, qualitative researchers display dissimilar perspectives on *how* to uncover the truth. Implicitly it must be understood that

qualitative investigation posits that there is no single or authentic manner by which to *verstehen* reality since one researcher's worldview may differ from the next one's (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:10). The qualitative paradigm, in terms of *ontology*, subsequently refutes the existence of an *objective external reality*. For this reason, it does not abide by a universal outlook of what scientific legitimacy involves. Fortner and Christians (2003:357; 360) advise that consistent with this design, the process of *contextualisation* is critical to the investigator's effort to comprehend the subject under investigation. Suitable knowledge of the social life situations in which meaning and value creation occur ought to be studied in order to understand how individuals create varied, unique connotations via their interactions with their macro and microenvironments (Struwig & Stead, 2001:12, Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:10).

Conversely, quantitative researchers support the perception of an objective reality and categorise the empirical material created by the qualitative interpretative mechanism as biased, "unreliable", and "impressionistic". The positivistic movement anchors its investigation of social constructs in more mathematical means of interpretation, which seek to anticipate and control individual variables according to *causal* relationships (Jensen, 1991:3). Within the qualitative design, in contrast, the intention is to understand and discover nuances and not to predict or manipulate the implicated variables.

Granted that quantitative researchers sponsor the notions of objectivity and an external reality, they trust that they can perform research "detached" from the participants and the objects of investigation, and so execute research *indifferent* to the influence of the participants (Struwig & Stead, 2001:16-17; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:10). This distinction between the "researched" and the "researcher" is regarded as the method by which to qualify an investigation as being impartial and "value free". However, in terms of *epistemology* the qualitative scholar interacts with the research participants and is accordingly more "subjectively" concerned with the participants. Termed *naturalistic observation*, it is maintained that the researcher can only interpret a research informant's social conceptions provided the former increases familiarity with the latter's natural settings and experiences. Knowledge is therefore gained via the establishment of a research-participant relationship in which experiences and meanings are disclosed and shared. However, this hints that the researcher should be weary of his own biases before interaction commences to avoid undue influence on the research participants and processes. Qualitative research, according to this tradition, can however never be entirely value free.

Evidently then the qualitative and quantitative paradigms disagree in their *methodological* approaches. Qualitative methodology regards human life in terms of an interpretative process

and is hence dialectical (*part-to-whole*) in nature (Mason, 1996:4). Conversely within the positivistic practice questions and hypotheses are stated, which are then empirically tested for verification or rejection. Subsequently, quantitative research is less flexible in terms of its structure and research design than the interpretative alternative. Struwig and Stead (2001:17) explain that qualitative adherents arrange research designs in such a manner that alteration and improvement are always achievable. The research process is therefore an evolutive process that allows the researcher to incorporate new insights and comprehensions as the research progresses. Additionally, many qualitative scholars frequently choose to introduce theory only as the research process advances rather than using it to guide the course implicitly.

4.2.3 Critique on the qualitative approach

4.2.3.1 Validity of qualitative research

As clarified in the prefatory section, qualitative analysis emphasises a multi-pronged approach to the discovery of the *truth* and hence claims that it can only be ascertained contextually. Many detractors resist the legitimacy of qualitative research by describing its nature as "soft" or "unscientific" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:7-8). Although several researchers consider the validity (*truthfulness*) of qualitative findings redundant, many others trust that the external validity of data, despite small sampling sizes or possibilities, must be secured to prevent anecdotal or incomplete reports. This debate on the "usefulness" of validity demonstrates that there are no universally acknowledged guidelines by which to validate qualitative research.

Whereas quantitative scientists employ widely accepted statistical means to secure validity, Neuman (2004:117) argues that interpretative analysis should adhere to uncovering truthful ways in which to represent and comprehend social aspects in an attempt to secure best correspondence with the participants' worldviews. Therefore, the qualitative researcher must give account of the variety of the techniques and the concepts that were used to document the informants' perspectives. Struwig and Stead (2001:144) justify that by placing the emphasis on the interpretations of the participants and not on the researcher's, the interpretative validity of the findings expands.

4.2.3.2 Reliability of research

As illustrated in preceding arguments, interpretative researchers emphasise the "subjective" quality of the social world, and the interactive *researcher-participant* relationship as integral to the evolutive research process. As a result, interpretative analysts are less concerned with the external generalisability of findings than the internal validity of data. Critics highlight this approach of exploration as particularly problematic in terms of the trustworthiness of qualitative

research. *Reliability* refers to the "dependability" and the "consistency" of methods researchers employ to document annotations (Neuman, 2004:116).

While the researcher in this study analysed all the material herself and hence involuntarily made subjective interpretations, detailed records of the audio taped interviews, field notes, interview schedule, along with the data-analysis documents could be made available for the benefit of the reader. Additionally, as will be explored in Section 4.5, categories were devised and refined during the analysis process in order to facilitate the systematic content analyses of the IEC web site. The web pages were studied as presented on the WWW and hence could not be unduly influenced by the researcher. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in the "natural settings" of the interviewees (i.e. their work places). All of these measures and methods of data gathering and analysis served to enhance the legitimacy and dependability of the qualitative research process.

4.2.3.3 Triangulation

In spite of the researcher's "involved" relationship with the research subjects, participant interpretative analysis should constantly endeavour to achieve validity in order to secure the soundness of the research. This effort is possible through the effective exercise of *triangulation.*

Borrowing from various definitions, triangulation can be defined as the construction of a holistic analysis of phenomena by examining such occurrences through the utilisation of multiple methods, and examination of several data sources by several investigators (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:5; Fortner & Christians, 2003:354, Struwig & Stead, 2001:18-19). Triangulation, however, does not merely imply that qualitative methods should be complemented with quantitative measures. By using several dissimilar methods and data sources, the interpreter's analyses may be limited to less biased understandings; thus affording credibility to the data and the researcher. As Fortner and Christians (2003:354) elaborate, "different lines of attack" may reveal different dimensions of phenomena, hence lending fuller or "thick description" to the patterns that may emerge from *reality* as understood by the participant.

Triangulation consequently refers to various and independent "types of measures" used to verify or contradict research findings (Janesick, 1994:214-216).

This study pooled content analysis with semi-structured interviews. Apart from this methodological triangulation, data triangulation was applied by analysing the web site of the IEC web site. Data verification was augmented by the qualitative content analysis of the Canadian electoral commission's (Elections Canada) web site. This permitted the researcher to fortify the observations and the consequent interpretations acquired during the analysis of the IEC web

site. Arguably, the Elections Canada web site could offer a framework of understanding of how the internet is used in political participation and to what extent the Habermasian public-sphere theory is applied to an electoral management body's web site in a developed democracy circumstance. This could then help determine whether the IEC web site could approximate successfully an internet public space of public opinion formation as suggested by the public-sphere theory. The researcher also interviewed five individuals from the IEC, which allowed the data and the findings to be placed within a broadened context of different perspectives and connotations. In the reading of the study it should also be evident that theoretical triangulation completes the validation process by applying the participatory communication development approach and the Habermasian public-sphere model to the findings and the conclusions of this research. The process of qualitative content analysis will now be discussed in more detail.

4.3 QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

In the reading of the literature, it is apparent that the core of field research – a synonym for qualitative studies – comprises fundamental techniques such as in-depth interviews supplemented with techniques such as content analyses (Pitout, 1995:105). As indicated in Chapter 1 (Section 1.7.2.1), qualitative content analysis is a detailed and formal research mechanism that can be used to investigate a particular body of data. Berelson (1952:18) described content analysis as:

A research technique for objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication.

Although it is therefore typically associated with quantitative observation, qualitative researchers employ this tool to study the prevalence or the absence rather than the frequencies of phenomena within certain contexts. Stempell (2003:209) describes the place of content analysis in communication research according to the *who* says *what* to *whom* with *what effect* paradigm. This means that analysed data (i.e. written, spoken, or visual materials) are usually of a non-numerical nature as the purpose of the tool is to reveal latent rather than patent perspectives or attitudes that may be present in the researched materials. This is achieved without precisely translating these to exact measurable variables and interpretations (Jensen, 1991:3). Contrary to Berelson's (1952) original quantitative conception of this research tool, qualitative content analysis is more concerned with uncovering *meaning*. Therefore, the interpretative researcher assumes that the theoretical problem may be addressed appropriately by encouraging analysis beyond the manifest content of materials. This does not imply that less "rigorous" analyses should be any less systematic or objective.

To gain a better reading of qualitative content analysis Berelson's (1952:116-128) seminal demarcation of the differences between quantitative and qualitative content analyses will now be reviewed.

4.3.1 Quasi-quantitative analysis

Qualitative content analyses often formulate less rigorous references to frequency, statistics, and numeral indices. Such analyses should then be considered as quasi-quantitative since frequency descriptions are not statistically exact as in the case of quantitative research. Similarly, quantitative researchers often opt to include qualitative inferences in their research. However, in both approaches, different data collection methods are applied and therefore it follows that different techniques of data description are required. This study did not make use of exact quantification methods as data was retrieved from only one organisation. Likewise, the research concentrated on discovering underlying meanings of phenomena thus rendering exact numbering and measuring of findings ineffective. As Berelson (1952:117) rationalizes, communication contents could be described by employing such terms as "repeatedly, rarely, usually, often, emphasis" and so on.

4.3.2 Presence or absence of particular content

In the prefatory sections, mention was made of the uncovering of latent motivations and meanings contained by data sources. This study expected to indicate the presence or absence of certain themes or concepts within the related researched material. Although interpretation of such "presence-absence" occurrences may prove particularly intricate it has the advantage of augmenting evaluation of the theoretical concepts of the research problem, in addition to the covert individual perspectives of the IEC personnel as contained in the semi-structured interviews (Berelson, 1952:121).

4.3.3 Small or incomplete samples

Berelson (1952:121) states that qualitative content analyses do not make use of specific statistical inferences as the samples for analysis are usually small or incomplete. This study may consequently be considered as a case study. The occurrence of phenomena and their related meanings are prevalent in a single organisation.

4.3.4 Content analysis as a reflection of "deeper phenomena"

As indicated in Section 4.2, the aim of qualitative research is to comprehend the complexities of social realities. The emphasis is not so much on the contents under study but rather on the meanings connoted to these materials. As explained earlier, this relates to the attempt to

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provide "thick descriptions" of phenomena. An interpretative analyst will therefore consider *how* other relations and events, within particular contexts, shape a particular construct or perspective.

The contents of the IEC's web site and the semi-structured interviews were regarded as the contextualising contributors in this study seeing that they represented the standpoints of the organisation. The perspectives offered by the interviewees were used as validating measures in the discovery of "deeper phenomena" and meanings.

4.3.5 Content analysis of non-content statements

Qualitative content analyses, as indicated previously, concentrate not on the manifest but on the latent context of textual data. The aim of the researcher is to uncover *how* the communicator fits with the communicated materials, and consequently *how* such underlying intentions affect the receivers or audiences of such communications (Berelson, 1952:122). As the qualitative research is an evolutive experience, the interpretative analysts must continually adhere to the interpretative analytical exercise. To this extent, this study attempted to ascertain the hidden perspectives and worldviews of the organisation in relation to their use of an organisational web site on the WWW.

4.3.6 Content analysis uses less formalised categories

The quantitative researcher who undertakes quantitative content analyses relies on formalistic procedures of category construction. Such categories are predetermined prior to analyses and are devised to be mutually exclusive. In contrast, qualitative analyses make use of smaller quantities of categories. These categories are initially conceived in rather vague terms but are revised as the research process advances. Categories may also be added or omitted as their relevance to the objectives of the research increase or decrease, which permits the development of "more subtle or individualised interpretations".

4.3.7 Content analysis of more complex themes

Quantitative research also relies heavily on statistical rigour and replication of findings. When dealing with complex contents data is divided into smaller parts in order to ensure the validity and reliability of the study. Even so, as the "parts" increase it will become more difficult for the researcher to secure the trustworthiness of the data and the process. Qualitative researchers, nonetheless, are able to manage themes that are more complex; they are not concerned with statistical exactness and the generalisability of results. The focus is therefore shifted from analyses of the parts to examination of the whole or *broadened* context of the researched materials.

As maintained in Section 4.2.3, semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to secure the validity and reliability of the research findings. This research technique is considered in the ensuing section.

4.4 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

An in-depth/intensive interview is considered as a conversation with a clear purpose in mind. (See section 1.7.2.2.) It aims at exploring topics, which will reveal the research participants' underlying viewpoints on the particular issues under discussion (Leedy & Ormrod 2001:157; Wimmer & Dominick, 1991:148; Pitout, 1995:112). The most apparent advantage of interviews in qualitative research is that they allow intensive probing into complex themes through interaction between the researcher and the informants.

As Neuman (2004:183-184) cautions, the interviewer must still be wary of establishing the proper environment for conducting the interviews. Therefore, although the interview may follow many of the dialogical rules of average conversation, the interviewer must remain non-judgemental throughout the process. This implies that only the respondent's opinions and perceptions may be elicited and then discussed for further clarification. The researcher must endeavour to discover accurate perspectives and responses in an emphatic and objective, yet, "warm but serious" tone. The interviewer is expected to ask the questions and talk less than the informant who should respond and therefore talk more. The interviewer controls the dialogue and therefore must not "correct" an interviewee's responses; the former should rather guide responses to reveal the deeper and direct implications. To augment such management the researcher must refrain from introducing closed or loaded questions. As the researcher's memory of interviews is often, unreliable note taking or audio taping of the events is required (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001:159).

The interpretative analyst may use structured or semi-structured interviews. The latter is a combination of structured and unstructured interviews where a predetermined list of questions is posed to each participant (Struwig & Stead, 2001:98). The opportunity does however exist to deviate from the prearranged list if certain topics or questions require closer attention or clarification. Issues that reach beyond the scope of the interview list may also emerge during the semi-structured interviews.

The researcher interviewed the various department managers, see *Table 4.2*, and other senior staff members of the IEC involved in the establishment and management of the organisation's web site in the attempt to discover their interpretations of how the normative, public sphere theory could be to the IEC's web site. Interviews were not conducted with users of the IEC web

site as this study opted to investigate the particular link between the organisational policies and the interpretations and implementation thereof by staff members.

4.5 RESEARCH DESIGN

The previous sections delineated the qualitative research design and methodologies selected for the study. These methodologies were chosen to answer the general research questions of this study. Accordingly, the specific research questions and theoretical statements are repeated in the next section. (Also, see Section 1.5 for a formulation of the research objectives of this study.) Moreover, the following sections describe how the categories for content analysis and the schedule for the semi-structured interview were prepared and devised. Attention will also be given to the processes of data analyses, data interpretation, and data presentation.

4.5.1 Research questions and theoretical statements

The specific research questions that follow from this general research question are:

4.5.1.1 What are the salient theoretical concepts that underpin the Habermasian public-sphere theory? (Chapter 3.)

4.5.1.2 How is the Habermasian public-sphere theory put into practice on the website of an electoral management body in a developed democracy (Chapter 5, theoretical statement 1, 2, and 3.)

4.5.1.3 How does the IEC put the Habermasian public-sphere theory into practice on its web site? (Chapter 6, theoretical statement 1, 2, and 3.)

Since the corresponding research objectives have been formulated in Chapter 1, Section 1.5, they will not be repeated here. However, in an attempt to answer the above-stated research questions, specific theoretical statements were proffered in Chapter 3. (Also, see Sections 3.5.4.1, 3.5.4.2, and 3.5.5.1.) It should also be noted that the first research question introduced the theoretical approaches used in this study for the qualitative content analysis of the IEC and Elections Canada's web sites. Accordingly, this research question was dealt with comprehensively in Chapter 3. (See Section 3.5.) The theoretical statements used to answer research question 2 and 3 read as follow:

4.5.1.4 Theoretical Statement 1:

The Independent Electoral Commission should maintain a legitimate internet public sphere by ensuring that all participants could participate equally, freely, and fairly on its web site in order for them to gather electoral information necessary to make informed political choices.

4.5.1.5 Theoretical Statement 2:

The Independent Electoral Commission should maintain a legitimate internet public sphere by ensuring that all participants could receive and impart diverse information, opinions, and values via its web site in order for the participants to appropriate public opinion.

4.5.1.6 Theoretical Statement 3:

For the Independent Electoral Commission to maintain its web site as a legitimate public domain of public opinion formation, the commission should manage its web site without fear or prejudice to governmental or commercial interests.

These theoretical statements were gleaned from the literature review of the public-sphere theory and subsequently used in the design of category criteria for the qualitative content analysis of the IEC's and Elections Canada's web sites. (See *Table 4.1.*) Qualitative content analysis was conducted in order to determine how the electoral commissions' web sites adhered to the normative principles of the public sphere theory. More specifically, qualitative analysis was conducted to determine:

- Whether the electoral commissions' web sites showed signs of universal access to their web sites;

- Whether the web sites of the electoral commissions showed signs of public opinion formation opportunities; and

- Whether the electoral commissions' web sites showed signs of impartiality to state or mercantile imperatives.

These theoretical statements were also utilised in the development of an interview agenda for the semi-structured interviews that were conducted with five, senior IEC personnel. (Refer to *Text box 4.1.*) The data obtained during the analysis of the IEC web site, was therefore triangulated with the data gained via the semi-structured interviews. (See Chapter 6 for a discussion of the IEC's web site analysis.) These semi-structured interviews were therefore used to gain:

- General background information on the IEC;

- General background information on the reasons as regards to the creation of the IEC web site;

- Specific information on the successes, and shortcomings of the IEC web site; and

- Information on how the principles of the Habermasian public sphere theory were applied on the IEC web site.

The next section describes the procedures that were followed in the content analysis of the IEC and Elections Canada web sites. In addition, the processes involved in the conduct of semi-structured interviews will also be discussed.

4.5.2 Content analysis

The organisational web site was not coded in order to make frequency statements. Instead, the web site was broken up into smaller, more manageable components in order to consign its contents within the broader themes represented by the various categories (Naudé, 2001:112). The aim of the qualitative content analysis was therefore to determine the presence or absence occurrences of the different category dimensions. (See Section 4.3.2.)

The unit of analysis consisted of the home page of the IEC web site – defined as the first page of information visitors view when accessing the organisation's web site – and the subsequent internally hyperlinked sub web pages as identified by eight, separate headings. Each of these subsections were analysed as individual, self-contained pages. These pages are broadly sorted under the following headings:

- Home page;

- About the IEC;

- Legislation;

- Registration voters' roll;

- Voting;

- Results;

- Political parties;

- Other IEC functions; and

- Library.

The next section will pay closer attention to the formulation of the categories and instruments used in the evaluation of these web pages.

4.5.2.1 Formulation of category criteria

Categories – as measurements of the content and the features of the web site – were generated in agreement with the theoretical foundation presented in Chapter 3. Repetitive reading of the theoretical underpinnings of the public-sphere hypothesis and participatory development theory enabled the researcher to identify the main criteria required for category development. Mindful of the proffered specific theoretical statements, an indefinite, preliminary category framework relating to the broader themes "impartiality", "universality", and "public opinion formation" was constructed.

A category framework, corresponding to the above-mentioned themes, was then devised in order to check the contents of the web site against various related indices and criteria that could correspond to the theoretical statements. The criteria contained by this framework evolved into sub-categories or sub-criteria, which assisted the researcher in improved investigation of the separate web pages. As the analysis was an interpretative exercise, continuous refinement and redefinition of the broader categories occurred as the researcher became more familiar with the patterns and themes apparent in the data. The initial framework thus developed into an enhanced tool of measurement as the qualitative content analysis of the web pages progressed.

4.5.2.2 Definitions of categories for the content analysis

As already established, categories formulated for the purposes of qualitative content analysis do not necessitate mutually exclusive categories. (See Section 4.3.) The specific criteria applied during analysis are detailed in *Table 4.1.* The category framework served merely as a broadly defined check-and-balance sheet against which all appropriate characteristics of the web site were assessed and interpreted. Corresponding to the theoretical statements gained from the Habermasian public-sphere theory, three broad categories for content analysis were developed:

- *Impartiality*

Impartiality indicates that for the IEC to maintain a legitimate public sphere it should function as a non-partisan agency, which endorses the principles of autonomy, professionalism, responsiveness, accuracy, efficiency, and trustworthiness. Impartiality implies that the IEC must conduct all administrative processes and outcomes in a transparent manner as to ensure and promote public scrutiny and accountability of its actions and policies. The IEC should therefore preclude interference of any commercial or state interests, which could possibly hinder the openness and neutrality of its web site, in the workings and management of its web site. References of this category could comprise self-contained position papers such as annual reports, official mandates, and organisational position papers. Additional indicators could

consist of press releases or any other manifestations of public records disclosures (e.g. electoral statistics, financial reports, fact sheets, web site disclaimers etc.).

- ***Universality***

Universality or "universal access" refers to the notion of inclusivity of participation for all participants in the electoral system. The opportunity should thus exist for all individuals to make informed political decisions based on the information provided on the IEC's web site. Universality thus suggests that contents provided on the web site should represent disparate, balanced beliefs and opinions as originating from diverse publics. Additionally, universal access requires that equal opportunity exists for all visitors to participate in a free and fair manner on or via the web site. Universality could thus be signified by indicators such as choice of language; cost implications of information downloads; feedback and consultative mechanisms; guidelines for web site participation; diverse sources of information etc.

- ***Public opinion formation***

As established in the preceding paragraphs, for the IEC's web site to function as an internet public sphere, the IEC must guarantee and encourage every participant's right of freedom to impart and receive diverse information and opinions. This exercise of critical, public opinion formation then supports the exchange of diverse, dissimilar opinions among participants in order to reach consensus on issues of public importance. Public will formation involves the promotion and facilitation of reciprocal, participatory interaction in addition to the earnest negotiation of public opinion via balanced information provisions and retrievals. Examples of public opinion formation could thus include online discussion opportunities such as chat rooms, bulletin boards, and any other consultative or feedback mechanisms. Additionally, this category could include elements such as annual reports, statistics, and financial statements, which could facilitate and enhance more active, meaningful public will formation among web site participants.

Table 4.1 provides the corresponding category criteria that were designed for the qualitative content analysis. The next section describes the procedures that were followed in the preparation of the semi-structured interview questions.

4.5.3 Semi-structured interviews

4.5.3.1 The procedures for the interviews

As mentioned before, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four senior IEC staff in order to determine how the IEC's web site fitted with the basic principles of the Habermasian public-sphere model. The data gained during the content analysis of the web site, was therefore

verified by the data collected from the interviews. The interviews were especially useful in revealing what the interviewees regarded as the raison d'être behind the setting up of the web site, in addition to how the personnel viewed its general expediency. General information on how the web site was managed was also gained via the interviews. (Also, see Section 4.5.1.6.) The interview questions are contained in *Text box 4.1*, while *Table 4.2* provides a list of the individuals that were interviewed.

Questions 1-11 attempted to determine the reasons behind the setting up of the IEC web site, in addition to how the web site's general management, administration, and objectives have changed since its original inception. Interview questions 12-20 intended to uncover how certain web site features, noticed during the qualitative content analysis of the web site, fitted with the theoretical statements gained from the Habermasian public-sphere theory. The interviews also tried to establish what some of the web site's shortcomings and successes were as experienced and viewed by the interviewees themselves. (See questions 21 and 22.)

Whereas questions 23 and 24 were asked to determine whether the IEC applied any specific communications or internet policies to the management of its web site, questions 24-29 aimed to reveal how the interviewees understood the concepts "universality" and "public opinion formation" in terms of the running of the IEC web site.

Table 4.1 Category criteria for qualitative content analysis

Criteria	Example
Reports: include self-contained documentation and text published or uploaded on the web site that give account of completed, organisational events or responsibilities.	Annual reports Financial reports and financing disclosures Election reports Research reports Minutes of meetings
Policies and strategic plans: include self-contained organisational policy or position papers published on the web site. This category also includes text or publications concerning organisational strategic positions.	Legislation and regulations Vision and mission statements Disclaimer and copyrights Guidelines for web site use
Public announcements: comprises official statements or speeches issued by the organisation and published or uploaded on the web site. This category does not include copies of newsletters that can be ordered via the web site.	Media or press releases Speeches Minutes of meetings Events and activities announcements Posters Advertisements Electronic newsletters Electronic notification services Electronic mail Bulletin boards Chat rooms
Organisational design: incorporates information published on the web site relating to the organisational design of the electoral commission.	Organisational history Organisational design and management structure
Voter education materials and voter information: include text or publications available on the web site that could assist visitors in gathering relevant electoral information.	Training manuals Online queries and downloadable forms FAQs (frequently asked questions) Reports and policies Organisational design Feedback mechanisms

	Statistical information
	Electronic mail notifications/newsletters
	Posters
	Advertisements
	Multi-media presentations
	Online games or quizzes
	Archive or publications library
	Events calendar
	External links
	Sources of web site contents and "date of publication"
Ease of navigation: relates to the ease of navigation of the web site by users in addition to access to the information published on the web site.	External links
	Software requirements and special downloads
	Online query forms
	Online order forms
	Cost implications
	Language preference
	Usability for visual or audio impaired persons
	Site map and internal search engine
	Help functions
	Personalisation or customisation
Feedback and consultative mechanisms: refer to mechanisms, which enable participants to interact with one-another in a potentially reciprocal manner.	Electronic mail
	Electronic mail notifications
	Electronic newsletters
	Hyperlinks (internal and external)
	Chat rooms
	Bulletin boards
	Standardised feedback forms
	Organisational contact details
	Special online events
	Online polls/surveys/petitions
	Online information gathering mechanisms

The interviewees were asked to elaborate on their answers by giving practical examples of how the IEC applied these concepts to its web site. Finally, the discussions were concluded by giving the interviewees opportunity to make additional comments on any of the questions asked during the interviews (Question 30). They were also given the chance to question the researcher on any matters relating to the interview questions as well as the research intentions of the study.

The interviews were conducted at the IEC's head offices *Election House* in Arcadia, Pretoria on August 6, 2004. On average, each interview lasted for about sixty minutes. (*Table 4.2* lists the interviewees). All of the interviews were audio recorded, with the interviewees' permission, after which rough transcriptions were made for analysis and interpretation. Written notes were also made during all of the interviews for improved correspondence with the tape-recorded responses.

Although the interviews were guided by a set of predetermined questions, the structure of the discussions was not restricted to a specific chronological order. Consequently, the researcher allowed interviewees to elaborate on their answers and discussions without unnecessary interference or excessive control. Where the interviews only partially answered or explained the submitted questions, the researcher asked additional questions that could satisfy the originally intended questions. In addition, supplementary questions were asked when interviewees indicated that some of the questions were unclear. As a result, the interviews were conducted with the intention of gaining a "thick description" of how the IEC approached the management of its web site and how this approach corresponded to the public-sphere model.

Table 4.2 Interviewed individuals

Individuals interviewed	Position/job title
Mr. Mosotho Moepya:	Deputy Chief Electoral Officer
Ms. Melanie du Plessis:	Manager: Business Applications
Mr. Libisi Maphanga:	Chief Information Officer
Ms. Sibongiseni Dlamini:	Manager: Communication

4.6 PROBLEMS EXPERIENCED

4.6.1 Content analysis

During the course of the investigation, it was discovered that large quantities of documents were published on the IEC web site. These ranged from legislation, regulations, and training manuals to voter training accreditation procedures. It was resolved that the contents of these documents would not be analysed. Instead, these publications were classified according to the criteria applicable to the various categories. It must then be understood that the primary focus of the analyses was to "code" these web site features in terms of "absence" or "presence" occurrences. Additionally, it was discovered that some of the categories required additional criteria, since many features present on the web sites were not listed in the original categories.

As a result, the following criteria were added to the original category agenda:

- *Reports:*

Research reports

- *Policies:*

Vision and mission statements *and* Disclaimers and copyrights

- *Public announcements:*

Posters *and* Advertisements

- *Voter education materials and voter information:*

Online queries and downloadable forms; Reports and policies, Organisational design; Posters; Advertisements; *and* Online games or quizzes

- *Feedback and consultative mechanisms:*

Hyperlinks; Standardised feedback forms; Guestbook; Online transitions and query forms

Furthermore, it should be noted that the contents of the web site might have been changed or modified since the original content analysis. Accordingly, the analysis of the web sites was restricted to specific time periods.

Text box 4.1 Interview Agenda

1. When did you first implement your organisational web site?

2. What were the initial reasons for setting up your web site? How have these objectives changed?

3. Who were the intended target groups for the original web site? Are these still the same?

4. Did the IEC conduct any research before the launch of its organisational web site?

5. Who was responsible for the technical design/development of the original web site? (I.e. IEC employees or outside consultants).

6. Who was originally responsible for the administration of the particular contents published on your web site?

7. Who is currently in charge of the technical design of the web site?

8. Who is currently responsible for the administration of the contents published on your organisation's web site?

9. What, in your view, is the strategic importance of your web site in terms of the other communications media used by the IEC?

10. How often does your organisation update the contents on the web site? Please elaborate on your answer.

11. How does your organisation decide which contents to publish on its web site?

12. What were the reasons for publishing your organisation's vision and mission statements on its web site?

13. I noticed that the web site contained several links to external web sites. How does the IEC, decide which sites could be linked to its organisational web site?

14. I observed that web site did not contain any links to the web sites of political parties. Are there any particular reasons for not placing such external links on the IEC web site?

15. I noticed that your primary organisational web site had a link to an additional "eProcurement" web site. What were the reasons for setting up this web site?

16. How frequently does the IEC receive e-mail enquires? What is the nature of these queries?

17. How does your organisation measure the informational needs of its web site users? For example, do you have feedback mechanisms available on the web site?

18. The contact details of your organisation are available on your web site. What were the reasons for publishing this information on the web site?

19. How recent is the organogram available on your web site?

20. The contents of your web site are only available in English. What are the reasons for publishing only in one language?

21. In general, what would you consider as some of the successes of your organisation's web site?

22. In general, what would you consider as some of the disappointments of your organisation's web site?

23. Does your organisation have a communications policy? Please elaborate.

24. Does your organisation have an internet policy? Please elaborate.

25. In your view, how do the following concepts fit into your organisation's mandate? (Political participation, information sharing, and two-way communication).

26. How does your organisation intend to apply these concepts to your web site?

27. In your view, how do the following concepts fit into your organisations mandate? (Inclusivity and access).

28. How does your organisation intend to implement these concepts on your web site?

29. How does the IEC handle the issues of availability and access to its website? (I.e., physical access and low literacy levels).

30. Lastly, would you like to add anything to any of the topics and answers that we have discussed today?

4.6.2 Semi-structured interviews

The questions devised for the semi-structured interviews were developed after the analysis of the IEC's organisational web site. As the personnel of the communication department were not all directly involved with the original set up and the subsequent management of the web site, it was determined that interviews had to be conducted with personnel whose responsibilities did include the administration of the web site.

In consultation with a regular IEC public relations liaison, it was established that higher-ranking members of the organisation in addition to members from various departments would suffice in answering the questions posed in the interview schedule. However, irregular response rates to the e-mail correspondences that were sent to the IEC by the researcher, placed unnecessary time constraints on the actual execution of the interviews. Telephonic enquiries proved, regrettably, to follow the same, time-consuming route. Weeks passed by before any substantial feedback on the researcher's enquiries was received.

4.7 ANALYSIS OF DATA

It should be noted that the researcher attempted to ensure the reliability and the validity of the interpretative framework through measures of triangulation. (See Section 4.2.3.3.) Leedy and Ormrod (2001:150) recommend that after data has been sorted thematically, interpretation thereof should occur in relation to the specific research questions the study has in mind. As a result, interpretative observations were recorded all through the content analysis of the IEC web site, after which the annotations were enriched with the data obtained during the interviews as to develop "thicker descriptions" of the data.

The specific theoretical statements undertook to answer each research question separately. Therefore, research objective 1.4.1 is answered in Chapter 3, objective 1.4.2 is discussed in Chapter 5, and objective 1.4.3 is dealt with in Chapter 6. In terms of the content analysis, the data is presented and discussed consistent with the various categories and sub-categories contained in the category framework. The same category agenda was used to devise questions for the semi-structured interviews. The observations drawn from the web site content analysis were synthesised with the notes made of the interviews. In this manner, it was possible to determine the correlation between the research question and the data reality. Since Elections Canada's web site operated within the context of a matured, developed democracy, the trends that were uncovered during its analysis were used as a benchmark for the analysis that was done on the IEC web site.

4.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter, the methodology employed in this study was described in relation to the intended research objectives. (See Chapter 1, Section 1.5.) Qualitative content analysis and semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary methodologies as to gain a better understanding of the IEC's use of an organisational web site. During the empirical analysis, an attempt was made to discover how the IEC web site correlated to the specified norms of the Habermasian public-sphere model. Chapters 5 and 6 will present the analysis of the Elections Canada and IEC web sites.

CHAPTER FIVE

Analysis and interpretation of the Elections Canada web site

Knowledge must come through action; you can have no test which is not fanciful, save by trial.
(Sophocles, 496 BC - 406 BC, Trachiniae)

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This study maintains that public will formation stands at the centre of any legitimate democracy; consequently, that new public spaces of political engagement must be identified and appropriated in which such discursive participation could occur. The underlying assumption therefore is that the Habermasian public-sphere theory could serve as a normative model by which web sites could be used as a public domain of civic engagement in electoral democracy.

However, this is only possible provided electors can i) obtain political information (public will formation) and ii) exchange diverse political opinions via the web site in an unobstructed manner (universality), iii) free from instrumental state and money coercion (impartiality). In this instance, Elections Canada's web site was analysed as a case study in order to ascertain whether the above-mentioned principles could be applied to a web site.

This chapter introduces the results yielded during the qualitative content analysis of the Elections Canada official organisational web site. The findings will be assessed and interpreted according to the category criteria provided in Chapter 4. (See *Table 4.1.*) In addition, as indicated in the previous chapter, the trends identified during the content analysis will be presented as a case study.

5.2 ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The Elections Canada web site [http://www.elections.ca] was evaluated in real time over a period of one week starting on August 12, 2004, and concluding on August 20, 2004. Seeing as the web site's contents could have been modified since the original analysis, all observations and interpretations were recorded in the past tense.

The data generated was data was tested against the theoretical statements proposed in Chapter 3 (Sections 3.5.4., 3.5.4.2 and 3.5.5.1.) As established in Chapter 4, Section 4.5, these theoretical statements attempted to discover whether the Elections Canada web site, in the context of a developed democracy, could be used as a public sphere of open, unobstructed public opinion formation. The findings that were yielded during the content analysis were used

as a standard of how a web sphere, the web site of the IEC, in a developing democracy could look.

The conclusions that were drawn from the analysis of the Elections Canada web site are discussed in Chapter 7. This concluding chapter will also give attention to particular concerns of this study and provide recommendations that were drawn from the conclusions. The next section concisely describes Canadian democracy and introduces the electoral management body, Elections Canada.

5.3 BACKGROUND

5.3.1 Canadian democracy and the Elections Canada web site

As one of the world's oldest, most matured democracies Canada has endured a long and complicated legal and political history of colonies, legislatures, unions, and federations (Oliver, 1999:66). With a population of just over 31 million people, of which more than half (17 million) is English first language speakers and almost 8 million is French mother tongue speakers, Canada is an exemplary of multiculturalism and multilingualism (Canada, 2003:2).

As a democratic nation, Canada is a state that is held in power by elected representatives of the people. As a federal parliamentary democratic state, with the British queen as monarch, Canada uses a system of federal government that means that the administration has different levels and orders as determined by the country's constitution[19]. Each government order, consequently, has different responsibilities and functions to fulfill in the democratic management of the country. Canada was set up as a federation in order to represent and meet the needs of its citizenry, since the country is geographically vast and also very diverse in terms of its cultural and linguistic groupings.

The *Constitutional Act* of 1791 created elected assemblers in the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, whereas the *British North America Act of 1867* guaranteed the foundation of the federal system and established the distribution of power between the federal and provincial governments in Canada (Canada, 2004a). In 1982, this act was renamed as the *Constitution Act, 1867* and in the process; Britain relinquished its power to establish Canadian laws.

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[19] Canada's constitution is a combination of a set of rules and laws that were originally inspired by Great Britain's laws. These include the Magna Carta (1215), the Bill of Rights (1689), Petition of Right (1629), and Act of Settlement (1701) (Canada, 2004a; Canada 2004b).

Elections Canada is promoted as an independent electoral management body set up by the Canadian parliament. Part of the agency's mandate is to inform the Canadian electorate about the Canadian first-past-to-post electoral system and all of the processes involved in the successful maintenance of regular elections (Elections Canada, 2004a). The Elections Canada web site is described as part of the effort of informing individuals interested in elections. The web site intends to function as a valuable and readily accessible information resource, which provided electoral information to members of the media, the general public, political parties and political candidates, and youth voters.

However, the agency indicates that the web site is not simply an informational resource, but also a helpful communication tool that could encourage organisational communication efforts to "work both directions" (Elections Canada, 2004a). As a result, Elections Canada envisions that the web site could facilitate interaction between the electorate, political actors, and the electoral agency itself. It was also discovered that the *Communications* directorate is responsible for the administration of the web site and the contents available on the site (Elections Canada, 2004b). This department is mandated to provide "comprehensive information about the electoral process" and hence aims to inform various political role-players ranging from the electorate, political parties, to members of the media. Aside from providing these political actors with informative, educational materials, the directorate also aims to provide access to the electoral system to "special needs" groups, and therefore ensures that these stakeholders receive alternative formats of electoral, appropriate information. With this context in mind, the web site of Elections Canada was examined according to the category criteria provided in *Table 4.1.*

5.4 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

5.4.1 Reports

The first set of content dimensions that were analysed included the "reports" category:

- *Annual reports*

During the analyses, it was established that the Elections Canada web site did not contain any explicit instances of annual reports. Even so, the web site did include external links to the Canadian Treasury Board's web site, which reported the performances of Elections Canada's administrative directories with reference to particular electoral events and activities. For the same reason, purported statutory reviews on recent Canadian elections gave voters concise accounts about the activities that occurred during the running of electoral proceedings. Despite the fact that these reports were available on the internet they did not strictly qualify as annual reports , since the documents related to time specific electoral actions. For Elections Canada's

web site to function as an impartial electoral information resource it should give account of the agency's administrative actions and judgments. (See Section 3.5.5.1, Chapter 3.) Voters must be able to scrutinise openly Elections Canada and the actions the latter enforces to beget its constitutional duties. Arguably, an internet public sphere could assist in achieving the objective of providing credible, non-partisan information. Given such accurate knowledge, electors could then help shape critical-reflective public opinion that might further consolidate democratic practices, including elections.

- *Financial reports and financing disclosures*

The web site did show several records of financial reports and financing disclosures. The online ease of access of these records contributed to the veracity of the electoral body regarding the rules and the regulations it applied in funding its own administrative activities as well as that of political parties and political party candidates. Statistical information and summaries of financial disclosures were also evident in a choice of formats ranging from Adobe Read (PDF) files and online databases to Excel spreadsheets. Web site visitors consequently had the option to access information according to their preferred software formats.

It was also possible for visitors to view documents relating to the contributions made to registered political parties, as well as the expenses incurred by such organisations. Considering the Elections Canada main web site, financial reports were also apparent in the form of so-called estimates documents. These reports featured time-specific performance assessments on the plans and priorities of Elections Canada. Some of these reports expressly addressed electoral expenditures. These publications were however located on the Canadian Treasury Board web site and not on the Elections Canada web site. Publications that were not on hand on the Elections Canada web site could be ordered via a standardised web form. This increased the likelihood for voters of obtaining informative electoral publications through alternative means. Even the travel and meal expenses of the electoral agency's chief electoral officer were disclosed online. These descriptions concisely recounted the costs and purposes of official business meetings and engagements fulfilled by the chief electoral officer.

The publicity of the financial reports and financing disclosures on the Elections Canada web site could make voters more attentive to the procedures involved in running elections and in financing political leaderships in a democratic system. (Refer Section 3.5.5.1, Chapter 3.) These reports revealed that Elections Canada treated all political participants in an even-handed manner by preventing commercial imperatives or private interests in interfering in the funding of political party campaigns and elections. (See Section 3.5.4.1 for the universality aspect of the

public sphere.) Accordingly, informed voters could engage actively in public reflection and consequently pressure political institutions more effectively in justifying their financial decisions. *The Elections Canada web site, as an internet public sphere, could as a result redistribute power from the political elites who receive public taxes to the voters who provide such funds and who demand public accountability.*

- ● *Election reports*

The latest general elections results were accessible on the *Elections Results* page where users could view the authenticated results of electoral districts by submitting their postal area codes in an internal search utility. Official results of earlier elections were located on various other web pages as well. For instance, a table showed all the voter turnouts at Canadian federal elections and referendums since 1857.

The avaibility of online elections results reports enabled voters in acquiring knowledge regarding the democratic system, since voters were able to inspect the actual results of electoral democracy without the assistance of partial gatekeepers or biased agenda setters. Such knowledge of elections results could empower an electorate to become conscious of the need for change and inform voters on how to mobilise intended action for change. As a result, the online availability of elections reports could increase the universality of the electoral system in the broader sense by allowing more voters to participate more knowledgeably in elections. In terms of the impartiality principle of the public-sphere theory, the elections reviews might also indicate the legitimacy of the electoral system because these reports confirm that all votes were cast free of commercial or state manipulation. Voters could then be confident that the subsequent political choices that they make are firmly based on accurate, timely, and credible information.

- ● *Research reports*

It was discovered that the Elections Canada web site dedicated the page *Electoral Law & Policy* to research publications. These titles included youth electoral participation surveys, online voter registration feasibility studies, and research about global voter turnouts. As commented previously, the online distribution of such electoral documents might contribute to the electorate's awareness of the legal framework necessary for managing and administrating free and fair elections, as well as increase their knowledge on other pertinent electoral issues. By means of the web site, voters could then become more knowledgeable regarding the rules and

procedures of electoral democracy, as well as the role voters could fulfil in a democratic system. (See Section 3.5.4.2.)

In addition, seeing that public opinion formation is a problem-solving approach, the online availability of research titles could augment voters' ability to control their own knowledge acquisition processes, since they could obtain information from the web site according their own specific informational requirements *if* and *when* they require. After the "awareness" process is completed, voters could perhaps also share information among one another and collectively search for solutions to perceived electoral problems. Accordingly, voters would then also be better able to suggest possible topics for future research; given that their newfound knowledge could conscientise them about additional, undeveloped needs for change. *True to the Habermasian principle of opinion formation, electors could then receive and impart new founded knowledge by making use of the Elections Canada web site as a useful internet public sphere.* (Refer to Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.)

- *Minutes of meetings*

Evidence of minutes of meetings was found on the web site. Records of the speaking notes of agency officials were also observed. (See Section 5.4.3.) In terms of public opinion formation, voters could easily inspect and judge the electoral agency's administrations because these records could; for instance, provide insight into the decisions Elections Canada made about the running of certain electoral events. In line with the principles of the public-sphere theory, the private decision-making authority of Elections Canada was dislodged, since the web site acted as a space of public inspection by which voters could determine whether their interests as voters were properly represented and addressed by Elections Canada. Increased organisational transparency could also possibly augment the public's trust in the electoral agency as a credible, impartial, and professional body. The internet could consequently be an ideal platform for publicising such information contexts as anyone with access could readily view such records. The online availability of minutes of meetings therefore supported one of the basic principles of the public-sphere ideal – a public sphere, as a mediating space between the state and the social realm, should enable citizens to oversee the activities of public institutions freely and openly.

5.4.2 Policies and strategic plans

The following indicators of policy and strategic documents were apparent on the Elections Canada web site:

● *Legislation and regulations*

Information about electoral legislation and regulations were noticeable on numerous web pages of the Elections Canada web site. The *Electoral Legislation* page summarised, to list but a few topics, federal and electoral legislation, election laws, and political financing policies. In the same way, information regarding significant electoral policy amendments was presented in this section; thus providing the voting public with a fuller account of the electoral legislative decisions reached by the Canadian parliament. Once again, voters could scrutinize the activities of Elections Canada in a public and unrestricted fashion via the web site. One could obtain further information on the electoral system's legal framework by linking to Canada's parliamentary web site from the Elections Canada web site. *In terms of functioning as a potential internet public sphere, Elections Canada allowed voters to collect pertinent information and specific contexts about electoral democracy via its web site.* (Refer to theoretical statement 2, Section 3.5.4.2.)

As regards strategic plans, it was ascertained that the publication *Serving Democracy: A Strategic Plan 1999-2002* explained *how* the agency intended to accomplish its legislative directive. In terms of public opinion formation, voters could thus easily become more familiarised with the workings of the electoral system by accessing this online document. Apart from an online, downloadable edition this document could be ordered in print by submitting a standardised "e-mail form" on the Elections Canada web site. This feature increased the universality of the web site since it enhanced alternative accessibility to pertinent electoral information. As a rule, it was discovered that legislative documents were supplied in HTML or Adobe Reader (PDF) formats as well. Web site visitors could thus freely gather information via the Elections Canada web sphere without the impediment of technical restrictions.

In general, from the observations offered in the foregoing paragraphs, it was decided that the Elections Canada web site provided voters with insightful background information on the legal framework in which elections were administered. As apparent in Elections Canada's mandate, the agency also publicised the responsibilities the agency was constitutionally required to enact on its web site. *As a result, in line with the Habermasian public-sphere theory, voters could self-reflect on the role and position of Elections Canada in the democratic system and consequently criticise the actions of the public body.* (See theoretical statement 2 in Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.) Subsequently, voters, the media, legislators, and international observers could hold the agency accountable regarding the efficiency and proper enactment of its constitutional remit. As suggested in the theoretical background, in order for a democracy to be sustainable, voters must continuously be educated on their democratic rights and the responsibilities of public agencies, such as Elections Canada, responsible in securing their civil liberties. Elections Canada's web

site succeeded in informing all of its stakeholders on their political rights by making sure that voters had access to information about the legislative and regulative context that guided electoral participation.

- *Vision and mission statements*

Similarly, a brief mission statement on the web site's front page reiterated that Elections Canada was founded by the Canadian parliament as an autonomous, non-partisan electoral management body. The web site could accordingly be considered as an independent, unbiased resource of electoral information and therefore an internet public sphere that apparently functioned in isolation from economical or state realms.

Furthermore, the agency's mission declaration placed great importance on discovering cost-effective and innovative ways by which to serve the informational needs of all voters, electors, and legislators by distributing up-to-date, accurate, and credible information. Arguably, the agency's web site could be regarded as an upshot of this aspiration. In terms of universality and public opinion formation, the Elections Canada web site enlarged voters' choices and opportunities for gaining electoral knowledge, since the web site could function as a medium by which voters could become aware of *and* self-reflect on electoral matters. As suggested previously, it is imperative that electors and all other political role-players properly appreciate and review the constitutional framework in which elections are conducted. *For this reason, the online description of Elections Canada's mandate served as a check-and-balance sheet by which Canadians could measure the integrity of the agency and the electoral system.* (Refer to Section 3.5.4.2.) Electoral participants could then critically reflect on whether Elections Canada endorsed democratic electoral participation for all Canadian voters, as well as decide whether the agency in fact enacted its mission statement.

- *Disclaimer and copyrights*

Considering the *Disclaimer and copyrights* aspect, a copyright notice was marked on the web site. This disclaimer summarised the web site's privacy policy together with a delineation of restrictions concerning commercial reproduction of the web site's contents. This section also contained important notices relating to web site language policy, the placement of external hyperlinks on the agency's home page, and guidelines regarding the use of external service providers. (See Section 5.4.5 for a discussion of external hyperlinks.)

The privacy policy explained that Elections Canada did not automatically collect personal identifiable information about web site users without their explicit consent. Besides, personal

identifiable information obtained in this manner was protected under the federal *Privacy Act*. The privacy of all participants was therefore protected; subsequently visitors could access and browse the web site without concern for discrimination or favouritism. The web site policy illustrated the agency's commitment to treating all citizens as equal political participants, since profiles of web site users were not covertly created or unwittingly disclosed. The privacy policy further ensured that web site users were not compelled to disclose their identities when they expressed their political opinions in the e-mail comment form. In view of the universality norm of the public sphere, the privacy policy created a public space in which political participants could gather as equals and interact freely with one another irrespective of their social statuses. (See theoretical statement 3.5.4.1, Chapter 3.)

Excluding cases where official permission was obtained, a copyright warning restricted commercial use of the web site's materials. *The Elections Canada web site therefore, in theory, functioned as an autonomous public sphere because private ownership of the web site and its materials was restricted.* The policy guaranteed that information obtained online could not be manipulated or abused by special or manipulated interests. Instead, the copyright notice augmented the legitimacy and accuracy of the web site's contents; hence the credibility of the electoral agency as a non-partisan, truthful information resource. Non-commercial public or personal use was allowed without charge or special permission. (See Section 3.5.5.1. for the theoretical statement concerned with "impartiality" principle of the public-sphere theory.)

The contact details of the agency were also present on the bottom of the disclaimer page. Individuals who required further information on web site policy could make contact with Elections Canada. (See Section 5.4.7.)

• *Guidelines for web site use*

The Elections Canada lacked proof of explicit rules and guidelines applicable to web site forums or chat rooms, given that such virtual fora were absent. (See Section 5.4.7 for a discussion about bulletin boards and chat rooms.)

5.4.3 Public Announcements

Recurring examples of the "public announcements" characteristic were noticed on the Elections Canada web site.

• *Media or press releases*

It was noted that a distinct information page was set up for members of the media. Nonetheless, this "media room" could be serviceable to anyone who paid a visit to the electoral web site. Both

the public's and the media's right to receive reliable, timely information was secured by the Elections Canada media page. The web site assisted users to fashion public opinion by supplying an extensive directory of internal hyperlinks to an assortment of useful media-related information services and resources. Media affiliates, and the public alike, could for instance access up-to-the-minute agency reports, statements or speeches, photo galleries, and an archive of press releases and media advisories.

However, the theoretical background established that apart from supplying political participants with varied information choices and contexts, a legitimate public sphere should also supply impartial, factual electoral information. Although the mass media traditionally performs the "watchdog role" of holding politicians accountable for their public practice, an unbiased information resource such as the Elections Canada web site could also ensure that the public receive relevant, trustworthy electoral information that is impervious to the agendas of private or governmental variables.

Overall, the availability of the purported media room contributed to public opinion formation as electors could make informed political choices by comparing mainstream media reports with the press releases available on the Elections Canada web site. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.5.1.) The media room, consequently, enlarged the electorate's choice of reliable, electoral information resources and enabled them to develop their self-reflective decision-making capabilities.

- **Speeches**

During the analysis of the Elections Canada web site, instances of speeches and official statements recurred several times. The "media room" dedicated a special section to the speaking notes of nearly all of the speeches and presentations of the chief electoral officer. The accessibility of these records improved the openness of the administrative workings of Elections Canada and accordingly permitted the voting public to actively determine for themselves whether the electoral agency supported democratic values such as free and fair electoral participation. The availability of these types of information could then cultivate a voters' corps that participates more freely and knowledgeably in electoral affairs such as the making of electoral laws and policies. As an internet public sphere, the Elections Canada web site therefore increased voters' sense of competency and sense of control over the voting system.

- **Minutes of meetings**

Aside from the collection of speeches, the "media room" also added transcriptions of the chief electoral officer's most recent public appearances to the list of obtainable documents. Records of transcriptions were recovered in the online media archive as well. As mentioned in the

foregoing subsection, the online availability of transcripts of public meetings and speeches increased voters' sphere of participation in electoral affairs, since voters could become aware of contentious issues and matters of public concern.

• *Events and activities announcements*

Considering the "events and activities" category, a segment on the media page connected to a listing of *Special Events and Conferences* relating to electoral themes. Internal hyperlinks lead to the descriptions of a number of significant symposiums and conferences that occurred over the last five elections years. These portrayals were improved by associated press releases and public speeches, which added to the usefulness of the already available descriptions.

The Elections Canada web site also devoted a special segment to the *Youth Voters Web Site*[20]. An archive of youth activities and events were contained in this section, for instance, round table discussions between the electoral agency and student activists from various Canadian universities were on hand for public inspection. Youth voters were thus also involved in electoral democracy by means of specific information contexts that suited their actual, lived experiences.

Electoral activities were also publicised under the heading "international activities", which described the foreign projects and initiatives managed by Elections Canada. Calendars of general elections were accessible on the *Past Elections* page too. Visitors could click on a graphic representation of a calendar to inspect the deadlines of all the events that occurred during the running of a general election. Comparable to promoting its daily and long-term projects online, Elections Canada could then be held publicly accountable for its actions and performances by allowing political participants to inspect projects' timelines and objectives.

Elections Canada, did however not promote any special online events, such as real-time electronic meetings on its web site. (See Section 5.4.7.)

Reviewing the numerous examples of the "events and activities" category, it was concluded that the promotion of electoral events on the internet contributed to the public's appreciation of the electoral system seeing as such briefings engaged the electorate in the agency's short-term objectives and long-term priorities. *As a potential public sphere, the web site facilitated public supervision over public institutions, since voters could use events and activities announcements as check-and-balance sheets for public practice.* (See Section 3.5.4.1, Chapter 3.)

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[20] As far as it could be established, this web site was not a self-sufficient site, but rather existed as an exclusive subdivision of the Elections Canada web site.

• *Posters*

A couple of voter educative posters were noticed under the heading *Information for Aboriginal Voters*. These posters served as voter educative materials in addition to sufficing as reminders about upcoming elections. (Also, see Section 5.4.5.) These posters were published in a choice between English and one other Canadian aboriginal language.

• *Advertisements*

For an evaluation of the "advertisements" category, see Section 5.4.5.

• *Electronic newsletters*

The Elections Canada web site did not provide an electronically distributed newsletter service. On the other hand, the web site did incorporate electronic versions of newsletters in the shape of Adobe Reader (PDF) files. These newsletters were targeted at so-called aboriginal Canadian electors and were accordingly published in a number of "heritage" or ethnocultural languages. These newsletters contained information and pictorial proof on the agency's initiatives encouraging aboriginal voters to participate in upcoming federal elections. The publications promoted aboriginal voter awareness campaigns and disseminated information applicable to the informational needs of the aboriginal electorate. (Also, refer to Section 5.4.5 and section 5.4.6.)

• *Electronic notification services*

Furthermore, the only example of a notification service was evident on the on the web site's media information page. Subscribers could choose to receive updates on the latest news releases along with a status report on newly released official reports, statements, and speeches. A choice between French and English notification services was offered. Through this alert service, the electoral agency web site fulfilled its function as an informative resource informing voters on electoral policies, concerns, and activities. The electorate could make fully informed political choices by accessing relevant, regularly updated information in this manner.

The web site did not offer any SMS text messaging (short message services). For more detail on notification services, refer to Section 5.4.7.

• *Electronic mail*

As examined above, apart from the e-mail alert service, no additional mailing lists services were discovered on the Elections Canada web site. The agency could consider including e-mail newsgroups services on its web site, since it would allow participants and subscribers to view

and exchange alternative viewpoints, which could possibly stimulate critical reflection and further public deliberation on significant electoral matters and events.

- *Bulletin boards*

Likewise, the Elections Canada web site did not offer bulletin boards or virtual forums on which participants could exchange messages and views. (See Section 5.4.7 for additional comments concerning the "consultative and feedback mechanisms" category.)

- *Chat rooms*

The Elections Canada web site also failed to encompass the chat room dimension. (See Section 5.4.7 of a detailed assessment of this dimension.)

5.4.4 Organisational design

The dimensions of the category, *Organisational design*, were considered during the content analysis:

- *Organisational history*

Accounts of the historical and organisational development of Elections Canada were available in various online formats and presentations. For example, one of these documents contained comprehensive relations about the Canadian electoral system, the electoral process, and the evolution of the agency since its foundation. These historical records enclosed informative illustrations and educational graphics of the organisational design and management structure.

In addition, an interactive CD ROM, *Exploring Canada's Electoral System*, could be ordered online by way of a standardised "e-mail form". The CD ROM seemingly informed users about the electoral system and the voting process through interactive devices such as video clips, interactive games, educative quizzes, and informative backgrounders. Supplementary educative material, in the form of a book, *A history of the Vote in Canada*, was promoted on the web site as well and could be ordered online.

Considering the above-mentioned publications and information briefings, presented in a choice of formats, it was decided that these types of materials were constructive, educational sources on the history of Elections Canada, as well as informative backgrounders about the democratic process in the broader sense. (See Section 5.4.5.) The web site functioned as a valuable public resource of electoral and civic information by which voters could expand their knowledge on the voting system. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2 for the "public opinion formation" principle of the public-sphere theory.)

- **Organisational design and management structure**

The organisational design and management structure of Elections Canada was established by linking to a number of informative web pages listed on the *About Elections Canada* page. Internal hyperlinks directed users to the organisational mission statement, elections reports, and strategic plans. These web pages sufficiently described the development of the electoral body and the processes involved in appointing the chief electoral officer – the administrative head of the agency – and the commissioner of Elections Canada. A chart that represented the agency's organisational configuration filled out the information available on this section. The chart was hyperlinked to detailed information backgrounders on each of the Elections Canada's directorates and comprehensively explained the responsibilities of each department.

The availability of these types of information enabled the electorate to inspect the internal structure of Elections Canada. Accordingly, voters could determine for themselves whether the electoral management body was managed as a legitimate and impartial public institution in support of free and fair electoral participation. (See Section 3.5.5.1, Chapter 3.) *The web site, as a possible extension of the liberal public-sphere ideal, illustrated that Elections Canada acted as an impartial elections management agency.*

5.4.5 Voter education materials and voter information

The "voter education materials and voter information" category included:

- **Training manuals**

Copious examples of training manuals were present on the web site. These manuals covered a wide variety of subjects ranging from leadership contestants guidelines, information for political parties, and rules applicable to election financing. An alphabetical listing of instruction manuals divided the available, downloadable handbooks into different categories as germane to different stakeholder groups. For instance, a distinction was made between the categories "political parties" and "nominations contestants". Some of these handbooks were also available in alternative formats, for instance Adobe Reader (PDF) files or video clips. (Refer to the criterion "multi-media presentations" for a further analysis of downloadable video clips.) Apart from sufficing as training materials for voting staff and political parties, these online "handbooks" enlightened voters on their constitutional rights and political responsibilities, as well as the obligations and functions of voting staff. Consequently, the Elections Canada web site expanded voters' choice of information resources by which they could regain their knowledge of electoral democracy.

The training manuals dimension was also apparent in a number of online voter information guides. These guides served a voter educative purpose as it conscientised voters on the importance of electoral participation in a democratic system. Electors from a wide variety of ethnocultural language groups could access adequate electoral and voter information in their preferred indigenous language. *Therefore, in terms of universality, the Elections Canada web site facilitated inclusivity and participation for voters from different cultural and language backgrounds.*

- **Online queries and downloadable forms**

The Elections Canada web site did contain a few examples of downloadable forms. For instance, voter registration forms were located on the web site. Consequently, eligible voters could download printable registration forms after which the completed forms could be faxed to a toll-free number or posted to an appropriate postal address. As a result, Elections Canada encouraged voters to respond appropriately to information cues, such as voter registration drives, by providing helpful information and instructions on its web site that could support voter participation in elections. *As an internet public sphere, the web site therefore helped coordinate possible political action.*

In terms of online query utilities, it was noticed that electors could find out their electoral voting districts by submitting their postal codes in a search utility on the home page.

- **FAQs (frequently asked questions)**

A FAQs service was on hand in the "media room". It provided an inventory of questions and answers targeted at the informational needs of media affiliates. The FAQs page was broken up into distinct information categories providing thorough responses on a wide range of possible queries. Additional examples of popular questions and answers were located on the *Information for the Public* web page. This particular register was designed for the wide-ranging informational needs of the voting public. Likewise, the "youth vote web site" maintained a FAQs page dedicated to the informational requirements of eighteen to twenty-four year olds. Aside from these afore-mentioned FAQs sections, it was also determined that an online glossary of electoral terms, graphics, and pictures was available on the web site. This glossary presented voters with practical descriptions of commonly used electoral terminology and concepts that explained the basics of the electoral system.

As previously argued, a functional, sustainable democracy requires informed, politically responsible participants. The FAQs pages sufficed as voter educative tools, since they provided

audiences direct, cost-effective access to electoral information. These FAQs pages also encouraged web site users to actively seek out, select, and retrieve information. (See theoretical statement 2, Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.) *The web site therefore created more fluid and active voter learning experiences, since voters could more easily connect with learning resources and opportunities.*

- ***Reports and policies***

The Elections Canada web site contained sufficient information on electoral legislation and regulations. These publications were presented in abridged editions or full text versions. The *Reports* category assessed the availability of the research reports as well. (Refer to section 5.4.1 for more detail.)

- ***Organisational design***

A detailed discussion on the organisational design of Elections Canada showed that the electoral agency was an impartial and self-governing body. (See Sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.4.)

- ***Feedback mechanisms***

The only web site feature that fitted the consultative and feedback mechanism category was a standardised e-mail web form. (Section 5.4.7 provided a complete evaluation of the web site's feedback and consultative mechanisms.) Elections Canada did however encourage voters to make contact via the organisational telephone numbers, facsimile numbers, and postal address details posted on its web site. (Section 5.4.7 evaluated the presence of the "contact details" dimension.)

- ***Statistical information***

The results of the most recent general elections, as well as related voter turnouts were published on the web site. As described in the "reports" category, all of the financial reports and disclosures of Elections Canada, political candidates, and political parties were available online for public scrutiny as well. (Refer to Section 5.4.1.) The public accessibility of statistical publications and factual information subsequently added to the public's appreciation of how their votes conferred political power upon political parties, as well as how public taxes were used in support of electoral democracy. Therefore, facts sheets boosted voters' understanding of how the electoral system functioned, as well as how public votes determined which political representatives represented civic concerns in parliament.

• *Electronic mail notifications/newsletters*

As established in Section 5.4.3, voters were not offered the choice to subscribe to a regular electronic newsletter service. A notification facility, which informed subscribers on the latest web site contents, was however on hand. (See Section 5.4.3.)

• *Posters*

As previously cited in Section 5.4.3, a couple of voter educative posters were observed on the Elections Canada web site. These posters contained voter messages that aimed to persuade certain indigenous cultural groupings to participate in upcoming elections. These posters contained basic voter information such as "where to register" and "where to vote" details. By specifically tailoring voter messages to the language needs of indigenous publics, Elections Canada broadened its communicative reach and so secured public involvement of minority Canadian electors from diverse backgrounds in elections.

• *Advertisements*

Related to the online accessibility of voter educative posters, persons could also view and download examples of voter education public announcements or "advertisements" from the Elections Canada web site. "Print ads" and radio scripts aired by Canadian broadcasters were on hand on in a choice of twelve indigenous languages. Voters from different cultural upbringings could thus expand their choices of educational resources by retrieving radio scripts and print ads directly from the Elections Canada web site. The web site, as a result, improved the universality of the electoral system in the broader sense, since voters were not dependent simply on the mass media to impart important voter information.

• *Multi-media presentations*

Moreover, as considered in prior paragraphs, the web site offered visitors the option to download training manuals and other educational tools in video clip formats. (See the dimension "training manuals".) Voters could thus facilitate their knowledge acquisition experiences without the physical attendance and assistance of an "educator". Presentations were offered in English and French editions along with a choice of closed or shown captioning. Accordingly, universal access for persons with special needs, for instance heard of hearing individuals, was improved as they could retrieve information from the web site in more appropriate formats. The youth vote web site provided some additional examples of multi-media presentations in the appearance of interactive games or purported "online activities". These games were evaluated in the following dimension.

- **Online games and quizzes**

The Elections Canada web site contained a short online quiz that tested voters' knowledge on the history of the Canadian vote. As an educative tool, this game not only improved voter awareness of democratic values, but also involved voters to some extent to become more active in educative processes. Regrettably, this quiz was an abridged extract from a book *A history of the vote in Canada*. The web site edition was therefore rather concise and did not meet the requirements of a bona fide interactive online quiz. Voters could however place an order for the book via the web site.

The "games corner" on the youth web site entertained voters with an improved choice of educative board games. A printable crossword puzzle board tested young voters on electoral themes, whereas a board game tested players' knowledge on electoral concepts and expressions. These games were, however, not interactive voter educative devices. On the other hand, a more interactive trivia game called *Selections* tested players' knowledge about electoral democracy. This game imitated the format of the well-known *Who wants to be a millionaire?* television trivia game show and sufficed as an entertaining way by which to learn more about the electoral system and voting process.

- **Archive or publications library**

As evident from several observations made in the previous sections, a number of library collections were accessible on the web site. These archives contained diverse information sources such as press releases, official voting results, and photo galleries of electoral events. The availability of these archives confirmed that the Elections Canada web site was transparent and open to public scrutiny. This supposed that the integrity of the electoral body could be inspected and critiqued, since voters could increase their knowledge on the electoral system simply by actively looking for *and* selecting certain information from the archived web pages. As a result, the accessibility of the archives supported the public sphere norm of public opinion formation.

- **Events calendar**

As reviewed in Section 5.4.3, the electoral agency web site included instances of events calendars, as well as electoral activities and events pages on its web site.

- **External links**

The web site offered entrance to a large number of external web sites under the heading *Related Sites*. One of these links connected to the official web portal of the Canadian

government. In view of the theoretical assumptions, the presence of this particular link was somewhat problematic, given that the strategic standpoints published on the governmental web site might impinge upon the apparent impartiality of the contents on Elections Canada's web sphere. Users of the Elections Canada web site might not be competent enough to accurately differentiate between government publicity and unbiased electoral information. It would therefore be more sensible to remove this link from the Elections Canada web site altogether as to protect the perceived objectivity of the agency's internet public sphere. (See theoretical statement 3, Section 3.5.5.1 in Chapter 3.)

The remainder of the external hyperlinks directed visitors to alternative, useful information resources and social networks. For example, a particularly useful category of hypertext included registered Canadian political party web sites. These web sites presented potential voters with further information on political party policy issues. Voter competency could be improved and consequently voters would be empowered to choose their political candidates with increased self-confidence. Additionally, interaction between electors and political representatives could also transpire on those political party web sites that already contained well-established bulletin boards and interactive chat forums.

The youth vote web site also enclosed several worthwhile links to sites expressly designed for young electors. These links were split into different information categories including "youth voting sites", parliamentarian information sites, youth education and employment organisations, youth issues networks, and a section that connected educators to functional, educational resources concerning the electoral system. The Elections Canada web site therefore developed an information network for young voters by which they could engage in public will formation and subsequent possible political action.

In conclusion, a number of links to international electoral and democratic organisations, some of which comprised research and policy institutions, were also available on the web site. As might reasonably be expected, entrance to external web sites might add value to the contents published on the Elections Canada web site. These external organisations offered alternative viewpoints and additional knowledge about electoral matters that voters would otherwise not gain from the Elections Canada web site. Nevertheless, as advised earlier, these web sites should not detract from the impartiality of the contents published on the electoral agency's web site.

- ***Sources of web site contents and "date of publication"***

The larger part of the web site's materials contained date specific particulars. Subsequently each web page contained a distinct and different date line, which demonstrated that the contents of the Elections Canada web site were frequently updated. The e-mail alert service also hinted to how often new materials were added to the web site. Similarly, the "media room" contained the latest official press releases and therefore indicated the timeliness of the events and the information that they promoted. The conspicuous presence of "time" indicators enhanced Elections Canada's position as a non-partisan, credible information provider, as web site users could decide the accuracy and trustworthiness of the published contents. Voters were thus assured that the political choices they made based on web site information were appropriate and well informed.

5.4.6 Ease of navigation

The dimensions of "ease of navigation" category were considered in the following subsections:

- ***External links***

A large assortment of hypertext was visible on the *Related Links* web page. (See Section 5.4.5 for additional comments describing this criterion.) As explained before, admission to external web sites greatly improved the usefulness of the contents on the Elections Canada web pages. Voters could more actively seek information and alternative opinions on electoral matters on these external sites; consequently improving their understanding of political matters and the importance of electoral participation in a democracy.

- ***Software requirements and special downloads***

A comprehensive catalogue outlined the online accessibility of electoral publications and indicated which of these learning materials could be procured online. As pointed out before, multi-media learning materials were available on the web site as well. (See Section 5.4.6.) For users to take advantage of these learning resources, easy-to-understand instructions explained how to download and use compulsory software applications. In terms of free and fair participation on the Elections Canada web site, the availability of exclusive software downloads guaranteed the user-friendliness of the agency's web site for all web site visitors.

Another interesting download option was Elections Canada's official electoral magazine, which appeared twice yearly. It explored topics pertaining to electoral administration and the democratic process in a series of in-depth articles. A complete archive of magazines was available on Elections Canada's web site. This magazine gave voters access to administrative

decisions and thus allowed public supervision vis-à-vis the policy-making decisions of ruling structure. As a voter educative resource, this magazine contributed to the voting public's political competency as it stimulated public awareness on civic issues and concerns. Accordingly, political actors acquired election information and new knowledge without the physical presence and assistance of a so-called "educator". *Therefore, the Elections Canada web site operated as a mediating public space in which the electorate could achieve critical-reflective public opinion.*

- **Online query forms**

See Section 5.4.5 for a fuller description of this dimension.

- **Online order forms**

An exhaustive inventory of electoral publications catalogued which materials and documents could be ordered via the web site for public purchase, governmental or parliamentary use. Each listing revealed the purchasing costs and particular file formats of these publications. Visitors could obtain annual reports, electoral district maps, or books in this manner. The ordering process was explained to newcomers under the heading *Ordering.* Voters were empowered to take charge of the voter education exercise, since they were allowed to purchase electoral information publications at their convenience.

- **Cost implications**

As far as could be determined, one could view all the web site contents without officially subscribing or registering to any services. No overt cost implications were detected on the site. In line with the public-sphere theory, access to the Elections Canada web site was unobstructed. Anyone with internet access could make use of the information available on the agency's web site. (See theoretical statement 3.5.4.1, Chapter 3.)

- **Language preference**

Upon first entering the Elections Canada home page, a choice was presented between English and French editions of the web site's contents. Correspondingly, it was discovered that the language preferences were customisable on all of the web pages. Access to the web site was therefore bettered and permitted visitors from the afore-mentioned language groupings to participate freely and fairly on the web site in their language of preference. A voter information guide was also on hand in a selection of indigenous languages. These voter guides were however not restricted to aboriginal languages only, but also appeared in a wide variety of so-called ethnocultural languages. For instance, Canadian citizens from Spanish, Italian, Greek, or

even Arabic descent, to name but a few, could access essential voter information about upcoming federal general elections via the web site. *Electors from different cultural upbringings were therefore capable of making informed political choices by collecting information from the Elections Canada web site.*

- ● *Usability for visual or audio impaired persons*

The web site did not offer an option between text and graphic-based interfaces. This option could have improved information access for functionally literate or visually impaired electors. In spite of this shortcoming, various examples of interactive CD ROMs were present on the site and improved accessibility for visually impaired and hard of hearing or deaf persons. One of the CD ROMs, for instance, described the Canadian electoral system in a series of informative and entertaining video clips, graphics, interactive games, illustrated quizzes, and backgrounders. This facilitated more interactive and self-determined methods of voter education, since voters could study these learning materials in their own leisure time. In the process, by releasing such materials online, the Elections Canada web site functioned as a mediated public space that stimulated awareness and self-reflection among voters. Copies of these CD ROMs, available in French and English versions, could also be ordered online as well.

Elections Canada also promoted a toll-free enquiries line for persons who were deaf or hard of hearing on its web site. Persons with disabilities could request alternative formats of the available electoral information. For example, "open- and closed-captioned videotapes" for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing were available for purchase. Braille, audio-cassette and diskettes were obtainable in this manner. The web site therefore greatly improved accessibility to the electoral system for voters with special needs by producing information in alternative, more appropriate formats.

- ● *Site map and internal search engine*

Web site navigation was further advanced by an internal site search engine. Keyword and prefix searches enabled visitors to establish the location and availability of particular publications or contents on the web site. Furthermore, a site map on the *Help* web page facilitated information searches according to distinct, practical content categories. For instance, in this manner it was easy to locate information purposely designed for the members of the media or aboriginal voters. (See Sections 5.4.3 and 5.4.5.) In the case of the "media room", journalists and reporters could access special media releases, photos of recent electoral events, or even view a special media FAQs page. The site map optimised the usability of the Elections Canada web site because

users could actively collect information according to their specific needs and without the interference of a "gatekeeper" or agenda setter.

- *Help functions*

In addition, a special section on the *Help* page introduced users to Adobe Reader (PDF) documents. This section was especially useful as several of the web site's contents were only retrievable in PDF file formats. Easy-to-understand instructions guided visitors through the steps of downloading and installing the software necessary for opening these file formats. This section also explained how access to PDF publications could be improved for visually impaired users. It was discovered that one could download special applications and tools from external web sites that converted PDF files into HTML files. These HTML text files were then more easily deciphered by certain screen-reading programs or "browsers" and could even be synthesised as audible speech. Once again, Elections Canada ensured, by means of special technical controls and devices on its web site, that voters with special needs had access to the electoral system.

Overall, each page on the Elections Canada web site was internally linked to a page that detailed the contact details of the organisation. The organisation explicitly invited web site visitors to disclose their informational needs through means of a standardised "e-mail form", postal or telephonic correspondences. The web form could therefore be used to submit queries or comments and even presented users the option to indicate which type of feedback mechanisms they preferred – for example e-mail correspondence or telephonic response. (Refer to Section 5.4.7 for an assessment of feedback and consultative measures.)

- *Personalisation or customisation*

The only patent example of the "personalisation" dimension was noticeable on the home page where users were given the option to adjust language preferences. (See the "language preferences" aspect for further elaboration on this feature.) It could however be argued that the "help function" on the web site acted as a "personalisation" feature as it allowed voters to limit searches to their exact informational requirements and queries. In the same way, via a search utility on the front page, all eligible electors could determine whether they were registered on the national voters' roll and subsequently where they should vote in upcoming elections. These technical web site features recognised voters' capacities to make their own choices regarding the selection and retrieval of electoral information. It also increased the opportunities available to voters to respond appropriately to such newfound knowledge. *As a result, the web site supported the public-sphere principle of public opinion formation.* (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.)

5.4.7 Feedback and consultative mechanisms

The subsequent subsections attempted to determine whether the Elections Canada web site applied feedback and consultative measures on its web site:

- *Electronic mail*

No obvious occurrences of e-mail addresses were noted on the Elections Canada web site. Despite this fact, as observed repeatedly, a standardised web form was readily available on all of the web pages. This web form could be used to put forward comments, submit queries, or order titles from the advertised electoral publications directory. (Also, see Sections 5.4.5 and section 5.4.6.) *Rather than merely disseminating information, the web site then caused Elections Canada to be a facilitator of public opinion by sharing and exchanging information and knowledge with the electorate in a more interactive, responsive manner.* (See Section 3.5.4.2, Chapter 3.)

Although the web site did not release the direct e-mail addresses of electoral employees or agency departments, alternative contact details were provided lest the public's e-mail queries remained unrequited or responses unsatisfactory. While e-mail correspondence does not fully approximate truly interactive online deliberation, it might facilitate two-way information exchange among the electoral decision-makers and its web site users. Therefore, the agency's ability to respond effectively and quickly to public enquiries may perhaps enhance online voter campaigns, since specific information exchanges could transpire between Elections Canada and electors. Voters could also share their viewpoints (input process) on the information already available on the web site in addition to what types of contents should be disseminated (output process) online.

- *Electronic mail notifications*

Section 5.4.3 evaluated the *Electronic mail notifications* feature in depth. In view of this analysis, the web site's notification service boosted the timely dissemination of relevant electoral information to the electorate. (See Section 3.5.4.2, Chapter 3.) As argued on previous occasions, voters need accurate and reliable election information to make well-informed, timely political choices. Elections Canada could consider the option of extending the e-mail alert service to SMS services, given that even more voters could be reached via cell phone technology and hence have access to the electoral system.

- **Electronic newsletters**

The prevalence of online newsletters and electronically disseminated newsletters was discussed in Section 5.4.3 and section 5.4.4. In consideration of these discussions, it is proposed that a regular electronic newsletter should be considered as a web site feature, since it could create more effective and equal opportunities for learning.

- **Hyperlinks (internal and external)**

See Section 5.4.5 and section 5.4.6 for observations about hyperlinks.

- **Chat rooms**

The Elections Canada web site did not show any signs of online chat opportunities. Visitors could not engage in ongoing opinion and information exchanges. Consequently, the contents of the web site were rather one-sided and fixed, as the viewpoints of the public were not properly represented or considered. *The communication flows on the web site thus remained top-down, one-way and did not encourage deliberation.* (See Section 3.5.4.2, Chapter 3.) The option of a chat room could give participants the chance to comment on one-another's beliefs, as well as allow critical reflection on public policies and electoral events. A chat room could engage the public in more active public will formation exercises, since electoral issues would be deliberated in real time. As a result, voters would also have the opportunity to consider alternative arguments and more likely achieve unanimity on the common good.

- **Bulletin boards**

In the same way, the agency did not include a bulletin board on its web site. Visitors could not post their opinions or perceptions of electoral politics online and hence had limited control over the web site agenda and its contents. It is proposed that Elections Canada should consider including a virtual bulletin platform on its web site in which participants and political actors could deliberate electoral subjects. Apart from engaging all relevant political role-players in deliberation civic exercises, such a forum could also support public input processes in policy-making activities. Electors and legislators, for example, could communicate their views to the agency, in a public arena, allowing all participants to consider miscellaneous perspectives. A bulletin board could therefore give participants the opportunity to consider all posted messages in a critical-reflective manner. The assumption is that such informed reflection could lead to meaningful criticism, recovered public opinion, and hence consensus on relevant election issues.

- **Standardised feedback forms**

In view of prior comments, the web site's standardised "e-mail form" permitted voters to formulate their questions and comments in a manner acceptable to the administrative standards of Elections Canada. This meant that e-mail requests and inputs were channelled to the appropriate electoral subdivisions or concerned employees. Accordingly, Elections Canada's responsiveness to public enquires could recover. *Additionally, the web form enabled voters the freedom to formulate and express their autonomous opinions. Citizen participation and consultation could thus be achieved as voters could give their input on electoral democracy or the public practice of Elections Canada.* (See theoretical statement 2, Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.)

- **Organisational contact details**

Given that a public sphere can only exist if the possibility of interaction between participants exists, the contact details of Elections Canada were provided on each web page. A toll-free telephone number, a fax line, a postal address, and an e-mail hyperlink were readily available to anyone who wanted to make contact with the agency. A special telephone number was advertised for people who were deaf or heard of hearing. Although the available communication opportunities did not make possible truly interactive communication, they expanded voters' choices and opportunities to communicate with Elections Canada and engage in discussion.

- **Special online events**

Elections Canada did not advertise the web casting of any live events on its web site. This could be considered as a limitation, since special online events might generate publicity and awareness of certain electoral issues and offline public events. Special web casts could then secure more inclusive participation in the electoral system for voters who might not attend live events in person. In conjunction with web forums, political participants could also perhaps debate the significance of such public events after it has taken place. In line with the public-sphere theory, special online events could therefore make certain that the welfares of more voters receive consideration when launching offline public projects or civic events.

- **Online polls/surveys/petitions**

No examples of online polls, surveys, or petitions were found on the web site. This was a definite limitation of the web site seeing as Elections Canada could have gauged public opinion on a wide range of elections topics and concerns via such measuring techniques. Although online opinion polls and surveys do not fully resemble interactive communication, such devices could have demonstrated Elections Canada's willingness to incorporate popular opinion in its

overall educational campaigns, policy formulations, and the enactment of its general mandate. The argument holds that public feedback could help the electoral body to better prepare educational initiatives and enhance overall organisational performances. Online polls and petitions could also aid voters to determine *and* respectfully deal with the diverse political views of other participants, and in the process help build critical public opinion.

- *Online information gathering mechanisms*

Section 5.4.2 revealed that Elections Canada did not automatically create personal profiles on its web site users. As a result, upon entering the Elections Canada web site all private and social statuses of participants were bracketed and suspended. Participants could then partake on the web site or express political opinions via for instance the e-mail web form without fear of biased treatment.

5.5 THE APPLICABILITY OF THE HABERMASIAN PUBLIC-SPHERE THEORY

With these results in mind, it was discovered that Elections Canada fared reasonably well at applying the normative public-sphere to the functioning of its organisational web site.

With regard to maintaining a public sphere free of strategic contents (commercial advertising or administrative propaganda), the Elections Canada web site contained links to several external web sites that would encourage the formation of public opinion. (See Sections 5.4.5 and 5.4.6.) Simply increasing the amount of information on the organisation's web site would not by itself increase the quality of public opinion. In view of this, the web site linked specifically to non-partisan, non-commercial organisations that substantiated the usefulness of information already available. Instrumental rationality was thus pre-empted from interfering with the transparency and openness of public debate and information collection. Citizens were informed well enough on electoral democracy by visiting the Elections Canada web site and the related sites to which it gave entrance. The web site consequently sufficed as a mediating internet public sphere in which an even balance of power was afforded to all participants who participated on Elections Canada's web sphere.

This effort was also supported by the web site disclaimer, which guaranteed the even-handed treatment of all web site visitors, as well as prevented commercial reproductions of the web sphere's contents. (See the "policies and strategic plans" category in Section 5.4.2 for further discussion on this dimension.) Consequently, no preferential or biased treatment was given to any participant based on his race, gender, socio-economic status, educational background or any other defining characteristic. The electoral agency also went to great lengths in explaining its constitutional remit and describing its autonomous status as a public institution by means of

extensive online accounts of legislation and regulations. (See Section 5.4.1.) The Elections Canada web site thus operated, in terms of the public-sphere norm of free and fair participation, as a virtual public domain of democratic web communication.

Given the huge amount of research reports, voter educative materials, and voter information on the web site, it was also concluded that voters could become aware of electoral information contexts that would facilitate critical thinking and reflection. (These content categories were comprehensively assessed in Sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.5). Through stimulated informed reflective exercises, electors were then able to keep a direct check on the electoral system and the public practices of Elections Canada. Certainly, through such reflections, voters would also be able to self-determine new directions for themselves as active citizens of a democratic society.

Considering the "public announcements" category, it was also decided that the electorate were further motivated to build public opinion, since readily available press releases, an e-mail alert service, and minutes of public meetings allowed voters to receive timely, accurate information, as well as analyse public judgements and performances. (Refer to the "public announcements" category in Section 5.4.3.) These information categories thus secured, although not by way of explicit interactive features, that Elections Canada's web site functioned as a top-down democratic communications medium. At the very least, online electoral information contexts allowed voters to engage knowledgeably in more meaningful "offline" participatory democracy opportunities and debates.

Furthermore, the normative concept of the public-sphere requires that public will formation should be driven by the commitment to on-going deliberation and informed reflection on diverse interests, statements, and values. Public opinion formation and self-governance, as indispensable democratic values, were advanced by web sites features that encouraged voters to self-express their political opinions, as well as submit requests for additional information. Voters could engage more inclusively and actively in civic projects, as well as have more direct access to the electoral agency's decision-makers and electoral politics processes. On the other hand, a definite deficiency of the web sphere was that these opportunities of democratic interaction were limited to electronic mail only. Elections Canada would then have to be prepared to respond to public correspondences and queries in order for this self-expressive opportunity to function to its fullest potential.

As a potential mediating communications medium, it was also determined that the web site lacked sufficient discursive opportunities such as online chat rooms or virtual discussion platforms. If the web site is to become an authentic public sphere, it should facilitate citizen-

based and citizen-guided knowledge exchanges – voters should have the dominant voice in the electoral internet public sphere. This could only be realised if ongoing online citizen participation and discussions occur in an open, unobstructed, and top-bottom manner. The Elections Canada web site did however direct visitors to the web pages of registered political parties, some of which facilitated interaction between electors and political representatives via already-established bulletin boards and interactive chat forums. As might reasonably be expected, entrance to such external web sites presented potential voters with information on political party policy issues that assisted them to choose better between political contestants and possible political representatives.

Then again, the Canadian electoral commission did link to the official web site of the Canadian government; as a result, visitors might confuse the information offered on the commission's web site with the views and values of the Canadian government. This misreading could then obfuscate the supposed truthfulness of the electoral agency's web site; therefore, the commission might appear partial to governmental welfares. As contained by the Habermasian thesis, a legitimate public sphere is only possible once independence from all partial interests is gained.

In terms of universal access criteria, it was nonetheless concluded that the Elections Canada web site adequately addressed web site participation for voters with special needs and voters from different language and cultural groups. (See Section 5.4.6. for a more comprehensive evaluation.) This was achieved by, among others, customisable language preferences and multi-media learning materials suitable to visually impaired or hard of hearing individuals. Physical entry barriers to the web sphere were removed also by allowing visitors to access and retrieve the larger part of the web site's materials free of charge. At no cost, expect for internet surfing expenses, voters could collect numerous informative electoral publications. The dimension of inclusivity was further advanced by provisions of software necessary for retrieving certain items. In general, it was evident that these technical measures not only enhanced web site navigation, but also permitted diverse electoral publics, irrespective of social or physical attributes, to expand their choices of electoral information resources.

Despite some obvious limitations, the Elections Canada web site exhibited the potential to relocate the traditional, liberal public sphere to cyberspace in which democratic, interactive communication could occur in support of public opinion formation. In general, the web site provided voters, as private citizens, with adequate opportunities to exercise critical-reflective will formation in a public arena. Although the inherent interactive nature of the internet was not fully exploited by Elections Canada, the web site did guide voters in more open and fair participatory

knowledge acquisition processes. Ultimately, well-informed electors would then have a better chance at influencing and contributing to public practice and hence, begin to develop a better vision for the common good of a developed democratic society.

5.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the trends that emerged from the qualitative content analysis of the Elections Canada web site. The investigation showed that the Election Canada web site fared reasonably well at resembling the Habermasian public-sphere model. It would appear as if the web site sufficed as a voter educative tool and not simply as a marketing or "profiling" mechanism. Despite some of the web site's shortcomings, it was concluded that the Elections Canada web site might be regarded as a trustworthy internet public arena in which possible public will formation could be achieved.

From the analysis, it was therefore apparent that the principles of the reportedly non-operational Habermasian public-sphere theory were applicable not only to traditional means of mass communication, i.e. television or radio, but could also be applied to an alternative new media public space such as the internet. The analysis revealed that the internet could be used, within a developed democracy, by an electoral management body in order to support, and perhaps even rejuvenate, democratic values such as equal electoral participation and competition. With this empirical evidence in mind, the following chapter investigated whether the internet could also be used to consolidate the political culture of a developing democratic circumstance.

The next chapter therefore introduces the detailed analysis of IEC's web site. Once again, during analysis, an attempt was made to test the specific theoretical statements of this study against the actual performance of the IEC web site as an internet public sphere. The findings that emerged during the content analysis were also measured against the perspectives of senior IEC personnel by means of semi-structured interviews. Additionally, the conclusions drawn during the examination of the Elections Canada web site were used as a benchmark for the analysis of the IEC web sphere. As explained earlier, this was done in order to determine whether Elections Canada, in the context of a matured, developed democracy, fared better at shaping democratic political participation via its web site than the IEC's web site, which functioned in the context of a developing democratic society. The analysis not only attempted to discover whether an internet public sphere could be fashioned by the IEC, but also whether the IEC internet public sphere could function as effectively as its Canadian counterpart could.

CHAPTER SIX

Analysis and interpretation of the IEC web site

You see things; and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were; and I say, "Why not?"
George Bernard Shaw, (1921)

6.1 INTRODUCTION

From the previous chapter it followed that the basic assumptions of the Habermasian public sphere theory, impartiality, universality and public will formation, could to a certain extent, be applied to the Elections Canada web site. This indicated that the web site could potentially function as a virtual public sphere in a developed democracy. In this chapter, the concept is explored further to investigate whether the above-mentioned principles are applied in a developing democracy, such a South Africa.

For this purposes, the IEC's official organisational web site is considered as case study.

6.2 ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The dimensions of impartiality, universality, and public opinion formation were analysed during the content analyses and will now be noted and reviewed in the following sections. These dimensions were analysed coinciding with the criteria listed in Chapter 4 (*Table 4.1.*) The categories were not mutually exclusive and thus significant overlapping occurred during the investigative process. Furthermore, as the interpretative exercise was a continuous process, some preliminary findings will emerge from the subsequent discussions. These trends, as explained in the introduction, will be merged into conclusions in the subsequent chapter.

The web site analysis occurred according to the sub-divided nine web pages as identified by their main headings. (See Chapter 4, Section 4.5.2.) The IEC's web site was analysed in real time as it appeared on the internet; hence, the contents and features of the web pages could not be manipulated or distorted by the researcher. As established previously, the observations were recorded in the past tense as the web site could have been updated or removed since the original analyses. The analysis of the web site occurred during a two-week period starting on July 12, 2004 and concluding on July 19, 2004.

Semi-structured interviews were employed to obtain additional information on the management and structure of the IEC's web site (See Section 4.4 and Section 4.5.3) The data generated was used to verify the findings and interpretations that emerged during the content analysis of the

organisation's web site. Moreover, the data was tested against the theoretical statements proposed in Chapter 3 (Sections 3.5.4.1, 3.5.4.2, and 3.5.5.1.)

6.3 THE INDEPENDENT ELECTORAL COMMISSION – IEC

6.3.1 Organisational background

The IEC was established in 1993 in terms of the interim Constitution as the electoral management body managing free and fair elections in South Africa. (See section 2.2.1.) Three years after this initial foundation, the electoral agency was instituted as a long-standing, publicly funded organisation in charge of the electoral system and all related electoral processes. At the time of the study, the agency co-ordinated all its activities and events from its national head quarters located in Pretoria.

In addition, as was determined previously, the IEC was charged with creating an environment conducive to electors making informed political choices at the elections polls, and as a result, the IEC was mandated to not only administer elections, but also to deal with voter education in South Africa. (Also, see Section, 2.2.1, Chapter 2.) Consequently, from the mission and vision statements – published on their organisational web site as well – it became apparent that the IEC should be considered as one of the constitutional mainstays of sustainable democracy in South Africa.

The IEC vision statement was:

- *To strengthen constitutional democracy through the delivery of free and fair elections in which every voter is able to record his or her informed choice.*

The organisation's mission statement subsequently read as follows:

- *The Independent Electoral Commission is a permanent body created by the Constitution to promote and safeguard democracy in South Africa. Although publicly funded and accountable to parliament, the Commission is independent of the government. Its immediate task is the impartial management of free and fair elections at all levels of government.*

In addition to the vision and mission statements, the IEC announced that its fundamental strategic objectives were:

- *To deliver free and fair elections in which all members of the electorate have the ability to make informed choices and exercise their rights to vote for their chosen parties.*

- *To create a sustainable organisation with the ability to deliver an election for any level of government within six weeks.*

In view of these declarations, it was deduced that the IEC identified every entitled voter in South Africa as being a part of its target audience. (See Section 6.4.2 for a discussion about the IEC's web site target audiences.) With the intention of fulfilling this objective, the IEC was divided into several departments headed by an executive structure that consisted of department managers, the office of the deputy chief electoral officer, the chief electoral officer, and finally, the constitutionally appointed commissioners of the organisation.

In terms of the supervision and administration of the IEC organisational web site, first launched in 1999, the chief information officer, the manager of business applications, and the communications manager reported directly to the deputy chief electoral officer accountable for communications. The running of the web site, although officially in the hands of the communications department, thus involved various management structures and executive role-players. Accordingly, interviewees pointed out that the IT (information technology) department was responsible for the technical administration of the web site, whereas the communications department identified and decided which information could be published on the web site. The communications department was also responsible for how often the contents available on the web site were updated.

6.4. THE IEC ORGANISATIONAL WEB SITE
6.4.1 Objectives and functions of the web site

During nearly all of the interviews, it became apparent that the IEC web site was chiefly developed as an organisational "profiling tool" instead of utilising it as a prospective, resourceful voter education platform. As one interviewee explained, the web site was not so much focussed on "voter education than it was concerned with conveying the organisational mission and vision statements" to the IEC's stakeholders. (See theoretical statement 2, Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.) For this reason, several of the interviewees indicated that, the web site was therefore not originally put up as a voter educative utility, engaging the electorate in deliberation on electoral concerns and democracy, but rather functioned as a "basic voter information" dissemination tool. As a result, it was imagined that the site would inform the electorate about the history of the election system, the elections processes involved, in addition to describing the "structures and the people involved in managing the organisation". The IEC did thus not consciously seek to expend their organisational web site as a potential internet public sphere of public debate.

Rather, the web site was originally put together in a very short space of time; consequently, the interviewees explained that the IEC did not have sufficient time to develop a comprehensive internet policy describing the reasons and the strategic importance of setting up such a "virtual

office" on the internet. Several of the interviewees also mentioned that, to date, the IEC has not yet established clear guiding principles for the running of the organisational web site. Besides, at the time of the study, it was told that the IEC was in the process of developing an overall communications policy, which would ultimately determine the strategic position of the internet within the IEC's organisational structure.

The organisational web site was therefore principally measured as a supplementary or "back up" communications medium instead of a democratic communication platform of public will formation. All of the discussions revealed that, regarding voter education and general communication initiatives aimed at electors, the IEC placed more value on the use of "traditional" means of mass communication such as radio, television, newspapers, and print media. For instance, according to one of the officials, electoral brochures and pamphlets were translated to several of South Africa's eleven official languages, whereas the web site's contents were restricted to English only. (Refer to Section 6.5.6 for a fuller account of the universality aspect the IEC web site.) Likewise, the interviewee argued that electoral information could be broadcasted on radio and television in a variety of languages reaching out to much larger, diverse audiences than the web site ever would. In support of these arguments, the discussions showed that different media were used to reach different stakeholder groups. As one official put it, "voter education messages were packaged in different media according to the psycho-demographic (sic) profiles" of each stakeholder group.

Hence, all of the interviewees indicated that the web site restricted the organisation's communicative reach, since most South Africans lacked access to the internet and would consequently not be able to access or use the IEC web site. (See Section 6.5.6.) Electoral placards, brochures, and the IEC call centre thus received most of the organisation's effort and attention as regards to finding methods by which to communicate with South African voters before and during elections.

Furthermore, the web site's use was allegedly constrained by restrictive legislations and regulations. For instance, it was explained that privacy laws prohibited the IEC from fully employing SMS services and e-mail facilities in communicating with the electorate during elections because the IEC would have to obtain voters' acquiescence to do so. At the time of the study, the voters' registration roll database – linked to the web site – also did not have the technical capacity to incorporate persons' cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses in the system. The IEC did however indicate that it was in the process of exploring such endeavours for future application.

On the other hand, the discussions showed that although the web site reached out to a specific, limited grouping of media users, it did generate much interest and activity during the 2004 general elections period. As confirmed during all of the interviews, it was especially the "am I registered?' and "where do I vote?" utilities that received the most interest from prospective voters. (See section 6.5.5 and 6.5.6 for an analysis of these features.)

6.4.2 Target groups of the web site

When asked who the IEC intended to reach through its web site, most of the interviewees divided the electoral body's stakeholders into two major categories. On the one hand, the IEC sought out an internal audience including all IEC employees and accredited voting staff. Conversely, the IEC identified the "South African electorate" as the second main target audience. This group was described as encompassing the "general public" (*sic*), NGOs, CSOs, churches, tertiary institutions, the South African government and governmental departments, the presidency, and "companies outside of South Africa". This last stakeholder group comprised international observers such as democratic research foundations, donor groups, large-scale monetary organisations, and governments. In view of the theoretical background, it would then seem as if the IEC aimed to secure the participation of all political actors in the electoral system and related processes. *This would suggest then that the IEC's web site should also be strategically used in order to fulfil the organisation's objective.*

Interestingly enough, all of the interviews made special mention of South African political parties as a leading stakeholder group. This category of role-players was described as a unique grouping of stakeholders that required individual consideration and attention. Accordingly, the web site was regarded by the IEC as a "valuable information resource tool" by which to communicate with political parties in South Africa. For instance, it was explained that political parties could access information about electoral advertising on the web site. This kind of information ensured that political parties were informed on and aware of the "do's and don'ts of electoral participation". One official pointed out that electoral staff liaised with political parties and political leaders, especially ahead of and after elections, to determine what types of information political representatives would prefer to retrieve from the IEC's web site. Additionally, the IEC published all elections results on the web site during elections times so that political parties – including all other interested persons – could inspect and view validated results. According to the interviewees, this "real-time accessibility of results" was an especially popular feature with political parties during the 2004 general elections. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2 for the theoretical statement concerning "public opinion formation".)

However, in terms of universal access to the IEC web site, this special highlighting of political parties as a leading stakeholder group could negatively influence the expediency of the web site for other, relevant role-players. This distinction between "prominent" and less prominent role-players had the implication that the IEC's web site contents primarily aimed at providing political representatives with information rather than aiming at informing all concerned publics. *For the IEC's web site to function optimally as an open space of public opinion formation, the web pages should reflect and contain miscellaneous standpoints and values.* As the Habermasian public-sphere thesis would have it, a public sphere is only useful inasmuch as it represents all societal interests with the aim of dislodging the power of elitist structures. This would then suggest that the IEC should more deliberately seek to satisfy the informational needs of all of its stakeholders and not just that of the political leaders and representatives of the country. (See Section 3.5.4.2 and Section 3.5.5.1 in Chapter 3.)

Lastly, as mentioned earlier, one of the interviewees believed that tertiary institutions constituted an additional special interest group, since the IEC regularly received requests from researchers who solicited specific data and documentation for inspection and analysis. One official claimed that the IEC web site served as an "information database for researchers, scholars, and professionals conducting research on our South African electoral system and democratic regime". Once again, the IEC should take care not to favour one stakeholder group over another, since public will formation should be based on the norm of open, equal participation and debate by all participants.

6.4.3 Shortcomings and achievements of the web site

Even though the IEC identified the above-mentioned groups as "possible web site targets", no formal research was conducted to determine the exact profiles of these perceived groupings and their related informational needs. Instead, the web site was informed by the rationale "we knew what information we have available, therefore we knew what information we can make available". As established earlier, the IEC aimed at "building an internet information providing (*sic*) service so that news could flow more voluntarily from us to whomever uses our web site." In contrast to the public-sphere ideal, this could imply that information exchange did not follow two-way, bottom-up communication patterns, but rather flowed from the IEC to the electorate in a linear, one-way fashion. *In order to reach critical-reflective public opinion, participation on the IEC web site should be equitable and unrestricted.* The IEC should thus focus on establishing opportunities for all web participants to receive *and* send information and opinions via its web site. Ideally, visitors to the IEC web site should be able to interact with one-another and the

electoral agency in an open, equal, and consultative manner. (See Section 6.5.7 for an assessment on the "feedback and consultative mechanisms" category.)

As indicated in the previous section, several of the respondents reiterated that the web site was a useful tool for communicating information to political parties. For example, as discovered during the content analysis of the web site, comprehensive accounts of electoral legislation and regulations were accessible via the web site. These categories of information could be of significant import to political parties contesting elections, given that they could gain ready access to relevant electoral information via the IEC web site. Political parties could use these types of information to become more involved in electoral decision-making processes by providing the IEC with critical input on, for example, policy issues, and other decision-making practices. As one of the interviews explicated, the political party floor crossing process and applicable policy were described on the web site in depth; therefore, political parties and political candidates were able to inspect these procedures and determine the legitimacy of the process and the results.

Bearing in mind the remarks offered in the foregoing section, the IEC should refrain from restricting its web sites contents to the interests of a singular, special interest group such as political representatives. Notwithstanding this caution, it could however be argued that in providing political parties with information, the IEC could ensure that its own administrative workings and constitutional role in society were transparent and appreciated by the "remainder" of the South African electorate. Electors could thus inspect the electoral system and decide for themselves whether the IEC, political parties, political candidates, and political leaders adhered to applicable electoral legislation and regulation.

On the other hand, as one interviewee conceded, the IEC web site per se, was not developed with the intention of actively generating public debate or two-way communication. (See Section 6.5.7 for an assessment of chat rooms and bulletin boards). The interviewee explained: "Talking about the two-way thing...I am not so sure...I don't think we can look at...for instance something like a chat site. However, it is an area we can look at..." Another official added that, as the South African electorate was considered as the IEC's "foremost audience", the Electoral Commission could not simply rely on "technological trends in the international community...in terms of what we could do..." The official continued that: "As *we* (emphasis added) develop internet capability in the future...there could be more opportunities to engage *this* (emphasis added) institution on the internet...*we* (emphasis added) would therefore keep on revisiting this issue in the future."

Arguably, the web site therefore did not expressly function as a two-way communicative means by which public opinion could be appropriated, but rather existed as an information dissemination platform or a "push" technology by which the IEC disseminated already available information. The web site, accordingly, contained vast amounts of legislative and regulative information, examples of elections reports, media releases, and electoral events calendars. Despite the fact that the IEC web site did not aim to stimulate actively online debate, its information-rich web pages could inform electors on the electoral system and the electoral process. The IEC web site could thus indirectly encourage possible discussion on electoral issues in "offline" forums.

The only means of two-way communication on the web site were evident in the e-mail hyperlinks provided on the web site. (Also, see Section 6.5.7.) Additionally, the IEC organisational contact details were promoted on the web site. As one of the officials stated, the IEC promoted this information not only on its web site, but also on all other promotional and educational materials so that "the public who lacked internet access could also engage with the IEC". (Refer to Section 6.5.7 for an assessment of the "contact details" category.) *Although the web site itself thus did not encourage "interactive dialogue opportunities between the IEC and the electorate", the e-mail hyperlinks and the contact details of the IEC could be used to by electors to facilitate potential, two-way information exchange.* (See Section 3.5.4.2, Chapter 3.)

It terms of additional shortcomings of the web site, as conceded by most of the interviewees, some of the web pages' contents were not updated as much as necessary. (See Section 6.5.5 for a discussion on the "currency of sources" aspect.)

As established earlier, the communications department was responsible for checking whether the web site's information "was correct and user-friendly". However, given the fact that the IEC lacked a distinct internet policy, the communication department relied mainly on the "line function approach" to feed it with ideas about which web site contents should be available or modified. In this manner, individual departments within the IEC might want that particular messages be broadcasted during different phases of the electoral process. For instance, during voter registration periods certain departments, concerned with this process, might require the web site to promote and publish voter registration drives and pertinent information. The web site was thus regarded as a "very resourceful tool, depending on the time of year, and on whether it's an election year."

Conversely, discussions with all of the interviewees proved that departments often failed to alert the communication department about which information was outmoded and which should be

removed altogether. On top of this, time constraints were cited as preventing the proper, dedicated administration of the web site. Some of the web pages were not topical anymore as "informal decisions often determine what information, and *when* (emphasis added), we publish on our web site."

To solve this problem, a few of the interviewees indicated that a dedicated team of staff should manage and update the contents of the web site. However, in the absence of a formal internet policy and formal research regarding the informational needs of the electorate, such an aspiration could take some time to achieve. Notwithstanding the fact that a great deal of the web site information related to time-specific electoral occasions, some of the information remained relevant throughout the year; hence, electors could access these types of contents at whatever time they needed. The IEC officials therefore stressed that one of the greatest successes of its web site was that information was available 24-hours a day and that users could log onto the IEC web site from any location in the world. One official stated: "During the elections our call centre helpdesk was linked to our web site databases through an automated voice service, so, voters could gather, for instance, their voting station details even after hours, even if they did not have internet access." In terms of supporting the concepts of "inclusivity" and "universal access", the IEC felt that voters could make informed political choices by gathering relevant information via its call centre support desk and its organisational web site "even after hours, even if they cannot go online".

However, during the interviews it was emphasised that the IEC could not guarantee that all South Africans had access to its web site because large parts of the country lacked the proper supporting infrastructure to gain internet access. (Refer to Section 2.4, Chapter 2.) It was pointed out that the web site did not rank well in terms of using it as a voter education medium. In addition, many of the interviewees remarked that its web site users were predominantly white, middle-class male academics, and professionals who knew exactly what kind of information they were looking for. It was mentioned that albeit voters in rural areas could gain internet access through community libraries, community centres, or internet cafés they would not use internet facilities as "rural areas will use computers for basic things, they aren't literate enough to use, I think, our web site. Actually, the web site is for people that are already educated." None of the interviewees was aware of any special IEC projects or initiatives that aimed at increasing voters' access to the IEC web site. One interviewee observed that he would "like to see more online collaboration with other democratic institutions, newspaper groups, and youth organisations" in order to add to the merit of the IEC web site as an information resource.

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Nonetheless, considering some of the web site's successes, the interviewees mentioned that one of the biggest challenges, particularly during the 2004 general elections, was to engage the South African youth in electoral participation. For this reason, the IEC decided to link an SMS facility to its web site so that young electors could check their voter registration and voting station details. This interactive feature was reportedly very popular with young voters, but apparently received much interest from the general voting populace as well. One official said that during the elections period, apparently more than sixty SMS enquiries per hour were handled by the web site database service. During this period the IEC web site received huge amounts of traffic and "at the height of the media campaign and election race, our web site was considered as one of the top five web sites in South Africa." However, the IEC web site did not contain any other enticing features that could convince young voters to engage in the electoral process. Instead, an attempt was made by the IEC to engage the youth through "tailor-made advertisements, debates, and competitions on youth television programmes, radio, especially community radio, and in magazines aimed at youngsters". These activities were combined with registration drives that involved famous South African celebrities that were well-known by South African young people.

Another success of the web site, according to the interviews, was that it could contain large volumes of information whereas the "traditional" modes of communication, for example brochures or voter guides, could only carry limited amounts of information. Mention was also made on the availability of a number of external hyperlinks allowing voters to gather further information from external organisations and companies. (Refer to Sections 6.5.5 and 6.5.7 for an evaluation of the significance of external hyperlinks.) As a result, information relating to electoral matters need not be restricted to limited topics or incomplete accounts, since the internet allows huge amounts of information to be published online.

Finally, various training manuals, designed for voting staff, were available online. These handbooks informed voting staff, accredited supporting staff, and the general electorate on voting, counting, and results procedures. (See Section 6.5.5.) These types of publications could be regarded as increasing the electorate's understanding of the electoral system and ultimately, how the democratic system operates. Voters could thus compare the actions of the IEC with applicable legislation and hence determine the efficacy of the IEC. (See Section 3.5.4.2, Chapter 3.)

The remainder of this chapter will now present the trends that emerged during the content analysis of the web site according to the category criteria framework contained in *Table 4.1* in Chapter 4. The results will also be discussed against the theoretical statements offered in

Chapter 3, Sections 3.5.4.1, 3.5.4.2, and 3.5.5.1. Consequently, the discussions will attempt to explain and contextualise the results of the content analysis within the normative principles of the public-sphere theory.

6.5 ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

6.5.1 Reports

Even though the IEC's front page did not contain any explicit manifestations of self-contained reports, various internal hypertext links pointed to their associated locations on separate, independent sub pages or external web pages. The dimensions of the Reports category included:

- **Annual reports**

In terms of annual reports, it was found out that the IEC web site did not retain any examples of such records. Certainly, for the IEC to function as an impartial electoral management agency its administrators and accredited staff should be held accountable by the public for the policy decisions the IEC enforces and the actions it takes to realize its mandate. In other words, role-players, ranging from legislators, electors, the mass media and international observers, should be able to keep in check the activities of the IEC on a continuous basis. This is however only possible provided the IEC publishes its annual reports online. The IEC should then consider the option of publicising its annual reports or other performance indicator reviews via its web site to improve the transparency of its administrative workings and to explain its role and position in a developing democracy situation. This measure could also support universal access to the IEC's internet public sphere since voters could retrieve valuable contents necessary in formulating reflective inquiry into the electoral and democratic systems. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.)

- **Financial reports and financing disclosures**

Additionally, no proof of financial reports and financing disclosures were present on the day of the analysis. The lack of online access to budgetary and spending information was a definite shortcoming of the IEC web site. Financial records could show that the financing of political candidates and political party campaigns occurred in an open and fair manner without interference from mercantile or state imperatives. The availability of budgetary and financial information on the IEC web sphere could therefore contribute to the voting public's appreciation of how public taxes were legitimately used in support of democratic purposes such as electoral events. Voters could then participate more knowledgeably in the electoral process as soon as they are informed on the financial affairs of the political institutions and individuals who eventually represent their public concerns in parliament. By providing the voting public with

detailed fiscal reports and organisational performance reviews, the IEC web sphere could ensure that voters become more politically competent and empowered in deciding for themselves about the legitimacy of the democratic system. An informed electorate could then stimulate the establishment of a politically active citizenry that could participate meaningfully in a democracy, and that could hold ruling public structures or oppressive representatives accountable for the public practice.

- *Election reports*

Although the IEC web site lacked annual reports and financial reviews, the caption *Election 2004 Results*, directed users to the latest general elections results. Election reports were also found respectively in the *Results* section and the purported online "library". These reports were customisable to fit the specific informational needs of users by fixing a choice of predetermined, search-specific parameters. For example, limits could be set according to preferences that generated reports on national elections results, national elections regional results, and provincial elections assessments. Detailed statistical reports condensed such results into easy accessible, online breakdowns. Furthermore, some of the elections reports were made more accessible through simple visual representations or so-called elections maps. (See Section 6.5.6 for a discussion on the "ease of navigation" aspect.) Every report also specified the date and time on which reports were last updated. During the interviews, the IEC officials corroborated that these particulars indicated that the online statistics were accurate, timely reproductions of the official elections results as originally filed and validated by the various regional electoral offices during election periods.

The availability of elections results and proceedings is paramount to the successful management of a credible electoral web sphere, since the electoral system should reflect the choices the electorate made at the elections polls. Via online elections reports, in conjunction with legislative and regulative documents, electors were therefore supplied with information on how electoral events and activities were managed and completed successfully. (See Section 3.5.4.2, Chapter 3.) As a result, all political participants should be able to determine whether the electoral process was free and fair; hence, whether the democratic system is trustworthy, legitimate, and inclusive. Lastly, web site elections reports are very valuable, because voters could examine elections results by themselves as opposed to relying on official media reports and verifications by additional gatekeepers or biased agenda-setters. In publishing results on the internet, the public could have immediate access to election results the minute they are verified by the electoral agency.

In addition to the above-discussed results reviews, the purported online library included illustrations of self-contained reports as well. These assessments were available in the appearance of statistical reports and graphs. Regrettably, access to these self-contained documents required that users needed the appropriate software to open such documents. The web site, however, did not offer the user the option to download the requisite software. (See Section 6.5.6 for a detailed discussion on the accessibility of the IEC's web site contents.) [0]This is in contrast with the Elections Canada web site, which gave the user the option of downloading the required software.

• *Research reports*

Although the IEC included various elections results reviews on its web site, the expediency of these reports were somewhat overshadowed by the absence of research reviews. The online library did not show any proof of lectures or presentations as proclaimed by their matching headings. The library section did nonetheless include a few instances of research papers.

Regardless, as indicated in foregoing paragraphs, access to these self-contained documents was problematical seeing as only users with the proper software could retrieve these files. *The IEC should include more research reports on its web site as this could augment public opinion formation exercises regarding electoral matters in addition to enlarging the voter corps' knowledge on how the electoral system operates.* Research publications could assist voters to make improved and informed political choices, since it could create public awareness on significant political issues. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.) The IEC should also consider soliciting the electorate's critical input concerning future research topics via such interactive web site features as bulletin boards, chat forums, and e-mail facilities. Through consultation with the electorate, the IEC web sphere could enhance meaningful political participation and political discussion among electors themselves as well as the agency, since voters could indicate which topics should be on the research agenda. The IEC could then also become more responsive to the specific needs of the electorate.

Moreover, through such feedback sessions the IEC might decentralise its decision-making capacities to include public opinion and hence improve its organisational capacity and overall efficacy. Ultimately, as an information organ, the IEC web sphere could function as a tool of two-way learning experiences by which voters shape public resolve that could influence political and public practice.

- **Minutes of meetings**

The option to view official IEC agendas and minutes of meetings was not available on the web site. In view of the preceding paragraph, it would be more appropriate to remove these links from the *Library* section altogether as their attendance could be misleading to web site visitors. The IEC should take more effort in publishing such records on their web site as this could increase the transparency of the organisation's administrative processes and consequently build public confidence in the effectiveness of the organisation. The electorate could expend these types of information in deliberations on the legality of the actions the IEC used to enforce its mandate.

6.5.2 Policies and strategic plans

Considering the "policies and strategic plans" category, the following indicators were evaluated on the IEC web site:

- **Legislation and regulations**

Legislation and regulations applicable to the administration of elections were observed on the *Legislation* page. The contents on this page were restricted to the minimum as hyperlinks provided access to all of the available regulations and acts. Once more, however, admission to these documents was restricted to users in possession of the applicable software required for downloading such documents. Besides, access was problematical since several of the links lead to external web sites without proper forewarning of such exists. (The presence and the influence of external links were assessed and reviewed comprehensively in Sections 6.5.5 and 6.5.6.) A sub-category on the *Legislation* page delineated the various administrative processes required in running successful elections.

Features of the "policy" category were also obtainable on the *Voting* page. This page contained subsections that explained regulations applicable to the appointment of elections observers. These summaries were abridged extracts from the Electoral Act, 1998 (Act No. 73 of 1998). Individuals who wanted to apply as potential elections observers could download application forms from this page. (See Section 6.5.5 for more detail on web site downloads.) Lastly, the page, *Political Parties*, described the guidelines and procedures pertinent to political party candidate nominations, political party funding, and political party registrations. Additional information, regarding such procedures could also be obtained by contacting the IEC head office in Pretoria. A telephone number and a dedicated e-mail link were supplied.

As discussed in the theoretical review, a legitimate public sphere is only possible once independence from all partial interests is gained. (See Section 3.5.5.1, Chapter 3.) In support of this ideal, it is imperative that electors and concerned role-players fully understand the legal and regulative context in which elections are conducted. As a result, the IEC published extensive accounts of electoral law and policy on its web site in which it announced, explicated, and affirmed the IEC's lack of partisanship or favouritism. These accounts described the IEC's constitutional role and mandate; consequently, voters could use electoral legislation and regulations as check-and-balance sheets by which to measure the efficiency of the IEC and the usefulness its web sphere contents. By publicising these types of information online, voters were also informed on their role and position within the democratic circumstance. Better-informed voters could then participate more meaningfully in the democracy by knowing and appreciating their political rights.

- **Vision and mission statements**

In addition to these patent examples of self-contained policies, hyperlinks offered on the primary fixed menu bar, pointed to additional dimensions of the "policy" category. For instance, the vision and mission statements of the IEC were on hand on the *About Us* page as a truncated version of the Electoral Commission Act, 1996 (Act No. 41 of 1996).

Comparable to advertising its legal remit online, the IEC thus confirmed its constitutional mandate as the self-determining, non-partisan executive body in charge of non-discriminatory electoral participation for all entitled South African voters. These officially authorised commitments therefore precluded commercial or governmental forces from distorting the accuracy and reliability of the information available on the IEC web sphere. By publicly disclosing it vision and mission statements, the IEC in effect conceded that the South African voters' corps could hold the agency accountable in the dereliction of its formally declared duties. Additionally, the vision and mission statements established the inclusivity of the electoral system, because the statements aimed at securing the electoral participation rights of all qualified voters. By implication this commitment to fixing equal opportunity of electoral engagement for all political actors, could also be extended to the communication channels the IEC used to communicate with voters; for this reason universal access to the IEC's web sphere could also be considered as one of the civic rights voters are entitled. Finally, the vision and mission statements established the legitimacy of elections results, since the IEC committed itself to free and fair management of electoral events.

* **Disclaimer and copyrights**

Several illustrations of official policy were also discerned on the front page in the appearance of a web site disclaimer policy, copyright notice, and privacy policy.

Firstly, the copyright announcement described in concise stipulations what the position of the IEC was pertaining to the copyright protection of its web sphere and its associated contents. Particular emphasis was placed on commercial infringements. Appropriately, none of the web site materials – i.e. pages, documents, and online imagery – could be utilised by persons for any commercial intentions. (See Section 3.5.5.1, Chapter 3.) For example, members of the media would not be permitted to alter original IEC web site materials without the explicit consent of IEC officials. The policy also stipulated that persons could not retrieve or publish the web site's contents if it entailed any form of advertising, soliciting, or the promotion of services or goods. Consequently, the IEC prohibited commercial influences from interfering with the truthfulness and authenticity of IEC web site contents, since the disclaimer ensured that biased interests could not distort or manipulate the information. The policy supported unrestricted public access to reliable, helpful information. This measure subsequently augmented the credibility of the IEC web site as an unprejudiced, credible source of electoral information that electors could use to formulate public opinion.

The postal particulars and e-mail address of the IEC's chief director of legal services were evident in the copyright disclaimer as well. The availability of this e-mail link demonstrated the IEC's readiness to explain its copyright policy to individuals who may expect additional clarifications. (See Section 6.5.7 for a more comprehensive assessment of the feedback and consultative mechanisms present on the IEC web site.) Certainly, this willingness of the IEC to communicate with voters could create feedback opportunities by which the IEC could gain helpful contributions as regards to the value of its web site's contents. Through feedback sessions, for instance e-mail correspondences, the IEC could determine the popularity and usefulness of the web site's contents, and request voters to help in the production of more adequate contents that would satisfy the informational needs of the public. South African voters could therefore more easily claim ownership of the IEC web site as a valuable communication channel and information resource seeing that they themselves could impart information and opinions via the IEC's web site.

Another feature of the *Policy* category was obvious in the shape of a web site user agreement. The policy was published in relatively uncomplicated language that detailed the applicable terms and conditions of access to and acceptable use of the IEC web site. *The disclaimer encouraged*

meaningful communication and equal participation to transpire on and via the web site. Nevertheless, a point of concern was that the disclaimer – in contrast to the imposed copyright laws – exempted the IEC from any liability for the accuracy of the information published on its web site. Although the web site's contents were generally believed to be accurate, web site visitors could not place absolute reliance upon the legitimate application thereof. Similarly, in terms of links to external internet web sites, the disclaimer declared that the IEC was not accountable for the accuracy or the legality of external sites, their associated contents, and the actions of their responsible administrators. (See Section 6.5.5 and 6.5.6 for a closer inspection of external links.) Ultimately, these stipulations could influence the quality of the public opinion voters appropriate via the IEC web site, since the veracity of the web site's contents could be called to question.

Lastly, proof of a privacy policy was enclosed in the disclaimer as well. The policy guaranteed the privacy of "personally identifiable information collected" about persons via the web site. In line with the normative principles of the public-sphere model, web site visitors could then "gather" on the IEC web site as private individuals. (See Section 3.5.4.1, Chapter 3.) Accordingly, all special privileges functioning external to the IEC web site should be suspended, for instance, when users choose to communicate with the IEC via the supplied e-mail hyperlinks. *Visitors were assured that their opinions, comments, and "otherness" would be received and perceived by the IEC in an atmosphere free of preferential treatment or censorship.* In view of that, social, cultural, or economical relations would apparently not influence the IEC's treatment of public commentary or input received via e-mail. These measures would ensure that message production is more democratic and participative, rather than the case in which some participants or the IEC dominate the communicative and educative process.

On the other hand, despite this assurance, the IEC could not promise the security of online, personally identifiable information disclosures that occur via e-mail. Therefore, the policy explicitly stated that individuals who disagreed with this regulation should categorically discontinue their utilisation of the IEC web site.

In general, it was resolved that the presence of the above-mentioned policy documents and statements contributed to public access to reliable, credible electoral information.

- *Guidelines for web site use*

In conclusion, the web site lacked indications of online bulletin boards and virtual forums. In view of this, guidelines for political discussion in such fora were also deficient. Regrettably, voters could not publicly discuss and deliberate electoral matters or concerns on the IEC web

site; and so, public opinion formulation would more likely occur in "offline" debate opportunities. (See Section 6.5.7 for a complete discussion on feedback opportunities.) The web site disclaimer supplied only basic guidelines that might be applicable to electronic mail interaction between the IEC and web site visitors. Regardless, for the IEC web site to exist as an authentic internet public sphere, it should guarantee the right of inclusiveness and participatory processes of interaction for all web site participants.

6.5.3 Public Announcements

In terms of the public announcements, numerous indicators were repeatedly discovered on the IEC web site.

- *Media or press releases*

For instance, a news archive, dating back to November 2000, included an internal search function that allowed web site visitors to actively seek and retrieve specific information. Every news release was marked with a date on which it was first released, which confirmed the authenticity and timeliness of the statements. Moreover, the majority of the media statements were accompanied by the contacting details of a responsible media liaison. The opportunity therefore existed to make further enquiries via the provided e-mail address and telephone numbers.

Bearing in mind the basic assumptions of the public-sphere model, the availability of media releases on the IEC web site offered voters alternative, opposing messages to what were available in the mainstream media. Since the IEC was a non-partisan agency, voters could then place trust in the correctness of the facts contained by the media releases, because biased agendas were precluded from interfering with the accuracy of the IEC's statements. The quality of the public opinion, appropriated via electors' use of the "media room", could thus be improved as voters could compare the IEC's media releases with alternative statements issued by the "traditional media". *The IEC therefore extended electors' right to freedom of receiving information by means of its web sphere media room.* In addition, the media page contributed to the improved political participation of the electorate in electoral processes by providing users with up-to-date, indispensable information required in making competent political decisions in practice. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.) For example, media releases contained details on voter registrations drives, which informed persons on important "where" and "when" details for upcoming elections.

Lastly, the news archive could also suffice as a media centre for diverse audiences including local or international media, foreign observers, and even international donor agencies. These role-players could openly inspect the performance of the IEC as to determine whether the IEC ensured fair electoral competition and equal participation for South African political actors.

- *Speeches*

Although the media room advertised "speeches", no examples of official speeches were evident on the IEC web site. This was a serious limitation of the web site because such documents could enlarge the public's trust in the administrative workings of the IEC. If these speeches were released online, electors and legislators alike could determine whether electoral staff followed the correct procedures involved in managing elections and related activities. These portrayals could also be enhanced by associated press releases and minutes of official IEC meetings, thus adding to the richness of the already available abstracts.

- *Minutes of meetings*

As mentioned in the prefatory section, evidence of proceedings of meetings was absent on the IEC web site. The IEC should consider publicising such information on its web site in the future, seeing as it could enlarge the public's understanding of how the IEC makes important policy decisions that in due course affect the South African electorate and the effectiveness of the democratic system. Release of such documents should then be combined with opportunities for voters to provide the IEC with comment on such decision-making activities. In effect, such a reciprocal exercise could then expand electors' inclusion in the electoral system, since their rights to "freedom to be heard" and to impart information might increase.

- *Events and activities announcements*

Despite the absence of minutes of meetings, the web site enclosed a web page that revealed intended and completed administrative events and activities of the IEC. This page detailed activities ranging from March 2000 to February 2004. Nonetheless, this page only described already completed events.

The openness of the IEC's organisational processes could have been enhanced if current and upcoming activities were advertised as well. In spite of the limitations of this web site feature, a separate section did briefly describe the "action details" implicated in each activity. It was therefore possible for the public to self-ascertain the "steps" vital to the success of each task. By overtly releasing such information, the IEC encouraged public trust in the organisational competency of the agency. Moreover, these announcements also enlightened voters on the

long-term priorities and objectives of the organisation given that voters could examine premeditated organisational events. The activities page, as a result, succeeded as an information providing service, which increased greater public access to important electoral messages. *Furthermore, the electorate could monitor and correct the IEC's actions by verifying the agency's actual performances against advertised achievements.* Hence, the critical-reflective function of the public-sphere ideal was fulfilled *inter alia* by this web site aspect. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.)

A caption on the front page, *What's Hot* (sic), also publicised more recent elections results. These results were also accessible via corresponding banners on the *Quick Menu*. The quick menu included the links IEC job posting and tenders sections. The vacancies banner lead to the online library on which job postings were placed. Yet again, access to these employment advertisements was constrained, as particular software applications were needed to retrieve the documents. In addition, the "tender page" promoted opportunities for persons and organisations to tender for services and goods required by the IEC for its administrative purposes. These tender notices were tagged with specific reference numbers, summarising captions, and the dates on which they were originally circulated. The IEC's contact details were added to these particulars. In terms of this page's ease of use, a search function permitted visitors to seek out particular tenders by limiting searches to specific, predefined parameters. Even so, the search option was rather ineffectual as only two tenders were posted on the day of analysis, thus negating the original intention of the utility.

However, a completely self-sufficient web site, the so-called *eProcurement* site, was launched via a link on the IEC's front page. This web site was set up especially for service providers so that they could easily browse through the IEC's procurement opportunities. During the discussions with one of the IEC interviewees, it was explained that this web site uncomplicated the tendering process by broadcasting tenders in an easy-to-use and standardised manner to all concerned role-players. It was maintained that companies could appraise their competition via this web site and so determine the fairness of the IEC contracting process. This web site therefore supported the public sphere principle of equality and universal access to the IEC's online procurement system.

The IEC web site did not include any evidence of special online events such as real-time electronic meetings or events. (Also, see Section 6.5.7.) On the other hand, the online library housed "elections time tables" (*sic*) applicable to the 2004 provincial legislature elections. Similar to the activities and events page, voters obtained timely, relevant information from this page as to determine when they could participate in upcoming elections. As a result, this type of

information were of use in that such knowledge could transform into possible action – that is voters would be knowledgeable on *where* and *when* they could vote.

- *Posters*

No examples of voter information or voter educative posters were noticed on the web site. The IEC should place such materials online as these could serve as reminders to voters about upcoming elections in addition to communicating critical educative messages to the voting public. Such posters could then possibly mobilise voters for popular participation in elections. (See Section 6.5.5 for an assessment of the "voter education materials and voter information" category.)

- *Advertisements*

Likewise, the IEC could have published the scripts of radio and television voter messages online so that web site users could download such materials for non-commercial, voter education purposes, and projects. The IEC's web sphere could subsequently have been used as a mechanism by which to expand the "mainstream" media and information networks that traditionally carry voter messages. Voter awareness of electoral events could have been supported by the IEC web site through two-way, bottom-up learning interactions.

- *Electronic newsletters*

No examples of electronic newsletters were found on the IEC web site either. (See Section 6.5.7 for a discussion.)

- *Electronic notification services*

Besides, the IEC did not provide any electronic notification services such as a persistent SMS facility via its web site. However, it should be noted that during the 2004 general elections period, an SMS-number was made available on the web site. During the interviews, it was explained that this number linked cell phone users to a text messaging service that verified eligible voters' registration statuses and voters' corresponding voting station details. (Also, see Section 6.4.1 for additional clarification on this web site feature.) In spite of this attempt, the IEC should consider installing regular notification features on its web site in an attempt to disseminate electoral information more frequently and timely. This could also greatly increase the universality of the IEC web site, since a significant number of cell phone users could be reached in this manner. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.1.)

- ***Electronic mail***

Apart from a number of e-mail links available on the web site, no indication was found concerning regular e-mail notification services or subscription opportunities to listservs. This dimension was explored more thoroughly in the very last content analysis category. (See Section 6.5.7.)

- ***Bulletin boards***

The web site also did not offer visitors the opportunity to exchange information or post opinions on the web site in the form of a bulletin board or a virtual forum. (Refer to Section 6.5.7 for comment concerning consultative and feedback mechanisms.)

- ***Chat rooms***

In conclusion, the IEC web site did not present any examples of virtual chat rooms. (See Section 6.5.7 for a complete discussion on this web site aspect.)

6.5.4 Organisational design

The web site user could collect information regarding the IEC's organisational structure, management, and responsibilities by visiting web pages available via the *About Us* section:

- ***Organisational history***

This web page contained a very succinct account on events that guided the establishment of the agency and the subsequent first democratic general elections of 1994. This contextualisation of the IEC's historical backdrop, although limited, did nonetheless provide some basic insight into the workings and the constitutional mandate of the IEC. An additional subsection outlined some of the key strategic accomplishments the IEC achieved since its initial inception. Still, the web site could contain more background information on the history of the South African vote in order for voters to strengthen their comprehension of their political rights. For example, historical contextualisation of the electoral system could augment reasoned public discussions on the validity and sustainability of the relatively young South African democracy. Voters could also use this type of information to reflect critically on their role and position within the democratic system. *Therefore, by informing electors on the legal remit of the IEC, voters are empowered to appraise and correct the IEC's performance as regards to the management of South African elections.* Only once the electorate is satisfied that the electoral system is just and open will they be able to decide whether the South African democracy is authentic and sustainable.

- **Organisational design and management structure**

Finally, a subsection introduced brief biographical profiles of the five constitutionally appointed commissioners of the IEC. These profiles were accompanied with photos of the persons, which were also accessible via the online photo gallery in the library section of the web site. Additional information on the legislations and regulations applicable to the appointment of commissioners was gathered on the *Legislation* page. A subsection described briefly the management structure of the IEC. In view of the prefatory remarks, this information was however insufficient, since it was difficult to determine exactly what the responsibilities of each department encompassed.

As discussed in Section 6.5.2, the vision and the mission statements of the IEC were obtainable on the *About Us* page as truncated outlines of South African electoral law and regulations. The rudimentary, overall organisational objectives of the IEC were delineated in this section as well. This information, while indispensable in educating voters about the democratic system, was however not adequate, as it did not submit comprehensive accounts of the electoral management body's specific, strategic objectives. The IEC should consider linking this section to a strategic plan document that describes the agency's values and the objectives more comprehensively.

In terms of an organisational design, a general organogram showed that the IEC consisted of various departments. Yet again, however, the organogram lacked backgrounders with regard to the various responsibilities and roles of the different IEC departments. In addition, during the interviews it was established that this organogram was not up to date, since restructuring of the IEC organisational structure had occurred since the original publication of the information. In order for the IEC web site to function as an internet public sphere, the web site's contents should be reliable and updated on a regular basis.

6.5.5 Voter education materials and voter information
The voter education and category were measured with the following dimensions in mind:

- **Training manuals**

Numerous references of training manuals were marked on the IEC web site. For instance, the *Voting* page provided a delineation of the voting and counting procedures involved in electoral operations. This information was presented in the form of training manuals or so-called handbooks that described the applicable regulations and measures concerning IEC personnel and elections observers.

Apart from sufficing as training materials for voting staff as regards to their electoral duties, these online "handbooks" could also enlighten voters on their constitutional rights as well as the obligations and functions of the IEC as the electoral management body. The online availability of these documents might add to the public's comprehension of electoral policies, the role of political parties, and the significance of voting processes within a developing democracy. *Certainly, voters could for instance shape reflective inquiry into possible distorted electoral procedures that should be corrected.* (See Section 3.5.4.2, Chapter 3.) Private individuals, such as voters, could then assume a direct political function by influencing public and political practice.

- **Online queries and downloadable forms**

Various types of online, customisable reports could be generated on the IEC web site. As noted previously, voters could verify whether they were registered to partake in upcoming elections, as well as where and when they had to cast their ballots. Additionally, examples of such online, customisable query forms were available in the appearance of elections results reports. (See Section 6.5.1.) The IEC web sphere thus ensured that voters had immediate access to important, timely information needed for participation in electoral events. Additionally, in terms of universal access to such contents, it was discovered that the IEC web sphere was extended to include SMS services with the intention that more voters could gain access to such helpful knowledge. (Also, refer to Section 6.4.1.)

The online library contained, for example, downloadable application forms for "special votes" or "absentee votes". In terms of *universality*, this could then suggest that the IEC web site attempted to involve oversees electors in electoral participation by supplying the latter with essential information on the correct procedures required for casting absentee ballots. (See Section 3.5.4.1 in Chapter 3.) These forms could however not be completed and submitted online and persons would therefore have to print, fill in, and send in applications "offline". A downloadable application form – accreditation for observers – was also available on the *Voting* page of the web site. Access to these forms was considered difficult. (See Section 6.5.6.) For the IEC web site to support the notions of universality and more open, democratic mechanism of communication, the IEC should contemplate developing online transactions services by which voters, and all other concerned role-players, could submit information queries and official applications forms without unnecessary agency supervision. Apart from assisting web site users in online transactions, the IEC could also gather structured feedback and constructive input via such facilities regarding its organisational performance and efficacy.

- **FAQs (frequently asked questions)**

In terms of basic voter information, the FAQs (frequently asked questions) page reviewed popular topics that could be of interest to the voting public. Internal "quick" hyperlinks related brief responses to "frequently asked questions" ranging from general registration issues to accounts on how eligible voters ought to prepare for electoral participation. The provision of such elementary voter information could perhaps facilitate democratic engagement by cultivating the formation of a better-informed, politically responsible electorate. Voters could actively retrieve information online without interference from any mediators or so-called facilitators. Additionally, since the IEC web site was very comprehensive and complex, the FAQs page facilitated timely ease of access to popular, useful information.

Nevertheless, it was found that the web site did not include any FAQs pages for special interest groups such as political parties, the media, or youth voters. As a result, the usability of the web sphere's FAQs facility was somewhat limited to basic voter information. If the IEC web site is to approximate the public sphere ideal, the IEC should attempt to publish contents appropriate to diverse informational needs and values. These types of information should represent the particular orientations, activities, and goals of all eligible electors including, for example political representatives and youth voters.

- **Reports and policies**

The library section included a few instances of research papers. (Refer to Section 6.5.1. for a fuller evaluation of this category.) Such sharing of electoral expertise illustrated the IEC's readiness to explain its legal, constitutional authority as the electoral management body. It provided online educational opportunities for voters and political actors to understand the electoral system and the responsibilities of the South African electorate in a developing democracy situation. Conversely, for critical discussion about these topics to occur, the IEC should combine these publications with more deliberative opportunities and consultative tools as to gain meaningful input from the public concerning electoral matters. Furthermore, as reported in Section 6.5.2, all the regulations, and legislations pertinent to the administration of the electoral system was contained by the web site.

- **Organisational design**

The characteristics of the "organisational design" category were discussed in detail in Section 6.5.4. It was discovered that the web site thus enclosed information, although in concise arrangements, which stated the structure and the functions of the IEC. As determined in preceding comments such information sharing could enhance the legitimacy of the agency and

the usefulness of the web site, since voters are educated on the roles and responsibilities of all democratic participants within a democracy. Certainly, such knowledge could then be applied by voters to electoral activity and ultimately allow voters to influence public affairs that affect their destinies. *Nonetheless, as elucidated repeatedly in earlier arguments, the IEC should consider the option of utilising more reciprocal tools of information exchange that might facilitate more two-way interaction and constructive input from the public.* (Refer to Section 6.5.7 for more details of feedback and consultative.)

- ### *Feedback mechanisms*

As already established in Section 6.5.3, the web site lacked committed consultative and feedback mechanisms such as electronic mail forms, bulletin boards, chat rooms, and online questionnaires or opinion polls. Section 6.5.7 assessed this category in more detail.

- ### *Statistical information*

Considering the "statistical information" dimensions, various reports contained facts on elections results. These features were evaluated in detail as part of the "reports" category in Section 6.5.1. Aside from these reviews, customisable reports for registration statistics of the 2004 general elections were to be found online. This information was also available as "percentage registration maps". These statistical backgrounders and fact sheets could greatly increase voters' awareness of electoral processes because the online provision thereof could enlarge the public's perception of the fairness and legitimacy of the democratic system. Since the IEC was the non-partisan management agency of elections, factual information could support the claim that the IEC web site is an objective, non-profit, and reliable source of electoral information. *Public opinion could then be shaped without the undue influences of state or commercial imperatives.* (See Section 3.5.5.1, Chapter 3.) Voters could participate proficiently in elections in a fair and open manner. The IEC could also consider disclosing party financing and budgetary information and fact sheets online as none were located during the content analysis (See Section 6.5.1.)

- ### *Electronic mail notifications/newsletters*

Similarly, no indication was discovered as regards to regular e-mail notification services or subscriptions options to e-mail newsgroups. (Refer to Section 6.5.3 and Section 6.5.7)

- ### *Posters*

As previously cited, Section 6.5.3, the IEC web site did not include any educative poster examples.

- *Advertisements*

Likewise, except for the IEC job postings, no evidence of radio or television advertisement scripts was located on the IEC web site. (See Section 6.5.3.)

- *Multi-media presentations*

No indications of multi-media presentations were uncovered on the web site either. Once again, considering the low levels of literacy among South Africans, the IEC could utilise video and audio clips to impart relevant information online and hence reach voters via more user-friendly interfaces. This could also assist the IEC to meet the informational requirements of special needs voters (i.e. heard of heard of hearing persons or visually impaired individuals) more effectively. (See Section 6.5.6 for a more detailed discussion. Also, refer to Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.1.)

- *Online games and quizzes*

The IEC web site did not include any online games or quizzes that might assess voters' knowledge of the South African electoral system. The IEC should consider utilising such features on its web site as they could extend and improve already existing "offline" educational campaigns and initiatives.

- *Archive or publications library*

As already discussed in preceding sections, the online archive included, among other things, a media release collection, a couple of research papers, "electronic copies" of elections results reports, and advertisements for IEC job vacancies. The availability of online annals ensured that voters could search the IEC web site at their convenience according to their particular informational needs. For example, whereas members of the media could search the media release archive for media advisories on important electoral activities, academics and researchers could retrieve valuable reports necessary for research. In terms of universality, the archive facility empowered users to claim ownership of the web site as a communicative resource, since users need not rely on one-way, linear information provisions from the IEC.

- *Events calendar*

The only example of an events calendar was available in the activities page and the "elections timetables". (Section 6.5.3 discussed this criterion in more detail.)

- *External links*

The IEC web site displayed links to information portals, and online news networks such as *CNN*, *SABCNews*, and *IOL* (Independent Online). As might reasonably be expected, these sites could add value to the contents published on the IEC web portal by offering additional, diverse views and extra, helpful information vis-à-vis electoral matters. However, in view of the literature review, the neutrality of such external sites should be questioned, since mercantile interests may perhaps dictate the agendas of such organisations, which subsequently might distort the reliability and accuracy of their related online information portals. By arbitrarily placing external links on its web site, the IEC injured its claim of impartiality and so injured the likelihood of creating an unbiased electoral information resource on the WWW. (Refer to Section 3.5.4.1, Chapter 3 for the theoretical assumption concerned with the "universality" aspect of the public sphere.)

Additionally, the web site linked to some commercial corporations, for instance, *Accenture* and *Internet Solutions*. When asked on the appropriateness of placing these commercial links on its web site, one IEC official responded that "the IEC has never compromised its constitutional independence through such actions", since the IEC has always made it clear to "outside business partners that certain terms and conditions" apply in affording them exposure on the IEC web site. Regardless of such stipulations, in view of the comments made in the preceding paragraph, it is proposed that the IEC should rather decide more thoroughly which external web sites should be "advertised" on its web site and which external links should rather not be featured on its web sphere. The IEC should rather attempt to include the perspectives of a miscellaneous electorate on its web site through means of bulletin boards or e-mail facilities, instead of simply allowing biased opinions and values to "enter" the IEC web sphere via external links.

Another point of concern in terms of this category dimension was the lack of links to the official web portals of South African political parties. Links to such political party sites could perhaps add to the content richness of the IEC web site and allow voters to appropriate public opinion more readily, given that many of these political party web sites already offered forum and discussion opportunities to web site users. Political parties and party leaders could, for instance, communicate with voters on particular policy or campaign issues and thus engage the electorate in political discussions, and ultimately influence active decision-making practices via such platforms.

The interviewees revealed though that the IEC web site deliberately refrained from linking to political parties' web sites, since many of the registered political parties did not have official web sites. The IEC thought it appropriate not to link to any political parties' web site as voters might think that the IEC afforded preferential treatment to certain political parties by making some external links available and others not. Then again, the IEC web site could consider relating neutral educational backgrounders on the organisational history and development of the various political parties that contest elections in South Africa. Such educational materials could increase the political intelligence of the electorate and thus facilitate informed interaction between electors and political parties. During the interviews, IEC officials stated that this option has never been consciously considered. To conclude with, the IEC web sphere could also enlarge its expediency by linking to non-partisan, non-profit organisations that support democratisation initiatives and principles. These web sites could add to the information-richness of the contents already offered on the IEC web site.

- *Sources of web site contents and "date of publication"*

No indication was given on how often the IEC's web pages and contents were updated. The web site also neglected to identify the persons or the webmaster responsible for the management of the web site and its contents. It was difficult for the web site visitor to determine whether some of the web site materials, for instance the IEC organogram, were current or completely redundant. On the other hand, some of the publications published onsite was marked with clear indications of when it was first published. Therefore, the conspicuous presence of these indicators assisted web site visitors to some extent in deciding the timeliness of the available published contents. In spite of these measures, it is vital that online election information remain accurate and up to date as this could enable voters to make well-informed, timely political choices. The IEC's web sphere should thus give clear indications on how often its contents are revised. Once the public can determine whether an information source, in this case the IEC web site, is credible they could expend this source to appropriate critical-reflective public opinion for political discussions and participation in elections.

6.5.6 Ease of navigation

The dimensions of "ease of navigation" category were considered in the following section:

- *External links*

In view of prior comments made in Section 6.5.5, external sites could facilitate users to seek actively for further information that might contribute to the political learning gained via the IEC web site. Voters were encouraged to collect and string together alternative viewpoints from

various, diverse information resources and accordingly shape their own understanding of reality and motivate their need for change if necessary. Arguably, voters could create critical-reflective awareness about their constitutional rights by visiting external sites. The semi-structured interviews confirmed this assumption seeing that IEC officials indicated that the electorate "should not only rely on us (*the IEC*) to communicate voter information, but also call on other organisations and educators" that might complement the IEC's web site contents. As one interviewee put it, "we would want to make a participative democracy in which we not only deal with good publicity, but also with bad publicity." The IEC therefore urged voters to create "balanced debate and public opinion" in an unforced manner by offering accessibility to "outside" media network web sites. As cautioned beforehand, access to these external sites could however also detract from the legitimacy of the IEC web site contents because commercial or governmental web sites potentially contain biased views that may misrepresent factual information.

- *Software requirements and special downloads*

Albeit that many of the documents on hand on the web site were only available in particular software formats, for example, Adobe Reader (PDF) formats, the IEC neglected to supply the appropriate programme downloads compulsory for accessing these documents. *This made physical access to some of the documents rather troublesome and thus could prevent certain users from retrieving information from the web site.* (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.1.) Besides, no examples of exclusive educational downloads such as interactive CD-ROMs, video and audio clips, music and songs, electoral brochures, games or other educational materials were noticed. Online dissemination of such downloads, for example electoral brochures or voter guides, could allow better distribution of educational materials and engage the voting public in more interactive, bottom-up and self-determined educational experiences. If the IEC web site is to embody the public sphere principle of universality, access to information should be relatively uncomplicated and unrestricted.

- *Online query forms*

The IEC web site also lacked opportunities for users to submit online queries. Voters were reliant on the IEC to provide them with information. Web site visitors should instead be afforded the chance to control information flows; therefore, voters should generate queries via for instance a standardised web form. Not only could electors request information, but they would also be able to criticise and correct the web site's media contents. (See Section 6.5.7 for an evaluation of feedback and consultative aspects.)

- **Online order forms**

Similarly, one could not order any organisational publications or materials via the web site. Once again, voters were dependent on the IEC to *provide* them with information. The IEC web site will only resemble a public sphere if voters can take charge of their own voter education experiences and improve their analytical abilities through such exercises.

- **Cost implications**

In spite of these limitations, users could view all the contents and the web pages of the web site without officially subscribing or registering to any services. (See Section 3.5.4.1, Chapter 3.) No overt cost implications were noted on the site either. In view of that, once users gained internet access they could navigate the IEC web site without cost restraints. *The web site could therefore become a relatively cost-effective means by which electors could "conscientise" themselves about the democratic culture.*

- **Language preference**

Universality was however hampered by the fact that the web site's contents were primarily published it English. It was not at all possible for users to set any language preferences. During the interviews with the IEC, it became apparent that cost implications and time constraints prevented the organisation from translating the contents to other official, South African languages. It is proposed that some of the contents be made available in other indigenous languages as it could broaden the communicative reach of the IEC web site and therefore impart political information to many more eligible voters. If the universal access of the web site expands, persons from diverse cultural and language backgrounds could challenge and negate dominant educative agendas, codes, and experiences. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.1.)

- **Usability for visual or audio impaired persons**

The web site also did not offer a choice between text and graphic-based interfaces. Users who were visually impaired might subsequently have had trouble in viewing some of the contents. The site did not offer any alternative formats of the web contents, for instance audio or video clips, which might have enhanced accessibility for visually impaired and hard of hearing persons. Voters with special needs were therefore prohibited from effectively utilising the IEC's web site and taking ownership of the information on hand.

- **Site map and internal search engine**

The web site also did not enclose a site map that could have simplified navigation. Hence, it was somewhat difficult to determine where particular contents were to be found. An overarching

internal search engine that could assist visitors in quick, effective information searches and retrievals was missing as well. These shortcomings decreased the navigability of the web site somewhat. A few instances of internal search utilities were however observed in the media archive and the tenders' noticeboard. Additionally, a FAQs (frequently asked questions) page enabled users to navigate their way through the most essential voter information via a standardised set of queries and answers. (See Section 6.5.5.) The IEC should bear in mind that internal search utilities could be used to optimise web site accessibility.

• *Help functions*

Although the web site wanted for patent examples of help functionalities, some of the available customisable reports utilities might be considered as "help functions". A dedicated helpdesk could however assist and advise visitors in online queries pertaining to specific matters. Such a helpdesk might include appropriate contact details and a standardised web form through which queries could be submitted. Once again, by allowing more interactive communication between itself and the voting public, the IEC could expend its web site as a participative, democratic communication tool. Voters could then manage their own learning experiences in a more responsible, self-sufficient manner by managing their own information searches.

• *Personalisation or customisation*

The only indications of the "personalisation" dimension were noticeable on the *Voting* page. All eligible voters could determine whether they were registered on the voters' roll and if so, where they should vote during elections. This service was assessed in Section 6.5.5 as part of the "voter education and voter information" category.

6.5.7 Feedback and consultative mechanisms

In this final section, it was determined whether the IEC made use of feedback and consultative mechanisms on its web site:

• *Electronic mail*

In view of prefatory comments, it was established that the IEC enclosed several e-mail hyperlinks on its web site by which persons could get in touch with its various internal departments. (See Section 6.5.3 and 6.5.4.) All of the supplied e-mail links were active during the investigation. Other than these general, organisational e-mail links, visible on the web site's front page, many of the links referred visitors to particular IEC personnel and related substructures; thus allowing users to interact more directly with those specific departments.

These addresses were also accompanied by telephone numbers; persons could accordingly make contact with IEC officials if initial e-mail queries remained unreciprocated.

Although e-mail communication does not fully approximate online deliberation it could, at the very least, facilitate two-way information exchange among IEC decision-makers and web site users. For example, visitors could elicit certain information from the IEC that does not appear online. As a result, users could make suggestions to what types of media contents should be published on the IEC's web site. Voters could thus turn into *generative media content producers instead of consumptive, reactive media content recipients. E-mail correspondence between voters and the IEC could hence influence voters' knowledge construction exercises to become more self-determined and intersubjective, since knowledge generation could become less centralised and objective.* The IEC web site would then only approach the principles of the public sphere if voters were given the opportunity to be critical of the media messages contained by the IEC web site.

The success of e-mail interaction will however depend on the IEC's compliance to respond appropriately to each e-mail communication in a timely fashion.

- **Electronic mail notifications**

In view of the observations presented in Section 6.5.3, it is maintained that the IEC should exploit the utilisation of online notification services more effectively. Notification services could provide timely access to electoral and voter information and offer voters the chance to respond appropriately to such information. For example, reminders could alert voters of upcoming election dates or the online availability of new documents and media releases; thus allowing users to retrieve such information and applying it to informed "offline" participatory democracy. The IEC could even invite voter input on important policy issues by alerting web users of opportunities to partake in decision-making practices.

- **Electronic newsletters**

As discovered before, no indications of online newsletters were available. This was a definite weakness of the IEC web site as an up-to-date newsletter could have been a valuable resource for web site visitors who wished to access reliable, neutral electoral messages on a regular basis. Newsletters could be used to promote the organisational activities of the IEC as well as promote web site contents that aim to encourage "offline" participatory practices. Online newsletters could for instance be used to reflect on issues not covered in depth in mainstream media. Such media messages could in addition reflect the multitude of opinions, values, and lived experiences of the South African electorate, imparting alternative messages to newsletter

recipients. Accordingly, voters could shape public opinion that is more balanced and critically informed by diverse viewpoints and knowledge formations.

- ***Hyperlinks (internal and external)***

See Sections 6.5.5 and 6.5.6 for a fuller description of hyperlinks.

- ***Chat rooms***

The IEC web site did not show any signs of an online chat forum. Consequently, visitors could not engage freely in online opinion formation and information exchanges. The IEC was thus also unable to debate and defend its policy positions. The contents on the IEC web site were rather weighted as the beliefs and viewpoints of a diverse voting public were not adequately represented. In terms of universality, the web site failed to give voters access to alterative constructions of voter knowledge and political understanding. (See Chapter 3, Sections 3.5.4.1 and 3.5.4.2.)

The only sign of a solicited comment opportunity was apparent on the front page of the web site. These were however available in the form of two e-mail links; the IEC could be contacted concerning general queries, whilst a webmaster could be contacted pertaining to the technical aspects of the web site. A brief statement, accompanying the e-mail links, invited visitors to submit comments to the organisation via these e-mail links. However, the ideal public sphere is where participants could openly and publicly discuss and reflect on a wide range of issues and public affairs. The IEC web site should attempt to support dialogical, interactive opinion formation that would improve the quality and quantity of voter information and create a more educated and involved electorate.

- ***Bulletin boards***

Besides the absence of a virtual chat room, the IEC web site also did not show any signs of an online bulletin board that could have sufficed as an educational area. Web site visitors could not post their announcement and opinions or perceptions of electoral politics online and so had very little control over the web site agenda and its media contents. The IEC overlooked the possibility of gauging public opinion and comments via such an online "barometer" as a bulletin board. For instance, by assessing the interactions that occur between bulletin board participants the IEC could gather valuable civic input concerning proposed electoral policy or practices. The IEC should therefore investigate the possibility of including more deliberative tools, such as a bulletin board service, on its web site in order to enhance participatory democratic practices, and to give voters the option to become aware and reflect critically on contradicting points of view.

- **Standardised feedback forms**

No examples of online feedback forms were available on the web site either. The IEC should consider the inclusion of standardised web forms on its web site as this might secure popular engagement in organisational practice. Standardised comment forms could also assist visitors to formulate their inputs in a manner in line with to the organisation's administrative expectations, therefore simplifying the participation process. Access to the IEC could thus become more open and uncomplicated via its organisational web site. Moreover, apart from engaging voters in policy formation exercises, standardised web forms could also help the IEC to determine which electoral topics should receive more online attention and which ones should be relegated. Voters could subsequently more easily assume ownership of the media contents contained by the web site. Finally, web forms could also aid the IEC in compiling comprehensive databases on web users by soliciting users to disclose demographical information when submitting a web form. However, such information collecting should not be conducted without the explicit permission of voters.

- **Organisational contact details**

As established already in the foregoing sections, the contact details of the IEC were obtainable via numerous hyperlinks on the front page. Related web pages also provided the physical addresses and telephone numbers of the IEC's head office in Pretoria, its provincial headquarters, and its municipal electoral offices. A toll free number for the IEC call centre was also on hand on the web site, which operated during the elections times and provided callers with election results for the 2004 general elections. *The online availability of organisational contact details established a potential communication channel between web site users and the IEC and its various substructures.* The opportunity therefore existed to connect directly with the IEC and solicit media contents suitable to voters' specific informational needs. The availability of organisational contact details could further assist voters in direct expression of miscellaneous views and values. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.4.2.)

- **Special online events**

In view of the fact the IEC web site did not contain any illustrations of bulletin boards and online chat rooms, no notifications of special, asynchronous, online events were discovered on the web site either. This is a definite shortcoming of the web site, since electronic "town hall meetings" could assist the IEC in communicating complex issues and policy concerns in a citizen-based and even-handed manner to voters. To make such activities more interactive and publicly oriented voters could e-mail the IEC with a list of agenda-setting questions that could guide

knowledge and information exchange during "live" events to be more issue-based. Apart from sufficing as participatory, educative tools, special online events could also increase universal access to the web site for voters with special needs through means of close-cap broadcasts and presentations.

- *Online polls/surveys/petitions*

The web site did not employ any online polls, surveys, or petitions. Still, the use of such measures could generate valuable, public feedback with regard to the policy work and the actions of the IEC. Thus, by including the public's "will" in policy work, the perceived responsiveness, and effectiveness of the IEC could also be augmented. Voters should also be able to view and reflect on the opinions of other electors; hence, results of online polls or surveys on important public affairs could be of use in such public reflective exercises.

- *Online information gathering mechanisms*

To conclude the web site content analysis with, it was confirmed during the semi-structured interviews with the IEC officials that the agency did not automatically gather personally identifiable information of persons via its web site. The IEC web site therefore respected the privacy of each web site user and consequently that internet communication could occur free from partial mediation or interference.

6.6 THE APPLICABILITY OF THE HABERMASIAN PUBLIC-SPHERE THEORY

Legitimate deliberative spaces on the internet need to be non-partisan, non-commercial, and independent from governmental interests. For his reason the presence of external hyperlinks and the publicity of electoral publications on the IEC's web site influenced the perceived objectivity of the web sphere. One of the most apparent differences between the IEC's and Elections Canada's web sites was the availability of different types of external hyperlinks to outside organisations. The IEC web site displayed links to information portals, and on-line news networks such as CNN, SABCNews, and IOL (Independent Online), whereas its Canadian counterpart directed visitors to independent, non-commercial organisations. (See section 6.5.5 and 6.5.6 for more detail.)

Moreover, the IEC web site linked to some commercial corporations, for instance, *Accenture* and *Internet Solutions*. Bearing in mind the theoretical background, the neutrality of such external sites was uncertain, since the political and commercial agenda's of these web sites were not sufficiently transparent for public scrutiny. Accordingly, in contrast with the Elections Canada web site, the IEC had very little additional useful information to offer voters by means of external

hyperlinks. Contrary to the public-sphere model, voters would then not be able to receive and retrieve non-partisan and accurate electoral information from credible outside organisations linked to the IEC web site. Instead of creating better-informed and even-balanced public opinion, South African voters would therefore have to rely predominantly on the legitimacy and accuracy of the IEC's web sphere contents when seeking electoral information. Otherwise, it follows that voters would have to be motivated enough to initiate their own internet searches in order to collect electoral information. Similarly, it was also discovered that the IEC web site did not include any links to South African political parties' web sites.

In contrast to the Canadian web sphere, the expediency of the web site was thus somewhat limited to the information the IEC already had available and consequently decided to disseminate to the electorate. In the absence of a properly formulated and researched internet policy, the IEC did not sufficiently address the proper use of external hyperlinks on its web site. (See Section 6.4.3 for a discussion on the shortcomings and success of the IEC web site.) As an impartial web sphere, the IEC web site needed some buttressing.

The IEC web site was also a typical example of the misuse of the interactive features of the internet. Similar to its Canadian equivalent, the IEC did not utilise chat rooms or offer forms of open fora for public discussions and information exchange on its web site. As corroborated during the semi-structured interviews, communication flows between the electorate and the IEC were thus rather top-down and predetermined. The public-sphere model argues that voters should be able to engage in electoral democracy more inclusively and actively in order to appropriate public opinion. As long as the IEC web site remains void of truly interactive devices such as bulletin boards and virtual chat rooms, voters would only be able to *receive* certain types of information instead of by themselves give expression to their own political views. With these observations in mind, one could question the quality of the public opinion formed via the IEC web site, since opinion formation was limited to fixed agenda's.

In its favour, the IEC web site did however contain copious examples of e-mail hyperlinks to certain personnel or organisational departments. Although the interviewees admitted the IEC did not actively practice two-way communication via its web site, the availability of these e-mail links suggested that web site visitors had some control over the communications process. As a result, electronic mail offered voters the chance to interact more equally with the IEC, as well as request certain types of formation to be released. Regardless of this communicative opportunity, the IEC might still choose not to respond to such public enquires. As a potential internet public sphere, the IEC still need to address issues of two-way information exchange and free and fair participation. Furthermore, the web site will only resemble the public-sphere model once voters

are capable of communicating diverse standpoints among one another. This process of public deliberation is equated to a social learning experience that operates as a problem-solving mechanism. Therefore, many analysts propose that deliberation amongst different political actors should be the focus of active political citizenship, since it uncovers the bonds between democratic communicative practices and learning processes. This creates even more reason for including interactive communication opportunities on the IEC web site.

Another cause for concern was the fact that universal access to the web site was rather limited. (See Section 6.5.6 for further detail on inclusivity dimensions.) The legitimacy of a public sphere system comes into question subsequent to declining popular participation levels. Whereas Elections Canada's web site carried voter information in various languages, the IEC's web site contents were only available in one of the country's eleven official languages, namely English. The IEC should therefore consider developing contents in alternative, local languages in order to release more information to eligible South African voters. If not, the alternative opinions of non-English-speaking political actors might continue to exist to no avail unless larger social networks or activists groups participate in the web sphere on behalf of marginalised groupings.

However, it should be noted that the IEC's task to expand political participation on the internet is not merely subject to inadequate institutional policies or restrictive controls, but is also influenced by the general lack of an appropriate physical infrastructure needed for internet access. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.4.)

Still, another cause for concern was the inaccessibility of the web site for voters with special needs. No measures were taken to improve access to the web site's contents for voters who were visually impaired or hard of hearing. (See Section 6.5.5 and 6.5.6.) Online availability of special multi-media downloads could also have allowed greater distribution of educational materials, and thereby engage the voting public in more interactive educational experiences. In terms of universality, the IEC web site still has a long way to go before an authentic public domain of democratic communication could be fashioned.

Considering the observations made in the preceding chapter, as well as comments offered in the foregoing sections, it would appear as if the Elections Canada web site fared better at approximating an internet public sphere than its South African equivalent. Although the Elections Canada web site did not fully resemble the Habermasian ideal of a public domain of unrestricted debate, it was discovered that some of the features and contents available on the web site did facilitate democratic communication and public will formation. It was evident that the IEC web site, on the other hand, was mainly used as an institutional image-profiling tool.

The online presence of the IEC therefore seemed less concerned with establishing an internet public sphere, as proposed by the normative principles of the Habermasian theory, than with using the internet as a "push technology" of information to the electorate. As a result, South African voters would have to be motivated enough to "go online", collect electoral information, and subsequently use such newfound knowledge in real-time public deliberation practices.

It was also evident that the Elections Canada web site was more concerned with securing opportunities for diverse publics to participate on its web site. For instance, by publishing information in different languages the agency ensured that different, dissimilar viewpoints were represented in electoral politics. Considering the fact that South Africa is still a long way off from securing universal internet access to all citizens, the IEC should take more care at implementing measures by which to broaden access to its "virtual offices".

Finally, the neutrality of the IEC's web site contents was somewhat ruined by the random placement of external links. Conversely, the Elections Canada web site made an effort to assure web site visitors of the impartiality of external links. Consequently, the Elections Canada web site came much closer to fulfilling the normative prescription of impartiality, which is required in the creation of a bona fide internet public sphere.

6.7 CONCLUSION

This chapter presented the trends that emerged during the empirical investigation of the IEC web site. Through means of semi-structured interviews with senior IEC personnel and the qualitative content analysis of its organisational web site, the investigation revealed that the IEC's web site did not fully resemble the Habermasian ideal of a public domain of unrestricted public will formation. It was discovered, however, that some of the features and contents available on the web site could at least facilitate "offline" participatory democracy.

Nonetheless, it appeared as if the IEC web site was mainly used as an institutional image-profiling tool. The most noticeable finding that emerged from the assessments was that the IEC therefore did not fully realise the interactive potential of an internet public sphere.

In the next chapter, the research objectives stated in Chapter 1 will be reintroduced and answered according to the assessments made during the content analysis of the IEC and Elections Canada web sites.

PART III
Conclusions and recommendations

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusions and recommendations

If distance does not matter anymore, the place becomes all the more important (Van Wusten, 2002.)

7.1 INTRODUCTION

The previous two chapters respectively discussed the qualitative content analysis of the Elections Canada and IEC web sites. In the case of the IEC, the results yielded during the content analysis were triangulated with the data generated during the conduct of semi-structured interviews. During the analyses of both web sites, some preliminary findings were recorded which attempted to answer the general research question of this study: *How could the IEC consolidate the South African democracy by creating an internet public sphere?*

In this chapter, the general research question is answered with reference to the specific research questions of this study that were put forward in Chapter 1, Section 1.4, as well as the related specific theoretical statements that were introduced in Chapter 3. (See Section 3.5.4.1, 3.5.4.2, and 3.5.5.1.) Whereas the preceding two chapters, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, respectively dealt with the Elections Canada and IEC web sites as case studies, this chapter summarises the results of these chapters' findings as to introduce the overall conclusions and recommendations of the study. This current chapter concludes with a short discussion on some of the shortcomings of this study and recommendations for opportunities for further research.

It should be kept in mind that in order to answer the study's general research question, the web site of Elections Canada was chosen for analysis as to determine whether the principles of the supposedly non-operational Habermasian public-sphere theory could be applied to a new media public domain such as the internet. The Elections Canada web site operated in the context of a developed, more advanced democracy, while its South African equivalent is situated in a developing context. Given the assumption was that the relationship between the political system, political process, and the political culture in the Canadian democracy was more matured and established, it was assumed that the Elections Canada web site could serve as a standard of *how* an electoral internet public sphere in a developing democracy ought to function in support of democratic purposes. This was confirmed by a preliminary analysis of this web site.

This investigation also attempted to determine whether the purported non-operational public sphere could be recovered by applying its most basic principles to a new media context such as the internet. (Refer to Chapter 1, Section 1.2.2 and Chapter 4, Section 4.2.3.3.) In this manner,

the study's general research objective was to determine *how the IEC could consolidate the South African democracy by creating an internet public sphere.*

In the next sections, each specific research question and related research objective is now addressed. The first half of the discussions answers specific research objective 1 (theoretical background), whereas the second part of deals with specific research objective 2 and specific research objective 3 (empirical analysis).

7.2 CONCLUSIONS: ANSWERING THE RESEARCH AIMS

7.2.1 Literature study

7.2.1.1 Specific research question 1 (See Section 1.4.1, Chapter 1.)

What are the salient theoretical concepts that underpin the Habermasian public-sphere theory?

In order to answer this research question, the research objective was to determine:

7.2.1.2 Specific research objective 1 (See Section 1.5.1, Chapter 1.)

The salient theoretical concepts that underpin the Habermasian public-sphere theory.

This research objective was answered during an extensive literature review about the Habermasian public-sphere theory. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5 for a complete discussion on the public-sphere theory.)

7.2.1.3 Answering research objective 1: the Habermasian public-sphere theory

The literature revealed that the public-sphere theory, as a historical and normative assessment, supposedly functions as an open communicative public space of democratic communication. As originally imagined by Habermas, a public sphere must be established as a precondition to any sustainable, legitimate democracy. *The central assumption being that a public domain is fashioned by which emancipatory political power is conferred to individuals with the intention of establishing political praxis necessary for sustaining a legitimate democracy.* Citizens, according to this line of thinking, can gain political agency by publicly discussing and debating issues of common political or social concern in an open and unrestricted public domain.

As determined during the literature study, the mass media is conventionally accepted as one of the many structures responsible for fulfilling this normative prescription. (Also, see Chapter 1, Section 1.2.2.) The media, or those institutions that use it for public communication, acts as mediator between the interests of so-called ordinary citizens and the particular welfares of the state. This is possible since the media allows one to obtain political information and political opinions necessary in overseeing the activities of the state. *As a result, the media creates a*

sphere of influence by which the public not only updates the state on its specific needs and wants, but also keeps the ruling structure in check concerning its public practice. The media, therefore, performs a critical political function in terms of securing popular participation and competition in a democracy. Ultimately, such public opinion formation exercises attempt to influence public institutions that in turn determine the direction in which a society develops.

In its most rudimentary form, a legitimate public sphere should adhere to three basic normative prescriptions: i) *impartiality* (from private or state controls); ii) *universality* (universal access to the public domain); and iii) *public opinion formation*. (See Section Chapter 3, Section 3.5.3 for a detailed breakdown of each of these norms.) Each of these norms will again be briefly discussed as to gain further understanding of the public-sphere theory.

- **Universality**

Often referred to as the norm of *inclusivity*, the Habermasian public-sphere theory states that a public domain is an open-ended communicative structure that allows participatory communication between *all* citizens (sphere participants). In view of this, an ideal public sphere precludes instrumental rationality from disturbing its critical political functions. *Upon entry in the public domain, participants assemble as private citizens and accordingly as equals who acknowledge one-another's humaneness and communicative ability.* In theory, participants' socio-economic or demographic attributes therefore have no bearing on physical access to the public sphere *and* actual participation in the sphere. Conversely, if entrance and participation in the public sphere were unobstructed and undistorted, it would mean that communication in the public sphere were *intersubjective* instead of *subjective* in nature. As a mediating public domain, universality therefore implies that *discussants could shape informed, balanced public opinion, since diverse standpoints and political values are represented in the public sphere in an open, unobstructed manner.* (See Section 3.5.4, Chapter 3 for a discussion on the "universality" norm.)

- **Public opinion formation**

Secondly, the Habermasian public-sphere theory's principle of *public opinion formation* encourages the right of every participant to receive *and* impart information and standpoints via the public sphere. Closely related to the norms of *universality* and *impartiality*, Habermas recounts the liberal public sphere as a *mediated voice of expression* that allows the exchange of diverse information contexts. (See Section 3.5.4, Chapter 3 for a detailed discussion.) Since the public-sphere is essentially a dialogical conception, participants of the sphere communicate and interact with one-another in order to build critical-reflective public opinion. *The normative*

mandate of the public sphere means that information should therefore be accessible to discussants if public opinion is going to be reached. For this reason, the subject matters of public debate should be unrestricted and accommodate diverse public interests. Once the normative mandate of information accessibility (*publicity*) is fulfilled, participants could exercise tasks of criticisms and control over public and state institutions.

- **Impartiality**

The public-sphere theory supposes that a legitimate public domain can only exist if it is liberated from commercial or state imperatives. As a counter-hegemonic force, the public sphere or lifeworld operates as a mediating sphere between the social sphere on the one hand, and the economical and state realms on the other. (See Chapter 3, Section 3.5.5 for further detail on the "impartiality" principle.) The theory suggests that a public domain, for this reason, is essentially democratic in nature, since truly democratic communication between citizens, as well as citizens and administrative authorities (the system organisation/world), is attainable only if special interests or dominant codes are prohibited from deciding the topography of public discussions. If instrumental and strategic reason establishes the functionality of the public sphere, communication flows between the "worlds" would be top-down in nature rather than bottom-up and cooperative. As a partisan sphere of influence, the public domain would then undermine the democratic values of civic engagement and democratic competition. *A legitimate public sphere is therefore non-partisan, non-commercial, and autonomous by design.*

With this theoretical background in mind, it is argued that South Africa's developing democracy could benefit from the creation of an internet public sphere, since citizens would be able to practice democratic values in a more participative and unobstructed manner than would be possible through the "traditional" spheres (i.e. television, radio, and the press) of civic engagement. (See Chapter 1, Section 1.1, as well as Chapter 2, Section 2.3.1 and Section 2.3.2.) The argument is made that the creation of an informed and political knowledgeable South African citizenry, through means of the IEC's organisational web site, could establish a potentially politically accountable society that could partake in the further consolidation of the democratic culture through electoral democracy.

The assumption is that the internet's innate interactive technical architecture facilitates every voter's "right-to-be-heard" and "right-to-know" through two-way, bottom-up communication flows; and as a result, the assumption is that the IEC's web site could more readily fulfil the public-sphere theory's normative prescriptions of impartiality, universality, and public opinion formation. (Also, See Section 1.8.2.4 for further clarification on the concept "interactivity".) As one of the

supporting structures of constitutional democracy, the IEC's web site could thus suffice as an internet public sphere in which voters could obtain political information and exchange diverse political opinions in a cooperative and unrestricted fashion. Optimistically, apart from maintaining a legitimate electoral system, the IEC web sphere could then perhaps also secure the democratic system in the broader sense by stimulating critical-reflective public opinion formation and political engagement in service of the public good.

7.2.1.4 Conclusion

Accordingly, as the primary theoretical background of this study, the above-discussed Habermasian public-sphere theory norms informed the empirical analyses of the study. The next sections answer specific research question 2 and specific research question 3 in relation to three theoretical statements.

7.2.2 Empirical study

7.2.2.1 Research question 2

How is the Habermasian public-sphere theory put into practice on the web site of an electoral management body in a developed democracy?

In order to answer this research question, the research objective was to determine:

7.2.2.2 Research objective 2

How an electoral management body in a developed democracy put the Habermasian public-sphere theory to practice on its web site.

7.2.2.3 Answering research objective 2: Elections Canada

From the theoretical background, it was shown that the Habermasian public-sphere theory encompass three indispensable norms. These three theoretical norms served as the starting point from which three related theoretical statements for the empirical analysis of the IEC web site were drawn. The theoretical statements were used in order to determine whether the public-sphere theory could be extended to an alternative public space such as the internet in service of democratic ideals. (See Chapter 2, Section 2.3.1, and Section 2.3.2.)

Following the logic of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere, these theoretical statements were first tested on the web site of Elections Canada as to determine whether they where applicable in the context of a developed, matured democracy. (The complete empirical investigation of the Elections Canada web site is contained in Chapter 5.) Each assumption's principles will now be discussed separately.

• *Universality*

The concept of universality implies that all participants should participate equally, freely, and fairly on the web site in order for them to gather electoral information necessary to make informed political choices. This would ensure a legitimate public sphere.

From the qualitative empirical analysis, it was shown that copious web site features on the Elections Canada web site answered the public-sphere theory's "universality" prescription.

The content analysis of the Elections Canada web site demonstrated that electors from dissimilar cultural and language backgrounds, as well as voters with special needs, had easy access to the electoral web sphere. (Refer to the "ease of navigation" category, Section 5.4.6, for a fuller description of the web site dimensions that supported this assumption.) Consequently, inclusivity of web site participation was enhanced for a miscellaneous Canadian electorate. It was decided that voters from different spheres of society could effectively retrieve electoral information, free of charge, from the Elections Canada web site in an unconstrained manner. Consequently, it was concluded that this *accessibility/publicity* of information assisted voters in appropriating public opinion needed for participating capably in electoral democracy.

The *publicity* function of the public sphere was also effectively facilitated on the web site through the availability of copious instances of different information contexts (e.g. organisational reports; public announcements; training manuals; external links; advertisements; minutes of meetings etc.) The Elections Canada web pages were thus information rich and very comprehensive in terms of imparting basic voter information and voter educative materials to the electorate. From the analysis, it also was apparent that universal access to the web site was increased considerably by making these information contexts available in different file formats and multi-media applications. (See Section 5.4.5.) Voters therefore had a picking between different types of information frameworks that would suit their particular informational needs and assist them in making educated political choices. Accessibility was further enhanced by offering visitors the software applications and programmes compulsory for retrieving specific types of information contexts. (See Section 5.4.6.)

Moreover, interaction among web site participants could occur in an even-handed manner, since the Elections Canada web site disclaimer established straightforward rules and regulations for the use of the web site's contents. (See Section 5.4.2 for further discussion on this dimension.) The interactive nature of the internet was also effectively exploited by Elections Canada through a "standardised e-mail" facility. (See Sections 5.4.2 and 5.4.7.) In this way, participatory communication between electors and Elections Canada could transpire in an intersubjective,

reciprocated manner seeing that the former were offered the opportunity to give feedback on the web site contents, as well as provide feedback on the electoral agency's public performances. The empirical findings, however, also showed that the e-mail facility was the only patent example of a potentially interactive communication web site device. It seemed that Elections Canada did not fully draw on the interactive capacities of the internet. As a result, the web site contents did not leave alternative means by which the opinions and perspectives of a diverse electorate could be publicised. (See Section 5.4.7 for an evaluation of the dimensions "bulletin boards" and "chat rooms".)

On the other hand, external hyperlinks to the web sites of political parties, did offer voters with discursive participatory opportunities by means of chat rooms and bulletin platforms. (See Section 5.4.5. and Section 5.4.7 for more detail on "external hyperlinks".)

In view of the above-mentioned conclusions, it was generally decided that the public sphere principle of *universality* was successfully achieved on the Elections Canada web site. The web site, in terms of inclusivity, therefore functioned as a legitimate internet public sphere in which public opinion could be created. It therefore seemed feasible to apply the Habermas' principles to an electoral commission's website. In view of these conclusions, it can be assumed that:

Theoretical Statement 1:

The Independent Electoral Commission should maintain a legitimate internet public sphere by ensuring that all participants could participate equally, freely, and fairly on its web site in order for them to gather electoral information necessary to make informed political choices.

The principle of public opinion formation was also tested during the content analysis:

- *Public opinion formation*

Public opinion formation implies that ensuring that all participants could receive and impart diverse information, opinions, and values via its web site. This would ensure a legitimate public sphere.

By means of the qualitative content analysis, it was established that the public sphere dimension of public opinion formation was facilitated through the Elections Canada web site with reasonable success. Since the web site contained large volumes and varieties of information contexts, voters were able to receive and collect valuable electoral information and expend it critical-reflective exercises. As proven by the *universality* aspect, Canadian voters had a very resourceful tool in the Elections Canada web site, since the web site made accessible great

volumes of electoral information in various formats and multi-media presentations. Furthermore, the findings showed that an electronic mail notification service allowed voters receive regular updates on modified web site contents. Likewise, this e-mail subscription service alerted voters on offline participatory democracy opportunities as well. (Refer to Section 5.4.5.) In this way, public opinion formation prospects were not restricted to online opportunities only.

Conversely, in terms of satisfying the two-way principle of public opinion formation, the Elections Canada web site did not manage as well. Even though the web site allowed electors and political actors from different backgrounds to retrieve vast volumes of information, participants were not encouraged to participate unreservedly in public will formation practices in which they could give direct expression to dissenting, diverse opinions, and values. (See Section 5.4.7 for an assessment of "feedback and consultative mechanisms".)

Consequently, as a public domain, the web site remained somewhat in the hands of the electoral agency since the electorate could not directly impart and post their viewpoints on the web site. Elections Canada did however rectify this shortcoming by linking to a large number of non-partisan, non-commercial democratic organisations and information portals, which presented voters with more interactive digital discussion opportunities. (See Section 5.4.5.) In this manner, Canadian voters could then obtain, although indirectly, alternative information perspectives on electoral democracy. Discriminatory, fixed discourses could be counteracted by allowing visitors admission to external web sites. It was thus concluded, regardless of its limitations, that the Elections Canada web site did ultimately set in motion build public will formation and as a result, the electorate could effectively practice tasks of criticism and control over the electoral agency. From these conclusions, it can be assumed that:

Theoretical Statement 2:

The Independent Electoral Commission should maintain a legitimate internet public sphere by ensuring that all participants could receive and impart diverse information, opinions, and values via its web site in order for the participants to appropriate public opinion.

During the content analysis of the Elections Canada web site, the applicability of the public sphere principle of "impartiality" was also evaluated:

* *Impartiality*

Impartiality implies that the electoral commission should manage its web site without fear or prejudice to governmental or commercial interests. This would ensure a legitimate public sphere.

The argument was made that an internet public sphere could expose voters to pertinent voter and electoral information that would be beneficial to the actual quality of public debate and hence the quality of a legitimate democracy in the broader sense. (See Section 2.3.2.) However, quality public opinion can only be produced if instrumental rationality is prohibited from interfering with the critical political function of the public sphere. In view of this, it was established that the Elections Canada web site did indeed operate as an impartial lifeworld of democratic public opinion formation. This was evident through the online availability of various types of annual reviews and research reports that detailed the activities and responsibilities of Elections Canada. (See 5.4.1.) These publications allowed voters to form improved *appreciation on how electoral democracy in Canada was managed in a free and just manner.*

Additionally, *impartiality* was achieved especially through the considered utilisation of external hyperlinks to independent, non-profit democratic networks and public institutions. (See Section 5.4.5 for empirical evidence in this regard.) These web portals not only complemented the already information rich web pages of the Elections Canada web site, but also established accurate, trustworthy and alterative information contexts for the electorate.

Additionally, as already verified by the findings in the previous paragraphs, a large number of electoral publications confirmed Elections Canada's independence from private and state pressures. The web site thus functioned as an open communicative structure in which dominant commercial or governmental logic was irrelevant (See Section 5.4.1 for the "reports" category and Section 5.4.3 for the "public announcements" category.) Above all, the availability of financial disclosing and financial reports, as well as minutes of official organisational meetings enabled voters to shape knowledgeable public opinion on elections. Consequently, the voting public could exercise responsible, competent political choices. Overall, the truthfulness of the web site's contents *and* Elections Canada was demonstrated by the *publicity* of important, useful electoral information, which the electorate could expend in keeping the electoral agency *and* political representatives in check. (Also, refer to Section 5.4.5.)

It was also pointed out during the empirical investigation and previously drawn conclusions, that Elections Canada contained copious, manifest examples in which the agency illustrated and reiterated its commitment to running the electoral system according to a fair-minded fashion. Voters could easily collect detailed backgrounders on the legislative context and the regulative framework in which electoral democracy occurred. (See Section 5.5.) From these online accounts, the voting public could subsequently generate check-and-balance sheets by which they could inspect and give rulings on the legitimacy of the electoral system and democracy in

the broader sense. With regard to maintaining a web sphere free of strategic contents, the Elections Canada web site therefore effectively operated as a mediating, non-partisan internet public sphere in which sphere participant's could formulate critical-reflective public opinion in an open and even-handed manner. These findings lead to the assumption that:

Theoretical Statement 3:

For the Independent Electoral Commission to maintain its web site as a legitimate public domain of public opinion formation, the commission should manage its web site without fear or prejudice to governmental or commercial interests.

7.2.2.4 Conclusion

From the empirical analysis of the Elections Canada web site, it was evident that the public-sphere ideal of critical-public opinion formation in support of civic engagement and democratic competition was successfully appropriated. It was therefore decided that the Habermasian public-sphere, although not entirely without its own weaknesses, could be applied with relative success to the web site of an electoral management body in a developed democracy. The next section answered specific research question 3 and entailed the application of the above-mentioned principles within the context of the stated theoretical statements.

7.2.3.1 Research question 3

How does the IEC put the Habermasian public-sphere theory into practice on its web site?

In order to answer this research question, the specific research objective was to determine:

7.2.3.2 Research objective 3

How the IEC put to practice the Habermasian public-sphere theory on its web site.

7.2.3.3 Answering research objective 3: IEC

As already established in the previous section, in order to answer specific research question 3, three theoretical statements were gleaned from the literature review of the public-sphere theory and applied/tested on the Elections Canada Website. These theoretical statements were used to determine whether the public-sphere ideal could be applied to the web site of the IEC. The following subsections will now discuss each theoretical statement separately. (See Chapter 6 for the complete empirical analysis of the IEC web site.)

- ***Theoretical Statement 1: Universality***

The Independent Electoral Commission should maintain a legitimate internet public sphere by ensuring that all participants could participate equally, freely, and fairly on its web site in order for them to gather electoral information necessary to make informed political choices.

The empirical evidence showed that the IEC's web site did not sufficiently address the issue of *universality/inclusivity*.

It was evident, for instance, from the analysis of the "voter education materials and voter information" category, that the web site's contents were mainly targeted at the informational needs of political candidates, political parties, and accredited voting staff because the available information contexts were for the most part restricted to staff training manuals and political party registration backgrounders. (See Section 6.5.5.) Therefore, in contrast to the Elections Canada web site, the IEC web sphere did not show any evidence of exclusive download materials such as interactive CD-ROMs, video or audio clips, music downloads, electoral brochures, games or other voter educational materials.   Online availability of such downloads could have allowed greater distribution of educational materials, and thereby engage the voting public in more interactive, participatory learning experiences.

This conclusion was also verified during the semi-structured interviews in which the interviewees pointed out that the IEC web site was primarily regarded as a convenient tool in communicating particularly with internal organisational audiences and South African political parties.   (See Section 6.4.2.)   This suggested that the expediency of the web site, as a voter educative platform, was somewhat deficient, since the IEC web site did not circulate apposite information and voter educative materials that would satisfy the electorate's informational requirements. Consequently, the general voting public were not able to contribute unreservedly in public will formation; hence, the IEC web sphere did not act as an open, democratic sphere of public opinion formation.

Inclusivity was further constrained by the IEC's inadequate utilisation of the internet's innate interactive characteristics. The findings in Section 6.5.5 and Section 6.5.6 revealed that the web site's contents were accessible in only one language (English) and that voters with special needs (visually impaired and hard of hearing persons) were largely excluded from participating on the web site because the IEC did not release electoral information in appropriate file formats or alternative applications. The conclusion was hence drawn that large sections of the South African voting public were unable to appropriate quality public opinion on electoral democracy, since the IEC web site was not established as a universally accessible internet public sphere.

This shortcoming was especially disappointing, since the IEC did institute a detailed web site disclaimer, which established rules of *intersubjective* participation on *and* via the web site. (See Section 6.5.2.) Therefore, although this web site disclaimer supported the principle of meaningful, participatory communication, the IEC web site did not provide adequate measures by which ethical, two-way public opinion formation could come about. In addition, as discovered during the analysis of feedback and consultative web site mechanisms, it was decided that the availability of e-mail hyperlinks did not adequately stimulate reciprocal online communication between electors and the IEC.

Therefore, as confirmed during the assessment of the *public opinion formation* principles, the web site did not support decentralised decision-making practices because voters were unable to post their own political opinions and perceptions on the IEC web site. (Also, See Section 6.5.7.) It was concluded that the IEC web site did not successfully resemble the public-sphere ideal of *universality*, given that the organisation did not satisfactorily address the issues of information *publicity* and *accessibility*.

• ***Theoretical Statement 2: Public opinion formation***

The Independent Electoral Commission should maintain a legitimate internet public sphere by ensuring that all participants could receive and impart diverse information, opinions, and values via its web site in order for the participants to appropriate public opinion.

The empirical investigation hinted that the IEC web site succeeded as a legitimate internet public sphere in terms of addressing the normative principle of *public opinion formation*. It was however concluded that this is only partially true, since the IEC did not properly address issues of universal access and information publicity.

Accordingly, the content analysis illustrated that the contents on the web site were rather limited. Despite the fact that the web site contained large volumes of information and exceptionally extensive accounts of elections results reviews, media releases, and electoral regulation and legislation, the results revealed that voter educative materials were in short supply. (See Sections 6.5.1, Section 6.5.2, and Section 6.5.3. Also, refer to the conclusions made in the previous section regarding *universality*.) While the voting public could use these available information contexts to recover their understanding of their political rights, the information did not suffice as explicit voter educative materials. The findings of the semi-structured interviews confirmed this conclusion as they showed that the IEC did not regard the internet as strategically influential as regards voter education. As acknowledged by the IEC interviewees, the web site

was exploited as a dissemination tool of already available information and legislation (See Section 6.4.3.)

The principle of public opinion formation was therefore satisfied only inasmuch as the voting public could *receive* information from the IEC in a one-way, top-down manner. This setback was however corrected to some extent by the availability of a great number of e-mail hyperlinks. (See Section 6.5.7.) Although it did not fully approximate reciprocal communication, the assumption was made that that e-mail correspondence could facilitate two-way information exchange between electoral decision-makers and web site users. Therefore, policy makers and voters could possibly work through problems via e-mail deliberations and information exchanges.

Nevertheless, it was also discovered that the IEC did not have any official policy that could guide efficient e-mail interaction. As a result, reciprocal communication between the IEC and electors was predominantly reliant on the IEC's compliance to respond to public comments and queries.

Correspondingly, public opinion formation was problematic as the IEC web site lacked dedicated deliberative platforms and open fora in which voters from diverse publics could post and trade dissimilar perspectives. (See Section 6.5.7.) One of the interviewees unequivocally stated that the IEC web site was not used as a two-way communicative platform. For this reason, it was doubtful whether voters would be able to build balanced, meaningful public opinion via the IEC web site. This concern was further fuelled by the fact that the web site did not link to external web sites that might have contained useful perspectives and alternative knowledge constructions on electoral democracy. (See Section 6.5.6.)

In view of these concerns, in terms of the expectation of public opinion formation, it was generally concluded that the IEC web site succeeded moderately in securing the public's "right-to-know". In opposition, the electorate could not fully apply the web site as an internet public sphere of mutual, cooperative learning experiences and information exchange.

- *Theoretical Statement 3: Impartiality*

For the Independent Electoral Commission to maintain its web site as a legitimate public domain of public opinion formation, the commission should manage its web site without fear or prejudice to governmental or commercial interests.

The assumption made by theoretical statement 3 also proved to be problematical. The results indicated that the IEC web site contained numerous electoral legislative and regulative documents. (See Section 6.5.2.) Additionally, complete and up-to-date elections reports

illustrated that the IEC was committed to fulfil its remit as an impartial electoral management body that accordingly publicised the results of its activities. From these accounts, it was ascertained that the IEC was an autonomous, non-partisan public institution accountable only to the South African law and parliament.

In spite of these affirmations, it was however exposed that the web site did not contain any financial disclosures, financing reviews, or annual reports. The voting public was thus barred from creating informed opinion concerning the administrative workings of the agency and the related political actors it administrated.

The impartiality principle was further negated by the IEC's random placement of external hyperlinks on its web site. (See Section 6.5.5 and 6.5.6.) The IEC injured its claim of impartiality and so reduced the likelihood of creating an unbiased electoral information resource on the WWW, since it was found out that the hyperlinked web sites were mostly profit and business oriented. As a result, it could not be categorically stated whether the information contexts on these web sites supported democratic ideals such as participatory citizen engagement and intersubjective public opinion formation.

In view of these observations, it was decided that the IEC would only be able to fashion a more knowledgeable South African electorate once the latter could place absolute trust in the accuracy and usefulness of its web site's contents. If the IEC web site is to approximate an internet public sphere of civic participation, it should not only publicise great volumes of information, but also make sure that the quality of these contexts remain indifferent to instrumental rationality.

7.2.3.4 Conclusion

Although the IEC web site did not completely satisfy all of the related theoretical statements, it was concluded that the web site could fashion a more knowledgeable South African electorate and stronger social capital that would partake in electoral democracy. From the findings of the empirical investigation, a number of recommendations were formulated. It is expected that these recommendations could assist the IEC in better appropriating an internet public sphere in support of democratic ideals. These suggestions were made with the specific theoretical statements of this study in mind.

7.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

7.3.1 Impartiality

In order to improve the impartiality expectation, the IEC should take more care in its selection of the external links it places on its web site. External web sites should add to the value and

accuracy of the IEC web sphere's contents instead of detracting from it. Therefore, it is proposed that the web sites should be non-profit, non-partisan, and independent from strategic logic.

It is consequently also suggested that the IEC revise its web site disclaimer to be more mission oriented. As it currently stands, the disclaimer exempts the IEC from accepting responsibility for untruthful and inaccurate information that visitors collect either from its own web site or external web sites. By realigning its disclaimer to fit with its constitutional mission, the expediency of the IEC web site as an impartial, credible web sphere could be recovered.

The impartiality norm could also be fulfilled by the IEC by disclosing financial records and financing reports online. These types of information disclosure could guarantee the IEC's perceived integrity and public accountability.

7.3.2 Universality

Universal access to the IEC web site could be greatly improved by making information available in alternative South African languages. Although this could have some serious cost implications, the web site will not reach its fullest potential as a democratic communication platform unless more diverse publics participate in digital public opinion formation opportunities.

For the same reason, the IEC should consider exploiting the technical capacities of the internet by creating interfaces that would suit the requirements of voters with special needs. The web site should endeavour to secure access for a broader audience by creating graphic-based interfaces.

This objective could be further augmented by using multi-media applications and presentations to communicate with *and* educate the voting public. Not only would voters with special needs gain access to the web sphere, but, potentially, illiterate and functionally literate voters would also be able to retrieve some electoral information from the internet.

The IEC web site's accessibility could also be improved by making software downloads available that are required for retrieving some of the web site's contents. Accordingly, voters would more readily collect and view important publications that could assist them in reflective exercises. If the IEC web site is to embody the public sphere principle of universality, access to information should be relatively uncomplicated and unrestricted.

It is suggested that the web site could offer voters more deliberative opportunities by which they could fashion balanced public opinion. Related to the norm of public opinion formation, voters would then be able to discuss and debate issues of electoral democracy in reciprocal,

collaborative manners. The IEC could therefore consider including chat rooms and bulletin boards on its web site. The web sphere would then reflect the perspectives of a miscellaneous and culturally diverse electorate. These measures would ensure that message production is more democratic and participative, rather than the case in which some participants or the IEC dominate the communicative and educative process.

Lastly, the IEC could work more closely with other social movements and public organisations such as churches, NGOs, tertiary institutions, youth organisations, the South African government and governmental departments, as to initiate projects and initiatives by which more voters could gain access to the internet and as a result the IEC web site.

7.3.3 Public opinion formation

The biggest concern in terms of public opinion formation is the fact that the IEC web site is completely devoid of fully interactive communicative platforms. The IEC would not only decentralise its decision-making capacities in making chat rooms and bulletin boards available, but could also gain valuable citizen input regarding policy issues in this manner.

Such discursive fora could also empower the electorate in creating more informed and balanced public opinion, since they would be exposed to dissimilar perspectives and values. A better-informed electorate could then perhaps engage more meaningfully in electoral democracy.

The IEC should also consider releasing more diverse information contexts on its web site, which could augment the public's knowledge of how the electoral system works. These could include research publications, annual reports, and financial reviews.

Lastly, it is proposed that the IEC web site include more explicit voter education materials as well as links to the web sites of South African political parties. In doing so, the public could take charge of their voter education experiences and become more competent regarding their political rights and responsibilities.

As a final thought, it is recommended that the IEC establish a definite internet policy that would determine the strategic importance of its web site in terms of voter education in South Africa. However, for this to come about, the IEC should conduct formal research on the audiences it wants to reach as well as how it intends to do so. Once such research is completed, it is assumed that the basic principles of the Habermasian public-sphere theory would be satisfied more readily. Accordingly, the web site of the IEC could perhaps resemble an internet public sphere.

With these recommendations in mind, the next section affords attention to some of the limitations of this study, as well as recommendations for future research.

7.4 SHORTCOMINGS OF THE STUDY AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This study made use of the qualitative research methodology as to explore how the electoral web site of the IEC could be used as an internet public sphere in support of democratic ideals such as participation and public opinion formation. The study applied the purported redundant Habermasian normative model for political participation in a new context regarding an electoral web site in a developing democracy. As far as could be determined, very little research has been executed in this regard in South Africa. The study thus contributed to the sub-disciplines of political communication and development communication by expending specific theoretical statements in a new media context. Following from this, an attempt was made to provide the IEC with some guidelines on how to successfully approximate an internet public sphere.

However, since the study made use of the qualitative research methodologies, the findings that were generated could not be extended to other public institutions' web sites, seeing as the current investigation regarded the IEC web site as a case study only. Another shortcoming of the study was that at the time of research, the IEC was still in the process of formulating an official communications and internet policy. It was accordingly difficult to gain the institution's perspective on the raison d'etre behind its organisational web site. For future research, it is suggested that the IEC be revisited, in due time, to determine and analyse the organisation's official policy on the strategic importance of the internet vis-à-vis the consolidation of the maturing South African democracy.

Additionally, although a great wealth of data was unearthed during the study, future research should seek to find and develop more creative and explicit research techniques by which the relation between political communication and the internet could be measured. For this reason, it is proposed that further qualitative study, in combination with quantitative research techniques, could for instance execute research on the theme of political participation and the web sites of South African political parties.

A specific topic of interest, which was not explored during this study, could then be to inflate the public-sphere theory in terms of Habermas's more recent communicative action theories (Habermas, 1987; Habermas 1984). Specifically, the Habermasian concept of an "ideal speech situation" could be explored more thoroughly by designing a normative model by which web site interactions on a political party web site could be evaluated.

Such an empirical investigation may consequently contribute to improved understanding of the social institutions and human interactions most suitable to participatory political communication. The role and form of political institutions could be adjusted, in due course, in favour of more participatory forms and applications once new channels of citizen participation and public deliberation are fashioned. Therefore, such a study could aim to produce guidelines for political web sites to enhance the participatory nature of democracy.

7.5 CLOSING REMARKS

This chapter presented the findings of the empirical analysis of the Elections Canada and IEC organisational web sites. The research questions that were originally asked in Chapter 1, Section 1.4 were answered in this chapter.

With reference to the study's theoretical background, it was concluded in this chapter that the IEC web site did not suitably resemble the ideal public sphere, since the IEC did not purposely work out the reasons and objectives of creating an organisational web site in a developing democracy. The empirical evidence confirmed that the web site, although information rich and very intricate, was mainly exploited as an information dissemination tool and a one-way, top-bottom communications conduit rather than an interactive voter education platform.

It was also learned that political participation on the IEC web sphere was also severely unbalanced, as web site accessibility and navigation were restricted to mostly literate, English-speaking visitors who had the technical and financial means to unlock the information available on the web site. However, access to the IEC web site was also limited because equal internet access in South Africa has not yet been universally achieved.

From these discussions, some recommendations were therefore devised by which the IEC web site could more efficiently resemble an internet public sphere of public opinion formation and equitable democratic participation. Possibly, these recommendations could be incorporated into official organisational policy on the strategic importance of the internet in a developing democracy circumstance such as South Africa. The most important recommendation being, the internet could be used as a platform for more participatory communication opportunities.

This study maintained throughout that public will formation stands at the centre of any legitimate democracy; consequently, that new public spaces of political engagement must be identified and appropriated in which such discursive participation could occur. The underlying assumption therefore was that the Habermasian public-sphere theory could serve as a normative model by which web sites could be used as a public domain of civic engagement in electoral democracy.

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