The Computer Mediated Communication as a way to debate within the public space

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“The public debate is at the same time necessary for our democracies and generally ineffective in its implementations: the televised debates don’t have other finalities than the show itself, the politic debates are diverted in communication operations, and in the forums we don’t find much more than juxtaposed opinions. In fact, the efficacy of public debate lies in the legitimacy that it confers to the citizen and in the impact of its speech over the decision-making processes. In practice, this can only be realized with a reduced number of participants within a deliberative process framework. Thus, the need to think about the deliberative situation in the public debate is asked”.

(http://net.iut.univ-tours.fr/recherche/appel/index.htm)

The above remarks are extracted from the communication call for the colloquium “The deliberative situation in the public debate”. By association of ideas, these remarks recall us the positions taken by some thinkers who consider that the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) constitute ways to contribute to the flourishing of democracy in a context characterized, among other things, by the important size of modern societies. It is in this context that in the end of the seventies, Alain Minc and Simon Nora wrote in their report about the informatization of France: “The oral word, with its rituals, balanced the village. The computerized word and its codes must recreate an “informational agora” extended to the dimensions of the modern nation. Thus, progressively, some agreements and commitment will take place. They will express a consensus engaging increasingly broader communities and ever more remote perspectives” (1978 p. 124 /1989/). Pierre Lévy reintroduced and made his the hypothesis according to which ICTs will contribute to support democracy over vast territories. “The contemporary communication techniques could redistribute the very old anthropological order which condemned important communities to forms of political organizations extremely distant from intelligent collectives” (1995, p.118, [1998]). Each technical innovation that gave rise to a new mediatic communication device, has always brought along a huge amount of deterministic speeches, most of the time optimistic ones. But is reality so simple? In this text we will try to go beyond these speeches by doing a critical presentation of the works on computer mediated communication practices and, more specifically, the works that dealt
with the characteristics of argumentative exchanges. Our review will rest on our own researches on the matter¹.

It seems that the first text to have tackled the question of communicational exchanges based on informatics, “The Computer as a Communication Device”, has been published in 1968 by J.C.R Licklider and Robert W. Taylor. Admittedly, what it is said in this book can be criticized: the human being is considered to be rational in every single act of his life and the search for consensus always seems to prevail in the communication practices. Moreover, both authors were being much more militant than analytical. But this is not surprising as they both played a crucial role in the genesis of the interactive informatic concept. Indeed, they had an important position at the Information Processing Techniques Office (IPTO) of the Advanced Research Project Agency (ARPA) in the United States, respectively between October 1962 and July 1964, and between June 1966 and March 1969. But the text remains extremely interesting for at least the fact that the question of the computer as a communicating machine is tackled, a question that will be developed more than ten years later. According to Licklider and Taylor: “Creative, interactive communication requires a plastic or moldable medium that can be modeled, a dynamic medium in which premises will flow into consequences, and above all, a common medium that can be contributed to and experiment with by all. Such a medium is at hand: the programmed digital computer. Its presence can change the nature and value of communication even more profoundly than did the printing press and the picture tube, for (…) a well-programmed computer can provide direct access both to informational resources and to the processes for making of the use the resources” (1968, p22). Both authors were in fact especially interested in the challenges of cooperation between experts in a group using computers as a working tool. They approached the concept of “cooperative modeling” according to which the computer must allow the clarification and the comparison of the ways in which different people apprehend a problem, and the construction of a group conception which makes the optimal synthesis of every individual positions.

Subsequently, it is from the eighties that the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) studies were carried out, especially in the United States where microprocessing was

¹ Three discussion lists were analyzed during several months in 1998 and 1999 within the work of a doctoral dissertation entitled “The uses of the Internet as a mode of participation to the public sphere within the MAI and ATTAC: Towards a revival of the democracy at the area of the omnicommodification of the world?” under the supervision of Jean Mouchon in France and Gaëtan Tremblay in Quebec. The three lists were: the ATTAC-talk, a list created by the Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens (ATTAC), the Contrôle-OMC, a list created by a dissident subscriber of the ATTAC-talk list a little before the World Trade Organization (WTO) summit in Seattle in 1999, and the SalAMI, a list of an association from Quebec which was created at the time of the fight against the Multilateral Investment Agreement (MAI) project. Since, we continued our observations in a less systematic way but in a longer period of time on three lists among which we find again the ATTAC-talk but also Multitudes-infos, the list of the Multitudes magazine close to the “thought” of Toni Negri, often presented as the thinker of the “alterglobalization movement”, and finally the Mondialisation list which was launched by a student in sociology of the University of Quebec in Montreal. The readers have certainly noticed that the contents of all these lists are devoted to a critical viewpoint of the globalization process, in particular economic and financial.
developed. Beyond the topics approached\(^2\), the question of the possible type of discussion was asked in many cases. Most of the time, the question appeared from the comparison between the “face-to-face” processes of communication and the computer mediated communication. It is in this optic that Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegel and Timothy W. McGuire published in 1984 a text in which they describe an experimentation based on comparisons of situations from three groups of three persons: a first one performed “face-to-face” communication exchanges; a second one applied anonymous computer conferences exchanges; a third one chose non-anonymous computer conferences exchanges. The authors exposed the following points: (1) there are difficulties to coordinate the exchanges because of the lack of immediate return of information This could explain the time needed to lead to a consensus; (2) the communication by computer doesn’t allow as much the domination of a person and this lack of leadership could also explain the difficulty to obtain a consensus; (3) the electronic communication supports the depersonalization of exchanges and the distraction of the audience attention. Sara Kiesler, Jane Siegel and Timothy W. McGuire added that the results could have been different with technical devises based on sound and image, but that they remain interesting because the tendency was rather directed to the textual electronic communication. Their remarks are still largely valid more than fifteen years after concerning the communicational exchanges by Internet.

Internet as a democratic construction?

Since the mid-nineties, with the Internet more and more present at the work place, at home and at public places, the issues surrounding the computer as a communication tool have been multiplied. Nonetheless, the informatic network was firstly developed by programmers that were also the first users. This element of Internet history is of great importance because it means that the essential technical characteristics of this system\(^3\) were developed by people for whom the Internet was at the same time the objective and a communication tool precisely used to develop it. Some observers put the accent on the democratic process that allowed the development of the Internet within the academic community. Thus, the analysis of Jean-François Tétu and Françoise Renzetti brought them to conclude that: “the principles which precede Internet evolution (have supported) the equality between users and the liberty for everyone. The organization of Internet as an erudite society, representative of the users interests, seemed susceptible of assuring the legitimacy of the network. Then, Internet appeared to be the armature of an international scientific democracy” (1995, p.192). They also evoked that the democratic aspect of an

\(^2\) Nancy K. Baym (1998) estimates that the studies were firstly directed towards the uses of computer for organizational purposes, the first questions asked being devoted to the work processes and the decision-making in group. Steve G. Jones (1998) also notes that the majority of CMC literature remained related to an organizational prospect from the study of the insertion of computers in the work place. In 1968, Licklider and Taylor already asserted that the formation of communities might not be done on a common location but on a common interest. But it was in fact the works of Howard Rheingold (1993) that put the emphasis on the possibility for the people to choose their belonging communities, that are often considered as major references even if the optimistic conclusions of the author are sometimes criticized.

\(^3\) From basic TCP/IP protocols to applications such as FTP, Telnet, the electronic mail system, the discussion lists, some software as NCSA Telnet, Telnet software for Macintosh or Pine, electronic mail software for Unix.
informatic network had been guaranteed by the potential access to it of every computer and by an apparent non-stratified social structure. The authors also conclude that the first users, researchers, had indeed transposed their way of thinking and their usual practices into the Internet.

The best testimony of cooperation processes between researchers is the Requests for Comments. A RFC is a “call for remarks” done in the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF)\textsuperscript{4} by a person or a group. The first version is spread to competent persons in the matter with the mention “draft”. Whatever its status, any person feeling concerned can answer the request by bringing his testimony. The volunteers of the organism study every proposition. Most of the time, the exchanges take place by e-mail. Several versions come along and the final document comes by iteration. Jean-Luc Archimbaud explains that with the development of the Internet since the nineties, “this process is nowadays more formal and the RFCs have attributes which describe their level of standardization and their importance. But the initial principles were preserved, namely the right of parole for all and the right to make public the documents and achievements of products for validation before the completion of the standard” (1992) It is highly recommended not to mention our professional status to avoid domination effects caused by social standing. When the debate is finished, the new document can then be used online under the standards in force. The RFC principle has been applied to all Internet dimensions, from the establishment of the different protocols to the exchange of recommendations\textsuperscript{5}.

In a way, one could find in the RFC a concretization of the habermassian model of deliberative democracy: use of reason, accessibility and transparency seem to be the rule. The deliberation has a central place in the established procedures. For instance, Maryse Rivard could note that deliberation is considered to be very important in the creation process of new discussion forums on Usenet (1996). This objective, which aims to giving the freedom of speech to everybody and promoting equality in the exchanges, has been historically more comprehensible and reachable as it emanated from members of a community, certainly marked by a hierarchy, but welded by a strong identity feeling.

Among all the Requests for comments, we note a certain number of written or tacit “rules for good use” which became founder deontology rules of some network ethic. It is in that optic that the “Netiquette”, in other words the RFC 1855, covers all computer mediated communication practices, from the e-mail in dyadic mode to the discussion lists. The “Netiquette” main objective\textsuperscript{6} is to quickly bring these new users into the Internet culture, which is transmitted by the respect of a certain number of rules; some of these are presented as being obligatory while other can largely be adaptable. The document is divided in three different parts:

\textsuperscript{4} IETF is presented as an independent organization where its collaborators think about the technical evolution of the Internet. Its working groups are open to all in order to support the contributions of academics, researchers, engineers from the public and private sectors of the whole world.

\textsuperscript{5} For example, the e-mail protocol characteristics were specified by John Postel in 1983 in the RFC 821 framework.

\textsuperscript{6} A more thorough synthesis is available in the text titled “Public exchanges dynamics on Internet between standards and uses” published in the collective book, Internet, new citizen space? (George, 2002b).
(1) The person-to-person communication, primarily the electronic mail (this also refers to talk, often presented as the Internet Relay Chat ancestor).
(2) The communication from a person to others, which includes the distribution lists and the newsgroups.
(3) The information services that include FTP, la Toile, Wais, Gopher, the Mud and the MOO.

About the person-to-person communication, in particular by e-mail, the references to face-to-face exchanges are important. That is why it is advised to follow the same rules in mediatized exchanges by e-mail as in direct communication. This recommendation shows that the interpersonal communication remained a model for those who were at the beginning of the Internet. “In general, rules of common courtesy for interaction with people should be in force for any situation and on the Internet it’s doubly important where, for example, body language and tone of voice must be inferred”. To compensate, the authors propose to agree on some rules: the capital letters must be used to give the idea that we are shouting, to put emphasis on a word, we should put that word between two asterisks (*), the use of emoticons allows to convey a particular tone or emotion in a sentence. “If you have really strong feelings about a subject, indicate it via FLAME ON/OFF enclosures”. Here we find the concept of “idealized conversation” of Michael Schudson who estimates that “any communication must be similar to the conversation model, regardless of the real existence of this model”. While, precisely by referring to the work of Michael Schudson, Gary Gumpert and Susan G.Drucker (1999) consider that the establishment of more or less tacit rules for the initiated move away the mediatized communication by the “idealized public place” technique, the authors of the Netiquette believe, on the contrary, that their propositions in terms of rules could help people to appropriate the Internet as a mean of communication on the face-to-face communication model. Incidentally, we should mention that some references to former communication means are also made. Thus, it is advised not to put in an e-mail what we weren’t to put in a postcard. As in other situations, it is recommended to “wait overnight to send emotional responses to messages”.

After the person-to-person exchanges, we find the communication from one person to a group. It is firstly mentioned that the same rules also apply here. The constraints are even believed to be more important as the audience is often unknown. That is why, to prevent offending someone, “it’s quite important to know as much as you can about the audience of your message”. It is even recommended to observe the exchanges for one or two months before participating in order to “obtain an understanding of the group culture”.
We find here one of the essential characteristics of the argumentation theories: taking account of the audience profile before expressing ourselves.

Internet exchanges characteristics

But are the recommendations of the Internet founders respected nowadays in the communicational exchanges? Can we actually find deliberations on the Internet? As we demonstrate it (George, 2002a), nothing is less certain.
Susan Herring gives a unique answer by trying to overlook a lot of generally accepted ideas on the so-called face-to-face superiority over CMC but also by trying to specify the device,
its configurations beyond the particular situations. She wonders why CMC is popular when
it is limited, in particular in terms of turn-taking and coherence in the follow-up of the
tackled subjects, which can be regarded as significant problems when the time comes to
promote exchanges based on argumentation. She agrees that messages aren’t often
adjacent, that the exchanges regularly overlap each other and that, normally, the topics are
quickly deserted. Nevertheless, her hypothesis is that if the users are satisfied, it is because
they adapt themselves to the mean of communication and because they believe that the
limitation in terms of coherence has two advantages: the “heightened interactivity” and the
“language play”. In fact, Susan Herring also considers that if so much people exchange
messages on the Internet it is because CMC isn’t so incoherent after all. In addition, she
proposes to clearly separate the eventual incoherence, which is typical of a communication
mean, from its popularity. In other words, if CMC is popular, it is for two types of reasons:
on one hand, the ability of users to adapt themselves to the communication mean in spite of
its limitations and the advantages linked to these disadvantages, and on the other hand, the
fragmented nature of interactions.

About the users adaptation, she notes that they invent ways of showing that they are
listening and ways of negotiating turn-taking. There is a development of compensatory
strategies. For example, there are very quick and very short answers in the case of
synchronous CMC. There is also ways of showing that there is a change of turn-taking or
maintenance of our own speech. To recreate adjacency and the appearance of a dialogue, it
is possible, in the case of asynchronous exchanges, to quote the previous interlocutor
incorporating portions of the previous message. It is the presence of quotation marks that
recreates that illusion of adjacency. There can also be some sort of organization of the
exchanges over a topic, for example with the use of “threads” in the case of newsgroups in
Usenet or with the presence of a moderator which is in charge of avoiding the straying
tendency, the fragmentation of raised topics.

According to Susan Herring, there are other reasons that can explain CMC popularity. First,
the fact that there are less constraining standards can be positive. The lack of coherence
can lead to humoristic exchanges about that lack, which can allow us to talk about
metalinguistic humor.8

Our research goes in the same direction but in a more vast way. Except in the lists where
the contents are very framed by constraining norms, we always noted that one day or
another, the relevance of the list, its objectives, the uses in terms of the exchanges, became
topics of discussion. Thus, metacommunication was replacing communication. This kind
of discussion was generally made after a question raised by someone in the list, sometimes

7 Finally, but undoubtedly it is less relevant for our work on public deliberation, Susan Herring also mentions
what she calls the hyperpersonal interaction. This happens when we take part in several exchanges at the same
time. On the principle of technological frames which allow multi-tasks, there is for example the possibility to
adopt several personalities according to the interlocutor. According to Susan Herring, the stimulation is
maximum and the risk of boredom is minimum. On the other hand, the face-to-face discussion limits the
multiple simultaneous interactions. This is why she thinks that, in the case of CMC, it is more interesting to
talk about hyperpersonal communication rather than about interpersonal communication.
8 Within the French research community, AgoraSFSIC constitutes a good example of a list whose content is
precise enough to avoid any exchanges over the list itself. Besides, it is not a debate list and the presence of
this kind of exchanges is almost nonexistent.
the host, or following a particular situation where some behaviors were criticized (out of subject messages, absence of the host, sending of illegible e-mail, etc). These discussions over communication come back regularly in the front scene.

In the course of our research about discussion lists that constitute asynchronous communication means, we also demonstrate three more or less complementary “framing” methods that support debates and that are separately or jointly mobilized by some key users.

(1) The presence of a host, designed or chosen over the exchanges, which build his own role. Generally, this role involves doing some regulation, sometimes over a given period, sometimes over a particular topic. Indeed, if there is auto-organization, one of the major tendencies observed consists in the very fast succession of two types of situations: the sending of many messages devoted to only one topic in a short period of time followed by a period characterized by the absence of any message on the same topic. Thus, from time to time, the host has to ask some people not to intervene too much on the list. However, as the debates often tend to decline, generally the host must especially undertake a specific action to stir up and support the discussion. Then, the list tends to become only a tool for informational questions. This doesn’t have a pejorative connotation, some lists have that mandate, but we then are in another field, in another public space, more centered on the distribution of information, than the other in which we are interested. There can also be relatively little exchanges on a list even if it is called a discussion list. This can be caused by the participation of people obviously very sure of themselves that leave very little space to questioning. It also happens that the main contributors send 4-5 screen pages mails. Isn’t this kind of practice intimidating to some participants that have little time and who believe that they don’t understand fully what has been said and thus aren’t able to actively participate? Consequently, the question of the equality of speaker’s turn is posed.

(2) The sending of an initial text used as a basis for discussion. The text was found sufficiently interesting by several participants for them to find it pertinent to answer to the author. Once the exchanges started, they continue thanks to the participation of several people who decide to answer to one another or to react to the initial text. Both situations can obviously combine. Moreover, we noted that the exchanges have more chances to be sustained if the initial interlocutor intervenes in the course of the exchanges. We find here the idea of Susan Herring according to which the proximity between the possibilities to access several filed documents and the possibility to exchange should be regarded as a specific Internet advantage within a public debate. Indeed, we noted that to have easy access to a text could contribute to support exchanges over it. Logically, it is the already digitized documents that are generally preferred but some people do not hesitate to scan some data in order to use it for the discussion. Beyond the fact that texts and other contents can be put online, it is important to underline the interest of the archive practice that should allow tackling more easily a problem from an historic approach. In their book The Network Nation: Human Communication via Computer (1993), Starr Roxanne Hiltz
and Murray Turoff put the emphasis in the interest that the archive and indexation devices could have to support argumentative exchanges. However, we shouldn’t forget that we are talking about potentialities. Only the development of the uses can support or not this kind of practice. The case of the list “Multitudes-infos” is illustrative. Usually, the list is largely made of contents independent from each other with, either contents simply taken from other sources, either contents written by the participants to be specifically distributed on the list. True debates are relatively rare. In addition, the number of people, about 20, which effectively take part in a regular way in the exchanges is relatively weak compared to the total number of subscribed people, more than 500. It is a pretty generalized data but it helps the people in charge of the magazine “Multitudes” to wonder about the reasons of that weak participation of the subscribers. From our present consideration, we could wonder whether the participation could have been higher if the contents of the magazine had been discussed on the list. However, curiously, this was never one of the main content of the exchanges. Some texts were sent on the list, either draft versions or final ones, but they didn’t raise a lot of debate. However, it is extremely possible that the reason for this was the fact that some articles were complex, even abstract. It could be interesting to see whether the tendency is maintained now that the contents of previous magazines are online in the “Multitudes” website.

(3) The announcement, right from the launching of the debate, that this one will take place in a determined period of time and that it will give place to a synthesis. In this case of figure, the debate has a finality. Here, we can find the importance to coincide communication and action that do not necessarily develop in the same scope of time. Communication could take place in a relatively long period which is part of the subjective calendars of the different contributors whereas action needs an objective calendar which contains a certain number of dates corresponding to as many appointments. For instance, we are thinking about everyone who discusses on subjects related to the meeting of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the Cooperation and Economic Development Organization, or the World Trade Organization. With the writing of synthesis, we can, at least partly, find the scientific practices of collective publication. Moreover, it isn’t unusual to find that kind of Internet use within the ATTAC association which brings together several academics, in particular within its scientific council. When ATTAC chooses to tackle an issue, it sends a call over all association discussion lists to seek external viewpoints. The Counsel, if its members consider it relevant, could reconsider the remarks made at that moment on the online debates. In the case of the “Multitudes” list, after the questioning presented in the previous point, it has been decided that some texts written for the list, that some translations of other contents and that some discussions which will have reached “a stabilization point around an easily locatable subject”, will be put online on the website of the magazine. This new policy implemented by the people in charge of the website and the magazine was presented this way: “This storage of the discussions engaged on the list should give to everyone the feeling that we are not inevitably dedicated to talk a load of drivel,
which is a little appalling in the long run, and that something in the list can BE DONE and make sense”.

Susan Herring (1999) draws some concrete consequences from this type of analysis in terms of implications for the design of CMC systems. These ones have to, at the same time, increase the interactions coherence and keep the fruitful aspects of the interactions incoherence. To achieve this she proposes tree tracks: (1) increase the recording and archive capacity (particularly in the case of synchronous communication for which it will not be systematic) because it is important in terms of cognitive process, (2) increase the feedback to reduce the conversation incoherence, the ideal thing would be to do bi-directional communication which could allow feedback while the writing of messages, even if this brings other problems (some examples: the technological frames where each participant has his speech space which inevitably limit the number of participants), (3) reduce the incoherent sequences by making easier the location and the linkage between speech-turns.

Tree important questions to continue the debates

It seems then fundamental to consider that the context is characterized by a technical, material and software device, which makes easier or prevent some types of exchange or others, allows for instance to archive data even if this isn’t obviously automatic or used even if it is available. As Josiane Jouêt asserts: “The use comes on top of a potential technique predetermined which constitutes an horizon of major references. The user chooses the desired application and builds by referring to the possibilities and constrains of the services and software borrowed” (1993, p.107). Similarly, Serge Proulx (1999) consider that the devices materiality, for instance the choice of a specific technique configuration for a communication network, act over the communication process as an intellectual technology. The choice of a specific technique device leads the users to develop a way of thinking/ building “reality” which is in part constrained by the technique device as a material form allowing or limiting expression in terms of debates.

In consequence, the question about the possibility to influence the Internet configuration as a sociotechnical device, becomes important. On this subject, our research leads us to think that as this device shows a certain plasticity, there is never, according to Thierry Vedel, a “final and permanent clarification”, as the conception-innovation stage is a “continuous process which goes on through the way in which (technologies) are being used” (1994, pp. 16-17). Guillaume Latzko-Toth showed to which extent the knowledge of the IRC sociotechnical device influences the nature of the communicational exchanges (2000). However, it is important to highlight the significant inequalities in ICT appropriation⁹. The research done within the sociological framework of ICT uses, particularly within the appropriation study field, showed that it is unusual to find a user with a true “informatic culture”¹⁰. It is possible to find an intensive Internet practice with a weak degree of

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⁹ See our text entitled “the question of inequalities in the heart of Internet uses” (2002).

¹⁰ It is possible to talk about “informatic culture” in the junction of three types of observations: an individual and intensive use of the computer and the Internet which leads to a certain command, their integration to the everyday life and the formation of groups sharing the same passion. One of the most interesting examples is
technical acculturation because the Internet can also be seen only as way to accomplish tasks that, in the past, were for instance reserved to typewriters. Consequently, it is important to pay attention to the fact that the opening of the Internet as a sociotechnical device can contribute to create important gaps in the command of computer mediated communication.

Moreover, the study of human-machine mediation cannot explain alone all the aspects of the computer mediated public speech. Now, studies on computer mediated communication often prefer to analyze society through CMC practices rather than the role of CMC in society (the article of Nancy Baym (1998) is very interesting and we find it particularly exemplary on this matter). Everything that has to be analyzed is online which constitutes a strong methodological choice. Consequently, even if it is made clear that we often find the same social characteristics online than offline, everything that isn’t happening online seems to be completely eliminated. Given this change of perspective, for instance, those who are not onto the network, are not taken into consideration anymore. More generally, this type of methodology can bring to very questionable views.

Thus, we find it impossible to support the view of Mark Poster (1997) on the central role of the Internet as a mean allowing to considerably decentralize the enunciation of speech spaces. This kind of position completely denies social inequalities in terms of technical acculturation degree but also in terms of general knowledge degree which “allows” to participate in public debates. Besides, the everyday life constrains, especially the one in terms of time availability, are greatly ignored. The concepts of cultural and symbolic capital and the Habitus of Pierre Bourdieu (1980 [1990]) should be taken into account to go further in the analysis. We also think about the approach of Henri Lefebvre (1958, 1962) according to which the everyday life can be considered as a level to seize all the social scene. Obviously, in that case, we are far from the stricto sensu study of computer mediated communication, but, for us, this needs to be done to go further in the analysis.

Finally, we will place the emphasis on another observation. A lot of texts about CMC, especially the seminal article of Licklider and Taylor about which we talked previously, link the mediated exchanges by computer and the research of consensus. Aren’t we finding here a not assumed particular conception of politics and social relations from the authors of these texts? Like Anne-Marie Gingras (1999), it is possible to wonder if the works which place emphasis in communication as a social dimension are not often tending, directly or indirectly, voluntary or involuntary, towards a vision of the world which neglect conflict over consensus. Anne-Marie Gingras puts forward the hypothesis according to which, as an ideology, communication can be seen as naturally distilling harmony (1999, p.3). However, isn’t this kind of perspective flouting the divergent interests of individuals and groups constituting society and postulating in a daring way the existence of social consensus as a norm? We ought to ask ourselves, like Serge Proulx, if “to resort to communication (or the lack of communication) to characterize some specific social relations” isn’t a “ideological trick” which mask “other aspects of power struggle between

given by the people who contributed to the development of the free Linux software (we could say the same about the IRC development).
players that also describe, and more fundamentally, the tensions and oppositions between them” (1992, p.223). In a perspective near the one of Vincent Mosco (2003), it is only by standing aloof from the idea according to which the communicational exchanges lead inevitably to a generalized agreement, that we can avoid to participate in the constitution of a new myth, the one of the information society.

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