Chapter 6
Facebook as a Tool for Enhancing Alternative/Counter–Public Spheres in Cyprus

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ABSTRACT
The chapter is based on a study focusing on the uses and impact of different forms/media of communication on bicommmunal relations in Cyprus. It presents a case study of bicommmunal communication through Facebook Groups that took place in Cyprus between 2007-2010. The discussion identifies the ways in which certain Facebook Groups facilitate bicommmunal communication in Cyprus and explains why they can be considered part of a counter-public sphere. The analysis suggests that groups whose voices or discourses are excluded from the public domain/sphere can find through the use of tools like Facebook Groups alternative forms of organising and debate, which places them—at least as far as this medium is concerned—on an equal footing with discourses sanctioned by power and hegemonic institutions, such as the press and broadcast media.

INTRODUCTION
The chapter presents a case study of bicommmunal communication through Facebook Groups that took place in Cyprus between 2007-2010. In the case of Cyprus, the dominant public sphere has been segregated between two different public spheres since 1974, thus even in the dominant public sphere the audience is limited per se. For this reason any space either offline or online which has a mixed audience—however limited in terms of size or reach—is worth analysis since it appears to be more pluralised even if it is only in this narrow ethno-national sense.
The chapter attempts to suggest that when bicomunal communication appears in environments such as the Facebook groups the dynamic of the medium allows it to be used in order to form audiences or publics even under circumstances that it could not be possible (e.g. when physical interaction is not ethically and socially approved).

THE TOPIC OF THE RESEARCH

The dynamics involved in the topic of this research are complex and include the different perceptions/narratives with which the two communities—and even different sections within them—conceptualise the history of ethnic conflict and the need for coexistence. As Bryant (2001) put it recently, the contradictory perceptions of the two communities may end up as conflicts between different rival concepts of “justice” and “respect.” To complicate things even more there are alternative perceptions in both communities and historical narratives that come into conflict with the dominant discourses in each community. It should be noted that I adopt Jäger’s definition of discourse as “the flow of knowledge—and/or all societal knowledge stored—throughout all time and, which determines individual and collective doing and/or formative action that shapes society, thus exercising power” (2006, p. 34).

The aim of the research on which this chapter is based on, was to explore the intersection of the impact of different media uses and institutions with the conflict of rival discourses in the public sphere or the differentiation of alternative and hegemonic public spheres. The theme that has been explored in the above context is bicomunal relations, i.e. how opposing discourses emerged and competed and continue to compete on the defining of these relations and the image of the other. The purpose of the research was to help in the understanding of how meaning has been constructed through conflict and how different media and forms of communication have fed into the broader social and cultural history of Cypriot society and more specifically the development of bicomunal relations, an area which has exerted the most profound influence on the modern history of the island.

These questions have been explored through the examination of three different forms of bicomunal communication—face-to-face, the traditional mainstream press, broadcast and new media part of which is the focus of the current chapter.

In Cyprus, due to the lack of physical interaction between the Greek and Turkish Cypriots since 1974, the communication between the two communities has been mediated by different means. The concept of the other has been largely the result of this mediated communication and that is why the main research on which this chapter is based on examined how the relations of the two communities are affected by the way their communication is facilitated. The other is used in this chapter in its singular form in order to emphasise the explicitness with which it has been used by the Greek-Cypriot (GC) and Turkish-Cypriot (TC) communities to refer to the ‘opposite’ community since the time the nationalist violence broke out in the island and especially during the period of separation.

The relative easing of the post-1974 absolute separation of the two communities in 2003 has created trends that need to be studied and analysed. The younger generations of the two communities have been brought up almost without any kind of interaction, since communication channels did not exist for 29 years; while the older generations had to negotiate between memories of friendly/peaceful coexistence and bicomunal conflicts between 1956 and 1974—and the nationalist perceptions disseminated by the dominant media. The focus of the empirical study that I am presenting in this chapter is on the period after the easing of restrictions regarding free movement across the Green Line.

Before moving into the area of new media let me provide a short note on broadcast media which appeared in Cyprus in the 1950s. During the British rule the Cyprus Broadcasting Service...
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