

Google, Buzz off

Democratic configuration in a period of immediate contention

New Media and the Transformation of Politics

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Abstract

This paper examines the period of contention over the introduction of the social media service Google Buzz. The resistance against the particular architecture of this new medium, is subjected to various conceptions of democracy, to examine its democratic aspects.

This paper asserts that the period of contention about Google Buzz can be interpreted as democratic form of resistance. There was a wide-spread network of various actors, who actively participated in the articulation of the issue, which led to a completely different service than Google planned it to be.

When the Google bee stings

This paper examines the period of contention in relation to the social media service Google Buzz, which was introduced on the February 2010 to Gmail users. It generally functions like other social media like Twitter and Facebook; as an information stream which other users of the same platform can follow. Although many people might be excited to be part of Google's unfinished products, like testing Google Wave for example, the case of Buzz demonstrated that the opposite is possible as well. Shortly after Buzz was implemented into Gmail users' accounts many privacy concerns were raised. The introduction was anything but flawless.

Instantly Gmail users got a 'Buzz' tab, in their Gmail account interface. They were automatically assigned to follow other users on Buzz, whom they chatted and emailed the most with¹. In addition, if they checked out a profile from another user, the communication between the users and their followers was openly visible². Another criticized and dubious feature was related to other Google services that Gmail users might use. Pictures from Picasa³ and personal activity on Google Reader⁴ were automatically shared through Buzz⁵. Considering the users' privacy concerns, many argued that Google Buzz was implemented quite intrusively.

Indeed, many bloggers, news sites and Twitter users responded quite heavily on its privacy issues, followed by a Harvard Law School student that filed a class-action complaint⁶ against Google. In addition, another privacy complaint was filed by the Electronic Privacy Information Center (EPIC) with the United States Federal Trade Commission (FTC)⁷. Google responded with apologies for causing the concern and not getting "everything quite right"⁸. They swiftly changed the service by giving the users more options to use its features, which they did not have before.

The introduction of Buzz and the resistance to its initial features exemplify a contemporary scene where the particular architecture of a new medium becomes an issue of contention. This paper takes up the challenge to untangle this contention and analyze the democratic aspects of the resistance, from the perspective of several theorists which have

¹ <<http://www.accmanpro.com/2010/02/11/google-buzz-off/>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

² <<http://knack.rnews.be/nieuws/technologie/-google-buzz-schendt-privacy-/site72-section27-article46646.html?cid=rss/>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

³ <<http://picasa.google.com/>>, 30-03-2010.

⁴ <<http://www.google.com/reader/>>, 30-03-2010.

⁵ <<http://gmailblog.blogspot.com/2010/02/new-buzz-start-up-experience-based-on.html/>>, 30-03-2010.

⁶ <<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/google-buzz-draws-class-action-suit-harvard-student/story?id=9875095&page=1>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

⁷ <<http://arstechnica.com/security/news/2010/02/epic-fail-google-faces-complaint-over-buzz-privacy-issues.ars>> last visited 30-03-2010.

⁸ <<http://gmailblog.blogspot.com/2010/02/new-buzz-start-up-experience-based-on.html>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

different conceptions of what democracy entails under the conditions of contemporary global technoculture. The goal is to examine these conceptions and build upon them, by applying them to the Google Buzz conflict as a case study. This leads to the following research question: *Can the period of contention in relation to this technological object be interpreted as a democratic form of resistance?*

1 Frames of democracy

In *Communication Power* sociologist Manuel Castells examines power in the networked society (2009). He is concerned with how power exists and is exercised within networks, which he describes as "complex structures of communication constructed around a set of goals that simultaneously ensure a unity of purpose and flexibility of execution by their adaptability to the operating environment" (Castells, 2009: p21). The flexibility of networks is enabled by the processes of 'programmability' and 'switching'⁹. Both operate with a type of power that Castells calls *network-making power*, and this type of power has two basic mechanisms. The first is "the ability to constitute network(s), and to program/reprogram the network(s) in terms of the goals assigned to the network," and the second is "the ability to connect and ensure the co-operation of different networks by sharing common goals and combining resources, while fending off competition from other networks by setting up strategic cooperation" (Castells, 2009: p45). Thus, by implementing a new goal to the Gmail network, Google exercised network-making-power. However, this power was also countered, which is applicable to Castells' view on democracy.

According to Castells, "(..) democracy resides in capacity to counter the power of heritage, wealth and personal influence with the power over the multitude (..)" (Castells, 2009: p366). This capacity manifests in what Castells calls 'counterpower'. An example of the exercising counterpower, is *reprogramming*, which imposes (a) new goal(s) onto a network (Castells, 2009: p48). Thus, if the programmed goal by Google was resisted by exercising counterpower, it could be considered as democratic practice to induce the reprogramming of the network (Castells, 2009: p48, p431, p413). This leads to the following questions: *How was counterpower exercised? How does it relate to (re)programmed goals of the network?*

⁹ Programming happens through humans engaging in discourse - changes to networks at the level of programming, then, are the results of a discursive process in which humans have determining agency. Human agency also figures heavily into switching, that is, the process of connecting or disconnecting various networks from one another.

The initial architecture of Buzz has led to the publication of many blog posts, news stories and Twitter posts¹⁰. Many of these practices can be conceived of as citizen journalism coverage about the new medium Buzz. Contrary to traditional journalism, which author Axel Bruns describes as hierarchical, centralized and paternalistic, the citizen journalism approach to news is heterarchical, decentralized and meritocratic (Bruns, 2008: p81). News facts have become stories, which individuals can expand, correct and combine with other stories. Bruns argues that this communal coverage of the news, which is open to participation, has a profound effect on democratic processes (Bruns, 2008: p75, p96).

In his book, *Blogs, Wikipedia, Second Life, and Beyond: From Production to Producership*, Bruns describes the shift from gatekeeping to gatewatching (2008). Traditional journalists are no longer gatekeepers, reporting mere facts, but rather making selections out of the large newsflow, which consist of many ongoing discussable issues (Bruns, 2008: p72-74). Gatewatchers are an active audience who, in communities, drive discussion-driven probabilistic news coverage of issues and items relevant to their peers (Bruns, 2008: p74). This is how citizen journalism comes about. Considering the vast amount of blogposts, news stories and Twitter posts covering the Buzz issue, how does Bruns relate this to democracy?

Citizen journalism is an example of 'producership', which he describes as: 'the collaborative and iterative content creation practices within many user-led environments as a hybrid and often inextricable combination of production and use' (Bruns, 2007: p2). Citizen journalists cover the news as a " (...) compilation of a range of plausible multiperspectival interpretations, which allows a continuous process of discussion, liberation, evaluation and communal exploration (...) " (Bruns, 2008: p83). In his view, producership in networked many-to-many media supports active and deliberated political engagement by citizens (Bruns, 2008: p92). Thus, one could argue that the citizen journalists, in relation to Buzz, were actively, politically involved in shaping the architecture of the new medium. In Bruns view, their actions could be conceived as 'molecular' democratic practices, if the process of its development was " (...) decentralized and distributed into a wide, broad and deep network of various contributors to the overall project (...) ", out of which an improved product emerged (Bruns, 2008: p366). However, a thorough examination of producership-based journalism about Buzz and its implications will provide a clearer image to analyze if this, indeed, was a (molecular) democratic process. Therefore the research questions arise: *What were the implications of producership-based journalism on the Buzz issue? (How) does it apply to the*

¹⁰ Links to blogposts and newstories have been indexed by EPIC on: <<http://epic.org/privacy/ftc/googlebuzz/default.html>>. (last visited on 30-03-2010) A screenshot of related Twitter posts can be found in the appendix.

concept of a molecular democracy?

Castells and Bruns both conceive of democracy as a procedural matter, which is enacted by a pre-assumed group of actors in the public sphere, harbored in communication networks (Castells, 2009: p12; Bruns, 2008: 379). However, there are authors who oppose this way of thinking.

According to Jodi Dean, the notion of the public sphere, traditionally conceived of as a site and subject of liberal democratic practices, should be uncoupled from democratic theories under conditions of global technoculture (Dean, 2003: p111). To effectively employ the democratic potential of networked communication, and affect the outcomes in struggles for hegemony, she argues that the focus on transparency must be replaced by the focus on decisiveness (Dean, 2003: p110). This is realized in what Dean calls neodemocratic politics.

From this perspective, it would not directly matter that individuals, including citizen journalists engaged in the discourse over Buzz; the decisive action, that Dean advocates, was rather undertaken by those who filed complaints against Google, which led to a class action lawsuit.

In 'Why the Net is not a Public Sphere' Dean draws upon the work of the Web epistemologist Richard Rogers and the political philosopher Noortje Marres, who identify 'issue-networks' on the Web to reveal spaces of contestation and antagonism (Dean, 2003: p107). Issue-networks are neither actors nor a public, but "flows of communication and contestation that turn matters into issues" (Dean, 2003: 107). Dean argues that by *following the issues*, rather than the actors, 'neodemocracies' can be mapped, which are more or less democratic configurations through contestation and conflict (Dean, 2003: p108). Thus, from this view, the Google Buzz issue has an issue-network which can be located, to examine its democratic configuration.

The formation of issue-networks occurs when people link around an issue, even if they have different notions or definitions of the issue. The notion of a 'public'¹¹, used by Rogers and Marres, is broadly defined as all those groups and entities that make claims on particular issues, a politics-in-the-making (Marres, 2005: p106). Marres argues that this process is more democratic when the affected actors are involved in the issue can speak for themselves; when they are able to articulate their definition of the issue, and come closer to a settlement (Marres, 2005: p154). However, in the case of Buzz, there were many users affected by the

¹¹ This is a very different notion of a public in the democratic tradition of Habermas; individual citizens confronting a state or corporation.

issue without knowing about it in advance¹². This seems to correspond with Marres' notion of 'displacement of politics', which can lead to a democratic deficit¹³ (Marres, 2005: p134). Furthermore, Marres calls for research into the technical interventions that prevent publics from organizing around their issue.

With the conception of Dean's neodemocracy and Marres' displacement of politics, the following questions can be posed: *(How) did the politics-in-the-making, concerning Buzz result in - what Dean conceives as- a neodemocracy? Did a displacement of politics occur through technical forestallment?*

1.1 Methodology

Google's network-making power was countered. Even though, the adjustments to the service could be conceived as 'resolution', the issue-network still exists, leaving traces of actions by various actors with different definitions of the issue. The introduction of Buzz and its consequent resistance is a contemporary example of period of immediate contention and techno-political struggle. Through a thorough analysis of the involved actors' relations and online traces, democratic aspects of the resistance to Google Buzz will be examined. In this case-study, the mentioned research questions shall be the guiding focus.

In the next chapter, the use of counterpower, and how it relates to the (re)programmed goals in the network, will be examined. Subsequently, the implications of the produsage-based citizen journalism about Buzz will be analyzed, followed by an examination of the concept of a molecular democracy. Thereafter, the Google-Buzz issue network will be mapped, to further discuss the concepts of neo-democracy, politics-in-the-making and the displacement of politics. Unfortunately, under the present circumstances there is no option to use the IssueCrawler¹⁴ software to map the issue-network. Therefore, a part of the issue-network will be manually located. The state of the issue and its public will be analyzed. Furthermore, different important issue definitions by various related actors will be compared. Finally, the different views on democracy in relation to Buzz will be compared in the conclusion, to formulate an answer to the main research question.

¹² <http://news.cnet.com/8301-31322_3-10451428-256.html>, last visited 30-03-2010.

¹³ A democratic deficit is created when: "(..) issues that depend on public involvement for their settlement are transported to locations that are inaccessible to publics, making their involvement in issue formation, and thus the settlement of affairs, impossible" (Marres, 2005: p145).

¹⁴ The IssueCrawler can be used to map issue-networks<<http://www.issuecrawler.net/>>, last visited 27-03-2010.

2 Reprogramming control over openness

Google, one of the largest companies on the Web, is known for seeking to dominate many other industries and contexts, besides searching the Web¹⁵. The company, which constantly launches new online services to expand, launched Google Buzz in February 2010, and entered the realm of social media with it. Their new social networking service is a primary example exercising of Castells' *network-making-power*. Google programmed a new goal assigned to the existing network of Gmail users. Namely employing the existing Gmail network and turn them into users of their service. Initially, this happened automatically, leaving the Gmail users powerless, with no choice whether to implement the service, or not. Also, the options, which were added later, to choose who you're following and to what other service you connect were not given, but automated. This also implies the exercising of switching power that Castells writes about. Google namely connected the Gmail network to Picasa and Google Reader network to combine resources and ensure the co-operation by connecting them by default. This resulted in automatic postings on Google Buzz if of Gmail users in Picasa and Google Reader. Moreover, for a short but crucial time, Google Buzz users' intercommunication and activity on other Google services was openly visible for automated followers. Was this Google's intention?

On the day that Google launched the service this is what posted on their blog: "Buzz brings this network to the surface by automatically setting you up to follow the people you email and chat with the most¹⁶". But even more explicit: "(..) Buzz itself is not designed to be a closed system. Our goal is to make Buzz a *fully* open and distributed platform for conversations¹⁷" (emphasis added). In another Google blog-post about the meaning of openness, it is even stated that open systems *win*, and lead to "more innovation, value, and *freedom of choice* for consumers, and a vibrant, profitable, and competitive ecosystem for businesses¹⁸" (emphasis added).

Contrary to this idea, the way that Google Buzz initially was introduced led to anything but freedom of choice for consumers. If 'openness' was the programmed goal assigned to Buzz network, the exercise of counterpower led to the reprogramming of the

¹⁵ This is also referred to as "Googlization" by Siva Vaidhyanathan, Richard Rogers and others, critically examining the implications of Google's actions. <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Googlization>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

¹⁶ <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/02/introducing-google-buzz.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+blogspot%2FMKuf+%28Official+Google+Blog%29&utm_content=Google+Reader>, last visited 30-03-2010.

¹⁷ <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/02/introducing-google-buzz.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+blogspot%2FMKuf+%28Official+Google+Blog%29&utm_content=Google+Reader>, last visited 30-03-2010.

¹⁸ <<http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2009/12/meaning-of-open.html>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

network. Openness was namely replaced by giving the users control, through options concerning the users' information flows. The resistance to the initial features is what countered Google's networking-making-power and Google's power as a switcher. But who exercised this counterpower?

According to Castells 'power lies on the control of communication and counterpower depends on breaking such control' (Castells, 2009: p3). Castells mostly refers to social movements when writing about those that exercise counterpower (Castells, 2009: p4). However, he also mentions civil society, which is more applicable in this case, since there was no specific or movement that collectively organized in resisting Buzz (Castells, 2009: p4). There were many different actors that expressed or reported the critique on Google's move, including (micro)bloggers, news websites and citizen journalists. Crucially, two complaints were filed against Google Buzz, by the EPIC¹⁹ and a Harvard law student²⁰. In addition, other important actors, like Danah Boyd²¹ and the Electronic Frontier Foundation²² made their statements about the lacking privacy control. Promptly after what Google calls 'loud and clear feedback'²³, Google literally let go of their initial goal of a fully open and distributed platform, by making drastic changes to their network.

Thus, counterpower was exercised by those individuals that engaged in critical discourse around the Google Buzz issue. Castells argues that "discourses of power provide substantive goals for the programs of networks" (Castells, 2009: p51). In this case, the goal was clear: swiftly give back control to the users, by changing automated features into options.

Critical engagement in the discourse around Buzz is what countered Google's power over the multitude's information flows, and led to reprogramming the networks' goal. Therefore, from Castells view, one could argue that the resistance to Buzz could be perceived as a democratic practice. Among those who engaged in the discourse were many citizen journalists. In the next chapter their democratic potential will be examined, by looking at the implications of citizen journalism on the Google Buzz issue.

¹⁹ <<http://arstechnica.com/security/news/2010/02/epic-fail-google-faces-complaint-over-buzz-privacy-issues.ars>> last visited 30-03-2010.

²⁰ <<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/google-buzz-draws-class-action-suit-harvard-student/story?id=9875095&page=1>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

²¹ <<http://techcrunch.com/2010/03/13/privacy-publicity-sxsw/>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

²² <<http://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2010/02/protect-your-privacy-google-buzz>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

²³ <http://gmailblog.blogspot.com/2010/02/new-buzz-start-up-experience-based-on.html>>, last visited 30-03-2010.

3 Citizen journalism. Vital for change?

“F*ck you, Google. My privacy concerns are not trite. They are linked to my actual physical safety, and I will now have to spend the next few days maintaining that safety by continually knocking down followers as they pop up.”²⁴

When a big media company launches a new service or product, it is always online news. There are news sites, bloggers, Twitter users who are immediately creating a ‘buzz’ around new product developments. However, it might be less common that bloggers post heavily negative comments, like Harriet Jacobs did. In her blog-post ‘F*ck you, Google’, she explicitly describes her negative encounter with the Buzz: making her personal Google Reader data available and automatically connecting her account to her abusive ex-husband’s account²⁵. Although her blog is not necessarily a news blog, her story is a perfect example of a produsage-based journalism. Her story became part of the news and the issue itself.

Not only did her blog facilitate a discussion about the Buzz issue through comments, but her story got spread through many various sources, including the New York Times website²⁶ and Twitter²⁷. Her story was blown up in such a way that she even received an email from Google Buzz product manager, apologizing for the extremely confusing product experience and letting her know that they would do something about her reported issues²⁸. Furthermore, her blog-post was also expanded on the p2pnet blog²⁹.

This example of citizen journalism is just one of the many blogposts³⁰ that were written by individuals that were actively engaged in the contention over Buzz. However, from Bruns’ perspective this particular example is interesting to acknowledge, because it marks the “(..) shift from the individualized conception of the informed citizen toward the collaborative concept of a monitorial citizen” (Jenkins, p208 in Bruns, 2008: p381). The blogger was deliberately and actively involved in the process of revealing the issues at stake, which other news concerned actors elaborated on. While Jacobs, was no (expert) journalist, she was still able to raise here concern. As Bruns puts it: ‘(..)the news online appears increasingly user-

²⁴ < <http://fugitivus.wordpress.com/2010/02/11/fuck-you-google/>> last visited 30-03-2010.

²⁵ < <http://fugitivus.wordpress.com/2010/02/11/fuck-you-google/>> last visited 30-03-2010.

²⁶ < <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/technology/internet/13google.html>> last visited 30-03-2010.

²⁷ On the Techcrunch blog it is also visible that it was spread through Twitter, by people who ‘retweeted’ the article: <http://techcrunch.com/2010/02/12/google-buzz-privacy/>> last visited 30-03-2010.

²⁸ The email can be read here: < <http://fugitivus.wordpress.com/2010/02/12/screw-you-google/>> last visited 30-03-2010.

²⁹ <http://www.p2pnet.net/story/35799/>> last visited 30-03-2010.

³⁰ Links to blogposts have been indexed by EPIC on: <<http://epic.org/privacy/ftc/googlebuzz/default.html>>. (last visited on 30-03-2010)

centered’.

In this case, citizen journalism about the Google Buzz issue amplified a negative encounter with the initial Buzz architecture. Although, the reactions by many others, like EPIC, Danah Boyd and the EFF, already emphasized that Google had made a big mistake, this particular example placed the Buzz issues in a personal context. Serving as an example to explain the issue at hand, in other news stories and (micro)blog posts. Furthermore, according to her follow-up blogpost³¹, Google was actually thankful for emphasizing specific issues, which they would fix. Thus, this exemplifies that the produsage-based journalism contributed to the development of Buzz. By raising specific issues, Jacobs participated in shaping the architecture of the medium. Could this, then, be considered to a (molecular) democratic process?

Bruns argues that produsage in many-to-many networks may drive changes to the democratic system itself (Bruns, 2008: p359). He conceives of produsage as a potential reinvigoration of citizen participation in democratic processes (Bruns, 2008: p359). Drawing on the work of Pierre Lévy, Bruns outlines a model, in which produsage-based democracy is molecular, and part of a constantly adjusting produsage-based political model (Bruns, 2008: p366-367).

“We can’t reinvent the instruments of communication and collective thought without reinventing democracy, a distributed, active, molecular democracy. Faced with the choice of turning back or moving forward, ... humanity has a chance to reclaim its future ... by systematically producing the tools that will enable it to shape itself into intelligent communities, capable of negotiating the stormy seas of change”

(Lévy in Bruns, 2008: p366)

In such a democracy, the policy-making process would not be based on the decisions of relatively closed bodies of political parties, but rather be a decentralized and distributed process of development by political engaged citizens (Bruns, 2008: p366). Crucially, artifacts, emerging from this process, could gradually improve and evolve (Bruns, 2008: p366).

Produsage-based democracy is non-representational in the sense that there are no fixed roles, within a party-style hierarchy but rather self-selecting, fluid groups of citizens-as-

³¹ The email can be read here: < <http://fugitivus.wordpress.com/2010/02/12/screw-you-google/> > last visited 21-03-10.

producers that raise a collective voice (Bruns, 2008: p372).

Bruns presents his ideal of a molecular produsage-based democracy, but he is also states that it is still unclear what its exact shape will be (Bruns, 2008: 381). Furthermore, in respect to policy making, he writes that it requires: ‘a new approach to engagement between the governing and the governed’ (Bruns, 2008: p366).

At first glance, it seems far-fetched to relate the produsage-based journalism about Google Buzz to the concept of a molecular democracy. However, shortly after the launch, Google pointed out that they needed feedback from its users in order to improve it³². Through the produsage based journalism about Buzz from various sources, they got input to change their company policy. ‘Tens of millions’³³ citizens-as-producers raised their collective voice that did were upset about what Google did. After acknowledging this, Google changed and improved the Buzz architecture and its policy. Therefore, arguably, their participation applies to Bruns concept of a produsage-based molecular democracy. Although, Bruns does not directly relate his concept to company policies, it is applicable in the sense that policy-making was affected be citizens-as-producers.

On the day that Buzz was launched, Google posted this on their blog: “We look forward to continuing to evolve and improve Google Buzz based on your feedback”³⁴. This statement implied that they encouraged citizens to speak up about the service. More important, it shows that the process of development³⁵ was intentionally decentralized and distributed into a ‘wider, broader, deeper network of contributors to the overall project (..)’ out of which an improved artifact emerged (Bruns, 2008: p366). However, while providing a utopian view on democracy, Bruns also argues that we should remain skeptical about the transformative potential of produsage (Bruns, 2008: p359).

It was Google that decided how to implement Buzz in the first place. Thus, it was not a clear cut case that engagement of citizen journalists would affect Buzz’s policy and its architecture in such a way. Google was expecting feedback from people that wanted to help improve the service. Whereas a firestorm of heavy critique³⁶ clearly is something else.

However, as the example of Jacobs shows, citizen journalism *did* contribute to the transformation of the medium. Therefore, the citizen journalism about Google Buzz could be conceived of as a molecular democratic process, because it exemplified deliberative political

³² < <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/02/introducing-google-buzz.html>> last visited 30-03-2010.

³³ < <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8517613.stm>> last visited 30-03-2010.

³⁴ < <http://googleblog.blogspot.com/2010/02/introducing-google-buzz.html>> last visited 30-03-2010.

³⁵ With ‘process of development’ I do not refer to the directly to the programming the web application, but rather to the ability to affect the process of development by giving feedback.

³⁶ < <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/13/technology/internet/13google.html>> last visited 21-03-2010.

engagement of citizens in broad decentralized network, participating in the improvement of the architecture and its policy.

Heretofore, Castells and Bruns have provided procedural perspectives on democracy, which are based on the procedural participation of actors in the public sphere. Whereas, in the next chapter a very perspective on democracy will be examined and applied, one that is based on issue-networks.

4 Mapping the neo-democratic configuration

In 'Recipe for Tracing the Fate of Issues and their Publics on the Web', Richard Rogers and Noortje Marres describe how they locate issue-networks on the Web, to examine whether and how the actors affected by the issue, may organize as a public (Rogers and Marres, 2005: p17). They use the Issue-crawler software to locate and explore issue-spaces, to examine how and by whom an issue is defined (Rogers and Marres, 2005: p6-7). With the input of a few URLs as starting point, the software follows hyperlinks among inter-linked pages that deal with a given issue (Rogers and Marres, 2005: p1).

By doing so, they can trace in which networks an issue has been 'public-ized', as well as examine the state of the issue and its public³⁷ (Roger and Marres, 2005: p8-9). In analyzing issue-spaces, the *heat*, *life expectancy* and *fate* serve as indications of the state of an issue and its public. The heat can be determined by looking at how 'fresh' the pages in the network are. For life expectancy, the key question is whether actors are increasingly attached to the issue, or increasingly detached. Lastly, the fate of an issue depends on the identification of a collective or institution that addresses and takes up the issue (Rogers and Marres, 2005: p8-9). Acknowledging these indications, what can be said about the state of the Google Buzz issue and its public?

Considering that there are 51.800.000³⁸ Google search hits for the query 'Google Buzz Privacy', it is impossible to manually locate the complete issue-network. However, by visiting and browsing through the first twenty returns a few things become clear. Firstly, they are all blog-posts that report or express critique on Buzz' privacy problems, which date from mid-February. Secondly, it is now almost April, this implies that the issue is not so 'hot' anymore. Also the comments are not fresh anymore, which could imply that there not many new actors

³⁷ Those actors who are affected by an issue, including the ones that may have caused it, and have a definition of the issue.

³⁸ These are the returns from a Google search query of 28-03-2010.

attaching to the issue. However, by looking at the fate of the issue, these findings seem to make sense.

The fate of the issue, Google changing their Buzz architecture, arguably depended on the institution EPIC, which filed a class-action complaint³⁹ against Google. From the perspective of Marres and Rogers it can be conceived of as the institution that took up and addressed the issue. But how did EPIC define the issue?

“ (...) unfair and deceptive trade practices of Google with respect to Google’s transformation of an email service to a social networking service without offering Gmail users meaningful control over their information or opt-in consent. (...) Google’s change in business practices and service terms violated user privacy expectations, diminished user privacy, contradicted Google’s own privacy policy, and may have also violated federal wiretap laws”⁴⁰.

This was stated at the Buzz archive page⁴¹ on the EPIC website, which also provides many links to online articles about EPIC’s complaint, as well as news stories and blog-post about Buzz. This is crucial actor in the in the issue-network, which articulated the issue.

Another actor who did so, which was found, by browsing through the links on the EPIC site, was social media researcher Danah Boyd. At the SXSW 2010 media festival Boyd asserted: “I can’t help but notice that more and more companies are thinking it is okay to overexpose people tremendously and then back peddle weeks later”⁴². She argued that Buzz had a huge privacy flaw because Google integrated something very public with something very private. But how did Google itself defined the Buzz privacy issue?

Eight days after the service was launched, Google executive Eric Schmidt suggested that those who complained about privacy invasions were subject of confusion and that nobody was harmed: "I would say that we did not understand how to communicate Google Buzz and its privacy"⁴³. This shows that by redefining the issue, Google tried to move away from the thought that they could have done it intentionally. Whereas Boyd’s definition expands the issue definition, by saying that there are more companies that act in the same way.

Obviously, there were many and various actors in the issue network that made claims

³⁹ <<http://arstechnica.com/security/news/2010/02/epic-fail-google-faces-complaint-over-buzz-privacy-issues.ars>> last visited 30-03-2010.

⁴⁰ <<http://epic.org/privacy/ftc/googlebuzz/>> last visited 30-03-2010.

⁴¹ <<http://epic.org/privacy/ftc/googlebuzz/>> last visited 30-03-2010.

⁴² <<http://techcrunch.com/2010/03/13/privacy-publicity-sxsw/>> last visited 30-03-2010.

⁴³ <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2010/feb/17/google-buzz-schmidt>> last visited 21-03-10.

about the Google Buzz issue and linked to other actors in the issue-network. Instead of arguing that transparency would matter in this process, Dean emphasizes the need for decisive action to affect outcomes of hegemonic struggles (Dean, 2003: p110). Moreover, she prioritizes contestation and antagonism over debate. Since neodemocracies are configured through contestation and conflict, EPIC is a crucial actor to conceptualize the democratic configuration that Dean describes. Since EPIC undertook decisive action and firmly contested Google's actions, by taking them to court. However, the other actors⁴⁴ who made contesting claims about Google Buzz, like Harriet Jacobs, were also part of enacting the "decisiveness" in this case.

Dean describes the goal of a neodemocracy as contestation, by recognizing fissures and antagonism, rather than reaching consensus in debate (Dean, 2003: p108-111). That is what gives democracy its political strength (Dean, 2003: p111). She argues that democracy is not something which can be archived when aiming directly at it: 'Democracy (..) may well be a secondary quality that emerges as an effect or a result of other practices' (Dean, 2003: p111). In this view, the goal of contestation was reached, by various actors who were part of the issue-network. Dean does not give a definitive account of what democracy entails under the conditions of global technoculture. But her re-imagination as neodemocracy, suited this case study, since there was an issue, a networked conflict and contesting engagement of various actors in the issue-network. However, arguably, the politics-in-the-making which contested the Google Buzz architecture would not be possible without transparency.

Dean argues that this norm of the public sphere is 'based on the idea that power is always hidden and secret' (Dean, 2003: p110). While all sorts of horrible political processes are perfectly transparent today, nobody seems to mind (Dean, 2003: 110). However, the Buzz case study shows that immediate shifts in power relations affected many people that don't even know about the issue. Whereas other people, bringing this issue to light, evidently *did* seem to mind that the multitude of Gmail users was affected. This does not imply that there is a need for transparency in public debate to reach consensus. It rather implies that there was a need for transparency in order to articulate the issue and come closer to a settlement, through contestation. Thus, one could argue, that in this case, transparency was as important as decisiveness, to affect the outcome of the issue.

Furthermore, the way of implementing Buzz, left many affected Gmail users, unaware

⁴⁴ Supposedly there were also bloggers who argued that repressive governments in countries such as China or Iran could use Buzz to expose dissidents. <<http://www.cbc.ca/technology/story/2010/02/16/google-buzz-privacy.html>> last visited 21-03-10.

of its privacy issues. Can we call this a democratic deficit?

In her dissertation, 'No Issue, No Public: Democratic Deficits after the Displacement of Politics', Noortje Marres, underlines the possibility for displacements of politics (2005). In the context of issue-networks, this could occur if the actors, affected by the issue, are not able to organize around an issue and their settlement (Marres, 2005: p134). This would lead to a democratic deficit when, "(..) issues that depend on public involvement for their settlement are transported to locations that are inaccessible to publics, making their involvement in issue formation, and thus the settlement of affairs, impossible" (Marres, 2005: p145).

The issue itself was not *transported* in the case of Buzz. Because it was implemented without users' approval, politics were displaced in advance, which was the issue of contention. Moreover, the implementation became an issue that depended on public involvement. Thus, there was no democratic deficit which kept the public from organizing around the issue. Rather a technical forestallment, which lead to many Gmail users unaware of the issue. Crucial to note, it was not made impossible for them to organize around the issue, as we have seen. However, they first needed to *realize* that they were affected by the issue, in order to do something about it.

Conclusion

In this paper, the contention over the architecture of Google Buzz has been subjected to various theories of democracy. Subsequently, a number of conclusions have been drawn, in relation to specific claims and concepts. By recapitulating these and comparing them an answer will be given to the general research question.

Castells' focus on power relations was helpful to theorize the struggle and its outcome by looking at (re)programmed goals of the Buzz network. First, Google exercised network-making-power by reprogramming the existing Gmail network, with the goal to function as a *fully* open social networking service. In addition, it exercised switching power by connecting it to other Google networks. Consequently, counterpower was exercised by those that engaged in critical discourse, which lead to a new substantive goal and the *reprogramming* of the network. Openness was replaced by user control. Moreover, the resistance to programming could be conceived as democratic, for it countered Google's power over the multitude's information flows, by engaging in critical discourse.

Bruns' concept of produsage-based journalism is compatible with Castells' perspective. The particular case of blogger Jacobs exemplified active deliberative political involvement in shaping the policy and architecture of the new medium. Furthermore, arguably, Bruns' somewhat utopian model of a molecular democracy was applicable. Since, one could argue that the process of development was decentralized and distributed in a wide and deep network of contributors to improve the product. However, the appliance of such a model to resistance and contestation might not have been Bruns' intention.

Dean would probably heavily critique Castells and Bruns for theorizing about public spaces, in relation to the public sphere. She argues that democracy, under conditions of global technoculture should be re-imagined because of the ideology of publicity, which she calls communicative capitalism, has materialized in the Net (Dean, 2003: p102). After (partly) mapping the issue-network and examining the issue state and its public, its democratic configuration could be examined from Deans perspective. She describes contestation as the goal of a neodemocracy and argues that we should not prioritize decisiveness over transparency. But in this case, the goal of contestation could not be reached without transparency of the issue. Furthermore, the affected actors, who *realized* that they were affected, have not been hindered to articulate the issue. However, through Buzz's forestalling implementation, many Gmail users could still be unaware of what happened.

The resistance to the architecture of Google Buzz took place in various communication networks. Those individuals that were rightfully upset⁴⁵ articulated the issue, in numerous ways. Most importantly, their voices were heard by Google, who made drastic changes to the company's initial goal. The case study exemplified that power relations in communication networks can swiftly change. In a period of immediate contention, the resistance to Google's goal led to a very different service that Google had planned. The resistance can be interpreted as democratic in the sense that a wide-spread network of various actors actively participated in the articulation of the issue, and reached a settlement.

Although everything seems to be 'fine' again, with the users back in control of their privacy and information flows, Buzz' implementation shows that social media users must continue to be alert, for the tables can turn very fast, even without noticing.

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⁴⁵ < <http://epic.org/privacy/ftc/googlebuzz/> > last visited 30-03-2010.

Appendix

Screenshot from <<http://search.twitter.com>>, dating from 26-03-2010.

The screenshot shows the Twitter search interface. At the top left is the Twitter logo. A search bar contains the text "google buzz privacy" and a "Search" button. To the right of the search bar is a link for "Advanced Search". Below the search bar, the page displays "Realtime results for google buzz privacy" with a search time of "0.37 seconds". Navigation links for "Newer" and "Older" are shown, along with "Page 2".

The main content area lists several tweets:

- Excelly:** How did she even get my **Buzz?** STUPID **GOOGLE**. FIX UP YOUR **PRIVACY** SETTINGS. 1 day ago from *m.tweete.net* · [Reply](#) · [View Tweet](#)
- fulltraffic:** **Google** Bookmark Lists - A **Privacy**-Friendly **Buzz?** <http://bit.ly/c0wfep> (expand) 1 day ago from *twitterfeed* · [Reply](#) · [View Tweet](#)
- myloft:** [#Microsoft](#) Outlook 2010 social connector, I do hope it wouldn't repeat the **privacy** nightmare mistake by **Google Buzz** 1 day ago from *TweetSG* · [Reply](#) · [View Tweet](#)
- TheBuzzOnBuzz:** **Google Buzz** Exemplifies **Privacy** Problems, FTC Commissioner Says ... <http://bit.ly/asCQY9> (expand) 1 day ago from *API* · [Reply](#) · [View Tweet](#)
- nipashah:** FTC on **Google Buzz**: Consumer **Privacy** Cannot Be Run in Beta. <http://ow.ly/1qtcN> (via [@mashable](#)) 1 day ago from *HootSuite* · [Reply](#) · [View Tweet](#)
- NavarroCorinne5:** **Google Buzz** tweaked amid **privacy** complaints :) followers

On the right side of the page, there are several utility boxes:

- Feed for this query** and **Tweet these results** buttons.
- A box for "Show tweets written in:" with a dropdown menu set to "Any Language".
- A "Translate to English" button.
- A "Trending topics:" section listing: [#FF](#), [#nowplaying](#), [#followmejp](#), [I ♥](#), [Earth Hour 2010](#), [TGIF](#), [Adam Lambert](#), [#sougofollow](#), [#sometimesiwonder](#), and [Justin Bieber](#).
- A "Nifty queries:" section listing: [cool filter links](#) and ["is down"](#).