Citizens' initiatives in an *onlife* world

Designing for the revitalization of the public sphere

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Abstract—Citizen participation is booming, especially the number of urban bottom-up initiatives where information and communication technologies (ICT) are deployed is increasing rapidly. This growth is good news for society as recent historical research shows that the more citizens actively and persistently interfere with public issues, the more likely a society will be resilient. And yet, at the same time, a growing number of scholars argue that due to the unprecedented impact of ICT, the public sphere is at stake. How to understand both trends? How do the anti-'public sphere' developments relate to the growing number of citizens' initiatives using ICT? And if these citizen initiatives can indeed be understood as manifestations of public spheres, how can ICT foster or hinder the development of these public spheres? These questions will be explored by analyzing a Dutch citizen initiative called 'Buuv' (an online 'market' place for and by local residents) from a 'public sphere' perspective. The author will turn to *The human condition* (1958) of Hannah Arendt in order to elaborate a 'public sphere' perspective. An Arendtian perspective (as any perspective) highlights, however, some aspects and underexposes other aspects. Furthermore, chances are that Arendt's thoughts are somewhat outdated, in the sense that we now live in a world where the online and the offline life intertwine — an experience that is referred to with the term 'onlife'. Bearing these remarks in mind, the author will elaborate on the value of Arendt's ideas to 1) the endeavor of understanding current trends in society—more urban bottom-up initiatives *and* anti-'public sphere' developments due to the broad uptake of ICT—and 2) the endeavor of revitalizing the public sphere in an *onlife* world.

Keywords: Arendt, public sphere, citizen participation, neighborhood initiatives, urban bottom-up movement, design, ICT

I. INTRODUCTION

'Buuv' is an example of Dutch citizens taking charge of their neighborhood and realizing an alternative view on the good (neighborhood) life. It is an online platform for local residents to offer services to other neighbors as well as to ask for help. Key terms of the initiative are reciprocity and independence. In recent years, urban bottom-up initiatives like Buuv where information and communication technologies (ICT) are deployed are booming in the Netherlands [1]. The increase of the number of (digital) neighborhood initiatives is warmly welcomed by Dutch policy makers as it fits government's and public authorities' policies of promoting citizen participation [2].

The growth of the number of citizen initiatives is good news for society and not just from an economic perspective. Recent historical research shows that the more citizens actively and persistently interfere with public issues (issues concerning general interests rather than the interests of individuals or social groups), the more likely a society will be resilient; equal access to decision making processes and an equal distribution of property in a society increase the likelihood that rules are formed which serve the general good and long-term sustainability [3]. Illustrative is economic historical research into the water control funding system in late medieval Flanders [4]. This research shows that the peasant small-holders' dominance of the rural economy of the coastal plain in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries 'guaranteed' that significant amounts of money and labor were invested in the water control system, protecting peasants' families. Later, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, absentee landowners and commercial tenant farmers prevailed the rural economy; short-term financial profitability rather than safety became the decisive factor. This change in the organization of funding resulted in low capital investments in water control systems. Based on an analysis of early serial data on water management funding in coastal Flanders, researcher Tim Soens concludes: 'In fragile areas, decades of low capital investment in the end led to diminishing returns, flights of capital and flooding […] the most famous "natural" disasters in the late medieval North Sea area' [4, p. 352]. Historical research into the causes and effects of hazards and shocks, as well, indicates that citizens, families, neighborhoods and volunteers—the (informal) networks coexisting with layers of the state and the market—are constitutive of society's ability to absorb internal and external shocks [5]. From a public perspective, the growth of the number of urban bottom-up initiatives is to be received warmly.

A group of international scholars argue, however, that due to the unprecedented impact of ICT, the public sphere—a notion which they have borrowed from the political thinker Hannah Arendt, so they say—is at stake [6]. They assert that the broad uptake of ICT changes power relations in society radically and, in light of these changes, they call for 'the repartition of power

and responsibility among public authorities, corporate agents, and citizens' which is balanced more fairly [6]. Furthermore, this group asserts that ICT are becoming environmental forces increasingly co-constituting who we are, how we interact with each other, how we understand reality and how we interact with reality and that these transitions often do not support a public sphere. Although some other scholars are neutral or even hopeful about the opportunities offered by ICT, many of them acknowledge that things have to change—whether with regard to our mental online habits [7], the articulation of legal frameworks which take into account the normative implications of technological developments [8], or our conceptual tools to make sense of the digital transition and its impact on the public sphere [9]—if the public sphere is to survive, let alone be revitalized.

Both developments seem to contradict each other. On the one hand, a growing number of citizens is using ICT to take matters into their own hands. On the other hand, the broad deployment and uptake of ICT seems to reduce the public sphere. How to understand these trends? How do the anti-'public sphere' developments relate to the growing number of ICT-mediated citizens' initiatives? If these citizen initiatives can indeed be understood as manifestations of public spheres, how can ICT foster or hinder the development of public spheres? In search of answers to these questions, I will analyze the citizen initiative mentioned at the start of the paper, the Dutch online 'market' place for and by residents called 'Buuv' from an Arendtian 'public sphere'-perspective.

Arendt (1906-1975) has written extensively on the subject of the public sphere, especially in *The human condition* [10]. In this book, she asserts that the most important question to ask about the use of scientific knowledge and technology is the question of what kind of world we are making. She offers conceptual tools (such as the notions of the public, private and the social sphere, plurality and natality) in order to rethink this, clearly political question through. These tools seem especially apposite for an analysis of the current, at first sight ambiguous trend: despite anti-public sphere developments, the number of urban bottom-up initiatives using ICT increases.

An Arendtian perspective, as any perspective, highlights some aspects and underexposes other aspects. Furthermore, chances are that Arendt's thoughts are somewhat outdated, in the sense that we now live in a hyper connected world where ICT are ubiquitous. Arendt wrote her books before the digital era where the online and the offline life intertwine—an experience that is referred to with the term 'onlife' [6, p. 1]. Bearing these remarks in mind, I will draw some conclusions on the value/importance of Arendt's thoughts to the endeavor of understanding current trends in society—more urban bottom-up initiatives and anti-'public sphere' developments—as well as the endeavor of revitalizing the public sphere in an onlife world.

First, I will elaborate on the notion of a public sphere according to Hannah Arendt. Second, the ways in which the digital transition further undermines the public sphere is described. After analyzing the Buuv-initiative from an Arendtian perspective, I will elaborate on the value of Arendt's thoughts for a better understanding of apparently contradicting trends in contemporary society as well as for the design and construction of an onlife world that stimulates citizen initiatives.

II. ARENDT AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Arendt has written extensively on the subject of the public sphere in *The human condition* (1958). In this book, she speaks of the public sphere as the sphere where men, as equals, come together and speak and act in freedom. It is the sphere where citizens contribute to a public debate, where men publicly put forward new answers to questions which concern us all. In Arendt's view, the public sphere is not given. It comes into being whenever people act—in words and in deeds—in the presence of others.

Plurality and natality are for Arendt the conditions of human action and speech. Arendt uses the notion of plurality to refer to the idea that we are all equals in the sense that every human being is distinct from any other human being. As humans we are unique beings and in words and deeds we disclose who we are. As each human being is unique, it is unknown beforehand how one's words and deeds will be taken up by others. Through speech and action, we set in motion unforeseen processes. Every human being possesses this capacity of beginning something anew, that is the capacity to act, by virtue of being born [10, p. 9]. Arendt uses the notion of natality to refer to this latter condition of human action and speech.

'Action' is one of the three fundamental categories of human activities that Arendt describes in *The human condition*. The other two categories are labor (activities which include all repeated tasks of daily life) and work (activities through which men produce an 'artificial' world of durable things). Of these three categories, only action is not mediated by things. According to Arendt, it is 'the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter' [10, p. 7]. It constitutes the political realm.

Although not mediated by 'things', action and speech often refer to the common world. This notion of the common world is important in Arendt's work. It refers to the world of things which we share. One can think of physical things such as roads and dikes as well as institutions and other man made settings; these are all part of the 'objective' world we share. This shared, 'artificial' world protects us from the dangers of nature, as well as provides a relatively stable and permanent context from which a public sphere can arise.

Arendt makes a clear distinction between the public and the private sphere. The private is the realm of life's necessities. Here, biological needs of consumption and reproduction are central. In the Greek *polis*—which was Arendt's source of inspiration for her ideas on the private and public spheres—the realm of the private was tied to the household where slaves and women took care of day-to-day needs. Here, necessity and needs reign. The public realm was tied to the Greek agora. Here, one was freed from the daily fight for existence. In the public sphere, men (and not women) experienced freedom. Men were,

as Arendt writes, 'both not to be subject to the necessity of life or to be the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself' [10, p. 32].

It is clear that in the twenty-first century, the distinction between the public and the private corresponding with the household/agora distinction and the gender distinction between men and women (and slaves) is no longer tenable. The necessity/freedom distinction is, however, a more relevant distinction.

While leaving aside the household/agora distinction, one should not leave out the spatial dimension in Arendt's work on the public sphere all together. Speech and action, which correspond to the public realm, involve the disclosure of the actor or agent in his distinctness and uniqueness; one discloses 'who' one is (not 'what' one is, like one's talents, qualities, and virtues) directly to other human beings. The manifestation of the 'who' in speech and action literally takes place in the presence of others. One has to be in the presence of other persons in order to be able to disclose oneself.

Arendt describes the uprise of a third realm: the social. According to Arendt, the social started to appear from the sixteenth century, or better formulated, the social started to invade in the public realm from the sixteenth century on. The rise of the social, as Arendt writes, coincided with the emergence of the nation-state. Arendt calls the state or nation-state the political form of the social [10, p. 28]. Public issues were more and more understood as household related, or economic questions articulated in terms of necessity and need. Arendt writes about this collective household: 'the collective of families economically organized into het facsimile of one super-human family is what we call "society," and its political form of organization is called "nation"' [10, p. 29]. The state looks after the interests of its super-sized, mass family. Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Arendt writes, the social realm has advanced significantly at the expanse of the public sphere.

III. PUBLIC SPHERE AT STAKE IN AN ONLIFE WORLD

The human condition was published in 1958. Arendt was already quite pessimistic about the possibility of the revitalization of the public sphere. Today, a growing number of scholars argue that, due to the ubiquity of ICT, the public sphere is even more at stake. In what ways does the broad uptake of and societies' growing dependency on ICT jeopardize the public sphere?

The analysis will be primarily based on *The online manifesto* (2015). In this document, a group of international scholars explore the impacts of the ubiquity of ICT on the public sphere. Their analysis, which is based on a Arendtian understanding of the public sphere, is specifically aimed at the policy-relevant consequences of current digital transitions. At least six aspects are addressed.

First, the wide spread use of technologies as big data, data mining and profiling has huge impact on power plays in society [6]. The intertwinement of offline and online life, causing almost every act to leave behind a digital shadow/footprint, allows for an exponentially growing amount of data. The abundance of data combined with a significant increase of our knowledge on how to influence people lead to an unprecedented practice of persuasion [11]. Technology-based companies as Google and Face book become more powerful every day. Governments use these technologies and strategies as well—sometimes openly as is the case in China where the Chinese government is introducing a Social Credit System in order to score and govern the behavior of its citizens [12]; and sometimes more implicitly as is the case in The Netherlands where techniques as nudging and anchoring are enthusiastically advised to the Dutch government in order to realize innovations in social systems and to change citizens' lifestyles [13]. Citizens often do not have access to these enormous quantities of data, nor to technologies for using these data sets. Furthermore, the practices of persuasion and, especially, the direction into which citizens are (gently) directed often remain hidden.

Second, the broad uptake of persuasive techniques as profiling, price discrimination and targeted advertising impacts the extent to which the shared world is the focus of attention. Virtual environments become intelligent, in the sense that these environments can 'change states in autonomous ways and can do so by digging into the exponentially growing wealth of data' [6, p. 10]. These techniques enable and fuel continuous processes of personalization of online environments which, in turn, undermine the possibility (or the idea) of an objective perception of reality, as well as trigger people to withdraw into their personalized world. The shared world is lost out of sight.

A third aspect of the public sphere that is at stake because of the broad uptake of ICT is the human capacity of beginning something anew. Layers of decisional algorithmic adaptations, nested between humans and reality, increasingly determine our life world. Hildebrandt, co-author of *The online manifesto*, describes the impact of the layers as follows:

> [these layers, HJ] co-constitute our life world, determine what we get to see (search engines, behavioral advertising), how we are treated (insurance, employment, education, medical treatment), what we know (the life sciences, the digital humanities, expert systems in a variety of professions) and how we manage our risks (safety, security, aviation, critical infrastructure, smart grids). [9, p. 181]

It is hard, and in most cases impossible, for people to 'read' the algorithms in order to guess how they are anticipated by these so called smart environments [14]. For human beings, it becomes increasingly difficult to interact with and 'surprise' these algorithmic environments. The possibility of exceptional deeds—new beginnings—is diminishing in the onlife world.

Fourth, the appreciation of the unexpected and the understanding of others as equals is more under pressure if the broad uptake of ICT reinforces the predominance of discourses of control, measurability, productivity and instrumentality. In western

societies, it is widely accepted that merits should be the basis for the social status of individuals and organizations, provided that everyone has equal opportunities to develop one's talents. Sociologist Michael Young coined the term 'meritocracy' to refer to this ideal [15]. In meritocratic societies, efforts should lead to predefined results and human beings are mainly understood in terms of means to an end. Chances are that the uptake of ICT is embedded in these types of discourses. These discourses are 'serious hurdles for thinking and experiencing public spheres in the form of plurality, where others cannot be reduced to instruments, and where self-restraint and respect are required' [6, p. 12].

Fifth, the increasing intertwinement of online and offline communication has changed and is still changing the ways we interact according to sociologist Sherry Turkle [16]. She describes how the new generation of young people, the digital natives, have developed new manners for interaction and communication in the onlife world. One can think of (unspoken) rules about when and how to interrupt a face-to-face conversation in order to use WhatsApp or Instagram and vice versa or what communication channel to use. Unfortunately, as Turkle asserts, due to these changes, we unlearn abilities (such as empathy and non-verbal communication skills) which are necessary for face to face communication [16].

Attentional capabilities are at stake as well. Companies like Google and Face book fight for our attention and time and they (produce and) use the most recent scientific insights to hook up people on their websites. In *The shallows. What the internet is doing to our brains*, Nicolas Carr explores how the shift from books to online information sources encourages distraction and superficiality [17]. Internet seduces its users to browse from link to link causing them to gain a broad but shallow overview of the available information. Much of Carr's popular book is about how the internet not only changes our habits of information consumption, but also about how the internet alters the human brains. While Carr's argument on the neural changes of the brain is sparingly supported by scientific evidence, he makes a plausible case that our attentional capabilities are at stake. These capabilities are, however, necessary capabilities for people to speak and act in freedom. '[T]he ability and the right to focus our own attention is […] a critical and necessary condition for autonomy, responsibility, reflexivity, plurality, engaged presence and a sense of meaning' [6, p. 12, 13].[1]

While the above mentioned list of developments is by no means complete, it illustrates the various ways in which the digital transition (further) undermines a possible revitalization of the public sphere.

IV. URBAN BOTTOM-UP INITIATIVES

It is, however, not all doom and gloom with regard to ICT and the public sphere in the twenty-first century. All kinds of experiments with digital forms of citizen engagement are conducted. One can think of the monitoring of social media (Germany), e-petitions (Belgium), online consultations of citizens' groups (Great Britain), crowd sourced legislative proposals (Finland) and citizen initiatives [18]. These are examples of so called digital citizen engagement; ICT are used to reinforce democracy, that is, to involve citizens in political decision-making.

In the following section, the focus will be on ICT-mediated neighborhood initiatives. This so-called urban bottom-up movement is, following Niederer and Priester, understood as 'a heterogeneous collection of people and groups that collaborate within cities in various types of communities (peer-to-peer networks) with the aim of improving the quality of their urban habitat' [1, p. 140]. The urban bottom-up movement is clearly present in The Netherlands [19]. This is especially the case for the capital. An inventory of websites for bottom-up initiatives in Amsterdam in 2014 resulted into a list of 40 URLs of websites which were being used in Amsterdam at that time [1]. From an Arendtian perspective, these neighborhood initiatives seem to be the manifestation of a public sphere par excellence. Citizens take matters into their own hands with regard to their living environment.

How to understand the growing number of citizens' initiatives supported and mediated by ICT? To what extent can these initiatives indeed be understood in terms of a revitalization of the public sphere a la Arendt? I will explore these questions by analyzing the Dutch citizen initiative called Buuv from a 'public sphere' perspective. Buuv is an interesting initiative to analyze as it is presented in the literature as a good example of local citizen initiatives [1, 13]. Furthermore, it is a successful initiative in the Netherlands if one takes into consideration the steadily growing number of local communities using Buuv [13, p. 29]. The fact that a variety of institutional and non-institutional actors are involved with Buuv makes it an interesting case as well. Two types of information sources with regard to the Buuv-initiative will be used for the analysis: the content on the website (www.buuv.nu) and scholarly and popular research mentioning Buuv.

V. THE BUUV-CASE

'Buuv' is a neighborhood marketplace for and by residents.[2] The word 'Buuv' is a vernacular for the Dutch word for neighbor ['Buurvrouw']. Buuv is a platform for local residents who offer services to help neighbors—without getting anything in return—as well as ask for help. As for services, one can think of cooking a meal, riding someone to the hospital and doing a simple job in or around the house.

Buuv offers three channels for posting messages: the website, bulletin boards and telephone. Buuv's intermediaries enter messages which are posted on the physical bulletin boards into the online environment. The same applies to messages

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[1] See also Sociologist Richard Sennett (2012) who emphasises that it requires focus and self-constraint in order to develop empathy which is a critical and necessary element for cooperation.
[2] The Dutch website does not use the word 'citizen'. It only speaks of 'residents' and 'neighbors'.

communicated by telephone. Citizens can respond to other citizens' posts across all three channels as well. Contact information of the intermediaries and the locations of the bulletin boards (library, supermarkets, community centers) can be found on the website. The combination of physical and online channels is part of the success of the Buuv-initiative, in the sense that no citizens are excluded beforehand.

The first version of Buuv was designed by a group of residents of Haarlem and social partners in 2010. After a slow start—in the beginning, people registered but hardly posted any messages—Buuv became popular among residents of Haarlem. In 2014, 3.250 Haarlem residents were members and 6.000 matches had been made between 2011-2014 [13]. Meanwhile, the Haarlem Buuv-site was transformed into a template website which can be instantiated by local communities [1, p.142]. Today, January 2017, Buuv is active in eleven Dutch cities and neighborhoods, bringing together supply and demand of local residents.[3]

A. *The private, public and social*

The Buuv-initiative can be understood in terms of the public sphere. The website reads that the reinforcement of residents' social networks and the strengthening of residents' involvement with their neighborhood are central to Buuv. Indeed, Buuv makes it possible for neighbors to come to know each other as most matches between supply and demand involve meetings of persons who have never met before. Furthermore, the Buuv-website offers the possibility to post 'group activities'. According to the website, these group activities might involve the organization of a book club, jointly learning another language or making music together as well as refurbishing the neighborhood or giving informal care to a sick neighbor.[4] The Buuv-initiative is an example of citizens taking matters into their own hands and realizing an alternative view on the good (neighborhood) life in an onlife world.

In scholarly research, the Buuv-initiative is understood in terms of the public as well. Niederer and Priester categorize the website under the heading 'websites used by communities for whom their own neighborhood itself is the main issue' [1, p. 141]. These researchers understand it as one of the many websites (and tools) launched by bottom-up initiatives seeking to contribute to positive change of their urban living environment.

This is, however, not the whole story. Buuv is intended as a platform to match supply and demand of neighbors with regard to day-to-day needs. The website reads: '[i]t involves services that residents can provide for each other, without necessarily having to do something in return.'[5] One could say that private concerns—meeting daily needs—are central to the platform. The Buuv-initiative evolves around private (rather than public) concerns.

Niederer and Priester unintentionally illustrate the second reading of the Buuv-initiative when labeling types of citizen participation supported by websites. In case of Buuv, they use the labels 'Helping and asking for help', and 'Connecting neighbors' [1, p. 145]. The first type of participation can be read as citizens meeting each other in order to fulfill everyday needs. Private concerns are dominant. It is a bit unclear what the researchers mean with the second type of participation ('connecting neighbors'). With a bit of good will, this category could be understood as the creation of opportunities for citizens, who do not know each other, to meet in person. Although these meetings are mostly initiated and triggered by individual and day-to-day needs, they could trigger citizens to discuss public issues and undertake public initiatives. The label 'connecting neighbors' might refer to the public sphere.

So far, the Buuv-initiative has been interpreted in terms of the public as well as the private. What about the social sphere? To what extent can it be understood as a social enterprise? In The Netherlands, the recent decentralization of responsibilities with regard to youth care, elderly care, care for the chronicle seek people, and work and income to the local government is accompanied with significant cut-backs in budgets [20]. On local level, less money is available for professional support and guidance of (temporarily) vulnerable citizens. Initiatives like Buuv could easily become local authorities' dream: citizens take over tasks of expensive public professionals. To what extent is the Buuv-initiative part of a 'social household' discourse?

The 'Haarlem'-website of Buuv reads that Buuv is a partnership of neighbors, neighborhood councils [wijkraden], the municipal of Haarlem and other social partners. The language used at this website does not suggest an instrumental approach, in the sense that citizens are understood as (inexpensive) means to be allocated. The Buuv-initiative is explicitly placed in the discourse of self-reliance, one of the priorities of the municipal of Haarlem. Moreover, all participants of Buuv seem to be addressed as equals. The language used on the website does not suggest any order or rank between the participants. However, terms like 'supply' and 'demand' illustrate the presence of a social-economic discourse.

Scholarly research mentioning Buuv offers an ambivalent answer to the question whether the Buuv-initiative fits a social-economic discourse. In a report on innovation and behavior change of TNO, an independent research organization in The Netherlands, Buuv is portrayed as a digital platform for neighborhood help initiated by the municipal of Haarlem [21]. The report uses the term 'top-down initiatives' with regard to Buuv [21, p. 29]. This description seems to fit a social-economic discourse. Furthermore, one of the authors of the report advices the report's readers on how to make a success of this type of top-down initiatives. The advice reads that citizens should be able to tell at a glance what is in it for them. The author refers to

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[3] An up-to-date overview of the cities and neighborhoods where Buuv is active can be found on the website: https://buuv.nu/, 2 January 2017.
[4] https://haarlem.buuv.nu/info/activiteit-met-groepje-bewoners/, 2 January 2017.
[5] https://buuv.nu/info/english, 2 January 2017.

the Buuv-initiative as a positive example deserving to be followed: 'Thanks to Buuv, one can get assistance from neighbors more easily and more quickly' [21, p. 29, translation HJ]. This advice clearly refers to the social realm.

The same report sketches the genesis of Buuv. This sketch contradicts, however, the likelihood that a social economic discourse is prevailing. The report reads that in 2007, the municipal of Haarlem had to (re)contract third parties for domestic help in the home care. Civil servants involved in this contracting trajectory wondered whether it was possible to engage citizens in the home care. They organized a meeting with beneficiaries of care, suppliers of help and futurists at the beach to jointly elaborate this question. One of the conclusions of this meeting was that people who asked for help wanted to give something in return. They felt they were depicted as inactive and dependent persons [21, p. 28]. Due to this meeting, reciprocity and independence (rather than economic considerations) became central to the digital neighborhood platform, which was set up by the municipal of Haarlem in collaboration with welfare organizations, social work and local residents in 2010 [21, p. 28].

B. What does an Arendtian perspective highlight?

An Arendtian analysis of the Buuv-initiative discloses first and foremost the intertwinement of the private, the public and the social. On the one side, the Buuv initiative is an example of an initiative in the public sphere. On the other hand, it involves day-to-day, private concerns. Furthermore, a social-economic discourse is present.

From an Arendtian perspective, this mixture or intertwinement has a major disadvantage: it carries the continuous risk of the dominance of the social and the private at the cost of the public. There is always the risk that fellow citizens treat each other as instruments in the pursuit for self-interest, or that local authorities treat citizens as a means in order to implement social policies efficiently. In *Bonding by doing. The dynamics of self-organizing groups of citizens taking charge of their living environment (2016)*, another manifestation of the risk of the social becoming predominant is elaborated [19]. Based on a Dutch study on 17 cases involving citizens' initiatives and self-organizing communities, it is shown not only that governmental institutions to some degree overrule citizens' initiatives with governmental rules and preferences, but also that citizens adapt themselves and their initiatives *in advance* to a governmental discourse [19, p. 145]. This is not to say that a governmental discourse always revolves around the social, but if it is, chances are that citizen initiatives adapt to the social discourse of their own accord.

C. What does an Arendtian perspective underexpose?

The mixture of spheres has advantages which are underexposed from an Arendtian perspective. First, private concerns are often reason for citizens to become involved with public issues. Most citizen initiatives involve a combination of self-interest and public interest [19]. In case of the Buuv-initiative, changes in the home care policy of the city of Haarlem had direct impact on the private concerns of citizens. This impact was among the reasons why several citizens took part in the consultation on citizens' role in home care.

Second, the presence of multiple discourses offers opportunities to match the aims and discourses of the different parties involved thus increasing the likelihood of success. The earlier mentioned tendency of citizen initiatives to adapt to government discourse can be understood as obedient and subjective behavior. It can, however, also be understood as smart and strategic behavior as one has to connect with other (institutional and non-institutional) actors in order to realize and embed citizen initiatives in society [19]. Where most officials prefer citizen initiatives which they can relate to with regard to content and form—one only loves, what one knows—citizens can use this insight and 'play' with the different spheres.

Institutional actors aiming at the revitalization of the public sphere can make use of the mixture of sphere as well—especially when addressing the question of how to contribute to the design and construction of an onlife world which allows for citizen engagement. Sociologists emphasize that citizen initiatives require an inviting and facilitating government if they are to be successful [22]. An Arendtian perspective underlines the fact that the common, manmade world—consisting of physical things such as canals and housing as well as non-physical things like laws and morality—conditions us. The point is to construct 'things' which promote the public sphere. One can think of particular spatial orders which promote citizens' engagement [23]. Budgetary orders or arrangements are important as well: the provision of accommodation or a small budget can be very helpful to make citizen initiatives successful [24]. Furthermore, the use of language can be decisive. In The Netherlands, government policy and policy decisions regarding care, well-being and labor market (re-)integration are mainly framed in terms of 'necessity', rather than political choices; this kind of framing does not stimulate citizens to participate in public debate or take up initiatives [25]. In case of the Buuv-initiative, the invitation of servants of the municipal of Haarlem to think along about the issue of domestic help proved helpful with respect to the promotion of the public sphere. Civil servants combined social concerns—contracting third parties for domestic help—and public issues—inviting citizens to think along about the issue of home care in Haarlem.

VI. THE VALUE OF AN ARENDTIAN PERSPECTIVE FOR TODAY'S WORLD

The following questions are still to be answered. How to understand two apparently contradicting trends in society: the rise of an urban bottom-up movement and the digital transition undermining a possible revitalization of the public sphere? And, what practical clues does an Arendtian perspective offer with regard to the endeavor of revitalizing the public sphere in an onlife world? Before addressing both questions with reference to the Buuv-initiative, I want to emphasize once more that the

question whether Buuv is to be understood as a manifestation of a public sphere does not have a simple answer. The Buuv-initiative is labeled "bottom-up initiative" as well as "top down initiative". Depending on the source one reads, the group of persons who initiated Buuv, varies: sometimes citizens, sometimes officials set in motion the trajectory that resulted in the neighborhood marketplace. The initiative can be understood as a criticism on the predominant view of the good (neighborhood) life and the realization of an alternative vision. And yet, Buuv is not a manifestation of a public sphere in the sense that it is a medium for public debate; primarily it is an marketplace for the exchange of services. But then again, as the exchange of services requires physical presence of neighbors, Buuv is an environment that triggers face-to-face contacts between citizens who do not know each other. These contacts have the *potential* of evolving into new manifestations of public spheres.

A. Understanding the rise of the bottom-up movement despite anti-'public sphere' developments

How do the anti-'public sphere' developments relate to the growing number of citizens' initiatives using ICT? What impact have these developments on urban bottom-up initiatives like Buuv? To what extent does the use of ICT prevent or reinforce the risk of citizen initiatives being incorporated into a social and/or private discourse?

The Buuv-initiative does not seem to disempower citizens, in the sense that there are no techniques used as data mining, profiling, targeted advertising, nudging and anchoring. No (hidden) algorithms are involved in the matching process between supply and demand either. Matches are made by Buuv-users via the site. In case of postings by phone or bulletin boards, the intermediaries match supply and demand.

Personalization of online environments, triggering people to withdraw into their personalized world, is not the case for Buuv. What is more, the shared world is put at center stage as Buuv is based on the principle of location based contacts. The neighborhood, the residence of the Buuv-users, is the binding element. This applies for civil parties and most social partners involved as well. As Buuv holds on to the idea of citizens in geographical terms, the binding element of location coincides with political, location-based arrangements (cities and neighborhood councils).

In another way, the Buuv-initiative foregrounds the shared, physical world. Buuv-users can enter posts and responses to other citizens' posts via physical bulletin boards, located at public spots. The citizen initiative is visible in the online *and* offline world.

What about the unlearning of capabilities necessary for speaking and acting? The Buuv-website promotes contacts between neighbors who do not know each other. It creates opportunities for neighbors to have face-to-face conversations. In this respect, it does not contribute to the unlearning of these capabilities.

The small scale of the Buuv-initiative—big data techniques require enormous amounts of data—and the inherent link with geographical space seem to prevent, or at least diminish, the undermining impact of the use of ICT on the public sphere.

B. Design and construction of an onlife world that stimulates citizen initiatives

Arendt's thoughts offer conceptual tools helping us understand a current, at first sight ambiguous phenomenon: despite anti-public sphere developments, the number of urban bottom-up initiatives using ICT increases. These tools offer clarity.

An Arendtian perspective, emphasizing the fact that the world of things conditions us, offers practical clues as well. The analysis of Buuv reveals clues for designers—policy makers, ICT-professionals, and civil servants—how to design and construct an onlife world that promotes the realization of citizens' initiatives. Or, quoting Hildebrandt: it offers clues 'how to empower Onlife inhabitants in a way that enables them to challenge the design of their world' [49]. The following clues are offered:

- Train policy makers, ICT-professionals, and civil servants to understand the idea of a public sphere. The design of an onlife world that invites and stimulates citizens to act (rather than work or labor) requires designers who understand Arendtian notions like the public, the social and the private and who are able to recognize these spheres.
- Include private *and* public concerns in the design. Online environments addressing private concerns might get people's attention creating opportunity to present public issues as well.
- One way of preventing the exclusion of (groups of) citizens is to include virtual and physical channels of communication in the design.
- Incorporate triggers for face-to-face contacts into the design. These contacts have the potential of becoming manifestations of public spheres. The triggering of location based contacts should be a leading principle in the design process.
- Prevent economy of scale-arguments dominating the design process. First, because the public sphere is an end in itself; speech and action makes us human. The public sphere is not about efficiently fixing problems. (This is of course not to say that designers should have a card blanche for the designing trajectory.) Second, because small scale initiatives do not allow for sophisticated big data techniques which (un)intentionally block the unexpected.

C. Further research

Further research is needed in at least two areas in order to further enable designers to contribute to the revitalization of the public sphere in the onlife world.

The first area revolves around the question of how to train designers to understand the Arendtian perspective. In The Hague University of Applied Sciences, teachers have good experiences with close reading sessions where students following ICT related programs and teachers jointly read philosophical texts [27]. Close reading might be a promising start.

The second research area revolves around the question of skills and tools which enable and trigger people to navigate between the private, the social and the public sphere. As most citizen initiatives comprise a mixture of spheres, designers will have to design 'scripts' in the onlife environment which lead its users from the private and/or social to the public realm. Furthermore, knowledge is needed about which designs of the onlife world trigger people to practice self-constraint and empathy, both necessary skills for speech and action.

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