

The Virtual Sphere 2.0: The Internet, the Public Sphere and beyond

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Technology is neither good nor bad, nor is it neutral.
Melvin Kranzberg, 1985, p. 50.

Technology is a mirror of society, not a 'neutral' force that can 'be used for good or evil.'
Lasch, 1987, p. 295.

The potential of online media generates a multitude of responses and reactions. Most are centered around the ability of digital and online media to simultaneously restrict and empower individuals as they interact with each other in public life. Thus, the use of the internet, the operative medium here, as it converges and sustains multiple technologies, becomes an asset or a detriment, depending on how it is put to use. The internet, from this point of view serves as a tool, and does not contain the agency to effect social change. Individuals, on the other hand, possess differing levels of agency, based on which they can employ the internet to varying ends, effects, and gratification. While it is important to avoid the deterministic viewpoint that online technologies are able to, on their own, 'make or break' a public sphere, it is also necessary to understand that technologies frequently embed assumptions about their potential uses, which can be traced back to the political, cultural, social and economic environment that brings them to life. Therefore, it is not the nature of technologies themselves, but rather, the discourse that surrounds them, that guides how these technologies are appropriated by a society. Both Kranzberg's (1985) and Lasch's (1987) descriptions of technology as 'non-neutral' or a 'mirror of society,' acquire meaning as they position technology within a particular discourse. Kranzberg (1985) recognizes technology as a historically relative construct, that possess neither evil nor good inherent characteristics, but at the same time is not neutral; it is actualized by and within the historical context that delivered it. Lasch (1987) frames technology

as the mirror that exposes the inadequacies, the merits, and the hopes of a society. Thus, individuals are likely to respond to technologies, but even more so, to the discourse that surrounds them. The future of technology rests on the metaphors and language we employ to describe it (Gunkel & Gunkel, 1997; Marvin, 1988).

The discourse surrounding the political potential of online new media could be located in the tension between the 'private' and the 'public,' as articulated in contemporary democracies. Online media lend themselves to several uses, but they acquire agency as they enable the re-negotiation of what is considered private and what is considered public in public life. Thus, a political opinion posted on a blog or a video parody posted on YouTube present an attempt to populate the public agenda, and a potential, privately articulated, challenge, to a public agenda determined by others. In the truest form of democracy, negotiation of that which is considered public and that which is considered private takes places within the public sphere. As defined by the architect of the concept, Jurgen Habermas, the public sphere presents "a realm of our social life, in which something approaching public opinion can be formed" (Habermas, 1974).

Quite distinct from, but reliant on the constructs of the public, public space, and public opinion, the public sphere facilitates rational discourse of public affairs directed toward the common good, and it operates autonomously from the state and/or the economy (Garnham, 1990; Habermas, 1974). The modern public sphere, according to Habermas, plagued by forces of commercialization and compromised by corporate conglomerates, produces discourse dominated by the objectives of advertising and public relations. Thus, the public sphere becomes a vehicle for capitalist hegemony and ideological reproduction. Naturally, a digital medium like the internet, with an infrastructure that promises unlimited and unregulated discourse that operates beyond geographic boundaries, would suggest a virtual reincarnation of the public sphere.

Utopian rhetoric habitually extols the democratizing potential of media that are new (e.g., Bell, 1981; Davis, Elin, & Reeher, 2005; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kling, 1996; Negroponte, 1998;

Rheingold, 1993). Dystopian rhetoric conversely cautions against enthusiasm regarding the democratizing potential of medium that currently operates on a 17% global penetration rate (World Internet Usage and Population Statistics, <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>, accessed April 2007). Others characterize the democratizing potential of the internet as simply vulnerable (e.g., Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001). Habermas himself doubts the democratizing potential of the internet, as he saw it developing in a commercial direction, with a political orientation that was largely circumstantial (Habermas, 2006). This chapter examines the democratizing potential of online media, as articulated through relevant theory, research, and online practices.

This essay first traces dominant narratives on private and public opinion, beginning with an overview of the public sphere, examining models that oppose or supplement the public sphere, and leading into work that examines the internet as a public sphere. As a second step, distinct conditions that moderate the democratizing impact of the internet are identified and explicated. First, the self-centered nature of online expression lends a narcissistic element to political deliberation online, which is distinct from the objectives of the public sphere. Second, patterns of civic engagement online suggest selective uses of online media to supplement the representative model of democracy and mobilize subversive movements. Finally, the proliferation of online public spaces that are part commercial and part private suggests a new hybrid model of public spaces, where consumerist and civic rhetoric co-exist. These three recent developments are used to question whether the public sphere is the most meaningful lens from which to evaluate the democratizing potential of online technologies.

THE PREMISE OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Academic discussions of civic engagement typically pay tribute to the concept of the public sphere, as conceptualized by Jurgen Habermas in his seminal work (1967/74). The public sphere presents a domain of social life in which public opinion is expressed by means of rational

public discourse and debate. The ultimate goal of the public sphere is public accord and decision making, although these goals may not necessarily routinely be achieved. Agreement and rational deliberation are desirable outcomes; however, the value of the public sphere lies in its ability to facilitate uninhibited and diverse discussion of public affairs, thus typifying democratic traditions.

The public sphere must not be confused with public space. While public space provides the expanse that allows the public sphere to convene, it does not guarantee a healthy public sphere. The public sphere also serves as forum for, but is conceptually distinct from the public, public affairs or public opinion. According to Habermas (1974), “public opinion can only come into existence when a reasoning public is presupposed,” and that is what distinguishes it from individuals expressing mere opinions, or mere opinions about public affairs, opinions expressed within simple proceedings that are made public, or a public consisting of individuals who assemble. Because, according to Habermas, the public sphere has been compromised to the point where its actual existence is in doubt, it is best understood as a metaphor for “a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere – that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane politics of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities” (Habermas, 1973, p. 351).

The historical context evoked by this definition places the public sphere at odds with feudal authorities, and in the modern era, with the state. Within the liberal model of the public sphere, mass media play a critical part in informing and directing public opinion, especially since mass society simultaneously abridges gender/class/race borders and renders direct communication among varying public constituencies more difficult. It is Habermas’ argument that the commercialized mass media have turned the public sphere into a space where the rhetoric and objectives of public relations and advertising are prioritized. Commercial interests, a

capitalist economy, and mainstream media content have colonized the public sphere and compromised rational and democratic public discourse extinct, with television frequently playing a vanguard role (Habermas, 2004).

This point of view resonates with leading communication scholars. Carey (1995), for instance, articulated how a capitalist economy and the private sector may further a mass commercial culture that crowds out the democratic objectives of a public sphere. Specifically relating to the mass media, Putnam (1996) examined a variety of institutional 'suspects' responsible for the decline of civic engagement in the US, to conclude that television is responsible for displacing time previously devoted to civic affairs and promoting passive involvement with politics. Similarly, Hart (1994) argued that some media, such as television, "supersaturate viewers with political information," and that as a result, "this tumult creates in viewers a sense of activity rather than genuine civic involvement" (p. 109).

Additional conditions associated with the transition to industrial and post-industrial modern and postmodern society contribute to a deteriorating public sphere and declining interest in politics. For instance, in contemporary representative models of democracy, politicians, opinion leaders and the media frequently rely on aggregations of public opinion obtained through polls, as opposed to the rational exchange of opinions fostered by the public sphere. Herbst (1993) refers to such aggregations of public opinion as "numbered voices," thus pointing to the substitution of individual and detailed personal opinion on public affairs with a concentration of viewpoints usually expressed in the bipolarity of the yes/no polling response format. Thus, deliberation of public affairs within the public sphere is postponed as citizens are called upon to express agreement or disagreement with prescribed options.

Such re-appropriation of the public sphere, combined with mainstream media narratives that commodify or simplify complex political issues, conjure up public skepticism among citizens who already have narrowly defined ways of becoming involved in public affairs within a representative democracy model. So, it is not simply that the media crowd the public sphere

with commercial rhetoric, it is also that when they do choose to focus on public affairs they do so using frames that prioritize politicizing an issue rather than encouraging rational deliberation of it (Fallows, 1996; Patterson, 1993). One argument suggests that the prospect of civic participation is de-emphasized and skepticism is reinforced through negative or cynical coverage in the mass media, growing cynicism spreads in a spiraling manner (Cappella and Jamieson, 1996; 1997), producing a public that is further detached from the public sphere.

Several scholars find that the malaise over the public sphere overestimates civic engagement in past societies and civilizations, or the value of public agreement for a healthy democracy. For instance, Lyotard (1984) argued that Habermas overemphasized rational accord as a condition for a democratic public sphere, and argues that it is anarchy, individuality and disagreement that have and can lead to genuine democratic emancipation. Lyotard's dissent was founded in Derrida's (1997) deconstructivist approach, who emphasized undecidability as the necessary constant in any form of public deliberation. Mouffe (2000, 2005) explicitly connected these ideas to contemporary, pluralist, democracy and posed the concept of agonistic pluralism as a more realistic alternative to the public sphere. Mouffe's (2000) critique is based on the impossibility of true plurality within a modern or post-modern deliberative democracy. Thus, she proposed agonistic pluralism, as a "vibrant clash of democratic political positions," guided by undecidability, and more receptive to the plurality of voices that develop within contemporary pluralist societies than the deliberative model (p.104). Specifically, the "agonistic' approach acknowledges the real nature of its frontiers and the forms of exclusion that they entail, instead of trying to disguise them under the veil of rationality or morality" (p. 105). Mouffe's (2000, 2005) emphasis on the agonistic foreshadows modes of political expression that have been popularized through the Internet, including blogging, YouTube privately produced content, and discussion on online political boards.

The notion of exclusion from the public sphere is also present in Fraser's (1992) work, who suggested that Habermas' examples of past, romanticized public spheres excluded women

and non-propertied classes and proposed a post-industrial model of co-existing public spheres or counterpublics, which form in response to their exclusion from the dominant sphere of debate. These multiple public spheres, though not equally powerful, articulate, or privileged, exist to give voice to collective identities and interests. Schudson's (1998) historical review of past political activity further questioned the actual existence of a public sphere, and argued that public discourse is not the main ingredient, or 'the soul of democracy', for it is seldom egalitarian, may be too large and amorphous, is rarely civil, and ultimately offers no magical solution to problems of democracy (Schudson, 1997).

Perhaps it is more meaningful to view the public sphere as a metaphor that suggests a mode and ideal for civic participation and interaction, as Habermas originally intended. Within this context, online media, including the internet, could host a virtual sphere or revitalize the public sphere. Several scholars have looked into this question and examined how online media serve as political discussion forum, encourage deliberative or direct models of democracy, and ultimately revive civic participation in public affairs.

THE VIRTUAL SPHERE 1.0

Scholarship examining the public sphere potential of the internet has been typically divided into utopian and dystopian visions, which praise civic participation online or question the actual impact of online deliberation, or do both. In these scholarly examinations, researchers tend to be concerned with the following three aspects of online communication, as they directly affect the social and political capital generated by online media: *Access to information*, *reciprocity of communication*, and *commercialization* of online space (e.g., Malina, 1999; Papacharissi, 2002; Sassi, 2000).

Access to Information

While the internet and surrounding digital technologies provide a public space, they do not necessarily provide a public sphere. Greater *access to information*, enabled by online

media, does not directly lead to increases in political participation, or greater civic engagement, or trust in political process (Bimber, 2001; Kaid, 2002). The advantages of the internet as a public space can be enjoyed only by the select few who have access to it, thus harboring an illusion of an open public sphere (Pavlik, 1994; Sassi, 2005; Williams & Pavlik, 1994; Williams, 1994). With the global digital diffusion presently at 17% (North America: 70%, Oceania: 54%, Europe: 39%, Asia: 10.7%, Africa: 3.6%, Latin America: 17.3%, Middle East: 10%) it might be more appropriate to discuss local, regional or national public spheres over a global public sphere. Moreover, while digitally enabling citizens (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren, 1988; Grossman, 1995; Jones, 1997; Rash, 1997), online media simultaneously reproduce class, gender and race inequalities of the offline public sphere (Hill & Hughes, 1988). Finally, the information access the internet provides also typically results in entertainment uses of the medium (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000; Shah, Kwak, & Holbert, 2001), the public sphere relevance of which is arguable (Moy, Manosevitch, Stamm, & Dunsmore, 2005; Dahlgren, 2005).

Access can also be understood as greater access to political elites that shape the public agenda, and the ability for these elites to communicate directly with the electorate. Thus, in addition to enabling access to information, online media make it possible for privately motivated individuals and groups to challenge the public agenda (e.g., Grossman, 1995; Rash, 1997), connect the government to citizens (Arterton, 1987), and allow for two-way communication, through interactive features (e.g., Abramson, Arterton, and Orren, 1988). Still, greater access to information and communication channels does not ensure increases in civic engagement, and could simply generate the illusion of "a sense of activity rather than genuine civic involvement" (Hart, 1994, p. 109). Online political conversations can be as easily dominated by elites as offline ones. Access to information does not guarantee that information will be accessed. Similarly, access to information does not render an electorate more active or efficacious.

Reciprocity

Online media enable conversations that can transcend geographic boundaries. They also allow for relative anonymity in personal expression, which could lead to empowered and uninhibited public opinion. Still, the technological potential for global communication does not ensure that people from different cultural backgrounds will also be more understanding of each other (e.g., Hill & Hughes, 1998). The deliberative model may either be globalized or tribalized, based on the motivations of the political actors that put it to use. Several scholars argue that in order for online discussion to be democratizing, meaning that it must involve two-directional communication, cover topics of shared interest, and be motivated by a mutually shared commitment in rational and focused discourse. These elements afford online conversations a degree of *reciprocity*, which can truly help connect citizens of democracies, rather than reproduce fragmented spheres of conversation.

Specifically, online discussion of public affairs can connect citizens sharing similar motivations but may also reproduce and magnify cultural disparities (e.g., Mitra, 1997a; 1997b; Schmitz, 1997). Scholars routinely point to online political discussions that are too amorphous, fragmented, dominated by few, and too specific to live up to the Habermasian ideal of rational accord. While relative anonymity enables political expression online (Akdeniz, 2002), that expression does not always result in discussion of greater substance or political impact (Jones, 1997; Poster, 1995; Schement & Curtis, 1997). Online communication typically takes place among people who already know each other offline (Uslaner, 2004). Research conducted by Jankowski and van Selm (2000) indicated that online discussions seemed to be dominated by elites and seldom extended to the offline sphere of interaction. Other analysis of online political deliberation revealed that collective use of the internet can lead to greater political participation, but only when it is characterized by trust and reciprocity (e.g., Kobayashi, Ikeda, & Miyata, 2006). Studies examining the connection between online political talk and social capital found that the social connections people make online do not necessarily promote trust; on the

contrary, evidence suggests that online forums frequently bring together mistrusting people (Uslaner, 2004).

Commercialization

Finally, *commercialization* presents a primary concern for researchers who examine the potential of the virtual sphere. The internet has gradually transitioned into an online multi-shopping mall and less of a deliberative space, which influences the orientation of digital political discussion. As a medium constructed within a capitalist context, the internet is susceptible to the profit-making impulses of the market, which do not traditionally prioritize civic participation or democratization (O' Loughlin 2001; Schiller, 2000; 2006). While equipped with an open architecture that resists commercialization (Lessig, 2006) it is not immune to commercial objectives (McChesney, 1995, Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1995). For instance, in a study of how an online democracy project measured up to the public sphere ideal, Dahlberg (2001) demonstrated how such projects, while partially successful, ultimately are unable to attract a sizable portion of the population and are frequently "marginalized by commercial sites, virtual communities of common interest, and liberal individualist political practices" (p. 615). Employing the Habermasian concepts of colonization and juridification, Salter (2005) showed how mainstream legal tendencies may restrict the democratizing potential of the internet. More importantly, the internet is unable to single-handedly "produce political culture when it does not exist in society at large" (McChesney, 1995, p. 13). Scholars also argue that the content featured online has yet to become distinct from that provided by traditional mass media or to draw in the average citizen in the manner traditional media do (Bimber & Davis, 2003; Margolis, Resnick, & Tu, 1997; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002). Finally, through collaboration and mergers with media conglomerates, creative factions of the internet are colonized by the commercial concerns that standardize the content of traditional media (Davis, 1999; Margolis & Resnick, 1997).

Therefore, scholarly examinations of the internet as a public sphere all point to the conclusion that online digital technologies create a public space, but do not inevitably enable a public sphere. Research so far has shown that *access* to information, *reciprocity* of communication, and *commercialization* are the three primary conditions that prohibit the transition from public space to public sphere. A new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere, in that a virtual space simply enhances discussion; a virtual sphere should enhance democracy. Similarly, given the nature of online deliberations, it would not be appropriate to even use the term virtual commons; the technologies at hand generate common space, but do not constitute 'commons.' However, this should not be interpreted as a predicament or a failure. It is not online technologies that fail the public sphere test; rather it could be the other around. This does not necessarily suggest a failure of the online political apparatus; it could merely suggest that the language we use to describe online technologies routinely underestimates their potential.

The Virtual Sphere 2.0

As individuals become more comfortable with online media, newer appropriations of the internet suggest interesting trends that pull us farther away from the public sphere ideal to a direction that is meaningful, but not what we may have expected. The remainder of this paper examines these trends and how they articulate the democratizing potential of the internet in a way that has little in common with the Habermasian public sphere but more in common with contemporary public impulses and desires.

(On the Benefits of) Civic Narcissism

Personalization, that is, the ability to organize information based on a subjective order of importance determined by the self, presents an operative feature of online media like the internet. Popular features of the internet, like blogs or MySpace personal/private spaces thrive on personalization. In *The Culture of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch (1979) described a self-centered culture that emerged following the political turmoil of the sixties, focused on self-

improvement, “wrapped in rhetoric of authenticity and awareness,” and signifying “a retreat from politics and a repudiation of the recent past” (p. 4-5). Lasch was not describing historical trends that have escaped other historians. Media scholars have also picked up on and analyzed how the consequences and failures of sixties alternative politics have impacted the current relationship individuals have with media or the tendency of contemporary media to abandon historical perspective (e.g., Hart, 1994; Gitlin, 1980; 1983; Patterson, 1993; Putnam, 1996; Schudson, 1998). Moreover, social and political scientists have visited the lasting impact social, economic, cultural and economic changes brought on by modernity have had on value and belief systems. Inglehart and Welzel (2005) have taken a comparative look at modernity, cultural changes and democracy across developed and developing societies, to conclude that post-industrialization has ratified a transition from existential to self-expression values. Self-expression values are connected to the desire to control one’s environment, a stronger desire for autonomy, and the need to question authority. Self-expression values are not uncivic, and have frequently lead to subversive of collective action movements on environmental protection, fair trade and gender equality.

It is within a postmodern culture that emphasizes self-expression values, that this particular breed of civically motivated narcissism emerges. It should be clarified at this point that term narcissism is not employed in a pejorative manner or in its pathological sense, which would imply a personality disorder. Narcissism here is employed to understand the introspection and self-absorption that takes place in blogs and similar spaces, and to place these tendencies in historical context. Lasch’s work, over psychological research on narcissism as a personality disorder, serves an apt starting pint. Narcissism is defined as a preoccupation with the self that is self-directed, but not selfishly motivated. Narcissism is referenced as the cultural context within which blogs are situated, and not as a unilateral label characterizing all blogs.

Blogs are defined as webpages that consist of regular or daily posts, arranged in reverse chronological order and archived (Herring, Kouper, Scheidt & Wright, 2004). Initially heralded as

a groundbreaking development in the world of reporting and media (e.g., Sullivan, 2002), blogs bear considerable democratizing potential as they provide media consumers with the opportunity to become media producers (Coleman, 2005a; 2005b). However, despite the audience and public pulpit that blogs provide, they typically regress to self-confessional posts that resemble diaries, with few exceptions that engage in journalistically informed punditry (Papacharissi, 2007; Scott, 2007; Sundar, Edwards, Hu, & Stavrositu, 2007). Research has shown that blogs can broadly be divided into A-list blogs (popular publicized blogs); blogs that are somewhat interconnected; and the majority of sparsely socially connected and less conversational blogs (Herring et al, 2005). At the same time, there are many instances in which bloggers exerted sizable influence over mainstream media, usually by creating noise over issues or political candidates initially marginalized by mainstream media (Kerbel & Bloom, 2005; Meraz, 2007; Tremayne, 2007). Several major news outlets, including CNN, use blogs as “a finger on the pulse of the people” substitute and routinely feature stories or content on what “the blogs” are reporting on a given day. Other mainstream outlets, like the NY Times, have incorporated blogging into their traditional reporting, and use it to provide in-depth reporting and/or indulge specific journalist story interests. Varied and diverse as they may be, news blogs frequently function as gateways for mainstream media coverage.

Blogs, video blogs (vlogs), and similar expressions present an articulation of what Scammell (2000) terms “consumer-style critique” (p. 354). Within this context, they are symptomatic of a hedonistic and materialistic culture, which, in Althusserian sense, ‘interpellates’ its citizens as consumers. Political thoughts expressed on blogs are narcissistically motivated in that they are not created with the explicit purpose of contributing to a public sphere, the commons, or heightening civic engagement. While it is true that occasionally they impact mainstream media and public opinion in a sizable manner, blog content is determined by subjective inclinations and tendencies based on a personal evaluation of content. Quantitative analysis of blogs finds them to be largely self-referential (Papacharissi,

2007) and motivated by personal fulfillment (Kaye, 2007). Even news oriented, A-list blogs present a mélange of public and private information that is subjectively arrived to and removed from western standards of the journalistic profession (objective or partisan). Bloggers blog because they simply want to.

This particular breed of political expression is self-serving and occasionally self-directed, but should not be mischaracterized as selfish. Similarly, Lasch understands narcissistic behavior as structured around the self, but not motivated by selfish desire. Ironically, narcissistic behavior is motivated by the desire to connect the self to society. Lasch acknowledges the insecurity embedded in narcissism, but proceeds to place that narcissism within the “sense of endless possibility” pitted against “the banality of the social order” contemporary Americans find themselves overcome with (p. 11). According to Lasch, the self-preoccupation associated with the culture of narcissism “arises not from complacency but from desperation” with a society that does not provide a clear distinction between public and private life (p. 26). In moments of variable insight bloggers engage in typical secondary strategies of the narcissist: “pseudo self-insight, calculating seductiveness, nervous, self-deprecatory humor” (Lasch, 1979, p. 33). The new Narcissus, according to Lasch (1979), gazes at his/her own reflection “not so much in admiration as in unremitting search of flaws, signs of fatigue, decay,” structuring a performance of the self that is reminiscent of the theatrical, as explicated by Erving Goffman (1959) in the seminal *The presentation of self in everyday life*. On blogs, the expression of public opinion on private forums (or the expression of private opinion on a public forum – the blogger constantly plays with this distinction) becomes a carefully orchestrated performance with the Other in mind.

This particular breed of narcissism has a democratizing effect. The subjective focus of blogs and similar forums encourages plurality of voices expands the public agenda. While narcissistically motivated, blogs are democratizing in a unique manner. As Bimber (2000) argues, while online technologies “contribute toward greater fragmentation and pluralism in the structure of civic engagement,” their tendency “to deinstitutionalize politics, fragment

communication, and accelerate the pace of the public agenda and decision making may undermine the coherence of the public sphere” (p. 332-333). With their focus making a private agenda public, blogs challenge the established public agenda in an anarchic manner. This lack of coordination or concentrated civic objective limits the contribution to the public sphere, and exemplifies how online technologies enhance democracy in ways tangential to, but not directly connected with the public sphere. While blogs and similar vehicles (e.g., YouTube.com) dilute the agenda setting function of traditional news sources, they still present personalized media environments (Swanson, 2000), and as such, have a limited contribution to the greater good objectives of the public sphere.

Atomized uses of online media by individuals in their homes do not constitute a public or a public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005), but they do successfully make the political environment more “porous” (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2000). Blogging should not be mistaken for journalism, nor should it be mistaken for a public sphere. Its value lies in demonstrating the conflict between what is private and public; a venerable and timeless conflict that is stressed by online technologies. The type of self-absorption we see on blogs is a play, a constant game with what others define as public or private and what the blogger believes should be defined as public or private. This online user and citizen is interested in challenging what is defined as private and what is defined as public. Priorities here lie in broadening and overlapping private and public agendas; not reviving the public sphere.

Direct Representation and Subversion: Pluralistic agonism

Initial reaction to the democratizing potential of online media was filled with the hope that citizens would employ the media for the deliberative discourse of public affairs that is emblematic of the public sphere. The inherent assumption was that digital media would inject our representative model of democracy with a healthy dose of direct democracy. Recent research on how citizens make use of online media worldwide, however, indicates that, while political use of new media is vast, it does not fit the mold of the Habermasian public sphere and

promotes direct democracy selectively. Specifically, while citizens are increasingly drawn to digital media, they are attracted mostly to interest group and non-partisan web sites (Cornfield, Rainie & Horrigan, 2003). Digitally connected citizens still prefer web sites of major media outlets or TV for information on public affairs over internet based news organizations (Kohut, 2003).

Additional research indicates that political party web sites are successful in reaching out to young voters, but are unable to connect with people who have so far remained aloof toward politics (Jensen, 2003; Boogers & Voerman, 2003). Availability of information alone is unable to sustain and encourage civic engagement (Marcella, Baxter, & Moore, 2002). Those connected enjoy participating in online polls and circulating political jokes and cartoons, but are not drawn to conventional formats of political content online (such as news releases and endorsements) (Cornfield, Rainie & Horrigan, 2003).

On the opposite end, politicians employ digital media mostly to conduct political research, enhance two-step flow communication with other media and opinion leaders, invite donations to political causes, and publicize news releases and endorsement (Cornfield, 2004). Online political discussions that feature politicians do enjoy greater participation, but are frequently dominated by politicians who employ them to advocate for their agendas (Jensen, 2003). Uses of digital media by politicians and the media tend to be one-directional and do not sustain feedback channels for the digital public or enable substantive citizen involvement.

Additional research points out the capacity of digital media to connect and sustain subversive movements. Subversion of mainstream political objectives by alternative movements, while not built in to the traditional Habermasian model, presents an operative aptitude of digital media. The role of the internet in shaping the antiglobalization movement specifically highlights this aptitude, and better fits within Fraser's model of counter-publics that compete to articulate a voice within the public sphere. The Zapatistas' use of the internet for political subversion presents a renowned example (e.g., Langman, 2005). Antiglobalization web

sites are instrumental to (a) establishing movement formation, (b) shaping movement collective identity, and (c) mobilizing movement participants and organizations in a fluid manner (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2002). Simone (2006) found similar consensus and mobilization use of the internet by CODEPINK, a self-identified women's movement for peace. Pickard (2006) explicated the centrality of the internet in Seattle's Indymedia activist efforts. To this point, both Norris (1999) and Davis (1999) found that the internet reinforces existing patterns of political participation, which primarily serve traditional activists and/or citizens active beyond the norm. Similarly, the internet is essential to non-profits and community association seeking access to the mainstream media agenda (Jensen, Danziger, Venkatesh, 2007; Kenix, 2007). Average voters and politically disinterested citizens employ the internet in a less goal-directed manner. Typically, online media succeed in mobilizing political expression and serving as complements or alternatives to traditional media (Shah, Cho, Eveland, & Kwak, 2005).

In societies that are undergoing political transition, access to alternative media online becomes important. For instance, for users in Russia and the Ukraine, sites of online only newspapers are of primary importance and online versions of offline news outlets, along with politician web sites, only minimally used (Semetko & Krasnoboka, 2003). Similarly, in a study of advocacy blogs in Kyrgyzstan, a former Soviet republic of Central Asia, Kulikova and Perlmutter (2007) found that samizdat (unofficial) blogs provided information not available through mainstream media, but essential in articulating vocal opposition to the republic's leadership and supporting the 'tulip revolution.'

Through this exemplary review of recent studies, it becomes obvious that citizens go online to complement or substitute their uses of traditional communication and directly represent their opinions, when possible and necessary. Politicians and media institutions, on the other hand, make use of digital media to supplement their own agendas and objectives, as they see fit. This model of use may ultimately have a democratizing effect, but does not bear a direct resemblance to the public sphere. Moreover, digital media prove adept at furthering mobilization

and subversive action. These types of uses evoke Schudson's (1998) model of monitorial citizens, who "scan (rather than read) the informational environment . . . so that they may be alerted on a variety of issues . . . and may be mobilized around those issues in a large variety of ways" (p. 310). Not to be mistaken as inactive or uniformed, monitorial citizens are "defensive," rather than "proactive," surveying the political scene, looking "inactive, but [poised] for action if action is required" (p. 311). In the same vein, and adapted to the context of the internet, Bimber's (1998) model of 'accelerated pluralism' presents a more accurate portrayal of the democratic role of the internet as contributing "to the on-going fragmentation of the present system of interest-based group politics and a shift toward a more fluid, issue-based group politics with less institutional coherence" (p. 135).

Contemporary uses of the internet suggest citizen confusion in directly engaging the public sphere. Some of the confusion is associated between the paradox of civic engagement in representative democracy, labeled by Mouffe (2000), among others. As the 'democratic paradox.' Mouffe (2000) argues that "Democracy requires the existence of homogenous public sphere, and this precludes any possibility of pluralism" (p. 51). Most political scientists subscribed to the more tempered viewpoint that, while civic engagement in representative democracy is not an impossibility, it is, nonetheless, a compromise (e.g. Coleman, 2005). For instance, Coleman's (2005) conceptualization of the "directly-represented" citizen presents a compromise between direct and representative democracy. Direct representation, enabled through online media, Coleman argues, "offers many of the same benefits as direct democracy, but fewer of the burdens," thus allowing "citizens the prospect of representative closeness, mutuality, coherence, and empathy without expecting them to become full-time participating citizens. With the incorporation of subversive activities enabled by the internet to this model, we are left with a set of online digital media that do not revive the public sphere, but inject a healthy dose of plurality to a maturing model of representative democracy.

In the same vein, the examples of online activity reviewed here reflect a challenge to authority and the need for the expression of individual political identity. Acts of online mobilization and subversion are aligned with Inglehart and Welzel's (2005) model of human development, which suggests that as societies are able to cater to the existential needs of individuals, citizens then to individual autonomy, thus emphasizing self-expression values more. Rising self-expression values do not lead to decline in all civic activities, but they do promote new political habits, "linked with higher levels of political action, focused on making elites more responsive to popular demands" (p. 194). Contemporary political uses of the internet reflect these tensions.

To this point, several argue that models of politics structured around collective identities present an inadequate way of understanding political activity in a more 'reflexive', or 'liquid' society (e.g., Bauman, 2005; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1990). Diminished participation in the public sphere, online or offline, reflects a move to newer modes of civic engagement, which might be understood better through Mouffe's (2005) proposal of agonistic pluralism and agonistic confrontation. Agonistic pluralism is formulated in contrast to the dialogic pluralism of the public sphere, and is aimed at radically transforming existing power relations. Mouffe (2005) employed the concept in a different context, to specifically call for the reinsertion of right and left into everyday politics, yet the concept is useful in understanding the effect of online subversive movements on democracy. While not all instances of subversion described here have successfully destabilized the existing power structure, they originated as adversarial, possess elements of what Mouffe (2005) terms a "conflictual consensus," and attempt a real confrontation based on shared set of rules and despite disparate individual positions (p. 52). Mouffe (2005) defined agonism as a "we/they relation" where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that they are adversaries, operate on common symbolic ground and see themselves as belonging to same association. In this context, "the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism" (p. 20). While agonists do not function outside the

spectrum of the public sphere, they are less concerned with public accord and more self-expression and voicing disagreement. Thus, the direct representation and subversive capabilities of online media enable agonistic expressions of dissent, that, do not necessary empower the public sphere, but, enhance democracy.

Commercially Public Spaces: A Model of Hybrid Influence

Early speculation on the democratizing impact of the internet addressed the possibility of online forums being subsumed by corporate entities and interests (McChesney, 1995; Schiller, 2000; 2006). From a political economy perspective, it is inevitable that as information technologies enter the capitalist market, they become commodified so as to enter the mainstream or perish to the margins. Within this context, several online forums emerge as alternatives to mainstream media, but easily forfeit their singularity as they merge with larger corporate entities and become corporate brands themselves. Numerous companies have gone through such cycles, including AOL being bought by Time Warner and gradually losing its unique place on the market, Excite being merged into AT&T and failing to retain its competitive share of the market, and Napster first being sued by music conglomerates, then eventually partnering with entertainment and telecommunications companies to launch a semi-successful online music venture.

More recently, Google, the on-again-off-again auctioning of Facebook, the YouTube/Google partnership, and the incorporation of MySpace.com into News Corporation present some of the latest ventures currently being valuated in the present market cycle (and will likely have undergone significant transformations by the time this chapter goes to print). Like their predecessors, these companies gain stature by challenging conventional media business and attracting new audiences. Media scholars ascertain that as new ventures become commodified, they transition from public spaces to commercial spaces, and thus compromise their democratizing potential. However, this cycle is not that simple or predictable, and

conceptualizing market dynamics through the dualities of marginal and mainstream, while not inaccurate, frequently detracts from observing important trends.

For instance, the recent examples of online music vendors running Tower Records offline stores out of business or Blockbuster being forced to adopt a half off-line, half on-line model so as to compete with NetFlix indicate that the influence of online ventures on traditional media has a more far-reaching and long term effect than expected. Viacom's current ongoing suit of YouTube on digital copyright reveals not only outdated regulatory and market mentalities about copyright law, but also how deeply threatened media giant conglomerates are by smaller, but more flexible online entities. The recent marketing decision of all major networks to make primetime shows available through their own web sites, shortly after they air on TV presents a formal recognition of changes to the market and audience structure effected by entities offering on demand content, for free (peer-to-peer file exchange) or nominal charges (iTunes, Tivo).

Thus, the rigid model of mainstream conglomerates subsuming the smaller marginal firms is being gradually replaced by a model of hybrid influence. This should not suggest marginal online ventures and the alternative interests they represent are no longer commodified, or that the larger conglomerates are being subverted. However, through a gradual process which unfolds over the long term, the dynamics of the market are actively challenged and conglomerates are being forced to adopt a more flexible structure that can more easily adapt and serve an audience that has become more selective, elusive, and whimsical. This development produces conglomerates with a more fluid and transient structure; firms that must not only include, but adopt the practices of the marginal firms they buy out so as to survive. What does this imply for the democratizing potential of online media? Online public spaces do not become immune to commercialization. However, they become adept at promoting hybrid of commercially public interaction that caters to audience demands and is simultaneously more viable within a capitalist market.

The case of YouTube presents such an example of a commercially public space. YouTube contains vast amounts of audiovisual content, presented in an amorphous format that makes the site virtually impossible to monitor or regulate. Some of this content violates copyright, in that it blatantly reproduces content already copyrighted by other entities. Other types of content present creative re-workings of media content in ways that endorse the audience member as media producer, and promote political satire and dialogue. Finally, YouTube also features original content that serves a variety of purposes, ranging from catching a politician in a lie to impromptu karaoke. This blend or hybrid of commercial and public interest is interesting enough to sustain audiences and viable enough to scare off conglomerates (YouTube was recently bought out by the more fluid-structured, medium sized, Google and consequently sued by Viacom, who saw versions of its copyrighted content featured on YouTube web space). These commercially public spaces may not render a public sphere, but they provide spaces where individuals can engage in healthy democratic practices, including keeping a check on politicians, engaging in political satire, and expressing/circulating political opinions. These spaces are essential in maintaining a politically active consciousness that may, when necessary articulate a sizable oppositional voice, in response to concentrated ownership regulation (as described in McChesney, 2004) or US foreign policy (as described in Hands, 2006). While distinct from the public sphere of the past, these tendencies may present a more accurate reflection of contemporary and postmodern public needs and wants.

A Private Sphere

The public sphere, in its many forms and conceptualizations by a variety of scholars, presents a concept that allows us to understand civic engagement in historical context. As a construct, the public sphere also helps explicate the influence of the mass media on public discourse, in mass societies that employ varying models of capitalist markets and representative democracy. Research on the political potential of the internet is frequently rapt in the dualities of determinism, utopian and dystopian. In reviewing literature on the role of the

internet in political life, Howard (2001) characteristically concluded that the first set of scholarship was “too favorable”, the latest ‘too somber” (p. 949). Scholarly research does not lend support to a virtual sphere, modeled after the public sphere. Moreover, uses that the public spontaneously invents for the internet are removed from the ideal of the public sphere, counter-publics, or similar conceptualizations. As Noam (2005), among others, argued, the internet is not “Athens, nor Appenzell, nor Lincoln-Douglas. It is, if anything, less of democracy than those low-tech places. But of course, none of these places really existed either, except as an ideal, a goal, or an inspiration” (p. 58).

Models that emphasize the plurality enabled by digital media (Bimber, 1998), contemporary citizen needs and wants (Schudson, 1997), and the ability of the internet to amplify political processes (Agre, 2002) present more realistic assessments of online media potential. Romanticized retrospectives of past and future civic engagement often impose language and expectations that curtail the true potential of technologies of the present. The public sphere can be helpful in critiquing and contextualizing the political role of online media, but not in prescribing that role.

Public sphere rhetoric set aside, the question of the democratic relevance of online media remains. The trends identified in this essay capture more recent tendencies in online deliberative spaces. These tendencies are situated in (a) narcissistically derived, civically beneficial expressions of political opinion present in blogs, subversive actions articulated in discourse that emphasizes plurality and agonism, and finally, privately generated narratives published in commercially public spaces. These tendencies form as an extension of previous dimensions of the virtual sphere, identified as access, reciprocity and commercialization. But, in both recent and earlier appropriations of online media, the tension between the ‘public’ and the ‘private’ is prevalent. The common thread among all these tendencies can be located in the individual, who operates civically in political sphere that is founded about the tension between that which is considered public and that which is considered private. Participating in a

moveon.org online protest, expressing political opinion on blogs, viewing or posting content on YouTube, or posting a comment in an online discussion group represents an expression of dissent with a public agenda, determined by mainstream media and political actors.

Strikingly, these potentially powerful acts of dissent emanate from a private sphere of interaction, meaning that the citizen engages and is enabled politically through a private media environment located within the individual's personal and private space. Whereas in the truest iterations of democracy, the citizen was enabled through the public sphere, in contemporary democracy, the citizen acts politically from a private sphere of reflection, expression, and behavior. Within this private sphere, the citizen is alone, but not lonely or isolated. Connected, the citizen operates in a mode and with political language determined by him or her. Primarily still monitorial in orientation, the citizen is able to become an agonist of democracy, if needed, but in an atomized mode.

The private sphere is empowering, liquid and reflexive. But, what happens to the public sphere, when all political action retreats to the private sphere? This transition from the prominent public realm to private spaces could equal alienation, in which “the specific and usually irreplaceable in-between which should have been formed between the individual and his fellow men” is lost (Arendt, p. 4). It is precisely this ‘in-between,’ that, as individuals act civically from the locus of the private sphere, is filled in by online digital media. Unlike offline digital media, online technologies possess ‘reflexive’ architecture, responsive to the needs of multiple private spheres, which would be isolated were it not for the connectivity capabilities of online media.

As we look for contemporary metaphors and new language with which to describe and understand the political potential of online media, it is necessary to contextualize our assessments within human development. For those interested in the internet as a public sphere (or not, as I argued here), readings beyond the obligatory public sphere literature, should include a balanced combination of pontification and data reflecting social, political, economic

and cultural trends. Habermas, in his recent writings (e.g., *The Divided West*) refers less to the public sphere, and more to concepts like cosmopolitanism, which could inform how a 'global' citizen functions in an online digital environment. Toby Miller's *Cultural Citizenship* (2007) traces the transition of citizenship from the political to the cultural realm, presenting an argument that could explain several behaviors we observe on online public environments. Zygmunt Bauman, in any of his books on liquid modernity (he typically publishes two every year), synthesizes contemporary social and political theory to provide a lively and accurate depiction public life in the age of modernity and beyond. Any work by Manuel Castells sets the standard for interdisciplinarity, and the complex interaction of socio-cultural factors to be considered as we interpret the meaning of contemporary technology. Inglehart and Welzel's (2005) more recent set of data and accompanying analysis trace a progression of human values that we all notice in our everyday lives, but lack the vocabulary with which to discuss. Finally, for a proper understanding of how social, political, economic and cultural trends converge, I like to read the work of architects, and anything by Rem Koolhaas presents a good starting point.

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