

From an Agora to a Trojan Horse:

Potentials of a Public Sphere from the Traditional to the Virtual and back again.

by

Raymond Payne,

Student of Sociology and Politics, Department of Sociology,

National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2013.

This essay largely excludes the traditional mass media and centres on the internet as the medium of potential. Consequently, Habermas' public sphere and Castells mass self-communication are analysed and ultimately combined in an approach to hypothesize a civic engagement in a potential cyber-sphere. A traditional Habermasian public sphere may be considered an ideal which never existed. However, if a re-imagined public sphere is acceptable then there may be avenues open for the conceptual construction of a virtual sphere. Further, in order to present an argument for the possibility of the existence of a virtual sphere, the essay puts forward an argument to illustrate political internet activism. However a public sphere also requires an informed public. As such, the process of media gatekeeping is introduced to understand information gatekeeping. An analysis is presented as to the possible limitation of gatekeeping thereby theoretically allowing for an informed public. Subsequently, the active involvement of citizens in this purported virtual sphere is explored in order to consider as to whether it may translate to activism in a physical sphere. Finally a token example is given in relation to democratic activism, which considers a citizenry not only acting *within* the technology of the virtual sphere, but also *on* the technology creating that virtual sphere, arguably exhibiting the potential of a joining of virtual and physical spheres.

Potential of a Public Sphere?

Habermas' concept needs to be analysed to evaluate how idealistic it was. Habermas originally (1964 [1974]) claimed that the public sphere was "...a realm of our social life in which...public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens, "...Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion" (p.49). The mode of conferring was by the use of reason in unconstrained argument (Thompson 1995:70). Such rational discourse was assisted by information provided, according to Habermas, by "intellectual newspapers" (1964[1974]:52). As such, the public sphere, as described, may be viewed positively. However, like the idealised Greek agora, there are questions around its inclusivity. If the above Habermas quote is analysed systematically, the first problem that arises is the idea of a "realm of our social life", arguably signifying a single realm. As Fraser (2010) notes of this realm, "...it has tacitly assumed the frame of a bounded political community" (p.77). This bounded single community is arguably exclusionary. Fraser asserts the anti- feminist and racist flaws of the concept (p.77) and its theoretical element regarding access by all citizens to the bourgeois sphere, which in reality consisted of middle class white men (Fraser 77, Howley 2007:345). Moreover, not only was the bourgeois sphere conceptually flawed as Fraser suggests, it was also not the only sphere. There were other social movements with which the bourgeois sphere was in conflict (Thompson 1995:71). Furthermore, Thompson questions the validity of Habermas' "intellectual newspapers", stating that there were publications of various type, the content of which would not support Habermas' argument (p.72). Consequently, in light of critiques such as these, the public sphere may be deemed idealistic, because as an attempt at a single forum for dialogue it was exclusive in practice (bourgeois) while being inclusive in theory (equal access). Therefore the sphere arguably did not satisfy its own theoretical principle, leaving the concept as an ideal.

However, while accepting the criticisms levelled at a historic Habermas (p.90), Lunt & Livingstone (2013) appraise a rethought public sphere by a more contemporary Habermas. Here, Habermas "...has moved away from...a singular conception of the bourgeois public sphere...to recognise a plurality of public spheres" (p.92). The contemporary Habermasian public sphere is considered less as a bounded realm and more as modes of communication, less in terms of consensus and more in terms of dissensus or contention, while including diverse identities and multiple modes and areas of deliberation (p.92). However, Habermas maintains the commitment to the public sphere (Habermas 1964[1974]:55), stating that entering a dialogue "...commits the participants to accept the terms and the outcomes of deliberation" (Lunt and Livingstone 2013:93). Consequently, the public sphere becomes both plural in number and plural in inclusivity. Furthermore, it becomes less a forum of consensus and more contentious. Therefore it may be argued that the concept of more numerous and more plural public spheres, over a singular public sphere, has increased the potential of a true public sphere. This may be considered as a 'matrix public sphere' incorporating the wider inclusivity and broader scope and multiplicity of Habermas' revised 'sphere'; a sphere of communication.

Potential of a Virtual Sphere ?

However, expanding communication beyond a 'bounded political community' to a global forum will inevitably challenge the physical ability of engaging in face to face interaction, as Habermas originally conceived (Washbourne 2010:14). Consequently mediated flows of interaction and deliberation may have to be contemplated if global public spheres are to be realised. In line with such re-imagining of a mediated sphere, Castells' concept of a network

society may be introduced to facilitate Habermas' revised sphere based "...less in terms of a geographic metaphor...and more as the consequence of certain forms of communication" (Lunt and Livingston 2013:92). A new public sphere incorporating Castells' conception of a network society can then accommodate this shift "...from the institutional realm to the new communication space" (2007:238), viewing the media as a "...social space where power is decided...[allowing]...insurgent politics and social movements...to intervene more decisively" (p.238). Castells centres this idea of media activism around the concept of 'mass self-communication' (p.248). However, Castells notes that a large amount of self-communication is not to communicate with others and may be described as 'electronic autism' (p.247). Therefore, it may be stated that while mediated activism is based around self-communication, mass self-communication is not centred on political activism. Yet, in terms of political or social power, Castells considers the process of communication as the arena to contest control over human mind (p.239). Social movements enter this contest "...by intervening in the global communication process" (p.249). Consequently an active, engaged citizenry may possibly be witnessed negotiating within the public sphere of communication.

However, the idea of an informed public also needs to be addressed in the context of a mediated public sphere. In particular, as the mass media of print and television have been charged with limiting content and voices (Howley 2007: 347), is the same true of the medium of the internet? Gustavo Cardoso (2006) highlights "... a new selection and classification phenomenon – Internet gatekeeping" (p.513). He argues that if the internet is looked at through the mechanism of the search engine, then this medium filters material in a similar fashion to newspapers, radio and television. However, there is an opposing vista that may be viewed. Using the example of the media coverage of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky, Williams and Delli Carpini contend that "...mainstream journalism lost its position as the central gatekeeper of the nation's political agenda" (p.1225). Furthermore, Katz (1996)

argues a historic and systematic segmentation of one medium as a new medium replaced it, which, the article suggests, is happening to television (p.33). Although it is conceded that Katz article does not promote a replacement of television by the internet, its segmentation analysis combined with Williams and Delli Carpini serve to dispute Cardoso's 'Internet Gatekeeping' perspective, illustrating the weakening control of media through segmentation and the loss of gatekeeping via alternate sources. Consequently, an argument may be proposed that an informational sphere less limited by mass-media is possible which arguably enhances the potential of a more informed citizen in the virtual sphere.

Potential for Democratic Insurgency in the Virtual Sphere ?

Yet circumventing the restrictions of gatekeeping may be only part of the solution. Agency must be employed by the citizen in order to effect 'self-communication' or any true form of engagement with civic democracy or the public sphere. On the basis of articles such as Kahn and Kellner (2004) and Carty (2010), there is an argument to be made that citizens and communities do not just receive information, they actively engage and contribute. Carty's article illustrates an example of the active community assisting in the 'broadcasting' of documentaries that would not necessarily be broadcast on mainstream media. This was achieved by a series of 2,600 house parties where a DVD of a documentary was 'aired'. "...After viewing the films, attendees made phone calls and wrote letters to voters" (p.168), illustrating civic activism in the democratic process. Both articles also illustrate that internet campaigns can be grounded in physical presence on the streets; 'hypertext made flesh' as it were. Carty's analysis of the MoveOn organization asserts that Web-based mobilization "...challenges the assumption that online political participation and activism are phasing out face-to-face contacts" (2010:169-170), while Kahn and Kellner contend that "...broad-based, populist political spectacles have become the norm, thanks to an evolving sense of the way in

which the internet may be deployed in a democratic and emancipatory manner” (2004:87-88). Consequently, it may be argued that there is an engaged citizenry willing to make use of not only their own potential but also the potential of technology in order to engage democratically.

However, one final engagement of the cyber-sphere may be considered. The previous examples show citizens engaging with technology as it ‘pre-exists’. While this may serve to contest Habermas’ ‘instrumental’ notion of the use of technology (Hands 2010:100), there is also the need to consider what Hands quotes as the ‘soft determinism’ in Castells’ analysis (p.46). This is a critique of an interpretation of Castells work interpreting that actions are limited by the very technology itself. However, there are arguments that those in activism may play “...a more active role in shaping technology itself” (p.45), or of “...technology playing a part in a politics that resists other technology” (p.101); a Trojan Horse within the walls of technology. However, it is conceded that there are concerns around technology including; the issue of net neutrality (Pfanner and Clark 2013, Phillips 2011), which essentially contests the right of ‘equality of status’ of all packets of data; and moreover, issues related to advances in quantum computing (Parsons 2012), which may allow for closed networks. Such issues are present and problematic.

Yet to return to the notion of a democratic Trojan Horse, consider the token example of Egypt’s closure of its internet facilities and the response of the hacker group Telecomix. The BBC documentary *How Hackers changed the World* (2012), shows the ability of those outside a national sphere to be able to engage and assist those within. This illustrates the potential of spheres to stretch beyond national borders and the willingness of foreign citizens to be active in the political spheres of strangers. The programme reports that when Egypt shut down its internet, hackers had the ability to bypass authoritarian imposed closure and relay access to the internet by the use of dial-up modems and third party sites (BBC 2012). This in

turn facilitated self-communication as individuals broadcast otherwise unavailable news, assisted by both physical and virtual communities. The Egyptian government's closure of the country's internet was undemocratic as it denied a medium of expression of free speech. The response of activists, in terms of re-opening that sphere, may be considered as democratic insurgency, allowing dialogue and communication to take place. Therefore, while there are accepted issues of dominance and stratification in the internet, it may be argued that there was not only potential but also actual impact both on the virtual and the physical spheres of Egypt, combining the virtual mediated sphere with the traditional face-to-face sphere, thereby promoting democracy in a mode of dissensus engagement with the Egyptian government.

In conclusion, this essay presents a trajectory of re-imaginings that move beyond the original Habermasian public sphere in order to illustrate potentials in the virtual sphere and back to a more open traditional sphere. It is argued that Habermas revised his own conception allowing not only a greater plurality and inclusivity, but also the notion of dissensus as well as consensus; a true sphere of communication. Yet the face to face public sphere, just like the agora, provides a limited physical boundary of communication. Consequently, wider spheres encompassing a global village require technology to mediate communication. The internet, according to Castells, provides such a communication space. While largely facilitating mass self-broadcasting, it also is open to social movements which may be considered civically active in this virtual sphere. However, action in a public sphere is also reliant on information and it is conceded that there are questions relating to media and internet 'gatekeeping' that restrict information flows. Yet there is also the possibility of a segmentation of television, thereby losing its hold on audiences, combined with an internet where mainstream journalism loses its gatekeeper role. Consequently, the potential of a less restricted, more informed citizen coupled with the potentiality of a global public sphere is, to a large degree, only waiting on individual agency to vivify this sphere. This agency may be seen in the translation

from broadcasting activity to physical activity as discernible in the penultimate examples provided. While in the final example, the ‘Trojan Horse’ of hackers within the technology sphere illustrates the concept of beyond-boundary communication and activism that becomes ‘text made flesh’ in physical face-to-face activity on the ground in the process of promoting democratic free speech. Therefore, it may be argued that there is the potentiality of a global matrix of spheres, of both virtual and traditional inception, which when combined may have both virtual and real impact.

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