

Public sphere and dynamics of the Internet

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The internet can be considered to be the most important device in contemporary communication, which serves as a meeting place for global ‘public sphere’ each individual can have direct access to a global forum where they are able to express their arguments without mediation, selection or censorship. However, questions are being asked whether the massive volume of communication seen on forums such as youtube, myspace, blogs, discussion boards and chatrooms could accomplish the conditions of a public sphere as forum for critical and rational debate.

Therefore, first of all it is important to clearly understand the nature of the ideological arena Jurgen Habermas has named the ‘public sphere’. Habermas (1989) defines the public sphere as a “realm of our social life in something approaching public opinion can be formed. (Where) access is guaranteed to all citizens,” (p. 102).

In his magnum opus ‘*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*’ Habermas argues that European society in the middle ages showed no indication of a public sphere as a “unique realm distinct from the private sphere” (p. 103), and each stratum of power was being dominated by the authority greater than theirs. The feudal landlord publicly constituted his power where the lord and the estate of the realm was the land, “instead of merely functioning as deputies for it... they represent their power before the people, instead of for the people” (Habermas, 1989, p. 103). However, changes in Europe’s political structure in the eighteenth century, largely substantiated in capitalist modes of production, and

enlightenment philosophy climaxed in the collapse of feudalism, announcing the entry of the bourgeois into center stage. Unlike the feudal system that made no distinction between state and society, public and private, the new social order defined the boundaries of state and private life – private sphere, thus enabling the formation of an arena which occupied the space between the state and private sphere – a public sphere. More accurately a ‘bourgeois public sphere’ where members of a property-owning, educated reading public were engaged in rational-critical debate on issues primarily relating to literature and politics.

Print media played a significant role in defining the bourgeois public sphere in those days. In contemporary times, with the development of communication technologies, internet has been adapted as the highly used medium for communication by the people. Therefore, it is important to know whether internet can be approximated to serve as Habermasian public sphere or as an 'Athenian agora' in ancient Greece. The Athenian agora was not merely an open space, but primarily a public space where the ecclesia, the popular assembly of Athenian citizens, could gather, exchange information, engage each other in debate on premeditated issues impacting the polis. One may presume that the internet does possess many features of the Athenian agora as it attempts to render the physical space of the ancient Athenian agora into a virtual and global one. The spatiality of democracy in the Athenian agora presumed physical bodies gathered together in physical space. The new virtual global agora radically re-articulates the conceptions of space and body and promise to construct a new public sphere where people can shop, trade, converse and debate. As in the case of physical bodies in a physical space, the global virtual agora consists of digital bodies in a digital space.

Sunstein (2001) and Shapiro (1999) have argued that characteristics of the Internet and computer-mediated communication generally subvert the sort of public sphere and political interaction that is necessary for genuine democratic

deliberation. We lack a clear understanding of how the Internet might contribute to a new kind of public sphere. In order to analyze the Internet's capabilities to serve as a new venue for development of a public sphere first of all we need to know the necessary conditions for a public sphere. Then, we need to examine whether internet exemplify the kind of cultivated criticism and debate that Habermas wished to encapsulate in the idea of the public sphere.

Although, the public sphere has necessary conditions it is an ambiguous concept. A space, if, has to be considered a public sphere must be a forum, that is, a social space in which speakers may express their views to others and who in turn respond to them and raise their own opinions and concerns. A public sphere must demonstrate loyalties to freedom and equality in the communicative interaction in the forum. Such interaction takes the specific form of a conversation or dialogue, in which speakers and hearers treat each other equally and freely exchange their roles in their responses to each other. Responses in the public sphere can be understood in an extensive spatial and temporal sense. In other words, someone in the indefinite future could give a response, without the speaker even possibly having intended to address that hearer. That is to say, in a public sphere communication must be addressed to an indefinite audience. Hence, any social exclusion would subvert the existence of a public sphere. This indefiniteness is required even in face-to-face interaction, since a conversation is public not simply because it could be heard by others but to the extent that it could be taken to address anyone. This feature of 'publicness' or 'publicity' of communication is the precondition for a space to be considered 'public.' Therefore, Communication is 'public' only if it is directed at an indefinite audience with the expectation of a response.

John Thomson (1995) is of the opinion that "we need to think about what 'publicness' means today in a world diffused by new forms of communication and information dissemination, where individuals are able to interact with each other and

observe persons and events without even encountering them in the same spatial and temporal locale.” (p. 75) With the extension of availability made possible by the media, the publicness of individuals, actions or events is no longer linked to a sharing of a common locale or common temporality.

Historically, writing opened up a sort of indefinite social space of possibilities of the spatial prolongation of the audience and the temporal prolongation of response. Taking the potentials of writing further, the printing facilitated a new form of communication based on a one-to-many form of interaction. The mass literacy of the national public sphere that emerged during modernity produced the mass audience that acquired the indefinite features proper to the public sphere. Computer-mediated communication also extends the possibilities of establishing the forum, by providing a new boundless space for communicative interaction. The space with newly increased interactivity is capable of managing many-to-many communication. Such a space holds out the promise of appropriating the features of dialogue and communication more robustly than the print medium. At the very least, it signals the emergence of a public sphere that is not subject to the specific linguistic, cultural and spatial limitations of the restricted public spheres that have till now supported representative democratic institutions.

It is Software that defines the nature of communication on the network. Therefore, the Internet’s capacity to support a public sphere cannot be judged only in terms of its intrinsic features. If agents introduce institutional ‘software’ that constructs the context of communication only then the Internet can serve as a public sphere. Observing the complexities associated with the Internet, Lessing (1999) notes, ‘an extraordinary amount of control can be built in the environment that people know in cyberspace’, perhaps without their knowledge. (p. 217) Such control depends on software in a much broader sense. Software includes both the modes of social organization mediated through the net and the institutions in which the Net is

embedded. For example it can create a private space on the Internet that excludes others and defines the audience. Today, most of the corporations work in such a manner, there by creating an inaccessible and commercial space within the network by the use of firewall and other kinds of software for commercial and monetary interactions. Such actions exhibit the modes in which power and control may be manifested on the internet. This shows that the internet can be controlled so that it may be used for privatization of information. Commenting on the control manifested on the Internet Sassen (1998) writes, “we are at a particular historical moment in the history of electronic space when powerful corporate actors and high performance networks are strengthening the role of private electronic space and altering the structure of public electronic space.” (p. 194)

Such complexities open the potential not only for infringing interpretation of computer- mediated public space but also for newly self-referent activity of civil society actors over the colonization of public character of the internet. The 18th century public struggled with the state over censorship of print medium that created a public concerned with its own publicity. Civil society actors concerned with publicity, freedom and openness of the internet as a public space should focus on those features that extend dialogical interaction colonized by large scale economic and political forces. Therefore, the civil society actors concerned with publicness in a computer mediated environment should not only repugn the manipulation of public space but should also position themselves between the corporations, software designers, access providers and other powerful institutions responsible for configuring the public spaces. The development and sustainability of public sphere depends upon those members of the public concerned with the public sphere and public opinion and thus concerned to construct a public space in whatever technical means of communication available. The internet lacks the means of institutionalization of the public sphere because there are no intermediaries’ equivalents to journalist, police, judge and other who can regulate and protect the publicity of political communication in the mass media.

Internet has not developed up to the stage where such intermediaries can be established and professionalized. As in the emerging public sphere of modern society the potential intermediary must emerge from those who organize themselves in cyberspace as a public sphere.

In a way by approximating cyberspace as a public sphere we are making the same mistake for which Habermas has been criticized-by emphasizing on the bourgeois public sphere-because by creating a public sphere on internet we are again considering or taking into account people who are literate or people who have access to modern communication technologies. Therefore, in order to be democratic and provide equal opportunity to every individual to participate in the public sphere the technological infrastructure should be made available to all the people in the society.

The augmentation of information due to its integration with communication technologies has created a situation of over abundance of information diffusion. According to Herbert Simon (1971), "...in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it". Articulating his argument with the idea of the public sphere it can be stated that the overload of information created by infinite public spheres interacting in the cyberspace limits the capacity of genuine public spheres that engage in political deliberation to influence the activities of the state. The debate and criticism deliberated by such public spheres remain unattended due to other information available on internet diverting the attention of people who can become potential participants of any of the public spheres.

The degree of influence that a public sphere enforces on state activities depends on the power that a public sphere acquires. In the 18th century Europe the public sphere was concentrated in a limited locality. Habermas also talks about the public sphere that existed in the saloons and coffee houses. When he talks about the journals, he is not concerned about the literary public sphere that is created within these journals but the public sphere that originated after reading these journals. In other words, Habermas' public sphere was-as many have already criticized-Eurocentric. Today, we talk of a public sphere in a global virtual environment. In such a universal public space with drowning information the visibility of a particular public sphere gets limited. The excess of visibility that a computer mediated environment promises in actuality diminishes the possibility of influencing the political decisions taken by the state because most of the debate taking place in such public forums goes unnoticed. Moreover, in such an environment there may be number of similar public spheres debating on similar issues but unaware of each other's existence. Therefore, the people concerned with a particular social issue gets scattered among different public spheres. With the scattering of people into different virtual spatialities the power of the public spheres to influence the state also scatters. Hence, in a global virtual environment there is a need to gather together the actors deliberating on similar issues for them to be influential there by serve the purpose of establishing a public sphere.

Conclusion

The paper highlighted the potential of electronic public space for deliberation and suggested the ways such a potential can be secured through innovative institutions. Habermas identified the reason for the decline of the bourgeois public sphere to be the radical change that the institutions which once provided a forum underwent. According to him, the saloons and coffee houses declined in significance and the periodical press became part of a range of media institutions which were increasingly organized as large-scale commercial concerns. Therefore, in order to organize the internet to function as a public sphere and

resist the economic and political forces, the civil society actors concerned with the public character of the internet need to organize spaces in the universal cyberspace that can assure democratic deliberation and increase the visibility of genuine public spheres.

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