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ARTICLE

The virtual sphere

The internet as a public sphere

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Abstract

The internet and its surrounding technologies hold the promise of reviving the public sphere; however, several aspects of these new technologies simultaneously curtail and augment that potential. First, the data storage and retrieval capabilities of internet-based technologies infuse political discussion with information otherwise unavailable. At the same time, information access inequalities and new media literacy compromise the representativeness of the virtual sphere. Second, internet-based technologies enable discussion between people on far sides of the globe, but also frequently fragmentize political discourse. Third, given the patterns of global capitalism, it is possible that internet-based technologies will adapt themselves to the current political culture, rather than create a new one. The internet and related technologies have created a new public space for politically oriented conversation; whether this public space transcends to a public sphere is not up to the technology itself.

Key words

cyberspace • information • internet • political • public • sphere • technology • virtual

INTRODUCTION

The utopian rhetoric that surrounds new media technologies promises further democratization of post-industrial society. Specifically, the internet and related technologies can augment avenues for personal

expression and promote citizen activity (e.g. Bell, 1981; Kling, 1996; Negroponte, 1998; Rheingold, 1993). New technologies provide information and tools that may extend the role of the public in the social and political arena. The explosion of online political groups and activism certainly reflects political uses of the internet (Bowen, 1996; Browning, 1996). Proponents of cyberspace promise that online discourse will increase political participation and pave the way for a democratic utopia. According to them, the alleged decline of the public sphere lamented by academics, politicians, and several members of the public will be halted by the democratizing effects of the internet and its surrounding technologies. On the other hand, skeptics caution that technologies not universally accessible and ones that frequently induce fragmented, nonsensical, and enraged discussion, otherwise known as 'flaming', far from guarantee a revived public sphere. This article examines how political uses of the internet affect the public sphere. Does cyberspace present a separate alternative to, extend, minimize, or ignore the public sphere?

It is important to determine whether the internet and its surrounding technologies will truly revolutionize the political sphere or whether they will be adapted to the current status quo, especially at a time when the public is demonstrating dormant political activity and developing growing cynicism towards politics (Cappella and Jamieson, 1996, 1997; Fallows, 1996; Patterson, 1993, 1996). Will these technologies extend our political capacities or limit democracy – or alternatively, do a little bit of both? Such a discussion should be informed primarily with an examination of the notion of the public sphere and the ideological discourse that accompanies it.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE

When thinking of the public, one envisions open exchanges of political thoughts and ideas, such as those that took place in ancient Greek agoras or colonial-era town halls. The idea of 'the public' is closely tied to democratic ideals that call for citizen participation in public affairs. Tocqueville (1990) considered the dedication of the American people to public affairs to be at the heart of the healthy and lively American democracy, and added that participation in public affairs contributed significantly to an individual's sense of existence and self-respect. Dewey (1927) insisted that inquiry and communication are the basis for a democratic society, and highlighted the merits of group deliberation over the decisions of a single authority. He argued for a communitarian democracy, where individuals came together to create and preserve a good life in common. The term 'public' connotes ideas of citizenship, commonality, and things not private, but accessible and observable by all. More recently, Jones (1997) argued that cyberspace is promoted as a 'new public space' made by people and 'conjoining traditional mythic narratives of progress with strong modern impulses toward self-

fulfillment and personal development' (1997: 22). It should be clarified that a new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere. As public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy. This article examines not only the political discussion online, but the contribution of that discussion to a democratic society.

Several critics romanticize the public sphere, and think back on it as something that existed long ago, but became eroded with the advent of modern, industrial society. Sensing the demise of the great public, Habermas (1962/1989) traced the development of the public sphere in the 17th and 18th century and its decline in the 20th century. He saw the public sphere as a domain of our social life in which public opinion could be formed out of rational public debate (Habermas, 1991[1973]). Ultimately, informed and logical discussion, Habermas (1989[1962]) argued, could lead to public agreement and decision making, thus representing the best of the democratic tradition.

Still, these conceptualizations of the public were somewhat idealized. It is ironic that this pinnacle of democracy was rather undemocratic in its structure throughout the centuries, by not including women or people from lower social classes, a point acknowledged as such by Habermas himself. Moreover, critics of Habermas' rational public sphere such as Lyotard (1984), raised the issue that anarchy, individuality, and disagreement, rather than rational accord, lead to true democratic emancipation. Fraser (1992) expanded Lyotard's critique, and added that Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere functioned merely as a realm for privileged men to practice their skills of governance, for it excluded women and non-proprietary classes. She contended that, in contemporary America, co-existing public spheres of counterpublics form in response to their exclusion from the dominant sphere of debate. Therefore, multiple public spheres exist, which are not equally powerful, articulate, or privileged, and which give voice to collective identities and interests. A public realm or government, however, which pays attention to all these diverse voices, has never existed (Fraser, 1992). Schudson (1997) concurred, adding that there is little evidence that a true ideal public ever existed, and that public discourse is not 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. Still, Garnham (1992) took a position defensive of Habermas, pointing out that his vision of the public sphere outlined a tragic and stoic pursuit of an almost impossible rationality, recognizing the impossibility of an ideal public sphere and the limits of human civilization, but still striving toward it.

Other critics take on a different point of view, and argue that even though we have now expanded the public to include women and people from all social classes, we are left with a social system where the public does not matter. Carey (1995) for example, argued that the privatizing forces of capitalism have created a mass commercial culture that has replaced the public sphere. Although he recognized that an ideal public sphere may never have existed, he called for the recovery of public life, as a means of preserving independent cultural and social life and resisting the confines of corporate governance and politics. Putnam (1996) traced the disappearance of civic America in a similar manner, attributing the decline of a current public, not to a corrosive mass culture, but to a similar force – television. Television takes up too much of our time and induces passive outlooks on life, according to Putnam.

This is not a complete review of scholarly viewpoints on the public sphere, but presents an array of academic expectations of the public, and can help us to understand if and how the internet can measure up to these expectations. Can it promote rational discourse, thus producing the romanticized ideal of a public sphere envisioned by Habermas and others? Does it reflect several public spheres co-existing online, representing the collectives of diverse groups, as Fraser argued? Are online discussions dominated by elements of anarchy or accord, and do they foster democracy? Will the revolutionary potential of the internet be ultimately absorbed by a mass commercial culture? These are questions that guide this assessment of the virtual sphere.

Research on the public sphere potential of the internet, to be presented in the next few sections, responds to all of these questions. Some scholars highlight the fact that speedy and cheap access to information provided on the internet promotes citizen activism. Others focus on the ability of the internet to bring individuals together and help them overcome geographical and other boundaries. Ultimately, online discussions may erase or further economic inequalities. Utopian and dystopian visions prevail in assessing the promise of the internet as a public sphere. In the next few sections, I focus on three aspects: the ability of the internet to carry and transport information, its potential to bring people from diverse backgrounds together, and its future in a capitalist era. This discussion will help determine whether the internet can recreate a public sphere that perhaps never was, foster several diverse public spheres, or simply become absorbed by a commercial culture.

INFORMATION ACCESS

Much of the online information debate focuses on the benefits for the haves and the disadvantages for the have-nots. For those with access to computers, the internet is a valuable resource for political participation, as research that

follows has shown. At the same time, access to the internet does not guarantee increased political activity or enlightened political discourse. Moving political discussion to a virtual space excludes those with no access to this space. Moreover, connectivity does not ensure a more representative and robust public sphere.

Nonetheless, the internet does provide numerous avenues for political expression and several ways to influence politics and become politically active (Bowen, 1996). Internet users are able to find voting records of representatives, track congressional and Supreme Court rulings, join special interest groups, fight for consumer rights, and plug into free government services (Bowen, 1996). In 1996, 'Decision Maker', a software program developed by Marcel Bullinga (the Netherlands) enabled one of the Netherlands' first political online debates, an experiment that lasted for a month and involved civilians, representatives of organizations, action groups, and political representatives. The research that tracked this experiment revealed that most discussions were dominated by a select few. Moreover, more responses were generated when the discussion involved individuals of certain political clout (Jankowski and Van Selm, 2000). This experiment demonstrated that political discussion can easily transfer online, although it is not certain that this transfer will lead to more democratic discussions or have an impact on the political process. Jankowski and Van Selm (2000) expressed reservations that online discussions, much like real life ones, seemed to be dominated by elites and were unable to influence public policy formation. Despite the fact that the internet provides additional space for political discussion, it is still plagued by the inadequacies of our political system. It provides public space, but does not constitute a public sphere.

In more recent elections in the US, clever uses of the internet allowed politicians to motivate followers, increase support, and reach out to previously inaccessible demographic groups. Jesse Ventura and John McCain are two examples of politicians who benefited from this use of the internet, a medium that still baffles many of their political opponents. In turn, voters were able to provide politicians with direct feedback through these websites. Of course, there is no guarantee that this direct feedback will eventually lead to policy formation. The political process is far too complex, to say the least, to warrant such expectations. Nevertheless, the internet opens up additional channels of communication, debatable as their outcome may be. These additional channels enable easier access to political information, spurring enthusiastic reformatory talk of a 'keypad democracy' (Grossman, 1995) and 'hardwiring the collective consciousness' (Barlow, 1995).

Therefore, celebratory rhetoric on the advantages of the internet as a public sphere focuses on the fact that it affords a place for personal expression (Jones, 1997), makes it possible for little-known individuals and groups to reach out to citizens directly and restructure public affairs

(Grossman, 1995; Rash, 1997), and connects the government to citizens (Arterton, 1987). Interactivity promotes the use of 'electronic plebiscites', enabling instant polling, instant referenda, and voting from home (Abramson et al., 1988). Acquiring and dispersing political communication online is fast, easy, cheap, and convenient. Information available on the internet is frequently unmediated; that is, it has not been tampered with or altered to serve particular interests (Abramson et al., 1988).

While these are indisputably advantages to online communication, they do not instantaneously guarantee a fair, representative, and egalitarian public sphere. As several critics argue, access to online technologies and information should be equal and universal. Access should also be provided at affordable rates. Without a concrete commitment to online expression, the internet as a public sphere merely harbors an illusion of openness (Pavlik, 1994; Williams and Pavlik, 1994; Williams, 1994). The fact that online technologies are only accessible to, and used by, a small fraction of the population contributes to an electronic public sphere that is exclusive, elitist, and far from ideal – not terribly different from the bourgeois public sphere of the 17th and 18th centuries.

This point is reiterated in empirical research of online political communities completed by Hill and Hughes (1998). In researching political Usenet and AOL groups, they found that demographically, conservatives were a minority among internet users. Online political discourse, however, was dominated by conservatives, even though liberals were the online majority. This implies that the virtual sphere is politically divided in a manner that echoes traditional politics, thus simply serving as a space for additional expression, rather than radically reforming political thought and structure. Still, they also pointed out the encouraging fact that at least people *are* talking about politics and protesting virtually online against democratic governments.

Despite the fact that all online participants have the same access to information and opinion expression, the discourse is still dominated by a few. Moreover, not all information available on the internet is democratic or promotes democracy; for example, white supremacy groups often possess some of the cleverest, yet most undemocratic websites. However, this particular comment should not be misunderstood. Fundamental democratic principles guarantee the free expression of opinion. While sites that openly advocate discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity exercise the right to free speech, they certainly do not promote democratic ideals of equality.

Some researchers pose additional questions, such as: even if online information is available to all, how easy is it to access and manage vast volumes of information (Jones, 1997)? Organizing, tracking, and going through information may be a task that requires skill and time that several do not possess. Access to information does not automatically render us

better informed and more active citizens. In fact, Hart 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' (1994: 109). In addition, Melucci (1994) argued that while producing and processing information is crucial in constructing personal and social identity, new social movements emerge only insofar as actors fight for control, stating that 'the ceaseless flow of messages only acquires meaning through the code that orders the flux and allows its meanings to be read' (p. 102). Finally, some even argue that increased online participation would broaden and democratize the virtual sphere, but could also lead to a watering down of its unique content, substituting for discourse that is more typical and less innovative (e.g. Hill and Hughes, 1998). Still, this discourse is not less valuable.

In conclusion, access to online information is not universal and equal to all. Those who can access online information are equipped with additional tools to be more active citizens and participants of the public sphere. There are popular success stories, such as that of Santa Monica's Public Electronic Network, which started as an electronic town square, promoted online conversation between residents, and helped several homeless people find jobs and shelter (Schmitz, 1997). Groups such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the Center for a New Democracy, Civic Networking, Democracy Internet, the Democracy Resource Center, Interacta, and the Voter's Telecommunication Watch are a few examples of thriving online political stops.

Still, online technologies render participation in the political sphere more convenient, but do not guarantee it. Online political discussions are limited to those with access to computers and the internet. Those who do have access to the internet do not necessarily pursue political discussion, and online discussions are frequently dominated by a few. While the internet has the potential to extend the public sphere, at least in terms of the information that is available to citizens, not all of us are able or willing to take on the challenge. Access to more information does not necessarily create more informed citizens, or lead to greater political activity. Even though access to information is a useful tool, the democratizing potential of the internet depends on additional factors, examined in the following section.

GLOBALIZATION OR TRIBALIZATION?

Yet another reason why there is much enthusiasm regarding the future of the internet as a public sphere has to do with its ability to connect people from diverse backgrounds and provide a forum for political discussion. While many praise online political discussion for its rationality and diversity, others are skeptical about the prospect of disparate groups getting along.

These technologies carry the promise of bringing people together, but also bear the danger of spinning them in different directions. Even more so, greater participation in political discussion, on or offline, may not secure a more stable and robust democracy. These are the issues addressed in this section.

Utopian perspectives on the internet speculate that computer-mediated political communication will facilitate grassroots democracy and bring people all across the world closer together. Geographic boundaries can be overcome and 'diasporic utopias' can flourish (Pavlik, 1994). Anonymity online assists one to overcome identity boundaries and communicate more freely and openly, thus promoting a more enlightened exchange of ideas. For example, the Indian newsgroup soc.culture.india is one of many online groups that foster critical political discourse among participants that might not even meet in real space and time. For several years this group has harbored lively political discussion on issues pertinent to the political future of India (Mitra, 1997a, 1997b).

Still, the existence of a virtual space does not guarantee democratic and rational discourse. Flaming and conflict beyond reasonable boundaries are evident both in Public Education Network (PEN) and soc.culture.india, and frequently intimidate participants from joining online discussions (Mitra, 1997a, 1997b; Schmitz, 1997). Hill and Hughes (1998) emphasized that the technological potential for global communication does not ensure that people from different cultural backgrounds will also be more understanding of each other, and they cite several examples of miscommunication. However, they did find that when conversation was focused on political issues, instead of general, it tended to be more toned down. Often, online communication is about venting emotion and expressing what Abramson et al. (1988) refer to as 'hasty opinions', rather than rational and focused discourse. Greater participation in political discussion does not automatically result in discussion that promotes democratic ideals.

Miscommunication set aside, however, what about communication? What impact do our words actually have online? Jones (1997) suggested that perhaps the internet allows us to 'shout more loudly, but whether other fellows listen, beyond the few individuals who may reply, or the occasional "lurker", is questionable, and whether our words will make a difference is even more in doubt' (p. 30). The same anonymity and absence of face-to-face interaction that expands our freedom of expression online keeps us from assessing the impact and social value of our words. The expression of political opinion online may leave one with an empowering feeling. The power of the words and their ability to effect change, however, is limited in the current political spectrum. In a political system where the role of the public is limited, the effect of these online opinions on policy making is questionable. To take this point further, political expression online may leave

people with a false sense of empowerment, which misrepresents the true impact of their opinions. Individuals may leave political newsgroups with the content feeling that they are part of a well-oiled democracy – does this feeling represent reality or substitute for genuine civic engagement? At the same time, it is through political discussions with others that individuals come to realize the handicaps of our democracy, and even commit to political activity to overcome these. More studies and closer observation of online political discussions is necessary to determine the impact of political discussion on the individual psyche as well as the wellbeing of a democratic society.

Another crucial issue lies in how interconnectedness affects discussion. The number of people that our virtual opinions can reach may become more diverse, but may also become smaller as the internet becomes more fragmented. Special interest groups attract users who want to focus the discussion on certain topics, providing opportunities for specialized discussion with people who have a few things in common. As the virtual mass becomes subdivided into smaller and smaller discussion groups, the ideal of a public sphere that connects many people online eludes us. On the other hand, the creation of special interest groups fosters the development of several online publics, which, as Fraser noted, reflect the collective ideologies of their members. After all, Habermas' vision was one of 'coffee-house' small group discussions.

But fragmentation does not manifest itself solely through the proliferation of special interest subgroups. A good amount of the information that we receive online is of a fragmented nature, presenting one aspect of an issue, snippets of information, or randomly assembled opinions or factoids. Schement and Curtis (1997) explained that 'when messages filtered through the media environment come unconnected, or as bits without organic integrity, the media environment exhibits fragmentation', and argued that 'fragmentation influences the climate of ideas within which we form values and construct reality' (p. 120). Fragmentation is at work in irreverent threads found in newsgroups and in the even more disjointed conversation style observed in chatrooms. When individuals address random topics, in a random order, without a commonly shared understanding of the social importance of a particular issue, then conversation becomes more fragmented and its impact is mitigated. The ability to discuss any political subject at random, drifting in and out of discussions and topics on which can be very liberating, but it does not create a common starting point for political discussion. Ultimately, there is a danger that these technologies may overemphasize our differences and downplay or even restrict our commonalities.

Furthermore, some contend that the disembodied exchange of text is no substitute for face-to-face meeting, and should not be compared to that.

Poster (1995), for example, argued that rational argument, reminiscent of a public sphere, can rarely prevail and consensus achievement is not possible online, specifically because identity is defined very differently online. Because identities are fluid and mobile online, the conditions that encourage compromise are absent from virtual discourse. Dissent is encouraged, and status markers are eliminated. Poster concluded that the internet actually decentralizes communication but ultimately enhances democracy. This brings to mind Lyotard's argument that social movements and democracy are strengthened by dissent and anarchy in communication. This is an appealing argument, but in a social system where the public has little power, more or less dissent may not make a difference.

To conclude, the internet may actually enhance the public sphere, but it does so in a way that is not comparable to our past experiences of public discourse. Perhaps the internet will not become the new public sphere, but something radically different. This will enhance democracy and dialogue, but not in a way that we would expect it to, or in a way that we have experienced in the past. For example, internet activist and hacker groups practice a reappropriated form of activism on the internet, by breaking into and closing down large corporations' websites, or 'bombing' them, so that no more users can enter them. This is a new form of activism, more effective than marching outside a corporation's headquarters, and definitely less innocuous than actually bombing a location. One could argue that the virtual sphere holds a great deal of promise as a political medium, especially in restructuring political processes and rejuvenating political rituals. In addition, the internet and related technologies invite political discussion and serve as a forum for it. Nevertheless, greater participation in political discussion is not the sole determinant of democracy. The content, diversity, and impact of political discussion need to be considered carefully before we conclude whether online discourse enhances democracy.

COMMERCIALIZATION

Despite all the hype surrounding the innovative uses of the internet as a public medium, it is still a medium constructed in a capitalist era. It is part and parcel of a social and political world (Jones, 1997). As such it is susceptible to the same forces that, according to Carey (1995), originally transformed the public sphere. The same forces defined the nature of radio and television, media once hailed for providing innovative ways of communication. Douglas (1987) detailed how radio broadcasting revolutionized the way that people conceived of communication, and she documented how it built up hope for the extension of public communication and the improvement of democracy. The potential of televised communication to plow new ground for democracy had met with similar enthusiasm (Abramson et al., 1988). Nowadays, both media have

transformed and produce commercial, formulaic programming for the most part. Advertising revenue has more impact on programming than democratic ideals. The concentration of ownership and standardization of programming have been documented by several scholars (e.g. Bagdikian, 1983; Ettema and Whitney, 1994), and growing public cynicism about media coverage undermines the democratizing potential of mass media.

For a vast majority of corporations the internet is viewed as another mass enterprise; its widespread and cheap access being a small, but not insurmountable obstacle to profit making. Online technologies, such as banners and portals, are being added to a growing number of web locations to create advertising revenue. Barrett (1996) traced how various communication technologies have destroyed one barrier after another in pursuit of profit, starting with volume, moving to mass, and finally space. He argued that time is the target of the electronic market, the fall of which will signal a more transparent market, in which conventional currency will turn into a 'free-floating abstraction' (Barrett, 1996).

Even so, advertising is not necessarily a bad addition to the internet, because it can provide small groups with the funds to spread their opinions and broaden public debate. To this point, some add that the 'very architecture of the internet will work against the type of content control these folks [corporate monopolies] have over mass media' (Newhagen, as cited in McChesney, 1995). McChesney (1995) agreed that the internet will open the door to a cultural and political renaissance, despite the fact that large corporations will take up a fraction of it to launch their cyberventures. He argued that cyberspace may provide 'a supercharged, information packed, and psychedelic version of ham radio'.

McChesney admitted that capitalism encourages a culture based on commercial values, and that it tends to 'commercialize every nook and cranny of social life in way that renders the development or survival of nonmarket political and cultural organizations more difficult' (1995: 10). He maintained that there are several barriers to the internet reforming democracy, such as universal access and computer literacy. Computers are not affordable for a large section of the population. I would extend this to a global basis, and add that for several countries still struggling to keep up with technological changes brought along by the industrial era, the internet is a remote possibility. When just about 6 percent (Global Reach, 2001) of the global population has access to the internet, discussion of the democratizing potential of internet-related technologies seems at least a little hurried. At the present time, political discussions online are a privilege for those with access to computers and the internet. Those who would benefit the most from the democratizing potential of new technology do not have access to it.

Even more problematic, however, is the notion that technologies can unilaterally transform the nature of the political sphere. Our political system currently does suffer from decreased citizen involvement, and internet-related technologies have managed to amend that, but only to a certain extent. More important, however, is the fact that the power of our political system is negated by the influence of special interests, and generally by a growing dependency on a capitalist mentality. McChesney (1995) concluded that

... bulletin boards, and the information highway more generally, do not have the power to produce political culture when it does not exist in the society at large ... given the dominant patterns of global capitalism, it is far more likely that the Internet and the new technologies will adapt themselves to the existing political culture rather than create a new one. (p. 13)

Capitalist patterns of production may commodify these new technologies, transforming them into commercially oriented media that have little to do with promoting social welfare. Even if this scenario does not materialize, can new technologies mitigate the influence of special interests on politics? Internet-related technologies can certainly help connect, motivate, and organize dissent. Whether the expression of dissent is powerful enough to effect social change is a question of human agency and a much more complex issue. New technologies offer additional tools, but they cannot single-handedly transform a political and economic structure that has thrived for centuries.

It seems that the discussion of information access, internet fragmentation, and commercialization leads back to a main point: how do we recreate something online, when it never really existed offline? It is not impossible, but it is not an instantaneous process either. Unfortunately, blind faith in information media is not enough to effect the social changes necessary for a more robust and fair public sphere. To paraphrase Adam Smith's legendary phrase, the invisible hand of information is not as mighty as several techno-enthusiasts contend it is. But it can be useful. Having reviewed the conditions that both extend and limit the potential of the internet as a public sphere, I address this specific issue further and discuss the nature of the virtual sphere in the following section.

A VIRTUAL SPHERE

Cyberspace is public and private space. It is because of these qualities that it appeals to those who want to reinvent their private and public lives. Cyberspace provides new terrain for the playing out of the age-old friction between personal and collective identity; the individual and community. Bellah et al. (1985) argued that individuals can overcome individualistic and selfish tendencies in favor of realizing the benefits of acting responsibly

within a moralistic, transcendent social order. Is it possible to do so in cyberspace?

Some have argued that it is not. Cyberspace extends our channels for communication, without radically affecting the nature of communication itself. Ample evidence can be found in political newsgroup discussions, which are often dominated by arguments and conflicts that mirror those of traditional politics. Hill and Hughes (1988) concluded that 'people will mold the internet to fit traditional politics. The Internet itself will not be a historical light switch that turns on some fundamentally new age of political participation and grassroots democracy' (p. 186). McChesney (1995) agreed that new technologies will adapt to the current political culture, instead of creating a new one, and viewed the political uses of the internet as 'making the best of a bad situation' (p. 15). Ultimately, it is the balance between utopian and dystopian visions that unveils the true nature of the internet as a public sphere.

Fernback (1997) remarked that true identity and democracy are found in cyberspace 'not so much within the content of virtual communities, but within the actual structure of social relations' (p. 42). Therefore, one could argue that the present state of real life social relations hinders the creation of a public sphere in the virtual world as much as it does in the real one. This is an enlightened approach, because it acknowledges the occasionally liberating features of new technologies without being deterministic. It is the existing structure of social relations that drives people to repurpose these technologies and create spaces for private and public expression. The internet does possess the potential to change how we conceive ourselves, the political system, and the world surrounding us, but it will do so in a manner that strictly adheres to the democratic ideals of the public sphere. The reason for this lies in the fact that we transcend physical space and bodily boundaries upon entering cyberspace. This has a fundamental impact on how we carry ourselves online, and is simply different from how we conduct ourselves offline.

A virtual sphere does exist in the tradition of, but radically different from, the public sphere. This virtual sphere is dominated by bourgeois computer holders, much like the one traced by Habermas consisting of bourgeois property holders. In this virtual sphere, several special interest publics co-exist and flaunt their collective identities of dissent, thus reflecting the social dynamics of the real world, as Fraser (1992) noted. This vision of the true virtual sphere consists of several spheres of counterpublics that have been excluded from mainstream political discourse, yet employ virtual communication to restructure the mainstream that ousted them.

It is uncertain whether this structure will effect political change. Breslow (1997) argued that the internet promotes a sense of sociality, but it remains to be seen whether this translates into solidarity. Social and physical

solidarity is what spawned political and social change over the course of the century, and the internet's anonymity and lack of spatiality and density may actually be counterproductive to solidarity. Ultimately, he concluded: 'How should I know who is at the other end, and when the chips are down, will people actually strip off their electronic guises to stand and be counted?' (p. 255). The lack of solid commitment negates the true potential of the internet as a public sphere.

Melucci's (1996) approach to new social movements makes more sense in an age when individuals use machines, where movements such as May 1968 used the streets, to protest against the same things. His main argument is that social movements no longer require collective action that reflects the interest of a social group; they revolve more around personal identity and making sense of cultural information. Melucci contended that in the last 30 years, emerging social conflicts in complex societies have raised cultural challenges to the dominant language, rather than expressing themselves through political action. Although Melucci implied that such language shifts are ineffectual, the point is that collective action can no longer be overtly measured, but is still present in the creative proclamation of cultural codes. What Melucci termed 'identity politics' allows room for both the private and public uses of cyberspace. The virtual sphere allows the expression and development of such movements that further democratic expressions, by not necessarily focusing on traditional political issues, but by shifting the cultural ground.

In other words, it would seem that the internet and related technologies have managed to create new public space for political discussion. This public space facilitates, but does not ensure, the rejuvenation of a culturally drained public sphere. Cheap, fast, and convenient access to more information does not necessarily render all citizens more informed, or more willing to participate in political discussion. Greater participation in political discussion helps, but does not ensure a healthier democracy. New technologies facilitate greater, but not necessarily more diverse, participation in political discussion since they are still only available to a small fraction of the population. In addition, our diverse and heterogeneous cultural backgrounds make it difficult to recreate a unified public sphere, on or offline. Finally, decreased citizen participation is only one of the many problems facing our current political system. Dependence on special interests and a capitalist mode of production also compromise democratic ideals of equality. Moreover, the quickly expanding commodification of internet-related resources threatens the independence and democratizing potential of these media.

Nevertheless, the most plausible manner of perceiving the virtual sphere consists of several culturally fragmented cyberspheres that occupy a common virtual public space. Groups of 'netizens' brought together by common

interests will debate and perhaps strive for the attainment of cultural goals. Much of the political discussion taking place online does not, and will not, sound different from that taking place in casual or formal face-to-face interaction. The widening gaps between politicians, journalists, and the public will not be bridged, unless both parties want them to be. Still, people who would never be able to come together to discuss political matters offline are now able to do so online, and that is no small matter. The fact that people from different cultural backgrounds, states, or countries involve themselves in virtual political discussions in a matter of minutes, often expanding each other's horizons with culturally diverse viewpoints, captures the essence of this technology. The value of the virtual sphere lies in the fact that it encompasses the hope, speculation, and dreams of what could be. Castells noted that 'we need Utopias – on the condition of not trying to make them into practical recipes' (interview with Ogilvy, 1998: 188). The virtual sphere reflects the dynamics of new social movements that struggle on a cultural, rather than a traditionally political terrain. It is a vision, but not yet a reality. As a vision, it inspires, but has not yet managed to transform political and social structures.

This does not mean that there is still no room for communication researchers to discuss and investigate the political potential of internet-related technologies. Our political experience online has shown that so far, the internet presents a public space, but does not yet constitute a public sphere. It still is a useful tool, however, and can serve to provide direct feedback to political representatives. Its technical capabilities enable discussions among voters and representatives, and relative anonymity encourages discussion participants to be more vocal and upfront about stating their beliefs. Unfortunately, as online political discussions are frequently dominated by a few they have a debatable, if any, impact on policy formation. Communication researchers should further investigate political discussions online and develop ways of gauging the responses of lurkers to online political discussion. This could help transform these discussions into a more representative indicator of public opinion. Patterns of online argumentation could be traced to learn more about the nature of online deliberation. Live chat or newsgroup discussions between online participants and politicians could also be monitored to ascertain whether and how the nature of online discussions changes when somebody with political clout is involved.

So far, considerable research has focused on the personal utility that online discussions can have for discussion participants. Research should tackle the effects question more aggressively, and try to determine the consequences of online political deliberation for individuals, social groups, and society as a whole. Case studies of instances where the internet was used to mobilize support could be pursued, to understand the process through which online discussions can begin to gain political weight. More

experimental debates between politicians and online discussants could be arranged, monitored, and observed by communication researchers, starting at a local governance level. Online discussants should be surveyed or otherwise interviewed to determine how powerful is the impact of their online opinions.

Finally, the internet has served as a valuable tool for political underdogs, and should continue to do so. For example, in the 2000 presidential US election, independent candidate Ralph Nader was able to use his website to connect and mobilize a large network of supporters. For independent candidates with limited funds and sparse coverage from the mainstream media, the internet presents a cheap, convenient, and speedy way of reaching out to potential voters. A website may not make as much of a difference for major party candidates, who can afford campaign advertising and enjoy continuous coverage from the mainstream press, but it has proven to be a blessing for other political contenders. Communication researchers could study and compare how politicians make use of the internet, and their own websites in particular. For example, scholars could consider how politicians' websites reflect the personality, mentality, and ideology of the candidate in question. The use and impact of these websites could be evaluated and compared to more traditional mass media, such as television and print journalism.

These suggestions for future research should contribute to the creation of a substantial body of literature on the political uses of the internet. We have successfully documented that political deliberation can indeed take place online; we now need to move forward and consider the greater impact of such political deliberation. Understanding and documenting the consequences of political uses of the internet can help us determine whether this relatively new medium will manage to transcend from public space to a public, virtual sphere.

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