Internet and the Public Sphere:

A glimpse of YouTube

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Abstract:

The internet, arguably the single most important communication break through of the latter half of the last century, has revolutionised the way people, communicate, access information including the mass media reportage, and even how they respond to and comment of social and political issues. In this context it has been argued the internet has facilitated a phenomenon philosopher Jurgen Habermas has defined as the 'public sphere'- a forum where public opinion is shaped.

In this context this paper aims to define the role of the public sphere in the cyber age, direct some academic focus on latest web based communications and networking tools which include the video sharing forum – YouTube, which has shown significant scope in less than two years of existence

This discussion pager first published in November 2006, has been updated and re-written to include more recent developments in the discussion of the Internet and the Public Sphere.

Considering the focus of rational debate in the 'public sphere', the paper attempts to move away form the accepted practice expert citations, and aim to include a wider forum of rational debate published in numerous online sources, outside of the academic confines which traditionally govern journal articles.

Introduction

The internet is heralded as arguably the singularly most important development in contemporary communication, which has produced a global 'public sphere' where, in theory each individual has direct access to a global forum where they are able to express their arguments without mediation, selection or censorship.

However questions are being asked how the massive volume of what many consider inane chatter seen on forums such as youtube, myspace and a vast number of blogs, discussion boards and chatrooms could fulfil the conditions of a public sphere as forum for critical and rational debate. In this context the paper attempts to explore some of the more significant questions on the internets role as a public sphere.

This being said it is important to clearly understand the nature of the ideological arena Jurgen Habermas has dubbed the 'public sphere'. Habermas 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," (Habermas,1989, p102).

The public sphere: a theoretical perspective.

In his magnum opus 'The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere' Habermas argues "*publicness* (or *publicity*) *of representation* was not constituted as a social realm, that is, as a public sphere; rather, it was something like a status attribute. . . . [T]he manorial lord . . . . displayed himself, presented himself as an embodiment of some `higher' power. . . . Representation in the sense in which the members of a national assembly represent a nation or a lawyer represents his clients had nothing to do with this publicity of representation inseparable from the lord's concrete existence, that, as an `aura,' surrounded and endowed his authority" (Habermas, 1962. p7). 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" (Habermas, 1989, pp103), and each stratum of power acted as mere spectators of the authority greater than theirs. The feudal landlord publicly

represented 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, pp103). However changes in Europe's political structure in the eighteenth century, largely embodied in capitalist modes of production, and enlightenment philosophy culminated in the collapse of feudalism, heralding the entry of the bourgeois into center stage. Unlike the feudal system which 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 creating enabling the formation of an arena which filled 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.

However the bourgeois public sphere eventually eroded once again through economic and structural changes paving the way for what Habermas calls the modern mass society of the social welfare state – where rational, critical debate, the life blood of the public sphere has been replaced by leisure. Similarly the state and society have become entwined in each other's spheres.

The collapse of critical debate and the emergence of the cultural notion of leisure, is critically analysed by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W Adorno, Habermas contemporaries of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer and Adorno argue the change is a direct result of the mass produced, mechanically reproduced culture, manufactured through structural changes in cultural industries. The somewhat cynical analysis presented by Horkheimer and Adorno suggest the "man with leisure have to accept what the cultural manufacturers offer him" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1995. p74).

Horkheimer and Adorno views are based in this context, on a Marxist argument which suggest "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas" (Marx and Engels, 1976, p59), an argument which suggest the class which controls the means of material production also control the means of mental production, there by the ideas of those who lack the means of production are subject to it. An argument further developed by Antonio Gramsci who argued the social groups attain 'hegemony' – dominance by inducing consent of the majority of the subaltern classes, those classes in a subordinate political position with in a given social theatre.

Horkheimer and Adorno's view of contemporary culture suggest the cultural industries treatment of culture as a commodity, and mass media as a product filtered, designed and packaged for consumers based on market statistics, has created a media culture where every response is carefully planned by the cultural manufacturers, limiting the possibility for any critical though outside of a predetermined equation. The commercialisation of the public sphere, the contribution of cultural manufactures including advertising and public relations, have Habermas argues has manifested in a refeudalization of the public sphere where the public are once again reduce to the status of spectator, and expert opinion has taken the place of 'true' public opinion.

Before embarking on a discussion on the Internet and the public sphere it is vital to further examine the universality of Habermas public sphere. In this context, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1993) critique the universality of Habermas' public sphere, and introduce the notion of an oppositional public sphere, manifested in proletariat public sphere which ideologically competes with the bourgeois public sphere. Similarly Jean-François Lyotard argues the emancipatory potentials of Habermas public sphere in *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984), and argument further expanded by feminist theorists who argue the so called public sphere of rational debate has continued to be gender biased (Landes, 1988; Fraser, 1990 and 1989).

In this context it can be argued Habermas' public sphere, and more importantly the acceptance of the universality of a bourgeois public sphere, and its uncomfortable closeness to a modernist grand-narrative, does not negate the democratic value of the public sphere. However it can also be argued, that instead of a public sphere, public sphere's with fluid and overlapping boundaries, loci of rational and critical debate would undoubtedly further the course or democracy in contemporary society. Thus a fragmented public sphere, with a truly post-modern structure would serve a grater purpose in furthering public opinion than a hegemonic public sphere or a refeudalized mass media that which fragments the public isolating them in individual private spaces where they continue to be mere recipients of entertainment heavy mass communication, devoid of an opportunity for interpersonal communication or rational discussion.

Habermas and the Internet:

There is little argument every aspect of contemporary culture has been subjected to commercial imperatives, of advertising, public relations, entertainment and even mass media, to such as an extent that any attempts of even creating the illusion of a public sphere by the mass media continue to governed by bottom-line finances, thus failing to conform to even the broadest notions of public opinion in the public sphere. In this context public opinion published in mainstream media continue to be influence by a series of commercial needs from availability of column space to consideration of possible increases to circulation figures.[i]

California University researcher Mark Poster argues "contemporary social relations seem to be devoid of a basic level of interactive practice which, in the past, was the matrix of democratizing politics: loci such as the agora, the New England town hall, the village Church, the coffee house, the tavern, the public square, a convenient barn, a union hall, a park, a factory lunchroom, and even a street corner. Many of these places remain but no longer serve as organizing centers for political discussion and action. It appears that the media, especially television but also other forms of electronic communication isolate citizens from one another and substitute themselves for older spaces of politics," (1995).

The Internet as, fundamentally a freely accesses medium of mass communication, is introduced to this otherwise heavily commercialised theatre of mass communication, sparking great expectations in the minds of those that support the reinvigoration of a public sphere. However more than a decade later questions are being asked if the internet has been successful in creating a public sphere, or even the optimism of its future ability to create a public sphere may in fact simply wishful. "Not so" says Lincoln Dahlberg arguing "a cursory examination of the thousands of diverse conversations taking place everyday online and open to anyone with Internet access seems to indicate the expansion on a global scale of the loose webs of rational-critical discourse that constitute what is known as the public sphere" (February 2001).

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[i] However it should be stressed, while the mass media have largely failed to create a public sphere mass media it self at times play a significant role in gaining and retaining democracy in numerous political threatens.

Habermas himself has been slow to speculate on the internets role as a public sphere. In his acceptance speech of the Bruno Kreisky Prize for the advancement of human rights on March 9, 2006[ii] Habermas said the "use of the Internet has both broadened and fragmented the contexts of communication. This is why the Internet can have a subversive effect on intellectual life in authoritarian regimes. But at the same time, the less formal, horizontal cross-linking of communication channels weakens the achievements of traditional media. This focuses the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public on select topics and information, allowing citizens to concentrate on the same critically filtered issues and journalistic pieces at any given time. The price we pay for the growth in egalitarianism offered by the Internet is the decentralised access to unedited stories. In this medium, contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus." It seems Habermas is lamenting the control of the expert, the voice which in many ways has silenced the voice of the public in a mass media driven pseudo public sphere.

While Habermas' analysis of the internet continue to be ambiguous, numerous scholars subscribing to the theory of multiple public spheres have outline fundamental criteria that need to be fulfilled if the internet is to function as a public sphere in it traditional definition which is based on the need for ration and critical thought, as opposed to forum of inane chatter.

Dahlberg (2001) argues six fundamental criteria need to be fulfilled for the internet to be considered a public sphere – autonomy from state and economic power; exchange and critique of criticizable moral-practical validity claims; reflexivity; ideal role-taking; sincerity; and discursive inclusion and equality. Once again the analysis fails to address the fragmented nature of internet and continue to theorise on one single over arching internet based public sphere – a futile pursuit in light of the internet being viewed as virtual world which mirrors the fragmented nature of contemporary society.

Through this post-modern view of a fragmented public opinion, emerges a more optimistic future for the internet as public sphere. The cyberspace becomes a virtual world and specific locations with in this vast digital expanse become analogues with eighteenth century European cafés that provided the physical arena

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[ii] In his acceptance speech printed by the Viennese paper Der Standard on March 10 and 11, 2006. http://www.signandsight.com/features/676.html

conducive to the creation of intellectual forum identified by Habermas as the 'bourgeois public sphere'. Within this framework, despite the structural change in society that has rendered physical loci such as cafés, taverns and public squares, geographically dispersed intelligence are able to converge in cyberspace to engage in rational and critical debate.

In this context it should also be noted the public sphere as Habermas defined it, while granting free access has never compelled every member of the populous to participate. Similarly the internet based public spheres, while providing the forum for those who are interested in engaging in critical debate, can not anticipate all users of the web to engage in meaningful dialogue.

However it can also be argued that the internet's potential in creating public spheres, can be and has to be harnessed by 'public intellectuals' if the cyberspace is to fulfil its potential as a forum for public spheres. In this context the argument can be presented, despite the risk of over simplification, as need for cyber loci analogues with the cafés and taverns which brought the intellectuals together, thus creating an environment conducive for the sharing of ideas and hence the sustenance of a public sphere.

In this context Lincoln Dahlberg has presented a case study base on the Minnesota E-Democracy project demonstrating how one such cyber locus was able to facilitate a public sphere – a project setup in 1994 which " has helped foster an 'online interactive public sphere' where people deliberate upon issues relating to Minnesota politics," (Dahlberg, 2001). The success and the optimism shown by The Minnesota E-Democracy project's Steven Clift, in his numerous writings on the success of the project, couple with the groups attempts to expand its interest group out side of the geographic limits of Minnesota has been frequently cited as the success of the internet's potential in creating an environment conducive to the formation of a public sphere.

"The Minnesota E-Democracy model has influenced online projects nationally and globally. It has been adopted by the Iowa E-Democracy project; The model also influenced the United Kingdom Citizens Online Democracy (UKCOD) project and the Nova Scotia Electronic Democracy Forum (both of these initiatives are not operating at present). Minnesota E-Democracy also inspired the British centre-left online public policy 'think tank' Nexus," (Dahlberg, 2001).

Despite the success of such projects that have successfully reignited greater public dialogue in existing democracies, greater challenges continue to remain unaddressed and hence unresolved in more volatile theatres of political conflict. In such theatres, where the ideological gulf between opposing publics are greatest even cyber communities have failed to create public spheres which transcend these pre-existing boundaries of hatred and mistrust. But hope remains, in the hand of a selected few intellectuals, who have against the odds have managed to create embryonic public spheres, through cyber links without which the opportunity of greater interaction among likeminded individuals would have been denied.

The anonymity of presenter and the validity of the argument:

It should also be noted that by its very nature the web users are able to successfully separate their own identity form the argument they are making, which much greater success than they would through mass media. Many news papers for example continue to be reluctant to publish letters to the editor where the writers seek anonymity – with many editors arguing any writer should have the conviction to stand by their writing as journalist all over the world do. In this context conventional media also rely on the identity of the writer to provide greater credibility to the argument. The question therefore is whether the anonymity accorded by the web undermines the integrity of the argument, preventing the establishment of a public sphere in a Habermas sense of the concept.

While more research needs to be conducted on this aspect of the internet, and the public's perception of validity, it can be argued the anonymity accord the writers to make bold claims that may not impact them in any negative aspect in the real world. While the ability to make bold claims and arguments with no real consequence could at times undermine the integrity of the cyber world it can also provide a break through in an argument that may have otherwise been tempered through social morays or fear of retribution, thus enhancing the prospect of greater debate.

However it can also be agued that the veil of anonymity may enable more extremist comment, where the populous is able to vent its darkest thoughts of hatred and prejudice – thus a tyranny of the masses. In this context philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville "believed the tyrannical masses, represented a new kind of political animal, brandishing new instruments. It did not wield the 'clumsy weapons of chains and hangmen.' Instead, it roamed about the land, arranging a

dull sameness through sentiments. The new agent of fear was a majority wielding power not through traditional offices or weapons of state, but through the social mechanisms of popular opinion and common belief," (Robin , 2006). The arguments of Tocqueville, while to some extent fanciful can not altogether be dismissed as mere paranoia, considering the manifestation of extremist political reactions within contemporary democratic communities.

The anonymity of the author and the arguable propensity towards mass tyranny many seemingly undermine the very foundation of the public sphere, and its ability to generate, presumably positive public opinion. Here the notion of the public sphere and what can rationally be expected of it become an even more complex argument, suggesting once again a need for rational monitoring of the public spheres in order to prevent them from descending into anarchy – in the colloquial not theoretical sense of the word. The need for 'control' would then arguably undermines the very freedoms accorded by the internet and structure of the public sphere as defined by Habermas. While the answer to this quandary is far from simple, it could once again find theoretical refuge in post-modern thought, which may suggest a more fragmented approach where freedom and moderation are delicately balanced depending on the specific need – as seen in the case of wikipedia, internet encyclopaedia where the public are free to make changes, while others are equally free to alter them our even suggest limited access to relevant pages that are under the treat of vandalism. Similarly it can be argued, once again form a post-modern stand point that the public sphere suggested in this context is one that would contribute and present alternative dialogue to the pre-existing discourse of experts and policymakers, as presented by the media and while competing with the public-sphere of experts to some extent, it not designed to quash or negate expert opinion.

The US election campaign on Youtube: a case study.

Less than two years after in inception US politicians have made an appearance on the video sharing website, providing a forum for the American public to directly respond with text and video comments. By passing the media's selection process, and hence any potential biases and political and commercial agenda's of the mass media.

In this context Barack Hussein Obama a relatively junior senator for Illinois has been quick to harness the internet's You Tube public sphere to post no less than 41

video clips between October 2006 and mid-April 2007. According to his You Tube site the BarackObamadotcom channel registered on September 5, 2006 has been hub of political activity and dialogue, with a video clip of a speech highlighting his anti Iraq invasion policy posted on March 19 receiving 146619 views and 403 comments by mid April, 2007. Obama's official website, which according to Whois server information[iii] is registerd to his campaign office " Obama for America, 233 N. Michigan Ave, Suite 1100, Chicago, Illinois 60601" contains a prominent link to his You Tube channel. The You Tube channel boasts 4674 subscribers and 2,767,667channel views.

Similarly Hillary Clinton's official website, www.hillaryclinton.com has linked to a Hillary for President – You Tube channel which had been operational under the 'hillaryclintondotcom' login since July 21, 2006. The channel boasting 1508 subscribers and 114,977 viewers according to automated counters, has posted 20 videos. Compared to Obama it can be argued Clinton has enjoyed limited success on You Tube, with her 'Children's Health Care' Video published on March 14, 2007, has been viewed 9049 times and has received a mere 26 comments.

Both channels have also been copied and 'favourited' by a significant number of You Tube users thus mirroring the clips and increasing there exposure. The accumulative effect of these websites and their comments is two numerous to study, and beyond the scope of this paper. However it should be noted that even within the context of American politics the you tube public sphere's attention is not limited to Obama and Clinton; and channels such as Politicstv created on March 28, 2006 cover a iwde range of political responces form both sides of the US political spectrum. The channel - www.youtube.com/politicstv, boating 1479 subscribers and 27,007 viewers presents 509 videos in just over 12 months of operations. It has also been cited by You Tube as the 54th most frequently accessed You Tube channel in April – a list, interestingly topped by a reality docu-drama hosted by LG15 on http://www.youtube.com/lonelygirl15, a site containing 114 segments in the life of a sixteen year-old girl. Thus suggesting while the You Tube offers an environment conducive for rational critical debate – thus a forum for a public sphere, and while it is harnessed to some extent by the public, their need for leisure purportedly a construct of the cultural industries and hegemony of the dominant media influence continue to hamper, at least to some extent, the wide growth of a cyber public sphere.

[iii] http://www.networksolutions.com/whois/results.jsp?domain=barackobama.com

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