

Reflections on the Virtual Public Sphere

Analysis and reflection on Habermas' Structural Transformation in light of the new media/communication environment

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バーチャル公共圏を探る

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in light of modern day developments. This analysis is intended to A) review important concepts from *Structural Transformation* and serve as a reference point for future exploration into public sphere theory; B) introduce the argument that advances in unfettered communication correlate positively with strengthened democracy; C) introduce and consider the importance of the concept of the "lay-expert" in modern critical theory; D) draw correlations between trends that Habermas points to in the late 18th century and those of today; and E) set the stage for arguments relating to the existence and function of what has come to be termed as the "virtual public sphere."

Key words: Habermas, critical theory, virtual public sphere, democracy, communication technology

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抄 録

本稿では、現代における通信技術の発展と批判理論の観点から、ハーバーマスの『公共圏の構造転換』を考察する。本分析の目的は、A) 『構造転換』において述べられた重要な概念を再考し、今後の公共圏理論の進歩において出発点としての役割を果たす、B) 自由通信の進歩と社会の民主化が相関関係にあることを論じる、C) 現代批判理論のコンテキストにおける“素人専門家”の概念を紹介し、その重要性を考察する、D) ハーバーマスの示した18世紀後半の動向と現代の動向との相関関係を表現する、E) バーチャル公共圏と言われようになりつつある存在および機能に関する理論について議論を構築することである。

キーワード: ハーバーマス、バーチャル公共圏、批判理論、民主主義、通信技術

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Habermas on Public Opinion

One of the central projects Habermas undertakes in *Structural Transformation*, is to set up a frame from within which to categorize and explore the ideas of “public vs. private,” “publicity,” and most importantly, the idea of “public opinion”; for it is these ideas he posits, that are at the heart of the modern day inability to construct and maintain effective democratic institutions based on popular consensus. To accomplish this formidable task, Habermas employs a rather unconventional methodology; by way of a historical analysis of the social factors leading up to the formation of an embryonic “public sphere” (situated within a liberal bourgeois public) and by chronicling its eventual decline under the mass-consumer oriented welfare state, he makes a powerful statement about the modern day democratic deficit that is being perpetuated by the very institutions which claim to be the protectors of free democratic choice and of individual autonomy within society. Although these developments occurred across Europe, Habermas limits his analysis to three countries England, Germany and France—focusing particularly on England as political and social circumstances there allowed for the more timely and markedly more pronounced emergence of a public sphere.

Habermas begins his historical account by looking to a time before the emergence of the public sphere. In the Middle Ages in Europe, according to Habermas, public opinion could not be said to truly exist because there was no *public realm* situated between the rulers and the ruled; in its place, there was instead what he refers to as *representative publicity*—or rather, an arrangement under which the king and associated nobility staged intricate public displays such as joust, theater, grand balls, etc. as well as employing less obvious symbolism in the form of noble crests, courtly virtues, or royal imagery—that functioned as constant reminders to the people of the political power of the ruling classes. Pure authority, then, is what dictated the actions of private people in feudal society and this extended even into the realm of production and commerce. In short, all *public* actions were directed towards the seat of power. Although it is not dealt with in any depth in *Structural Transformation*, Habermas does identify at least one institution that is in fact able to circumvent the authority of the crown to act in a more or less public manner. Prior to the reformation, the church—which drew its legitimacy from a transcendental plain of existence—was free of the requirements of property ownership as a means of legitimizing itself, and therefore, it commanded its own *flavor* of representative publicity before its captive audience; ensured by the royal decree of a state religion. From the English reformation onward however, religion became for the most part a matter of personal choice rather than a requirement of the state and the once centralized power of the ruler(s) began to fracture into an array of separate institutions:

The so-called freedom of religion historically secured the first sphere of private autonomy; the Church itself continued to exist as one corporate body among others under public law. The first visible mark of the analogous polarization of princely authority was the separation of the public budget from the territorial ruler's private holdings. The bureaucracy, the military (and to some extent also the administration of justice) became independent institutions of public authority separate from the progressively privatized sphere of the court. Out of the estates, finally, the elements of political prerogative developed into organs of public authority; partly into a parliament, and partly into judicial organs. (Habermas, 1989: 11, 12)

These "sphere(s) of private autonomy," which Habermas refers to in this passage, had their origins in an earlier development. 16th century mercantilism, bringing with it an expansion of commerce and long distance trade, was the crucial event allowing a rising merchant class to first begin to break free of the constraints imposed on society by representative publicity and to set up a limited realm of autonomy. It allowed some actors in society to operate outside of the authoritarian reach of the monarchy, and in fact, gave them the latitude to begin to take on functions that had previously been reserved for state power. From this, a symbiotic relationship began to emerge where the capitalists supplied revenue in the form of tax and investment to the crown in exchange for political and military assistance in order to advance trade routes and open markets. It is at this crucial juncture that Habermas begins to develop the notion of *civil society* (a term he borrows from Hegel (Hegel, Wood & Nisbet, 1991)) to describe the new sphere of production and capitalist exchange; which, for the first time, opened up a public realm distinct from the state and governed by an internal logic. Civil society as he describes it, is the linchpin allowing individuals and organizations within society to act in a public manner to represent their own interests in opposition to the state when they are at cross purposes, or in tandem with the state when their interests overlap. This new class of economic citizen–bourgeois in character–represented the beginning of the end for the noble classes of society and the imminent birth of the modern nation-state.

The Rise of Communication Technology (CT) and Its Relation to Commerce

One of the important elements that allowed this new (public) space to be forged between the rulers and the ruled was a social revolution in communication technology and communication medium that was made possible by the economic expansion of the new bourgeois class. This transformation, as Habermas describes it, is intimately linked with the expansion of trade and the necessity for the merchant class to be kept abreast of developments in other cities and townships, in provincial districts and eventually in foreign

territories. Alongside the traffic in commodities, a robust traffic in news developed in the form of scheduled carrier mail routes and the circulation of newsletters. This communication however was kept to a large degree private because the content of the communications had wide implications for gaining competitive advantage in an increasingly deregulated market environment as well as for allowing the administration to enforce tighter control over society. News therefore became a valued commodity *itself* and a market just for its circulation gradually coalesced and began to take the shape of the modern day news outlets which we are all very well acquainted with. Habermas stresses however that this did not happen overnight, but rather, over a very long protracted period of time that paralleled, and in many ways intercalated, the rise of modern nation states and the promulgation of democratic ideals. For our purposes here, it is not necessary to detail step by step the full evolution that Habermas lays out, only to note that according to his model, communication and organization of *news* was intrinsically tied up with the establishment and expansion of civil society as well as with the later rise of the nation state and the spread of *democratic* ideals. It is also worth noting that one of the main catalyst that allowed this to happen at all was a pervasive atmosphere of deregulation and liberalization on many levels of society; brought about in a sense by the establishment of a bourgeois class of property owners and the gradual phasing out of representative publicity in favor of a system where the media was *enlisted* by the state to carry out the publicity function of the former regime.

Historically, communication technology (CT) has always been intrinsically tied up with democratic potential. This is true in part because once a new CT is developed and made available to the public; it generally takes time for regulatory forces—along with hegemonic capitalist dominance—to catch up with it, allowing a brief window where public opinion is bolstered. In addition, each successive technology carries with it new possibilities for exchange of private opinions over time and geographical distance and for popular organization that leads to a stronger citizenry (Bimber, 1998; Coombs, 1998). If a given CT is important enough to public interest, efforts may be made to make sure that it is kept open and in the public domain to the greatest degree possible. As an example of this, Habermas points to how the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695 was instrumental in allowing for the formation of the first fledgling public sphere with a political function. In modern times, overt regulation of the Internet has thus far been negligible (in most western democracies) despite a constant assault by a number of regulatory entities and private interests. At present, a lively debate is ongoing regarding the concept of “net neutrality” and although forces are at work to artificially recreate the scarcities of access that were enjoyed by monopolies and ensured by government regulatory bodies under previous one-to-many CT platforms, a more sophisticated and organized class of citizenry is hard at work to ensure that the rights of end-users are preserved and if possible expanded through measures such as the creation of the

Internet Bill of Rightsⁱ, the promotion of open source software and open standards protected under the GPUⁱⁱ, and the establishment of wireless mesh networks to name a few.

Habermas and the Concept of Public Sphere

This leads us back to the main conceptual component of Habermas' intellectual project, the idea of the "public sphere." Habermas describes it as a realm of public authority created by the vacuum left over from the gradual phasing out of representative publicity. He quotes Arendt here to further unfold his image of what defines this new public space:

Hannah Arendt refers to this *private sphere of society that has become publicly relevant* when she characterizes the modern (in contrast to the ancient) relationship of the public sphere to the private in terms of the rise of the "social": "Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance, and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public." (Habermas, 1989: 19)

In this formulation, the public sphere is linked to both the economy (civil society) and the private realm of the household—whose economic activities have been relocated to the area between the *polis* and the *oikos*. Civil society too had undergone a metamorphosis and ideas stemming from political economy now demoted the artisan and merchant classes in favor of a privileged clique of *professionals* who occupied the upper echelons of the public sphere and were able to both speak in an authoritative manner—as experts—and also to interface with and hold a certain amount of sway over decisions that were being made within the administration. The public sphere then, took on a *bourgeois* character, according to Habermas, under which public opinion—distilled and amplified via the reading bourgeois class through *critical discussion*—could be invoked in such a manner as to challenge decisions and policies of the state. It is here that one of Habermas' main questions is partially answered. As it turns out, for a brief period, at the end of the 18th century in England and later in Germany and France, what could accurately be referred to as "public opinion" existed in the form of an educated bourgeois class enlisting its reason and critical capacities to intervene in state affairs on behalf of the "public"; to, in a sense, force the government to legitimate its actions before the people. These so called "critics" (or "experts"), who were integral to the early public sphere, are of central importance for this discussion as well. According to Habermas, these critics evolved from within the realm of the bourgeois literary sphere (and from artistic circles in general); signifying the mode by which the casual reader could be distinguished from the "expert"ⁱⁱⁱ; and by which the "informed" opinion can be distinguished from the "common" opinion.

These critics eventually took up a dual role within the literary public sphere. On the one hand, they were representatives for the public and their authority to do so was grounded in their willingness to rationally debate the central issues with their colleagues:

The art critics could see themselves as spokesman for the public—and in their battle with the artists this was the central slogan—because they knew no greater authority besides the better argument and because they felt themselves at one with all who were willing to let themselves be convinced by arguments. (Habermas, 1989: 41)

On the other hand however, they were also in opposition to the public—or certain sectors of the public—because public custom or public “common sense” was either not open to change, or altogether too fickle in some instances. The art critics then, also had to take it upon themselves to be not just seekers of the truth, but educators of the public; and in the extreme case, crusaders for new ideals when they deemed it necessary:

At the same time they could turn against the public itself when, as experts combating “dogma” and “fashion,” they appealed to the ill-informed person’s native capacity for judgment. (Habermas, 1989: 41)

Unfortunately, as time went by, these experts tended to become less radical in their approach and more organized and systemic in character. From the literary circles came academic societies, journals, and publishing houses that were often motivated more by considerations of social standing and profit than by a sincere desire to transform the fabric of society. Later, with the advent of broadcast media, yet another devolution occurred as public opinion came to be dominated not by critically debating experts in the search for truth, but by one-to-many forms of mass discourse (newspaper, radio, television) that were supported by advertising revenue and often employed sophisticated public relations strategies to achieve political and economic ends.

But now that we stand firmly footed in the digital age, we are presented with at least the possibility of reclaiming much of the public space that has been either eroded or usurped by private interests. While Habermas spoke of a public sphere grounded in time and place, it has become obvious that need to revisit this conception to update it to better fit our changing reality. Much of the public space that we are now gaining cannot be conceived of in traditional terms because it does not occupy physical space, is not limited by geographical location, and persists through time in a different way. In this *virtual* public sphere, we can observe that a new class of expert has emerged in recent years, facilitated by the same opportunities and pressures that enabled their earlier counterparts; namely,

advances in communication technologies coupled with a deep seated angst stemming from a renegotiation of societal arrangements. The central difference being that now, with the many-to-many nature of the new medium of communication—sharply contrasting all preceding models—we are presented with the added opportunity of having a low-cost platform for being able to aggregate and distill the opinions generated by a number of observers of varying expertise, despite being separated by great physical distances. In short, we are no longer confined by the opinions of *certain* experts in particular geographical locations, associated with the *right* institutes, but rather, we now have the ability to tap the aggregated opinion of a crowd of experts who carry on a critical discussion regarding, among other topics, what is best for society.

Public Sphere Theory, Classic and Present-day

Habermas recognizes several unique features of the bourgeois literary public sphere that he claims allowed it to expand and eventually enter into the political realm. These criteria are retained in his later writings on discursive democracy and, although Habermas himself hasn't updated his own theories to take account of new developments in communication trends, we can assume that these categories carry over and can be used to evaluate the quality of the modern day public sphere—as it exists in relation to new media^{iv}. The important features of the bourgeois public sphere are:

The Bracketing of Status

Bracketing of status can be interpreted as a type of “civility” of discourse. As Habermas makes clear, the point of this is not to pretend that everyone in the debate is equal in terms of social standing, but rather to make sure that no voices are excluded on the basis of social power relations extending into the value neutral space that has been created, “far from presupposing the equality of status, [they] disregarded status altogether. The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals” (p. 36). Commentators have criticized (and rightly so) this criterion as being in a sense, a false pledge and also, as possibly being an impediment to fringe voices from entering the conversation. But more and more we are seeing that in the new private/public spaces that are opening up in what has been termed the virtual public sphere, not only is status being disregarded, it is becoming arbitrary. For many of the discussions being carried on in numerous special interest forums at any given time, participation, contribution, adherence to a basic degree of civility, and the ability to construct clear and rational arguments/explanations tend to count for more than any participants social position in corporeal society. In this sense, we can say that Internet mediated communications in some respects surpass Habermas' original conception of the

criteria in that bracketing of status is the rule of the new medium rather than the exception to it. People can more freely express their opinions without necessarily linking those ideas back to the societal *role* that they play in a community. This is especially true for people who act in some official capacity as a representative for an organizational interest, be it public sector or private.

The Opening up of Debate

As discussed earlier, due to the reconfiguration of the family unit through the distancing of its economic functions—freeing up its subjectivity and interiority—many topics that had previously been monopolized by the state or by the church were now open for debate. As Habermas puts it, “discussion within such a public presupposed the problematization of areas that until then had not been questioned” (p. 36). The market forces of capitalism in a more general sense as well played an important role in this opening up of debate; as more and more people were able to obtain cultural symbols as commodities, they were put in the position of interpreting them and rationalizing what was intrinsically “good” in them. This led to a demystification or *profaning* of these symbols which once held a sacramental character. We can extend this argument to the modern day public sphere if we examine a current pressing issue such as, for example, the state of modern medicine. The healing arts continue to push the bounds of what is mortally possible; thus, demystifying the human body and opening up areas of debate that were once the domain of the state, as regulated by law in codified dictates; or as ordained by the church, through interpretations of scripture. As a result, the state, along with religious factions continues to be locked in a struggle with science and empirical research over questions that arise from the social implications of pioneering medical and bioscience research. Although this struggle has generated a great deal of public *interest* in topics which were once off the table for consideration, the prevailing structure of the media in the 20th century ensured that the parameters of the debate continued to be defined not by public opinion generated through a critically debating public, but rather by a narrow set of special interests which fell within one of the three categories mentioned above: science, religion, or the state. Many-to-many configurations of communication, along with the ubiquity and quality of technical and expert information, have helped to remove this barrier to some degree but have yet to mature to a level where they can exert an appreciable influence over policy formation. With that being said, this is one area that is definitely promising, and if limitations of *focus* can be overcome, then this is one aspect in which the virtual public sphere can be said to be superior to its 20th century or earlier counterparts.

Inclusiveness

The literary public sphere was open to all comers—in theory. Minimum entry

requirements did exist, which made it difficult, if not impossible, for many in society to participate. The bourgeois literary sphere was reserved for those who were propertied, educated, who were able to afford the cost of the literary works as well as the time to acquaint themselves with a wide range of authors. What Habermas means by *inclusive* then, is that the public sphere was not *insulated* from—and *could not* be insulated from—society at large, and in a sense, it could be said to be representative of it through the institutions that slowly emerged from its ranks. Inclusiveness then, or rather “entry requirements,” is another important criterion which also deserves further consideration and qualification. Any inquiry that attempts to deal with the virtual public sphere in a serious manner must take this into consideration inequities in access such as are created by the *digital divide*. In developed economies, these entry requirements have been reduced to a negligible degree; however, in developing countries the gap still remains formidable if not insurmountable for the majority and now that we are possibly entering into a more cosmopolitan era, this will likely have serious repercussions. Projects such as the OLPC^{vi} have recognized this fact and have directed their efforts to bridging this gap. But, it is important to recognize that physical access to the basic means of information sharing in society is only one of many hurdles that need to be overcome for the virtual public sphere to evolve to the point of being a truly inclusive medium. Along with basic entry requirements such as language and expertise, there are other obstacles to participation that are not so well understood and are just now starting to become apparent.

The Special Status of Rational Critical Debate

If the bourgeois literary public sphere is the heart of Habermas’ theory, then rational critical debate is its soul. This idea—which he reformulates and refers to in his later work as discursive theory, communicative rationality, discourse ethics, or the theory of communicative action—at its core, recognizes rational argument as the sole arbiter of any debate. The genesis of this idea can be traced to several different sources, one being the so-called linguistic turn accredited largely to the later works of Wittgenstein (Wittgenstein, 1921) and taken up particularly by postmodern thinkers. According to this view—which shifted the paradigm for research in the fields of philosophy and the social sciences for the later half of the 20th century—language defines reality in the world rather than vice versa. In other words, we cannot truly perceive things without language; experience must first be *translated* into language for us to experience “reality.” Employing this strategy allowed Habermas to sidestep the problem of grounding his theory in transcendental, metaphysical, religious, or otherwise un-testable frameworks that would ultimately make any recommendations based on his model a matter of faith. This included also (counter intuitively) the roots of his rationalist predisposition; which, although it looked to objectively and empirically qualify facets of reality (the world)

as the basis of all knowledge, was seen as being prone to widespread dogmatism and oversimplification. Instead, Habermas adopted a version of rationalism grounded in a very significant normative feature of human experience, interpersonal linguistic communication. The influence of Kant on Habermas' intellectual project is also unmistakable, in fact, with the exception of the fore mentioned substitution of "critical dialogue" for Kant's "pure reason" (Kant, Guyer & Wood, 1999); Habermas followed the Kantian "universalistic" framework faithfully. Beyond these two main influences on Habermasian discourse ethics, the influence of Hegel (briefly discussed earlier in relation to legal constructions) and the neo-Marxists is also noteworthy.

Here, it may be instructive to briefly draw a correlation between the way in which Marx viewed the emancipation of the public and the way that Habermas viewed it. According to Marx, the means of production was the vital key allowing the public to cast off their chains of oppression under the tyranny of the capitalist mode (Marx & Engels, 1967); meanwhile for Habermas, the capitalist mode was merely one catalyst allowing the *true* emancipating power—citizens' public use of their critical faculties—to come to the fore. Ironically however, in Habermas' version, once the chains of oppression are cast off, the corrosive tendencies inherent in the capitalist ethos functioned to subvert the newfound freedoms (through engineering of public opinion) and once again plunge the citizenry into a state of oppression—the critical difference being that the oppression now is not so easily found out. The newly constituted subjugation is much more insidious than its predecessor in that it operates for the most part in the open—in the form of the consumerist oriented mass media—but it is not immediately recognized as an instrument of suppression due to the propaganda that enshrouds it, hidden in plain sight so to speak. Both Marx and Habermas therefore viewed the capitalist mode as the source of much of the oppression in society although they differ as to how this could be overcome, for Marx it necessitated handing the means of production back to the people, while for Habermas, it means allowing their critical faculties to function unimpeded, in a public capacity. This difference in approach can be seen as a consequence of Habermas' rejection of many of the ideals that the Frankfurt school was constructed on; ideals which—at the time—had proved or were proving to be dead ends. So although *Structural Transformation* maintains many of the underlying features of the Marxists analysis, it breaks ranks in a very significant way.

In the modern day as well, we intuitively understand that rationality has an important role to play in social and political discourse. The underlying reason for this is based in the realization that private interests will often attempt to block or to engineer discourse on which we base our public choices. But while we know this to be true, we also realize that the liberal application of dry rationality often comes at the expense of our creativity and humanity. There is much to be said for the inclusion of fringe voices into the public discourse in a

number of stylistic formats that can extend beyond rationalism to include a range of ideas that may, at first glance, be regarded as either anti-intuitive or possibly less than pragmatic. It must be recognized that while rationalism is useful, it is not necessarily the default expressive format for everyone in a diverse society and more often than not, those most versed in rationality are also those born into a privileged class of society who have a vested interest in maintaining a certain configuration of societal relations.

Conclusion

Hopefully the reflexivity and re-configurability inherent in online communication can open up new possibilities for conveying our rationality through more expressive and creative mediums, or for breathing new life into public discourses that have been taken off of our collective table by prejudice and/or hegemony. Moreover, while it goes without saying that person-to-person direct interactions are always preferable when dealing with localized issues, Internet-facilitated many-to-many platforms open up a doorway for personal participation in broad consensus building on a national and international level in that they are: a) unbounded by geographical constraints, b) open 24/7, c) not as internally or externally regulated as one-to-one, or one-to-many forms of media, and d) infinitely more inclusive and reflexive than systems that have existed to this point.

While many of the developments described in this article have yet to play out, we can at least begin to adapt our classical understanding of Habermas' vision of a more enlightened and "emancipated" society in light of the possibilities that are unfolding before us daily. As with any technological advance aimed at communication and openness however, we need to remain vigilant against private/corporate interests slowly usurping the newly forged public spaces that serve as an incubator for considered public opinion. In the final analysis, the message of *Structural Transformation* remains as relevant today as when it was written nearly half-a-century ago; while commerce has been instrumental in bringing about advances in communication technology—that then act to inform the public and open up critical examination of institutions (thus strengthening democracy)—commerce taken to extremes will, undoubtedly, perpetuate our collective slide back into virtual iniquity.

Endnotes

- i Based on the Report from the Coalition workshop at the Rio IGF, 13 November 2007, by V. Bertola, "*Towards an Internet rights framework: a work in progress*", available on March 20, 2008 at: http://www.Internet-bill-of-rights.org/en/report_20071113.php.
- ii General Public License. License used by the Free Software Foundation for the GNU. See <http://www.fsf>.

- org/copyleft/gpl.html(<http://www.fsf.org/copyleft/gpl.html>)
- iii *Kunstrichter* (Germ.)
 - iv What is often referred to as the “virtual public sphere”
 - v These days, while we often celebrate being “information rich,” we also recognize that it has come at a cost of being “focus poor.” While many-to-many communication technologies have opened a number of doors, some scholars argue that we are slowly slipping into a state known as “disintermediation,” where the choices become so overwhelming that we lose a collective focus and become ineffectual in decision-making.
 - vi One Laptop Per Child, <http://laptop.org/en/> Last accessed on September 12th 2009.

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