Does Habermas Understand the Internet? The Algorithmic Construction of the Blogo/Public Sphere

R. Stuart Geiger

Georgetown University, Communication, Culture, and Technology Program

Abstract: Is computer-mediated discourse leading to collective political action in the public sphere, or simply more fragmentation? This question has been asked by social and political theorists ever since the Internet entered academia in the early 90s. However, this debate has been recently rekindled by Jurgen Habermas – one of the leading theorists of the public sphere – who recently broke a longstanding silence and spoke out against the Internet as a potentially democratizing medium. Instead of directly intervening in this debate, I interrogate the techno-epistemic conditions of possibility for 'the blogosphere' to exist as a sociopolitical entity. Specifically, I analyze social aggregation sites like Technorati, Delicious, Digg, and even Google, which make it possible for collective action to precipitate out of the Internet. I find that Habermasians should not fear fragmentation, but instead integration: the blogosphere as a public sphere is constructed and unified not by ideal discourse, but algorithms.

Keywords: public sphere, blogosphere, networked public sphere, discourse, critical theory, social media, social aggregation, technoepistemics, oligopticons, Jurgen Habermas, Yochai Benkler

From its unusual beginning as a data-sharing network designed by the U.S. military to remain operational in the event of a nuclear attack (Abbate, 2000), the Internet has quickly become one of the most prevalent and important media technologies in contemporary life. As first universities and then households began to link up to this global communications network at an exponential rate, one of the first and most longstanding predictions was that such a medium of communication would radically transform contemporary society for the better—as most early accounts claimed. Drawing extensively on the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas, a predominant prediction was that the Internet would usher in a rebirth of the public sphere. As Habermas argued in the mid-20th century, the public sphere had atrophied in a society where the high barriers to entry associated with radio, television, and print media, political discourse had been monopolized by a handful of monolithic mass media institutions. His ideal vision of a social world in which the only force was discourse, or "the unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1998, p. 306) finally seemed possible in a virtual world. Yet despite the fact that his theories quickly become the *de facto* intellectual tradition deployed by the Internet's most vocal supporters, Habermas remained silent regarding the role of the Internet in the public sphere for quite some time. He has recently spoken out on the issue, although his brief remarks disappointed many who continually cited his work to celebrate the Internet and critique traditional mass media. Habermas claimed in 2006 that computer-mediated communication has little more than a 'parasitical' role to play in the public sphere, largely due to the way in which Internet-based discourse communities have fragmented the public.

As such, this paper analyzes the current debate that has emerged between the two camps regarding the role of the Internet in the public sphere: Habermas himself and the pro-Internet post-Habermasians. Before such an analysis, I first historicize the literature on the topic of the

Habermasian public sphere since the introduction of the Internet in public life. I then return to the contemporary debate between Habermas and the self-proclaimed Habermasians, to argue that the current champions of computer-mediated discourse still hold troubling assumptions regarding both the Internet and the public sphere that were not fully excised from the flamboyant visions of virtual realities prevalent in the early 1990s. Finally, I critique the rebuttals made to Habermas' recent critiques of the Internet, specifically examining the issue of social integration between fragmented Internet-based communities. While Habermas's definition that the Internet has no mechanism for collective will/opinion formation between isolated nodes is, as many have claimed, empirically denied. I conclude by arguing that the solutions presented by the Internet's most vocal supporters are highly problematic for those who would call themselves Habermasian.

While the technological construction of society is a longstanding topic (Feenberg, 1991; Ihde, 2001; Latour, 1988; Woolgar, 1991), many researchers have recently identified the active roles of software programs and platforms in constructing Internet-based social spaces (Brey, 2008; Geiger & Ribes, 2010; Reagle, 2007; Rowland, 2005). Extending this line of research, this article argues that algorithmic aggregation sites not only make the blogo/public sphere knowable, but also play a key role in its highly non-discursive construction. The issue at hand in relation to the question of the Internet as a public sphere is not the risk of fragmentation, but of integration. While individual blogs, discussion forums, chat rooms, and other 'virtual communities' may very well be ideal discursive spaces for political deliberation, the Internet as a public sphere capable of synthesizing public opinion is not unified by discourse, but algorithms.

A Silence Broken

Despite the extensive amount of work that was being performed in Habermas' name regarding the Internet and the public sphere by the mid 2000s, the critical theorist had generally

remained silent on the issue. However, in his keynote speech to the International Communication Association in 2006, Habermas spoke out about the Internet in a way that was rather unsatisfying to many who called themselves Habermasians. His talk was largely about the role of the mass media elite, but Habermas made a passing remark regarding the claims that had been made in his name since the early 1990s:

> The Internet has certainly reactivated the grassroots of an egalitarian public of writers and readers. However, computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal *democratic* merits only for a special context: It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes that try to control and repress public opinion. In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics. Within established national public spheres, the online debates of web users only promote political communication, when news groups crystallize around the focal points of the quality press, for example, national newspapers and political magazines. (Habermas, 2006, p. 423)

He continued, giving a humorous example that illustrated the "parasitical role" of such online discussion spaces: a blogger who sent a bill to a German newspaper for "criticisms and corrections" (Habermas, 2006, pp. 423-4) that they made to various articles. In this argument, he did not appear to be completely dismissive of bloggers; rather, the implication is that their only positive role in journalism and politics is as external reviewers of traditional sources of media. While he acknowledges the validity of the contemporary critiques of mass media (many of which he spearheaded), Habermas defended the existence of media professionals and even media elites in his talk, arguing that they are necessary for the proper operation of the public sphere.

As may be expected, his remarks faced a significant backlash among scholars like Howard Rheingold, a longstanding champion of the Internet as a public sphere, who quoted from Habermas frequently in his landmark 1992 book *The Virtual Community.* In a blog post widely circulated with the tagline "Habermas Simply Doesn't Understand the Internet," Rheingold made a thinly-veiled implication that the philosopher is simply too old to understand the implications

of the phenomenon he is critiquing. In the post, he expressed frustration over the comments made by the critical theorist whom he and many others had repeatedly cited in their defenses of the Internet over the mass media over the past fifteen years:

> Habermas — a man whose theory of communicative action places high priority on precision of communication — describes Internet discourse as "a series of chat rooms," which is a telltale that he doesn't understand the phenomenon he is describing. Certainly, the Internet hosts chat rooms, many of which are the site of political discussion of varying degrees of rationality and civility. But as millions of people know, there are mailing lists, wiki talk pages, blogs and blog comments, and message boards as well. What I wish Habermas had said, since he clearly does not understand a phenomenon that is central to the applicability of his theory in the 21st century, is "I leave that work to younger scholars […]" (Rheingold, 2007, par. 10)

Another objector was Axel Bruns, a self-described Habermasian who had frequently used principles of discourse ethics to analyze the role of the Internet in the public sphere. In another widely-circulated blog post, he claimed that Habermas was fundamentally misrepresenting the Internet, which he said was most likely due to Habermas' ignorance of how most web users interact online. Specifically, he claimed that Habermas' critique of fragmentation was "misleading, if not downright disingenuous" if the critical theorist had spent any time on the Internet in the past few years. Drawing on many sources, Bruns stated that the objection had:

> …been thoroughly discredited through the observation of a number of factors which combine to allow quality material to emerge to public attention: such factors include both explicit social rating and tagging systems which in their aggregate serve to highlight quality and importance (whether this is in internal mechanisms like *Slashdot*'s comment ratings, or in distributed models like *del.icio.us*), and implicit preference tracking systems (from *Flickr*'s 'interestingness' score to *Amazon*'s recommendations or finally to *Google*'s PageRank) […] The much-feared 'information overload' predicted in the 90s simply hasn't arrived - as networked information has grown, so have the tools available for making sense of it. (Bruns, 2007, par. 10)

In such a conception of both the Internet and the blogo/public sphere, this process of aggregation is assumed to be decentralized, democratic, meritocratic, bottom-up, radically participatory, and so on. It is acknowledged by such defenders of the blogo/public sphere that hierarchies of popularity do exist, but the common conception is that a relatively unpopular blog can generate

interest regarding an issue that will be transported up the chain to the most popular blogs - if and only if it interests enough bloggers in the middle. On many of the websites like those mentioned by Bruns, the opinions crafted by individuals (presumably after or through discourse in a small community) can be aggregated and passed to other users and communities for further discussion and subsequent aggregation. Such sites cut out the human mediation traditionally required in a social network, allowing for a seemingly direct representation of public opinion in the blogosphere. Through a system of uncoordinated coordination, collective action has become possible on a previously unimaginable scale, due to the small amount of effort required by each human in order to bring about the so-called "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki, 2004).

One such site is Digg, which has experienced significant growth in recent years. Users can "digg particular web pages that they wish to share with others, and the website's algorithms determine which news stories, blog posts, videos, and other content to display. Users can vote a site up or down, and the number to the left of each link represents the operationalized level of approval or interest for that page. Other sites do not even require direct participation in their system, instead trawling through every website they can find and systematically documenting relationships and content according to highly-automated algorithms. Of this class of aggregation sites, Technorati is the most prevalent, having indexed hundreds of millions of blogs into a complex web of associations. This system also ranks blogs, both by number of readers and a metric of "authority" largely dependent on the links that other blogs make to a site.

Tags from what's rising

What bloggers are saying now

africa birmingham city blogposts business championship entertainment europe football fox soccer free globe guardian.co.uk middle east news notice premier league sport times to u.s.

Figure 1: Tags from emerging posts on Technorati

Top Stories Hot Topics

Madoff Swine Flu Afghanistan North Korea American Idol Mexico Lance Armstrong China Wall Street Pope Benedict XVI Iraq Supreme Court GM Obama's First 100 Days Michael Jackson Oakland AIG Iran Jack Kemp Pirates Tsunami Cuba Susan Boyle Death Penalty Gay Marriage Zimbabwe Climate Change Dom Deluise Sri Lanka Craigslist Killer Gunman Kentucky Derby Plane Crash Ireland Smoking Ban

Figure 2: Tags from top posts on Topix

Top in All Topics   all news videos images

1792		Majority Of Americans Want Pot Legalized: Zogby Poll
1131		T-Mobile Provides iPhone Support Despite Not Offering iPhone
1114		What the rest of the world sees when we kill civilians
999		Manny Ramirez to be suspended 50 games for positive test
976		It's Time to Legalize Personal-Use DVD Copying
973		Essential Gear to Survive a Zombie Attack
868		And The Rest Is History....
860		Caught on Camera -- The Best of Google Street View
839		Colbert Responds to Richard Branson's Threats
708		TPB judge accused of bias in another case

Figure 3: Top stories on Digg

Rising Videos   Most Viewed   Top News   more ▼

in News & Politics   Today | Last Week | Last Month   Play All
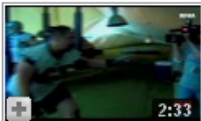
Ridge Won't Say Toomey Can Win -...
1,419 views
tpmtv

新台灣星光大道 2009 年5月8日 Part 3/10
1,274 views
DelayTV

(SCHOKKEND)Unie ke beelden ongev...
564,090 views
imnoa24

PANDEMIA EN MEXICO
434,180 views
autolitus

Gol Iniesta Chelsea 1 Barça 1 - ...
39,698 views
Valladoliddigital2

5/7/09 Ron Paul on Fox Business:...
9,464 views
minnesotachris

Ron Paul discusses the GOP with ...
33,596 views
marcaeld

Condoleezza Rice meets with some...
215,660 views
reynagarcia621

Dallas Cowboys Practice Facility...
48,188 views
unclespellbinder

CNN: Police Commit "Highway Robb...
10,692 views
NewsPoliticsNews

Figure 4: Rising videos on YouTube – News & Politics

Figure 5: "What's Percolating in Blogs Now" from Technorati
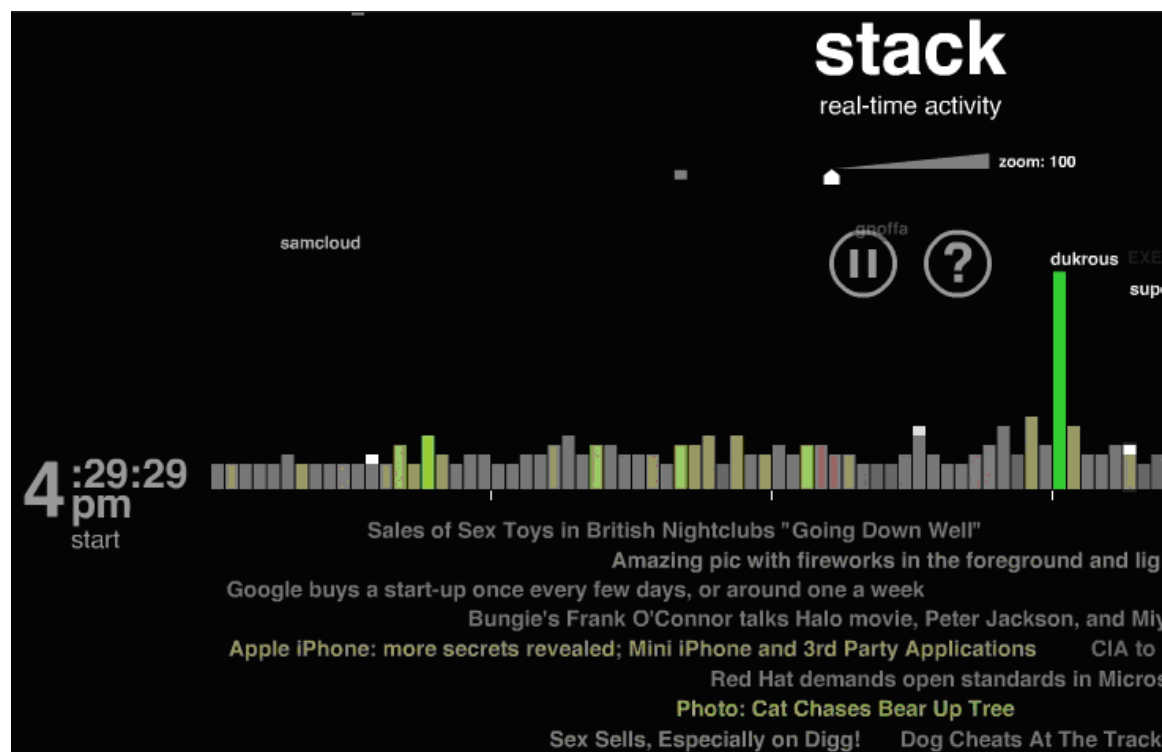
Figure 6: "Stack" – graphical representation of voting on Digg

Like the technologies of demography, macro-economics, or cadastral mapping that render populations visible (Mitchell, 2002), these aggregation sites function as "oligopticons" (Latour 2005, p. 181), or the inverse of panopticons. While the lone guard in the panoptic prison can cast a totalizing, even dominating gaze at any prisoner in its reach, the oligopticon allows the observer to see extremely limited abstractions of an entire population at once. As oligoptica, sites like Facebook, Delicious, Alexa, or Google similarly allow users to view a social network, the blogosphere, or even the entire Internet on a single screen, to see "what's percolating in blogs now," as Technorati's main list describes itself. Of note is the fact that these sites are frequently used by the most popular blogs as well as the mainstream media to support findings that a certain topic, story, or individual is popular or emerging in the blogosphere. In fact, search engines like Google and social bookmarking sites like Delicious make possible my previous claim regarding the "widely-circulated" nature of Rheingold and Bruns's blog postings.

While Habermas's current description of the Internet is undoubtedly outdated in light of these new mechanisms of data aggregation, this does not mean that the responses by commentators like Burns are sufficient to escape Habermasian critique. The issue at hand is twofold: first, the role of discourse in the public sphere; and second, the role of discourse in these aggregation mechanisms. For this first issue, I develop a historical account of the deployment of the Habermasian public sphere in relation to Internet-based communication, demonstrating that some vestiges of the most flamboyant fantasies of the mid-1990s still remain latent in contemporary discussions about the public sphere. Following this history, I give an account of the public sphere from Habermas' (1998) work *Between Facts and Norms*, specifically focusing on the theoretical concepts that have been problematically discussed by previous scholars. After this section, I critique the algorithmic aggregation mechanisms that supporters of an Internet-

based public sphere have deployed in response to Habermas' criticism of fragmentation. I argue that these rebuttals are based on the misguided conceptions presented above, which tend to ignore the task of social integration between otherwise incommensurable lifeworlds through rational discourse facilitated by the public sphere.

The Public Sphere and the Internet: A History

Ever since access to the Internet became widely available to the general public in the early 1990s, scholars, activists, politicians, journalists, and ordinary citizens have debated the Internet's potential effect on society at large, particularly its impact on political systems. Even before the widespread emergence of the webpage-based medium enabled by the World Wide Web, electronically networked political communication was heralded by many as *the* solution to problems created by the top-down, one-way mass mediated system through which most citizens participated in the political system. From Ross Perot's promise of "electronic town halls" (McManus, 1992) in the 1992 U.S. Presidential campaign to John Perry Barlow's "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace" (Barlow, 1996), the early 1990s was filled with unbridled optimism regarding the future of politics and governance in a world that was growing increasingly networked. The Internet was claimed by its supporters to be the cornerstone of a new society – even a new world – in which the constraints of materiality and physicality would be cast off and usher in an egalitarian liberalism the likes of which Enlightenment-era philosophers could only dream.

In the 1990s, the techno-libertarianism espoused by the Internet's most vocal supporters became increasingly aligned with two different political and cultural critiques: first, the propagandistic nature of mass media, described by *Manufacturing Consent* (Herman & Chomsky, 1988); and second, the decline of civic associations, identified in works like *Bowling Alone*

(Putnam, 1995). Many of the Internet's supporters began to counterpoise this new form of decentralized communication as a solution to both problems, and many took the political theories of communitarian political philosophers in celebrating the emancipatory potential of the Internet. In particular, the work of Habermas – who emphasized the crucial importance of the public sphere for a free society governed by deliberative democratic consensus-building – was used by many in this camp.[1] Taking from the discourse-based politics and ethics described by Habermas, these champions of the Internet saw chat rooms, web forums, mailing lists, and other forms of computer-mediated communication as far more ideal discursive spaces than either contemporary mass media or the coffeehouses described by Habermas as the cornerstone of the 19th century bourgeoisie public sphere. After generations of atrophy of the mass media, the Internet was to finally facilitate the rebirth of the public sphere: a multitude of 'virtual coffeehouses' would emerge, each of which would be far more inclusive and deliberative than the commercialized mass-mediated public sphere. Instead of relying on media elites – who at best arbitrarily set the agenda for public discourse and at worst actively manipulated public opinion for commercial or governmental interests – the Internet was to enable a radically egalitarian process of will-formation. While these accounts generally remained skeptical regarding the current state of computer-mediated communication, most expressed optimism for the future and gave recommendations as to how the Internet could be used to operate in more egalitarian and discourse-based ways.

Idyllic accounts of consensus-based groups who were mediated only by computer networks began to emerge alongside invocations of Habermas's descriptions of the public sphere. The most notable of these was Howard Rheingold's book *The Virtual Community*, in which he

---

[1] Interestingly enough, his seminal 1962 work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was only translated into English in 1989; as such, Habermas and the Internet were introduced into American academia around the same time.

described his self-professed "utopian vision" of the Internet as an "electronic agora" with "democratizing potential" (Rheingold, 1992, p. 298). Heavily drawing on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1989), Rheingold concluded his discussion of Internet-based discussion forums with a vicious attack on the public sphere produced in contemporary mass media society. He invoked Habermas's description of the commodification of the public sphere at the hands of the mass media to both celebrate the Internet's potential and issue a dire warning to his fellow Internet utopians:

> According to Habermas and others, the way the new media have been commoditized through this evolutionary process from hand-printed broadside to telegraph to penny press to mass media has led to the radical deterioration of the public sphere. […] Discourse degenerated into publicity, and publicity used the increasing power of electronic media to alter perceptions and shape beliefs. (Rheingold, p. 305)

Like the "new" media of the past century, Rheingold warned that the Internet could quickly become commoditized just like other forms of media. His final instruction to Internet enthusiasts was that they would have to work hard to resist such colonization by corporations, governments, and other organizations focused primarily on economic or political power. There was much possibility for true discourse to flourish on the Internet, but much opportunity for commodification as well.

The idea that cyberspace would be a place outside the control or influence of any traditionally coercive entity or institution (the state, the military, organized religion, the economy, the mass media, etc) was powerful and fueled visions of an online Habermasian public sphere. The fear Rheingold espoused regarding commodification tended to drop off the scene, largely due to the belief that low costs made advertizing unnecessary and the plurality of alternative spaces preserved competition. In this view, a commodified public sphere could only come into being via monopolization of media outlets (because few would freely choose to consume such media), and monopolies are only possible because of the scarcity of resources, bandwidth, labor,

attention, or choice. In a libertarian fashion, the only fear was from government regulation – the only entity that could rewrite the fundamental protocols of the Internet that allegedly ensured such a self-regulating post-scarcity heterotopia.

This is the vision depicted by Mark Poster in his 1995 essay "CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere" (Poster, 1997) one of the earliest and most-cited[2] articles explicitly focusing on the Internet as a Habermasian public sphere. Setting the agenda for a generation of scholarship on the topic, Poster declared that the "age of the public sphere as face-to-face talk is clearly over: the question of democracy must henceforth take into account new forms of electronically mediated discourse" (p. 222). In his analysis of the issue, Poster began by rejecting the depiction of the 19th century bourgeois public sphere presented in *The Structural Transformation* as an "impossible (counter-factual ideal)," citing feminist and Marxist criticism that the oft-mentioned coffeehouse discussions systematically excluded women and the proletariat from "the public." While he acknowledged that existing social, cultural, and political institutions could very well reinforce existing hierarchies and power relationships in this new medium as well, Poster held that Internet contained within its networked infrastructure the possibility for a public sphere that was truly public. Primarily due to the fact that a user's identity on an Internet site is self-defined, he celebrated the emancipatory and democratic potential when "acts of discourse are not limited to one-way address and not constrained by the gender and ethnic traces inscribed in face-to-face communications" (p. 211).

Poster's argument was explicitly associated with the emerging "third-wave" of feminism, a movement which critiqued the "second-wave" of feminism for establishing a universal concept

---

[2] According to Google Scholar, the article has been cited over 375 times; according to Google Books, the title of his essay appears in over 250 books. The next-most cited work on this topic from the 1990s is Tsagarousianou's edited 1998 volume "CyberDemocracy: Technologies, Cities, and Civic Networks" – which, having the same opening title, would appear to be directly inspired by Poster's essay. Of note is the fact these scholarly aggregators which make such claims possible function similarly to the oligoptic aggregators I analyze in this work.

of womanhood that essentialized the diverse conceptions of femininity. In the same way that second-wave feminists critiqued the notion of the universal human subject established in Enlightenment-era politics as one that was male by default, this critique held that the deployment of the universal female subject was a mask for white, Western, and middle/upper-class women. The Internet was to be not a single, universal public forum in which the whole of humanity could gather together as equals and converse, but a multiplicity of segmented, safe spaces in which individuals could be free to express both their identities and political positions through discourse alone. As Poster argued, this necessitated a rejection of Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, which Poster critiqued as "a homogeneous space of embodied subjects in symmetrical relations" (p. 209). In contrast, he claimed that because:

> …the thick culture of information machines provides the interface for much if not most discourse on political issues, the fiction of the democratic community of full human presence serves only to obscure critical reflection and divert the development of a political theory of this decidedly postmodern condition. (p. 210)

What is notable about this quote is how Poster characterized the role of discourse in relation to the public sphere: the only logically necessary precondition for an Internet-based public sphere was that the technology must facilitate "discourse on political issues." This is based on a view that the Habermasian public sphere exists primarily to facilitate ideal discourse among rational and free individuals. The crucial difference between the Internet and the mass media for such theorists was that the former did not give individuals the ability to come to their own viewpoints and identities. If there was no ability to discuss content disseminated by the mass media, individuals would simply accept whatever opinions were dictated to them. Because of this, early academic scholarship regarding the Internet and the public sphere was predominantly focused on the extent to which it was a liberating communicative environment in which individuals could freely exchange ideas in order to form their own opinions. In the

literature on the topic from the '90s and early 2000s, there was little discussion of social integration, collective will/opinion formation, or mediation between otherwise incommensurable social groups.

As a later article (Maltz, 1996) on the topic more clearly illustrates, the public sphere was predominantly theorized as a domain of communication that enabled an activity which was a necessary prerequisite for the formation of a proper public opinion and/or participation in politics proper. Responding to several accusations that the Internet was a frivolous space, Maltz claimed:

> The potential of cyberspace is not *simply* the creation of yet more "chattering" space - it has the potential of creating a virtual "public sphere" of the type necessary for healthy democratic governance. The trend of displacement of public spaces such as town-halls and other community meeting places with the ersatz "public space" of modern media has been criticised by Jürgen Habermas. […] Habermas distinguishes between the "public opinion" necessary for a healthy democracy, and artificial "opinion": "public opinion, in terms of its very idea, can be formed only if a public that engages in rational discussion exists." (par. 3)

In this reading of Habermas, an ideal public capable of exercising democracy must be comprised of individuals who rationally discuss issues, much in the same way that an ideal public capable of self-defense must be comprised of individuals who regularly exercise. While the quality of such discursive engagement does matter, the only prerequisite is that it is performed. Maltz recasted what appears as mere "chattering" into a politically and socially efficacious activity. From this position, such theorists praised discourse in an Internet-mediated public sphere to be a welcome alternative to discourse in the mass mediated and bourgeois public spheres – which were both seemingly universal, all-encompassing spaces that actually silently homogenized dissent and excluded minority voices. The fragmentation and pluralization of particular discursive spaces for communication afforded and even encouraged by the Internet was a phenomenon to be celebrated, not avoided, as Maltz argued:

Networked communication is a catalyst for community formation. Marshal McLuhan's book title is therefore misleading. There will never be "*the* Global Village." There already exist Global Village*s*. Having one interest in common is enough to justify the formation of a community of people from around the globe. [5] The real world is to be shattered in the Networld into a thousand overlapping, fragmented and specialised communities. (par. 4)

In conceptualizing the public sphere to be a communicative platform in which individuals were to make themselves into informed, engaged citizens, the only criteria for determining the efficacy of the Internet was the extent to which proper discourse was occurring between citizens and the number of citizens involved in the process. As long as enough individuals were interacting with each other about politics, according to the rules Habermas described, the Internet was facilitating a public sphere and was to be celebrated. This view spawned countless studies of particular chat rooms, web forums, mailing lists, and other sites, which were evaluated based on the extent to which they enabled this mode of communication for their particular research subjects. As may be expected, such research found mixed results: some communities were tightly bound by discourse and relations of mutual respect, others were filled with hostility and breakdowns in communication, and most were somewhere in between. This research also had its share of critics; the most prevalent critique was the 'digital divide' issue – the extent to which owning a computer excluded certain kinds of individuals from participating in this new public sphere (Menzies, 1996; Norris, 2001; Rheingold, 2000; Tsagarousianou, Tambini, & Bryan, 1998; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001).

Around the turn of the millennium, the rhetorical distinctions between the Internet and traditional mass media intensified, still operating on the assumption that purpose of the Internet-based public sphere was to enable individuals to escape mass media coercion. Comments like "on the internet people can set their own agendas" (Gimmler, 2001, p. 33) frequently appeared in academic and popular works on the topic. However, a growing number of scholars, activists,

and "netizens" were skeptical of the discursive egalitarianism that was allegedly inherent in the Internet's infrastructure. Writing from a Habermasian perspective, many expressed fear of "colonization" by corporations and traditional mass media outlets, as well as the growing number of Internet users who did not wish to abide by rational rules of discourse. As Douglas Kellner argued, those who believed that the Internet was a viable public sphere would have to actively work to ensure such a vision of political discourse; in short, to "teach individuals how to use the new technologies […] to promote democratic debate and diversity, allowing a full range of voices and ideas to become part of the cyberdemocracy of the future." (Kellner, 2000, p. 280) At the time, academics and activists in this area were also concerned with many other potential problems with the Internet as a public sphere, warning primarily of the digital divide (between haves and have-nots) and government surveillance alongside the issue of commodification.

A Networked Blogo/Public Sphere?

In the next few years, blogs became one of the most visible aspects of the Internet, and scholars interested in the potential of an Internet-mediated public sphere drew heavily on the emerging blogosphere. As political blogs became especially popular venues for Internet users to discuss politics, the blogosphere became quickly equated with the public sphere – both in academia and in popular accounts. As early as 2002, mass media outlets were first reporting on the growing phenomenon of the blogosphere, and then quickly reporting on the content produced within. One of the most frequently-mentioned events in the history of blogs was in 2003, when Republican Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott stated that the U.S. would not have as many "problems" if the segregationist politician Strom Thurmond had been elected in 1948 – a comment that was largely ignored by the mainstream media. However, as the narrative goes,

bloggers picked up the story and kept generating outrage in the public sphere until mass media outlets had no choice but to report it about one week later. Lott was forced to resign shortly thereafter, and the episode was only the first of many self-proclaimed victories by the blogosphere over the mass media.

This is one of many tales that Yochai Benkler has described in his book, *The Wealth of Networks* (2007)*, which has been characterized as taking up the Habermasian lineage in a new, digital age. Benkler's key argument is that our mass-mediated public sphere (which has systematically failed to give us an authentic, democratic space) must give way to what he terms the *networked public sphere* – one mediated through computer networks instead of the modern media forms of newspaper and television. Since its initial publication in 2005, it has quickly become the *de facto* theoretical text for those celebrating the demise of the mass media at the hands of the Internet. Both Rheingold and Bruns cited Benkler's work in their rebuttals of Habermas's 2006 criticisms of the Internet, and Rheingold even insinuated that Benkler was the leader of a new, post-Habermasian era of research on the Internet. While it was published before Habermas's controversial comments, *The Wealth of Networks* preemptively responds to the characterization of the Internet that was depicted by Habermas in his recent remarks. In particular, Benkler uses Habermas's discourse-based critiques of the mass mediated public sphere to support his view of the networked public sphere. While he spends much of the book describing the way in which the nature of the Internet has led to a multitude of predominantly discourse-based communities and associations, his work on the unified public sphere is what is truly new in the literature on the topic.

Unlike most previous readers of Habermas, Benkler acknowledges the role of the public sphere in facilitating collective will/opinion formation between the otherwise incommensurable

lifeworlds or discourse communities. It is not enough that the Internet has produced a significant number of spaces that enable non-coercive discourse, and Benkler is one of the first to seriously tackle the issue of the synthesis of public opinion across the entire web. His recasting of the Habermasian public sphere into the networked public sphere is based on what he terms "coordinate effects"– the spontaneously-emergent macro-properties a network exhibits simply due to the ability of any user to interact with any other user. While his analysis is highly intricate, drawing significantly on literatures from mathematics, complexity theory, and network topology, the key point is that the process through which discourse is to be circulated and synthesized is highly non-discursive:

> …the aggregate effect of individual action, even when it is not self-consciously cooperative, produces the coordinate effect of a new and rich information environment. One needs only to run a Google search on any subject of interest to see how the "information good" that is the response to one's query is produced by the coordinate effects of the uncoordinated actions of a wide and diverse range of individuals and organizations. (p. 4).

While such an account would seem to disavow any connection to the highly-discursive theories of Habermas, it must be emphasized that this process is built on top of the already-existing discourse communities, which are assumed to facilitate proper discourse – or at least more proper discourse than is presently available in the mass-mediated public sphere. Once these highly discursive local groups have discussed relevant topics to the extent that they can collectively submit an opinion, it flows through the network to other groups, and, if carried by enough autonomously deliberating groups, produces in a statement that speaks on behalf of the Internet or the blogosphere. As Benkler describes:

> Filtering, accreditation, synthesis, and salience are created through a system of peer review by information affinity groups, topical or interest based. These groups filter the observations and opinions of an enormous range of people, and transmit those that pass local peer review to broader groups and ultimately to the polity more broadly, without recourse to market-based points of control over the information flow. Intense interest and

engagement by small groups that share common concerns, rather than lowest-common denominator interest in wide groups that are largely alienated from each other, is what draws attention to statements and makes them more visible. This makes the emerging networked public sphere more responsive to intensely held concerns of a much wider swath of the population than the mass media were capable of seeing, and creates a communications process that is more resistant to corruption by money. (p. 242)

From a limited view of the Habermasian vision of society, it therefore seems that one of the key features of the public sphere could indeed be achieved through the Internet –transporting personal stories about the effects of politics in the lifeworld to the political system. In fact, Benkler gives many examples where uncoordinated coordination made such a mobilization possible.

Due to these emergent properties of networked economies, the Internet can (and does) constitute a public sphere in Benkler's reading of the concept. Because of the dual nature in which the multiplicity of autonomous discursive collectives is united and synthesized by uncoordinated coordinate effects, the Internet has allowed the citizenry to perform the only task that matters in such a conception of the Habermasian public sphere: giving citizens a space to form their own opinions through mutual discourse without coercion or manipulation by the mass media. It also may appear that the various aggregation mechanisms which make visible the zeitgeist of the Internet rebut Habermas's critique of fragmentation caused by the Internet's endless, independent discursive communities. Yet the problem with Benkler's analysis from a Habermasian perspective is that the critique of fragmentation is not an external social harm that must be mitigated, but rather an indication that no true public sphere actually exists. Benkler – like Rheingold and Bruns – has taken the synthesis of public opinion to be an end in itself, whereas Habermas clearly situates it in relation to the task of social integration.

The Powers of Discourse and the Construction of "Public Opinion"

Because of this, it is clear that Benkler's analysis still treats discourse as a sociopolitical inoculation or propaedeutic, a necessary exercise required to get the public into a healthy position so that their collective opinions will result in an informed decision. While Benkler requires both intersubjective discourse in particular web communities, and the activity of collective will/opinion formation between these fragmented communities, he does not require that this latter process be discursive. In other words, public opinion must be constructed out of discursively-generated social spaces, but such an act of construction remains non-discursive – not to mention largely opaque and uncontestable. The only quality that he requires of the aggregation process itself is an absence of coercion, unequal information, manipulation, censorship, or illegitimately-exercised power. Assuming that such algorithms through which the blogosphere is made to speak with a single voice are indeed transparent and subject to public review, they are fully insufficient to perform the kinds of socially integrating tasks that a Habermasian public sphere performs. If Benkler's key example is the automated ranking system that structures search engine results according to a myriad of metrics, what kind of a discursive relationship can individuals possibly have with each other in a public sphere so constituted?

Benkler's work, like much of the early literature on this topic, has fundamentally misconceptualized the purpose of discourse in the Habermasian public sphere, specifically neglecting the highly-nuanced philosophical assumptions that turn ideal discourse into a powerful and productive social force. For Habermas, individuals who communicate with each other have implicitly conferred on each other certain mutual rights and respect, and his entire critical theory is based on the conditions under which this phenomenon can be extended to all of culture, society, and politics. As he argues, the empathetic perspective necessitated through the

requirement to negotiate discursively with one's communicative partner generates a kind of social relation that is not necessarily present in, say, a marketplace of buyers and sellers:

> Unlike success-oriented actors … persons acting communicatively encounter each other in a *situation* they at the same time constitute with their cooperatively negotiated interpretations. Every encounter in which actors do not just observe each other but take a second-person attitude, reciprocally attributing communicative freedom to each other, unfolds in a linguistically constituted public space. (Habermas, 1998, pp. 360-1)

The public sphere is therefore not the mere communicative domain in which such conversations can take place, but "the social space generated in communicative action" (p. 360). The purpose of the forum or the coffeehouse (physical or virtual) is not simply to give each individual the effective ability to make their opinions known to others, but more importantly to produce a public sphere in which communicative freedom has a socially integrating effect. The production of public opinion does have a politically efficacious effect of being a "sounding board" or a "warning system" (p. 359), but it cannot be divorced from the conditions under which it emerges in Habermas's ideal account.

Assuming that it is authentic (i.e. not manufactured), the production of public opinion in the public sphere is performed in such a way that "the orientation to reaching understanding that is predominant in everyday practice is also preserved for a *communication among strangers* that is conducted over great distances in public spheres whose branches are quite complex" (p. 366). While the kinds of interactions that individuals have in face-to-face conversations between friends and family members would certainly require the reciprocal attribution of communicative freedom, the issue at hand is the extent to which this can occur between individuals who are from distinct cultures or lifeworlds and therefore may not necessarily enter into Habermasian discourse. The ideal public sphere solves this dilemma by requiring that the formation of public opinion be performed in such a manner that involves not simply entering into discourse with friends and family, but those individuals from other lifeworlds. Because of this, Habermas

critiques opinion polls, making a crucial distinction between public opinion and the activity of the public sphere:

> Public opinion is not representative in the statistical sense. It is not an aggregate of individually gathered, privately expressed opinions held by isolated persons. Hence it must not be confused with survey results. Political opinion polls provide a certain reflection of "public opinion" if they have been preceded by a focused public debate and a corresponding opinion-formation in a mobilized public sphere. (p. 362)

> This mobilization required for the formation of a proper public opinion must be highly discursive. While champions of the blogosphere as the new public sphere give overwhelming evidence of the extent to which marginalized groups have made their unique experiences public through the Internet when ignored by mass media outlets, this is not sufficient for Habermas. While it is most certainly to be celebrated in discussions regarding the effect of the Internet on society or politics in general, the Habermasian public sphere has a much tighter role. As Habermas states:

> The diffusion of information and points of view via effective broadcasting media is not the only thing that matters in public processes of communication, nor is it the most important. … the rules of a *shared* practice of communication are of greater significance for structuring public opinion. Agreement on issues and contributions *develops* only as the result of more or less exhaustive controversy in which proposals, information, and reasons can be more or less rationally dealt with. In general terms, the *discursive level* of opinion-formation (p. 362).

Because of this, the seamless and uncoordinated coordination praised by Benkler surgically removes the aspect of the public sphere that is most critical to Habermas: the admittedly arduous process of negotiating with those that one would not ordinarily meet in private life. Being able to render the blogosphere visible in a single chart that, in real time, lets viewers know which speakers, positions, and issues are the most and least reputable, interesting, or contested is a very useful tool. However, in the same way that the process of performing a public opinion polls must not be mistaken for the act of crafting a fully-qualified public opinion in the public sphere, so must the zeitgeist of the blogosphere not be mistaken for a solution to the very real problem of

social fragmentation. As Habermas states in relation to the difficult task of resolving conflicts in the public sphere, "communicative mastery of *these* conflicts constitutes the sole source of solidarity among strangers" (p. 308). While social aggregation and recommendation sites make possible a previously unimaginable expression of the collective will or opinion of millions of isolated, uncoordinated individuals, their efficiency and flexibility comes at the expense of the production of social solidarity between fragmented and isolated discursive communities.

Conclusion

The question, "is the Internet (part of) a new public sphere?" takes the existence of 'the Internet' as a unified sociopolitical entity for granted. From a computer science standpoint, the Internet is a well-defined technological infrastructure of meticulously classified and categorized computers, cables, and code. In any other context, it is a gross category error to invoke the unity of the Internet. It has no more potential to become a new public sphere than do the airwaves that made possible the modern mass-mediated public sphere. A better question might be, "what is the role of the Internet-based discourse communities in the constitution of the public sphere?" When the question is phrased this way, it becomes clear that the initial version attributes a problematic but widely assumed stability to "the Internet". While this may seem like a trivial technical distinction, it becomes quite relevant when considering the similarly-constituted entity known as "the blogosphere."

As a recent report on "the state of the blogosphere" by the blog aggregation website Technorati claims, "Since all blogs are on the Internet by definition, they may be seen as interconnected and socially networked" (Technorati, 2009, par. 1). The problem is that *a priori*, blogs are only interconnected and networked by the telecommunications infrastructure of the Internet; they are networked, but NOT necessarily socially networked. Even the seemingly

social act of linking to another blog (the default manner of giving credit) is not fully actualized until an aggregator, trawling through the Internet, identifies these patterns and analyzes them using a number of algorithms. It is only through the oligopticons of the Internet that it is possible for one to subsequently speak in the name of the blogosphere in a politically or socially efficacious manner. Because of this, the blogo/public sphere may very well operate at a micro-level via Habermasian ideal discourse, but it is at a macro-level constructed not through communication, but algorithms. In such a space, Habermas's philosophical justification for discursive power – the "unforced force of the better argument" that requires individuals from different sociopolitical spheres to engage and empathize with each other – is short-circuited by the algorithmic power constituted in today's most popular aggregation services. And as a number of scholars have identified, control that is constituted through code (Lessig, 1999) or protocol (Galloway, 2004) can be far more powerful, invisible, and uncontestable than more traditional forms.

In short, the kinds of oligoptic technologies that are currently being evoked to defend the networked blogo/public sphere against criticisms of fragmentation are undermining the very conditions of possibility for a truly Habermasian public sphere. In order to synthesize public opinion, these heterogeneous computerized networks must be made visible through a series of largely non-discursive aggregation algorithms. Because of this, the entity referred to by the term "the Internet" or "the blogosphere" is not a well-defined, pre-existing domain or communicative space (i.e. the set of all conversations that take place on blogs), but rather an always-incomplete representation that must constantly be performed. The task of making these disconnected, fragmented, pluralistic nodes in the networked blogo/public sphere socially networked is taken by many champions of the Internet to be an inherent, even emergent property of the software.

However, this task is actually one performed by sites that forge associations between these independent micro-publics in ways that enable what appears to be an uncoordinated coordination. Unfortunately, this non-discursive act of public opinion/will formation forecloses on many of the socially integrating aspects of the Habermasian public sphere.

Bibliography

Abbate, J. (2000). *Inventing the Internet*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Barlow, J. (1996, February 8). A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace. Retrieved May

25, 2008, from http://homes.eff.org/~barlow/Declaration-Final.html.

Benkler, Y. (2007). *The Wealth of Networks: How Social Production Transforms Markets and*

Freedom. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Brey, P. (2008). The Technological Construction of Social Power. *Social Epistemology: A*

Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy, *22*(1), 71. doi: 10.1080/02691720701773551.

Bruns, A. (2007, February 18). Habermas and/against the Internet. *Snurblog*. Retrieved

December 11, 2009, from http://snurb.info/node/621.

DiMaggio, P., Hargittai, E., Neuman, W. R., & Robinson, J. P. (2001). Social Implications of the

Internet. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *27*(1), 307-336. doi: 10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.307.

Feenberg, A. (1991). *Critical theory of technology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Galloway, A. R. (2004). *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization*. Cambridge,

Mass.: The MIT Press.

Geiger, R.S. & Ribes, D. (2010). The Work of Sustaining Order in Wikipedia: The Banning of a

Vandal. In *Proceedings of the 2010 ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative*

work (CSCW '10). Association for Computing Machinery (ACM). Retrieved from

http://www.stuartgeiger.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/10/cscw-sustaining-

order-wikipedia.pdf.

Gimmler, A. (2001). Deliberative democracy, the public sphere and the internet. *Philosophy*

Social Criticism, *27*(4), 21-39. doi: 10.1177/019145370102700402.

Habermas, J. (2006). Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an

Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research. *Communication Theory*, *16*(4), 411-426. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere : an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.

Habermas, J. (1998). *Between facts and norms*. (W. Rehg, Tran.). Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press.

Herman, E., & Chomsky, N. (1988). *Manufacturing consent : the political economy of the mass media* (1st ed.). New York: Pantheon Books.

Ihde, D. (2001). *Bodies in technology*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kellner, D. (2000). Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention. In L. E. Hahn (Ed.), *Perspectives on Habermas* (pp. 259-288). Peru, IL: Open Court.

Latour, B. (1988). Mixing Humans and Nonhumans Together: The Sociology of a Door-Closer. *Social Problems*, *35*(3), 298-310.

Lessig, L. (1999). *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books.

Maltz, T. (1996). Customary Law & Power in Internet Communities. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *2*(1). doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.1996.tb00182.x.

McManus, M. (1992, March 5). The Ultimate Town Meeting: Dialing D for Democracy. *The Washington Post*.

Menzies, H. (1996). *Whose brave new world? the information highway and the new economy*. Toronto: Between the Lines.

Mitchell, T. (2002). *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (1st ed.). Berkeley, California: University of California Press.

Norris, P. (2001). *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*. Communication, society, and politics. Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press.

Poster, M. (1997). Cyberdemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere. In D. Porter (Ed.), *Internet Culture* (pp. 201-218). London: Routledge.

Putnam, R. D. (1995). Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy*, *6*(1), 65-78.

Reagle, J. (2007). Bug Tracking Systems as Public Spheres. *Techné*, *11*(1), 32.

Rheingold, H. (2007, November 5). Habermas blows off question about the Internet and the Public Sphere. *Smart Mobs*. Retrieved December 11, 2009, from http://www.smartmobs.com/2007/11/05/habermas-blows-off-question-about-the-internet-and-the-public-sphere/.

Rheingold, H. (2000). Rethinking Virtual Communities (Postscript). In *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electonic Frontier*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Rowland, W. (2005). Recognizing the Role of the Modern Business Corporation in the "Social Construction" of Technology. *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture and Policy*, *19*(2), 287. doi: 10.1080/02691720500145522.

Surowiecki, J. (2004). *The Wisdom of Crowds: Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations*. Doubleday.

Technorati. (2009, August 21). State of the Blogosphere 2008. Retrieved December 11, 2009, from http://technorati.com/blogging/article/state-of-the-blogosphere-introduction/.

Tsagarousianou, R., Tambini, D., & Bryan, C. (Eds.). (1998). *Cyberdemocracy*. London: Routledge.

Woolgar, S. (1991). The Turn to Technology in Social Studies of Science. *Science Technology Human Values*, *16*(1), 20-50. doi: 10.1177/016224399101600102.