



Emotion and politics in a mediated public sphere: Questioning democracy, responsibility and ethics in a computer mediated world



Lucy Jackson*, Gill Valentine

Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Winter Street, Sheffield S10 2TN, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 21 March 2013

Received in revised form 13 January 2014

Keywords:

Habermas
Internet
Democracy
Responsibility
Emotion
Abortion
New media

ABSTRACT

This article debates the extent to which particular forums of the internet enable democratic discussions around social and political issues, developing the interest in cyber-geographies from the late 1990s and early 2000s. The paper investigates discussions around abortion in the UK media, and public response(s) to such discussions. The analysis originates from an article written for the Huffington post by political editor Medhi Hasan and deconstructs subsequent reactions to this through mainstream media and news sites, comments pages on these sites, and reactions on Twitter. We assess the democratic potential of these types of media, developing Habermasian notions of the public sphere by analyzing the extent to which specific forums within the internet sphere play a role in facilitating emotions in political discussions. We also discuss the impact of individual narrative and personal perspective and its role within this quasi-political space. In so doing, we question the extent to which these types of 'new media', as a forum for public discussion and interaction, enable democratic deliberation by assessing the engagement between users of this sphere, and the nature of those discussions. This presents an assessment of computer mediated communication as a new way of 'doing' politics through its absence and presence(s) and through ideas of distance, moral responsibility, and an understanding of ethics and care at-a-distance, presenting a holistic account of how we might envision these debates playing out.

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1. Introduction

This paper discusses the extent to which particular forums within the internet may enable democratic discussion, building on notions of the public sphere. Numerous insights have been offered into the internet and its ability to act as a public sphere. For example, Bernal (2005) has noted that online spaces are increasingly seen as a central space, intertwined with the politics and practice of everyday life. In addition, Miller (2012) argues that such technologies are quickly becoming the medium through which social life is conducted. Analyzing these types of media thereby allows us to investigate the very construction of social and political debate within these communities and the extent to which these conversations and communications facilitate democratic discussions; thereby, we identify the democratic potential of such sources. In this paper, we focus on online news portals and the social blogging sphere Twitter, which present unique opportunities to investigate the concepts of social and material ab-

sence and presence in the virtual world and their role in the facilitation of democratic discussions.

We deconstruct discourses of virtual presence, material absence and concepts of 'distance' in connection with a responsible and engaged public, discussing the role of emotions in these debates, the potential equality generated by anonymity in participation, the role of situated context, and notions of temporality and engagement as facilitating democratic discussion. We challenge some of these ideas by looking at processes of deindividuation, brevity, flaming and abuse, and at the ownership and control of these forums. To flesh out these concepts, we utilize the example of abortion politics in the UK mainstream media, focusing particularly on a debate that unfolded in October 2012 around Huffington Post journalist Mehdi Hasan's article, 'being pro-life doesn't make me any less of a lefty' (14/10/2012). In assessing reactions to this article, we debate the extent to which morals, ethics and responsibility play a role in the formulation of placeless democratic discussions characterized by absence and presence in everyday society (Miller, 2012), drawing on Cohen's assertion that cyberspace(s) operates "as both extension and evolution of everyday social practice" (2007 in Graham, 2011, p. 220). This paper therefore moves the debates that regard the internet as a potentially democratic public sphere forward, discussing in detail not only the democratic poten-

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: lucy.jackson@sheffield.ac.uk (L. Jackson), g.valentine@sheffield.ac.uk (G. Valentine).

tial of these types of spheres, which operate in specific ways, but also the emotions involved and the subsequent impact of these debates.

2. Cyberspace and the public sphere

The geography of cyberspace garnered great attention in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Heralded as a ‘new geographical space’ (Kitchin, 1998b), a number of scholars celebrated the arrival and subsequent increased popularity of this space as both alleviating and creating inherent social disparities, thereby changing the nature of the debate around how individuals connect with each other in both material and disembodied (virtual) ways. Questions over the extent to which cyberspace created the ‘death of distance’ investigated the physical location of cyberspace (Wilson, 2001; Dodge, 1999), whilst Graham’s (1998) work examined the inherent geographical-ness of cyberspace itself. Some commentators highlighted that electronic media increased distance between material bodies (Crang, 2000; Turkle, 2011), whilst Kitchin (1997), amongst others (Graham and Hale, 2012; Graham et al., 2013a,b; Zook, 2006) analyzed the internet as an inherently exclusionary space. Attention was also given to the internet as a democratic space (Fernback, 1997), attesting to how it allowed individuals to break the ‘silence’ that is associated with the (physical) public realm. The nature of the relationships created in and through this forum has also been debated, for example, examining the spatialities of the digital divide (Graham, 2011). The meaning of computer-mediated contact and its connection to geographical constraints (Batty, 1997), as well as the relationships occurring within cyberspace itself (Kitchin, 1998a), have also been analyzed. Further, the effects of internet use on the psychological well-being of individuals was identified (Bargh and McKenna, 2004), discussing the way in which cyberspace has transformed everyday social lives (Batty, 1997; Valentine and Skelton, 2008, 2009).

Discussions centered on Habermasian notions of the public sphere have tended to dominate the literature on computer mediated communication (CMC). Habermas saw the public sphere as a domain of our social life in which public opinion could be formed out of *rational public debate* (1991, in Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11). In Habermas’ public sphere, individuals meet physically as social equals; it is democratic, and it is a space for deliberation and discussion about the common good. When Habermas (1989) conceived of the public sphere as a realm in which rational public debate helped to shape participatory democracy, he noted that the nature and limits of public space were partially determined by the social configurations of the day. Thus, cyberspace may serve as a public sphere comparable to the 17th century coffee houses of Britain and salons of Paris from which the Habermasian ideas of a public sphere originate. For example, Tsaliki (2002) highlights that the internet, as a place for participatory politics, is conducive to what Habermas (1989) saw as the locus of discursive democracy, in which the weight of democracy is placed on the ability to generate communication. She argues that an open forum theoretically conforms to the ideal conditions for a rational-critical public sphere. In addition, Crang discusses the way in which the internet, being less controllable and based on many-to-many exchanges, can remedy the crises of participation that Habermas depicts (2000, p. 309). Here, users can act as audiences but also as authors actively involved in constructing this space (Woo-Young, 2005). Dahlberg (2006), however, critiques the moral and practical validity of these claims for the internet as a public sphere, developing Poster’s (1995) evidence, which suggests that rational argument can rarely prevail and consensus achievement is not possible online. What is clear from these discussions is that democracy ultimately resides with the citizens who engage in talk with each other, and therefore a public sphere that has democratic signifi-

cance must “be a forum, that is, a social space in which speakers may express their views to others and who in turn respond to them and raise their own opinions and concerns” (Bohman, 2004, p. 133).

Whilst these examples consider the extent to which ‘cyberspace’ might indeed act (or not) as a public sphere, we want to further narrow the focus by not only honing in on specific types of communication technology within the internet sphere, but also by focusing purely on the democratic potential of these engagements. Whilst the literature focuses on ‘the internet’ as a frame for analysis, we develop these debates by more broadly focusing on the changing nature of the types of interaction within ‘the internet’. We argue that the internet is not a homogeneous category but is constructed of different types and forms of media. We also argue that the internet and internet technologies have changed significantly since the early 1990s. For example, we have seen changes in the number of online services as well as the capabilities of those services (and the range of services we now have access to) such as the rolling out of high bandwidth capabilities, mobile internet and accessibility ‘on the move’ (for example, through personal hand-held devices), as well as changes to the socio-demographics of internet users themselves (Schrädie, 2011). In addition to these changes in infrastructure and in who has access, the very nature of news media, and indeed the news culture, has also altered. This change includes a growth in 24/7 rolling news coverage, which brings worldwide news into the everyday ‘local’ lives of individuals situated around the globe, thereby ensuring that access to information and awareness of global issues is inescapable in our daily lives. The ability to engage in a number of global issues whenever and wherever has altered the way in which we, as individuals, engage in specific debates of interest to us and changes the spatiality of relationships mediated by information communications technology (ICT) (Crang, 2010). However, concerns are still raised over the inequality of access to these online spheres, with digital divides only amplifying the distance between the privileged and the underprivileged (Graham, 2011; Graham and Hale, 2012) with Zook (2006, p. 53), suggesting “the internet is far from being a uniform process or system. . . rather, it provides new geographies of connection and exclusion”. Therefore, the processes that are involved in contributing to online democratic discussions are of interest to study.

Within the globalized digital world, Crang’s (2010) research focuses on ICTs as another mode of communication between individuals, focusing on the politics of interaction rather than spatial location and arguing that “rather than seeing cyberspace as a separate detached realm [we should] focus upon a ‘multi scalar comingling of electronic and physical space’, digital flows and physical flows, virtual and real places” (Crang, 2010, p. 328). Virtual and material spaces, then, have always been inextricably linked (Firmino and Duarte, 2010; Graham, 2010, 2011; Nagenborg et al., 2010; Graham et al., 2013a,b). This statement highlights our inability to separate the realms. Instead, we must see them as mutually constituted through everyday interaction; this enables us to rethink how democratic discussions play out in different forums. In addition, we must also consider the entanglements between the material and virtual world and the way in which proximity is being deterritorialized (Sassen, 2002, p. 226), with the effect being a shift from a ‘container’-based notion of scale to one in which these different scales are entangled and cross-cut. Bernal (2005) also suggests that there is a ‘bleeding’ of the virtual realm into the material world and vice versa; with connections across time and space and with the instantaneous nature of the internet, anyone, anywhere can become involved in more localized debates (2005, p. 663).¹ In this

¹ Although this is over-stated given inequalities in internet access around the world (for discussions of these issues see Kitchen, 1997; Graham and Hale, 2012; Graham et al., 2013a,b; Zook, 2006).

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