Transformations in the Mediation of Publicness:

Communicative Interaction in the Network Society

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Abstract

Recent debates on the role of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in facilitating a democratisation of the public sphere are criticized for presenting inadequate accounts of the public sphere that is being transformed. Like broadcast communication, computer-mediated communication does not obey national borders. Because of this a number of questions are raised insofar as the traditional conception of the public sphere has invariably corresponded to the nation-state. The difference between embodied and electronic assemblies, between an homogenous public sphere and public 'sphericules' is introduced in order to clarify the political and communicative significance of contemporary CMC.

Introduction

In a key text addressing the role of the Internet in transforming the nature of the public sphere, Mark Poster (1997, p. 217) claims that "contemporary social relations seem to be devoid of a basic level of interactive practice." For Poster, the physical forums for 'interactive practice' such as the agora, the New England town hall, the village Church, the coffee house, the tavern, the public square, a convenient barn, a union hall, a park, a factory lunchroom, and even a street corner, are in decline. The central factor behind such a demise of embodied assembly is, according to Poster, the concomitant rise of broadcast media which "isolate citizens from one another and substitute themselves for older spaces of politics."

Poster takes up John Hartley's argument that, for all intents and purposes, broadcast media are the public sphere, "the place where the means by which
the public is created has its being" (p. 217). In Hartley's view, the media provide a spectral space which, although it lacks the possibility of direct interaction, allows participants to express public opinion through the act of consuming media as well as relating to a common culture of discourses. If it is true, as Hartley and perhaps the media theorist Jean Baudrillard (1983) would suggest, that the electronic media have eclipsed and displaced the public sphere, then a great deal of pressure is placed on understanding what kind of public sphere electronic media produce.

Certainly, there have been many observations from political theorists, which gained ground in the 1970s, that traditional kinds of public sphere based on embodied and institutionalised assembly within industrial democracies had begun to break apart (see Goulder, 1976; Habermas, 1989, 1992; Sennett, 1978). But the role of the mass media in this process was not really addressed. The spectral space of the media where all participants can relate to message producers and the messages that are produced, is one which, up to a point, sits well with Jürgen Habermas' idea of an homogenous universal public sphere.

In a central work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1989) defines the public sphere as a domain of uncoerced conversation directed exclusively toward pragmatic agreement. For Habermas, such a development of a democratic public sphere was possible in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but has been diluted in the current period by the fact that the apparatus of media are controlled by interests which systematically distort the content of public discourse.

Since Habermas put forward his thesis of a unitary public sphere, many theorists have suggested alternative models such as Negt & Kluge's (1993) idea of an 'oppositional' working class public sphere, Rita Felski's idea of a feminist public sphere and Nancy Fraser's (1990) notion of a 'post-bourgeois' public sphere.

What is distinctive about these last mentioned models is that they each define themselves against a unified public sphere as pervaded by some version or other of a 'dominant ideology' - be it patriarchal or bourgeois or perhaps 'logocentric' and based too much on decision-making and questions of 'consciousness.' More recently, newer understandings of a public sphere have emerged which can be viewed as qualitatively different from traditional civic and media-extended accounts of 'publicness.' These newer theses take account of interactive media and 'interactivity' as considerations in the delimitation of alternative possibilities of civic integration.

Todd Gitlin (1998) has advanced the idea of 'public sphericules,' segmented spheres of assimilation which have their own dynamics and forms of constitution. He argues that "a single public sphere is unnecessary as long as
segments constitute their own deliberative assemblies" (Gitlin, 1998, p. 173). Gitlin suggests that the segmented assembly constituted by computer-mediated communities do loosely interrelate, but more in their difference from each other. It is akin to the state generated public sphere implied by 'multiculturalism,' in which a citizen, such as in Australia or America, might adopt a national identity by embracing a much more unitary principle of publicness - liberal or communitarian pluralism.

Finally, the segmentation of the public sphere comes to bear down on the question of democracy itself:

Does democracy require a public or publics? A public sphere or separate public sphericules? Does the proliferation of the latter, the comfort in which they can be cultivated, damage the prospects for the former? Does it not look as though the public sphere, in falling, had shattered into a scatter of globules, like mercury? The diffusion of interactive technology surely enriches the possibilities for a plurality of publics - for the development of distinct groups organized around affinity and interest. What is not clear is that the proliferation and lubrication of publics contributes to the creation of a public - an active democratic encounter of citizens who reach across their social and ideological differences to establish a common agenda of concern and to debate rival approaches. (Gitlin, 1998, p. 173)

Gitlin does not address the role of CMC in traditional kinds of decision-making activities like voting, which characterise participatory kinds of democracy (see Sobchack, 1996), but suggests that the electronic public sphere, what John Thompson calls 'mediated publicness,' facilitates a 'deliberative' model of democratic engagement.

Gitlin's view accords with the thesis of Barbara Becker and Josef Wehner (1998), who argue that interactive media support the formation of 'partial publics' - "discourses characterised by context-specific argumentation strategies and special themes" (p. 1). Becker and Wehner still subscribe to the idea that traditional mass media have the central role of mobilizing and institutionalizing public opinion, but argue that interactive media is growing in significance as a space for the formation of 'pre-institutional' forms of public opinion. Interactive media enable alternative kinds of public opinion, but this 'alternativeness' does not come out of ideological reaction to dominant values in the media, but from the structure of interactive mediums themselves. Thus, they follow Neidhardt and Gerhards in arguing that different forums of public opinion - based on direct or extended interaction, on assemblies, or on the mass media - correspond to different ways of "selecting, clustering and spreading information" (Becker & Wehner, 1998, p. 2).
Technologically-extended interactive environments are distinguished from mass media by the fact that they are unable to constitute a 'mass' in which individuals are related together as spectral 'citizens.' The Internet promotes differentiation rather than homogenization by "generating polycontextual communication structures" in which there "is no citizen who is discussing with other citizens on the Net. Rather, there are simply individuals - such as experts, old people, homosexuals, women, men, children, youngsters - who debate their particular interests on the net" (Becker & Wehner, 1998, p. 2). Becker and Wehner echo many of the advances made by that of the 'second media age' theorists (see below). However, they add two important observations which challenge the characterisation of the Internet as a free de-centralized structure. First, they point out that the Internet is characterized by numerous submedia which are 'thematically restricted domains' - a point to which I will return. Second, less and less information on the Net can be regarded as 'public' and universally accessible as, increasingly, the bulk of Internet content becomes colonized by contextless fragmented information (advertizing, spam, unverified messages) while a significant volume of 'bandwith' is used 'privately' - accessible by institutional and private elites.

**Public/Private**

What both the models of 'unified' and 'partial' politics discussed above are committed to is some notion of the separation of the public from the private, which rests on the Greek distinction between 'polis' (the place of 'Demos' - democracy) and the 'oikos' (household). The public/private distinction is a complex one, which in modern capitalism is so often confused by the extension of private control (private property, private interests) into the 'public sphere' as market place. The traditional pre-capitalist market place is not a place of private interests negotiating, but of the public good of exchange. Today the private exists in the public sphere as can, to take Hartley's argument, the 'public' exist in the private. Privacy might be commonly thought of as being confined to the spaces of the home, but this is also increasingly the place where, paradoxically, individuals gain access to the public sphere.

The fact of this is mutually generated: the less individuals engage in practices of interaction in 'public spaces,' the more they are likely to be engaged in interactive practices in private spaces, and vice versa. Under these conditions, the household unit becomes a primary cell of modern social relations, the basic unit and building block from which social interaction occurs. When the public sphere has withdrawn to the home, where a 'dialogic' or two-way open interaction becomes impossible, interaction becomes more and more 'confined' to the family, the household, and where one works. These conditions certainly did not obtain in pre-media society in which the
frequency and intensity of embodied interaction are of an entirely different order. The origins of European modernity since the 18th century, for example, are founded on the café as the bedrock of the emergence of a public sphere (Habermas, 1989). In the year 1700, for example, the city of London boasted 3,000 coffee houses.

However, in media societies where the geographic and kinship ties of the parish, local neighborhood, or the industrial slum have virtually disappeared, individuals have historically become very heavily dependent on media of many kinds to acquire a sense of belonging and attachment to others. The situation is one of separation and unity. Individuals are separated at a geographic level, locked away in their house allotment or unit fortresses, but united on scales of city or nation in their attachment to forms of media. Ironically, the marketing calls for consumers to 'get connected' and 'travel on the Internet' instead of being 'stuck at home' are an exact reproduction of the social and urban consequences of broadcast technologies. On the one hand, individuals are told they can interact to overcome the tyranny and restraints of broadcast, but they do so only by reinforcing the domestic conditions of their atomized existence.

The question of whether interaction, once it is reduced to the electronically mediated and technologically-extended kinds of access to communication which is enabled from the home, constitutes participation in a public sphere is a pivotal one to ask in relation to CMC. Certainly the private/public question becomes extremely vexed on the Internet. As Poster (1997) suggests:

If 'public' discourse exists as pixels on screens generated at remote locations by individuals one has never met and probably will never meet, as it is in the case of the Internet with its 'virtual communities', 'electronic cafês', bulletin boards, e-mail, computer conferencing and even video conferencing, then how is it to be distinguished from 'private' letters, printface and so forth.

We could add to Poster's observation the fact that virtual meeting places are replicated in physical form in cybercafé and video-café Symbolically, as well as functionally, the cybercafé is extremely interesting. It strongly reaffirms the idea that the cellular network basis of gaining access to the public sphere predominates, where even one of the strongest institutions of embodied public life can be remade in terms of CMC. Nobody meets face-to-face at a cybercafé as the face-to-screen precludes dialogic contact in any form other than electronic.

The First and Second Media Age
To understand whether electronically-mediated communication, of either the broadcast variety or network form, is capable of constituting a public sphere, the difference between these forms needs to be discussed.

The contention that the Internet, and CMC in general, have radically altered the nature of public communication is largely built on the assumption that they are progressively coming to usurp the power of broadcast media. Theorists of the second media age argue that both broadcast and interactive communication apparatus have together constituted the primary forms of cultural mediation in information societies since the second world war. The important point here is that it is not possible, in this view, to understand the second media age without first understanding the first media age. The dependence on media of both first and second media are, as we shall see, interrelated. However, theorists of cybersociety like George Gilder in *Life After Television*, Sherry Turkle in *Life on the Screen*, and Mark Poster in *The Second Media Age* contend that the second media age has arisen on the back of the conditions produced by the first (for a review of these arguments see Holmes, 1997). These conditions, the production of an indeterminate mass by broadcast, the separation of individuals from the means of producing their own contributions to public communication, and the disintegration of traditional community, are all hailed to be overcome by the Internet.

The Internet is, above all, a decentralised communication system. Like the telephone network, anyone hooked up to the Internet may initiate a call, send a message that he or she has composed, and may do so in the manner of the broadcast system, that is to say, may send a message to many receivers, and do this either in 'real time' or as stored data or both. The Internet is also decentralised at a basic level of organisation since, as a network of networks, new networks may be added so long as they conform to certain communications protocols (Poster, 1997).

According to the second media age perspective, the tyranny that is attributed to broadcast lies in its hegemonic role in the determination of culture (the culture industry) as well as individual consciousnesses (the theory of hegemony), which derives from its predominantly vertical structure. This structure is one in which the individual is forced to look to the image and the monopolization of information and entertainment to acquire a sense of assembly and common culture. The second media age, on the other hand, bypasses this 'institutional' kind of communication and facilitates instantaneous, less-mediated and two-way forms of communication. For the romantic variety of cyber-utopians, on the other hand, it 'restores' such communication.

At the level of interaction, the second media age utopians point out the empirical increase in the take-up of the Internet and other network
technologies, and the fact that empirically it is true that the Internet is mainly interaction and very little broadcast while television is mainly broadcast with very little interaction, as evidence for the 'ontological' nature of the second media age as a distinctive trend, movement and modality of social integration. The importance of the fact that the many can interact with the many in cyberspace is almost exclusively related to the way it is said to break the 'lock-out' predicament which individuals face in broadcast interaction. The walls that are erected by the power of broadcast rapidly disintegrate as a form of electronic communication is made available which is adequate in speed, form and complexity to the abstractness of the social forms which have denied mediated interactivity by way of broadcast. In broadcast communication, the individual receiver of messages is subject to one-way communication from the 'elite' producers of messages. The horizontal connection with other consumers of the same messages is generally only possible via the fetish of the image or the celebrity, in whom (as Durkheim once argued) "concrete consciousnesses are concentrated." Conversely, with the Internet, the message producers are by-passed, as the walls that are erected at the horizontal level effectively disappear.

These 'media' walls are the result of the architecture of broadcast itself. The more the individual looks to the media for acquiring a cultural identity the less he or she looks 'sideways' for interaction. Conversely, the less the individual looks sideways for social solidarity and reciprocity, the more this mode of association becomes weak and de-normalized, and so the alternative dependence on a centralized apparatus of cultural production becomes imperative.

In the second media age, however, the walls separating individuals at a horizontal level are said to be overcome, as the individual looks directly to others for a sense of milieu and association. As Poster (1995) explains:

Subject constitution in the second media age occurs through the mechanism of interactivity. ... interactivity has become, by dint of the advertising campaigns of telecommunication corporations, desirable as an end in itself, so that its usage can float and be applied in countless contexts having little to do with telecommunications. Yet the phenomena of communicating at a distance through one's computer, of sending and receiving digitally encoded messages, of being 'interactive', has been the most popular application of the Internet. Far more than making purchases or obtaining information electronically, communicating by computer claims the intense interest of countless thousands (p. 33).

The Internet lifts individuals out of the isolation created by media walls - particularly as these walls are reinforced in urban contexts. In information societies, individuals increasingly interact with computer screens, developing
face-to-screen relations rather than face-to-face relations, but this opposition is no longer significant, argues Sherry Turkle, when the larger cultural contexts of post-industrial societies are eroding the boundaries between the real and the virtual. It is not possible to think of the individual as alone with his or her computer as Sherry Turkle explored in her 1984 text *The Second Self*; rather as she more recently suggests, "the Internet ... links millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities" (Turkle, 1995, p. 9). What Turkle insists on periodizing as the 'Age of the Internet' is synonymous with the opportunity to build virtual communities, "in which we participate with people from all over the world, people with whom we converse daily, people with whom we may have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet" (Turkle, 1995, p. 10).

The extent to which the Internet is hailed as an overcoming of fragmentation and individualism is quite remarkable in recent literature. In some cases it is attributed with an integrative function which is able to correct a tendency that is over two hundred years old. As Dave Healy (1997) argues, however, "the networked citizen ... is never alone." To the degree that the Internet represents a 'culture of coherence,' argues Healy, it serves as "a corrective to the dangers of individualism" which Alexis de Tocqueville spoke of in his visit to America in the 1830s (p. 60).

The message of redemption which is promoted in the second media age thesis, be this for public or private, is a resounding one - a message whose dreams of unity has theological undertones.

**A New Public Sphere?**

The success of any argument claiming a special role for the Internet in the constitution of a new public sphere rests on its ability to establish an imaginary unity in which all participants have equal opportunity for 'observation' and communication. This postulated imaginary unity, most well known in the phrase 'virtual community,' seldom reconciles itself with the fact that 'the Internet' is not at all technically homogenous and is segmented into quite a range of properties and capabilities, each of which carry different sociological and communicative potentials and effects.

It is true that, unlike television, the Internet is a network\(^1\) as well as 'dialogical' capable of a two-way dialogue, and for this reason is applauded as a universalizing structure of communication. But its network properties are rarely realized in communication directly, rarely do they become meaningful *qua* network because, as Becker and Wehner point out (see above), individuals only ever 'use' the Internet within well-defined sub-media...
Trevor Barr usefully breaks down the different kinds of interaction on the Internet into six categories:
1. one-to-one messaging (such as email);
2. one-to-many messaging (such as 'listserv');
3. distributed message databases (such as USENET news groups);
4. real-time communication (such as 'Internet Relay Chat');
5. real-time remote computer utilisation (such as 'telnet'); and
6. remote information retrieval (such as 'ftp', 'gopher' and the World Wide Web') (Barr, 2000)

It can be seen from this list that the Internet provides a generic environment for a number of different modes of interaction which can vary according to real-time/stored time, symmetrical versus asymmetrical dialogue, broadcast sending and receiving and information posting and retrieval.

But each of these modes of interaction relates very differently to the possible constitution of an 'electronic public sphere.' Moreover, the information and communication possibilities of the Internet are more often than not parasitic of broadcast-mediated communication. The growth of companion websites which accompany media organizations, newspapers, consumer products, sporting events, etc., provide an astonishing array of reasons why information retrieval, listserv, and interactive databases available on the Internet are turned to. When CMC is broken down into specific sub-media rather than reduced to the indeterminacy of 'the Internet' as a communication environment, a more sophisticated appreciation of the technological transformations of the public sphere is enabled, and the advancement of new accounts of context-specific partial publics is one outcome. However, at the same time, the global reach and mobility of all forms of Internet communication, regardless of the specificities of their sub-media, also needs to be accounted for. The reason for this, I argue, is because it is impossible to separate the significance of contemporary CMC from its antecedent and wider context of broadcast communication culture.

Why this is significant is that, whereas broadcast generates an instant 'international context' of social connection, there are few ways in which individuals can achieve meaningful interaction to make tangible these global connections. There are telephones and other 'narrowband' ways of communicating, but none of these is quite able to provide a multi-media context for any given interaction. The Internet, it is argued by its promoters, changes all of that.

In accounting for the growth of CMC via the Internet, both national and global statistics become significant. Given that the experience of community on the Internet is not limited to to national boundaries, the shape and structure of this
virtual community becomes significant. In 1996, five years after the Internet became fully commercially available, only 7% of Australian homes had connected to the Internet, while 25% already had access in their workplace (Barr, 2000). In 1998, the domestic connection figure had almost tripled to 19% (ABS Data and The Industry Standard, March, 1999). The number of Internet users worldwide at the end of 1998 was 147,800,000, of which 52% were American (Harpers Internet Index no. 24). World wide, therefore, the number of Internet users had increased from approximately 25 million in July 1995 - almost a sixfold increase.

Besides being hailed as a technology which can deliver the 'global village,' the Internet is also promoted as a singular medium which allows for democratized processes which were not previously possible in the era of broadcast. But what kinds of democracy are being postulated here? Traditionally, and more than ever now, democracy is heavily aligned with the nation-state. Because of this, nonsense is made of the claim that the Internet enables universal participation in democratic process. The point here is that practices of communication afforded by CMC may be able to substitute some of the functions of the mass media - for example in the formation of pre-institutional public opinion - but do not necessarily exert pressure on the institutional apparatus of politics. Of course the mass media, as a means of electronically mediated communication, can never replace the institutional apparatus of politics and, as numerous studies have shown, has been just as much used by politicians as it has influenced them. Secondly, the Internet can properly be classified as a 'global' technology, which enables connections with individuals and institutions overseas just as easily as does nationally, regionally or locally. If there is an imagined community (see Anderson, 1982) on the Internet, it is definitely not the nation-state. State-bounded kinds of citizenship cannot be considered coterminous with the kinds of citizenship which are achieved on the Internet. However, this is not to argue that a global sense of citizenship, even if it too is an 'imagined one,' cannot exist. Recent protests against international financial institutions such as the World Bank were organized almost entirely through Internet media - a case of not so visible electronic assemblies producing very visible embodied assemblies.

Democracy and Interaction

In his book The Media and Modernity, John B. Thompson (1995) argues that it is not possible to arrive a satisfactory understanding of the nature of public life in the modern world with a conception of 'publicness' which is spatial and dialogical. By seeing the public sphere in only these terms we are invariably obliged to "interpret the ever growing role of mediated communication as an historical fall from grace" (p. 132). Thompson argues that this is so because
the widespread conception of publicness used by political and communication theorists alike is one based on mutual face-to-face relations. To problematize this, Thompson takes issue with Habermas' model of the public sphere which is criticised for being metaphysically flawed.

In adhering to the traditional notion of publicness as co-presence, Habermas has deprived himself of the means understanding the new forms of publicness created by the media: he views them through the lens of the traditional model, whereas it is precisely this traditional model that has been displaced. (Thompson, 1995, p. 132)

Thompson's critique of 'political science' accounts of the public sphere, even those which try to accommodate the significance of media, is that they are invariably modelled on a theoretically inflexible yardstick of mutual presence. The deficiencies of such a framework begin to reveal themselves when we start to differentiate between different socio-technical bases of interaction. The following is an outline of Thompson's (1995, pp. 82-86) model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>John B. Thompson's Three Types of Interaction</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Face-to-Face (mutually embodied presence)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• dialogical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• mutual presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• a high degree of contextual information (body language, gestures, symbolic cues, affective expressions 'here' 'this')</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• reciprocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• interpersonal specificity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Mediated interaction (technical mediums like writing, telephoning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• dialogical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• extended / not mutual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• restricted degree of contextual information (letter head, signature, date placed on communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• reciprocal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• interpersonal specificity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Quasi-Mediated interaction (books, newspapers, radio, tv)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• monological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• extended</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• produced for an indefinite range of recipients</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• senders and receivers of messages nevertheless form bonds</td>
</tr>
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<td>• narrowing of the range of symbolic cues</td>
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</table>
The value of Thompson's classification is that it is able to distinguish between the social dynamics of the different sub-media of the Internet. On the Internet some forms of communication are clearly produced for an indefinite range of recipients, while others are produced for one or a few others. Some forms of information retrieval and transmission are one-way and not dialogical. What is most instructive, however, is the fact that mediated interaction, be it the Internet or television, depart from the face-to-face, or 'mutual presence' insofar as it involves a definite narrowing of the range of symbolic cues. Thompson's commentary on this is to suggest that communicative acts do not require their own in-built contexts in order to be meaningful or provide information.

In the Habermasian model, on the other hand, all communication involves: (i) the transmission of a message that is intelligible within the inventory of meanings common to a culture; (ii) an agreement over its meaning according to legitimate norms; and (iii) a disclosure of the subjectivity and speaking position of the speakers. This model does not allow for the fact that reciprocity can be a function of technological constitution, that may or may not be dialogical. As Nancy Baym (1995) explains, "because computer-mediated interactants are unable to see, hear, and feel one another, they cannot use the usual contextualization cues conveyed by the appearance, nonverbal signals, and features of the physical context. With these cues to social context removed, the discourse is left in a social vacuum quite different from face-to-face interaction." (pp. 139-40). However, when cues are 'filtered-out' because the context is removed, so too is the fragmentation which derives from the fact that all cues-based communication is always localized and incapable of universalization. Thus, paradoxically the more there is a narrowing of cues by way of the constraints of a technical medium, the greater the prospect for semantic standardization, by which communicative competence and consensus can be achieved.

**Conclusion**

The merit of a model like John. B Thompson's, of specifying levels of interaction according to a range of communicative qualities, is that it reveals the folly of putting forward a theory of a unitary public sphere based purely on technological possibility. The almost theological status of the Internet as a redemptive agent of 'civil society' is exemplary of this tendency as is the earlier view of some thinkers like Jean Baudrillard that the mass media had replaced the public sphere in post-industrial societies. To privilege either 'broadcast' or interactive mediums like CMC as one-dimensional domains which can deliver a universal public sphere is fraught with methodological problems. Perspectives on media epochs - 'the
video age', the 'age of the Internet' (Turkle) or the 'second media age' (Poster),
are too simplistic and read as much too technologically determinist insofar as
they neglect the sub-media and sub-cultures which are internal to the
apparatus of electronic media, both broadcast and interactive. Such models
tend to be one-dimensional in that they view forms of public association, be
they by images and broadcast or by information and interactivity, as mutually
exclusive.
At the same time however, the 'public-sphericules' or 'partial publics' theses of
Gitlin, as well as Becker and Wehner, purvey another kind of technological
determinism, which moves from the grand historical grounding of social life
on one or other over-arching technology, to differentiating forms of
association in specialized 'spheres' on the basis of more particular
 technological media as the context for particular civic sub-divisions.
It is true that certain media, particularly ones like CMC which enable global
reach, provide the individual with mobilities of communication which enable
associations beyond what persists in modern life as the most powerful sense of
a pre-given public frame - the nation-state. And moving beyond the
nation-state in a global rather than 'inter-national' sense also expands the
numbers of those with whom we would want to participate in a public sphere.
However, it is also true that individuals are mobile across communicative
mediums and continuously participate not in a pre-given public sphere, but in
the process of constructing publicness across a range of media. It is less the
case, I argue, that the contemporary public sphere is breaking down and
becoming fragmented as is the fact that it is sustained across increasingly
more complex, dynamic and global kinds of communication environments.

Footnotes

1 Television can be a network, but only for the producers.
2 See Hirst & Thompson's argument (1996) that far from the nation-state
being swept away by 'globalization' it in fact constitutes itself ever more
strongly in the face of the imagined threats of globalization - borders close to
migrants, politicians refuse to revoke tariffs, national economies maintain
their own indices rather than a common global one, nations negotiate to create
policies regulating TNCs, etc., and every country in the world now aspires to
the legitimacy of democratic liberalism, even totalitarian states.

References


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