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Media Culture Society 2010 32: 691

DOI: 10.1177/0163443710367715

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Everyone a pamphleteer? Reconsidering comparisons of mediated public participation in the print age and the digital era

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Fifteen years after the breakthrough of the world wide web as a mass consumer technology, the task of conceptualizing ongoing changes to the public sphere remains a key challenge for media research. In the wake of early generic labels like ‘cyber’ or ‘virtual’ public spheres, some try to grasp the unfolding processes by reaching for historical comparisons or analogies. A case in point is pamphlets.

Historically, pamphleteering may be said to have had features that became central for mediated public debate in general. But pamphleteering is also a much-used analogy in descriptions of the transformation of the public sphere as brought on by the technological potential of the internet. The pamphleteering analogy is sometimes related to specific online forms, like blogs. In a recent article titled ‘The Blogosphere and the New Pamphleteers’, Donald Kochan (2006: 99) states that: ‘much like – but more sophisticated than – the printing press, the internet allows every individual to be a pamphleteer in the marketplace of ideas by blogging’. Similarly, when discussing ‘printed precedents of blogs’ in a recent introductory book on blogging, Jill Walker Rettberg (2008: 40–1) starts with pamphlets as a prime example.

Elsewhere, the comparison relates to internet technology more generally. Yochai Benkler (2006) refers to the US Supreme Court to illustrate the meaning and the prevalence of the pamphleteering analogy. According to a Supreme Court ruling from 1997:

The Web constitutes a vast platform from which to address and hear from a world-wide audience.... Any person or organization with a computer connected to the internet can ‘publish’ information.... Through the use of Web pages, mail exploders, and news groups, [any person] can become a pamphleteer. (quoted in Benkler, 2006: 214)

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I want to critically consider the value of the pamphleteering analogy. Clearly, an assessment of how online communication impinges on the public sphere cannot, without problems, be based on what might appear to be a somewhat far-fetched comparison with a form of print publication born several hundred years ago under very different circumstances. Still, rather than just dismiss the analogy as naïve or ahistorical, I will argue that, with contextual awareness, the reference to some forms of online communication as pamphleteering can shed light on genuinely new aspects of the mediated public sphere in the transition to the digital era.

As a normative ideal, the public sphere is a 'warning system with sensors' spread throughout society independent from the state apparatus (Habermas, 1996 [1992]: 359). Political decisions must be steered by communication flows in the public sphere. These flows should start at the periphery and 'pass through the sluices of democratic procedures at the entrance to the parliamentary complex' (Habermas, 1996 [1992]: 356). In this process, the media should assist the institutions of civil society by transmitting concerns from the periphery of society, generating public debate and mounting pressure for the political system at the core to respond.

Coupled with an ideal of rational deliberation, this poses a major challenge for the media. Of course, all communication does not have to live up to a deliberative ideal. But to identify the valid concerns at the periphery and ensure quality of public debate, there have to be some mechanisms to control participation. This has to do with the content of statements, and whether they are truthful and relevant. But it also has to do with structuring participation in a way that allows for reasonable representation under conditions that promote fair debate. In practice, the extent to which the media succeed depends on such things as the professional solidity of journalistic work; editorial independence from state and commercial interests; the reach of a medium; ethical standards; and criteria for inclusion of issues as well as participants.

This is a normative idea of the media's function in the public sphere. The question is how different technologies have been employed historically in different contexts to contribute to such an ideal task.

Pamphlets and the basis of the public sphere

Habermas's original work on the public sphere in the 1960s was based on a historical study of the emergence of a space for critical discussion outside state control and separate from the private domain. Members of the bourgeoisie formed such a public in Western European nation states in the 1700s. Habermas explains how the growth in newspapers and journals, along with reading clubs and coffee-houses formed the infrastructure for this public.

In the massive amount of works criticizing and building on Habermas's study, some scholars argue that the elements of a public sphere emerged much

earlier. David Zaret (2000: 6; see also Halasz, 1997), for instance, claims that the rationality and normative authority of public opinion as a political force can be found in English politics during the revolution in the mid-1600s. In this period of turmoil, the pamphlet was a widespread form of publication based on the technology of printing.

Though somewhat hard to define, a pamphlet is a short piece of polemical writing, printed in the form of a low-cost unbound booklet and aimed at a large audience (Orwell, 1948: 7). In his history of pamphleteering in early modern Britain, Joad Raymond argues that England's involvement in the wars on the European continent in the 1580s launched an interest in foreign news (Raymond, 2003: 103 ff.). Pamphlets reporting on political and military success or failure were the preferred form of communication. Such news pamphlets were occasional, made if and when there was anything to report. But the pamphlet was not limited to the communication of military news. It was employed to address all kinds of issues, often sensational. Accounts of witchcraft, the trial and execution of criminals, earthquakes or other natural disasters, and freaky medical stories were all among the favourite topics reported on. Some pamphleteers also openly added fictional details, mixing styles and genres, or forming new ones.

Historians estimate that 22,000 pamphlets of various kinds circulated in London during the English Revolution between 1640 and 1660 (Orwell, 1948: 7). By the end of the 1600s, the pamphlet was, according to Raymond: 'the most public print medium in Britain... Pamphlets had become part of the everyday practice of politics, the primary means of creating and influencing public opinion' (2003: 26).¹

Pamphleteering is an interesting case due to several technologically facilitated and culturally formed characteristics. First, pamphleteering exploited the low cost, speed and flexibility of the printing press, thereby lowering obstacles to participation. Second, pamphlets housed a wide variety of styles and genres, and contributed to the development of new ones. Third, pamphleteering allowed for anonymity, and the use of pseudonyms became an important tool in avoiding criminal charges. Typically forbidden under censorship laws, the right to anonymity can be linked to ideas of the democratic public sphere: it is the force of the argument, not the standing of the speaker that should matter. Lastly, pamphlets were also ephemeral, meaning they could evade official scrutiny in times of censorship. Taken together, these characteristics meant that pamphlets could provide a mediated arena for public communication of opinions in an era when all publications were subject to government control.

One famous critique of such censorship laws is found in a pamphlet published by John Milton in 1644. Here, Milton argued for free speech, developing the idea that, in order to exercise his reason, any individual must have unlimited access to the ideas of others in a free and open encounter.

Milton did not argue for free speech for all – he ruled out Catholics, not to mention women. At this point in time, the majority of the British population

was by default excluded from the print public sphere due to illiteracy. Historians have showed that while up to 60 percent of tradesmen and craftsmen in London could read and write, the numbers dropped to 20 percent in the north-east of the country. And female illiteracy among the general population was over 90 percent (Feather, 2006: 12).

Coupled with limitations on distribution, and the political restrictions posed by censorship, this forms a picture of an incomplete public sphere. The channels for sluicing concerns from the periphery to the centres of power were hardly operative. In addition, the discursive forms were obviously quite far from approximating an ideal of rational deliberation: predisposed, postulating and libellous are among the characterizations of the phenomenon found in scholarly works. Briefly put, neither the media nor the political system itself could facilitate a public sphere. Still, the diverse use of printing technology in this period does indicate a basis for the emergence of practices and forms that came to define what Habermas described in his historical study of Western Europe in the century that followed.

During the 1700s, periodicals and newspapers started to incorporate public debate, often in the form of letters written by professional authors or editors. Such new publications took over and developed the functions of pamphlets in the public sphere. Economically, these periodicals and papers exploited a growing market. Their periodicity also meant a debate could be maintained over time within a more stable and recognizable frame, thus facilitating the sort of truth-seeking function that, it has been argued, motivates freedom of expression. Under improving political conditions, these new forms of publication replaced the messy and occasional public forum offered by pamphlets. The 'wild' pamphlet medium was 'tamed' – or, as some would say, civilized. The range of views and vigorous expressions might have suffered, but the operation of the sluices improved. As a consequence, the conditions were in place for making the flows of concerns from periphery to the centre more steady and representative – and perhaps improving the quality, primarily the trustworthiness, of the information made available to citizens. This is, basically, a description of the emergence of journalistic print media.

Journalistic print media and the public sphere

In the 1800s, the journalistic press came to dominate the mediated public sphere. As comparative studies illustrate, journalism developed differently in different countries (e.g. Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Everywhere, however, the history is about how journalism grew as an institution between state and market powers. The extent to which the media contribute to the public sphere needs to be understood with this in mind.

To give one example: by the late 1800s, scholars argue, there was a shift from an educational to a representational aim in British journalism. Rather

than influencing the readers, papers should now speak on their behalf. This line of thought was closely connected to new ideas about the reader as consumer, but it also forms the basis for the idea of the fourth estate, since the concept of the fourth estate depends on the image that the press represents the people better than Parliament itself. The press therefore had to underline its independence from state powers and keep a finger on 'the public pulse' (Hampton, 2004: 109). Or, to use Habermas's metaphor, the press had to pay closer attention to its function as the warning sensors of the public sphere.

The letters section is a concrete instance of how newspapers are organized to let concerns from the periphery be heard in a wider public sphere. The section has remained a stable element since the penny press of the 1830s. In a recent study of US newspapers, Karin Wahl-Jorgensen (2007) shows that editors believe this 'wide open forum', as they call it, is good both for democracy and for circulation. On this basis, editors are also very reluctant to edit rude or uncivil letters, and eager to present their letters section as unbiased. Wahl-Jorgensen also shows the more everyday aspects of this forum for public debate. The journalists see the editing of the section as manual labour, dull compared to their own writing. In practice, journalistic writing tends to get priority over the task of providing an arena for citizen participation.

Wahl-Jorgensen's study shows how journalists not always do a good job of facilitating fair citizen participation. In the same way, there will always be good and bad journalistic writing. Still, in terms of the legitimacy of political decisions, there are qualitative advantages with sluicing public debate through the gates of the press. Key features of the institutionalization of journalism such as professionalized norms for news reporting, adherence to a common code of ethics and the protection of sources have been crucial for the development of a functional public sphere in modern democracies.

In the age of the journalistic press, the pamphlet became a channel at the margins of the mass media. In his book collecting British pamphlets from the 1500s to the 1930s, George Orwell pointed precisely to this feature:

The great function of the pamphlet is to act as a sort of footnote or marginal comment on official history. It not only keeps unpopular viewpoints alive, but supplies documentation on events that the authorities of the day have reason to falsify. (1948: 15)

In practice, however, while they could be outlets for excluded voices, the pamphlets did not necessarily contribute greatly to the quality of public debate. In 1943, Orwell took stock of British pamphleteering for the *New Statesman*. He admitted that most contributions belonged to one of two main schools: Party Line and Astrology. So, Orwell concluded, 'there is totalitarian rubbish and paranoiac rubbish' (Orwell, 1943).

At this point in time, radio technology organized as broadcasting was already some decades old, and we are well into the broadcasting age. From here,

I will fast forward past a long line of alternatives that challenged the status of journalistic mass media in the public sphere: past Bertolt Brecht's much-quoted call for turning the radio into a two-way participatory medium in 1932; past TV amateurs' interactive experiments in the US during the same decade; past local and open access radio and television initiatives which run through the broadcasting age; and past established broadcasting institutions' long history of participatory radio and television formats. I will fast forward past all this – using a metaphor from the analogue era – to bring us towards the digital era, to look at the potential transformation of the public sphere brought on by the internet.

The internet, blogs and the public sphere

The internet is an infrastructure of interconnected computer networks, dating back at least to the 1960s. Since its inception in the early 1990s, the world wide web has made crucial contributions to the consumer appeal of internet technology. In 1994, the web housed approximately 3000 sites. Four years later, the number was estimated at 1.2 million (Rasmussen, 2007: 88). In 2008, Google claimed to have identified 1 trillion unique web addresses (Alpert and Hajaj, 2008).

Though television remains the most used medium, the web clearly takes up an increasingly important position in the public life of democratic societies in the wealthier parts of the world. Because although the numbers of users are substantial in China and India, for instance, the per capita statistics still put North American, European, Oceanian and rich Asian countries far ahead of the rest. This applies both to internet use in general, and even more clearly to broadband access. Africa accounted for 14.2 percent of the world's population in 2007, but only 3.5 percent of internet usage. In contrast, North America has 5.1 percent of the population, but 18.8 percent of world internet usage (Internet World Stats, 2008). A list of broadband access per capita puts Chile as the highest-ranking Southern American country at no. 23. No African countries are found among the top 30 (NationMaster, 2008). Such patterns reflect the political, economic and social impact of the internet worldwide.

Internet technologies offer a many-to-many mode of communication, or a 'mediated and dialogical form of publicness', as Slavko Splichal (2006: 702) puts it. It is in this context that Yorchai Benkler (2006: 233 ff.) takes issue with the idea that everyone can be a pamphleteer on the internet. He puts forward two critiques of this notion. The first is the Babel critique. It basically points to the dangerous consequences if too many speak in the public sphere at the same time. The result is noise, confusion, fragmentation of discourse and, potentially, political polarization. The second critique of the claim for mass participation through pamphleteering online has to do with concentration.

Contradicting the Babel objection, scholars have argued that patterns of attention on the internet are less distributed than optimists claim. In this respect, the web of recent years diverges much less from the mass media than some might hope.

Benkler does not subscribe to either of these two critiques. Instead, his stand is somewhere in the middle (2006: 237 ff.). First, against the Babel critique, he argues that individuals do not use their ability to control the flow of information to isolate themselves in groups with like-minded. Second, concerning concentration, Benkler assesses several studies of online behaviour and presents analyses of how peer-to-peer networks, personal blogs and grassroots news providers are used, often in combination, thereby vitalizing the public sphere.

Blogs and related online tools mean it is easy for individuals to make information about a pressing issue publicly available. By the aid of hyperlinks, diverse feedback mechanisms, easily accessible archived material and systems for signalling endorsement, the issue can in turn gain momentum to break through to the wider public sphere. Especially interesting are the different mechanisms for endorsement or recommendation designed to highlight the more relevant or pressing contributions. These mechanisms are vital for web services like technology news site Slashdot, or for Digg. Digg.com is a so-called news-aggregator. Users submit links to news stories or other content on the web. If enough other users 'dig it', the story rises to the top of list, getting more exposure. Similar systems are also used to help structure comments to online newspaper articles, highlighting contributions recommended by fellow participants. A related service is the 'trackback' below the articles. A trackback is a system used to track, list and link to bloggers writing about the article in question.

Such practices of endorsement illustrate a kind of user-generated agenda-setting based on other criteria than in traditional journalism. This *could* amount to new mechanisms for picking up concerns and sluicing them towards the centre of society, potentially changing the workings of the mediated public sphere. To some extent, that could be seen as a challenge to the institution of journalism. However, as the tools surrounding mainstream online news providers' content illustrate, these new practices are also embraced by, and incorporated in, the practices of established journalism. In this sense, actors of the institutionalized press do not seem particularly threatened at the current stage of the digital era.

The value of the pamphleteering analogy

What, then, of the pamphleteering analogy? If we look at pamphlets and, for instance, blogs in isolation from their contexts, there are some similarities. Like pamphlets, blogs exploit the low cost, speed and flexibility of new technology, thereby lowering obstacles to participation. Blogs can also, as pamphlets did, contribute to the shaking up of well-known styles and genres.

Moreover, like pamphleteering, blogging allows for anonymity. But the comparison also brings out key differences. As signalled by their full label, web-logs are comparable with diaries. They are continuous, not one-off, occasional communications like pamphlets are. Blogs are also less ephemeral than pamphlets. This points to a genuinely new feature of digital technology: The possibilities for archiving and for easy retrieval of archived material via the internet find no parallel in the 1600s. And, just as important, the diverse feedback mechanisms developed online are without precedent. These differences illustrate the problem with comparing pamphleteering and blogging. But they also, in a sense, show the value of the analogy, since it helps us to see some really new features of digital media technology.

However, if we raise our eyes to look at the societal context of these two forms of mediated communication, the analogy clearly loses much of its value. It is enough to refer to dimensions like literacy, capitalist economy, freedom of speech and the right to vote. The democratic societies in which blogging has emerged are so fundamentally different that the analogy is in danger of concealing, rather than yielding, insight. But such contextual awareness also points to some final observations.

When we dismiss the visions of universal internet-pamphleteering today, we should keep in mind that the digital era has not lasted for long. When the US Supreme Court hailed the potential of the internet in 1997 – in the reference used by Benkler (2006) – the online world looked very different. The year 1997 was when Norway's leading tabloid, *VG*, first decided to make the internet a priority. As late as in 2000, fewer than 50 percent of Norwegian newspapers provided a daily online news service (Ottosen et al., 2002: 199). By the end of 2008, however, the online version of *VG* was proclaimed 'the most read Norwegian newspaper ever', reaching nearly 1.5 million daily readers. That is almost a 100,000 more than its print 'mother' achieved when its circulation peaked in 2002 (VG Nett, 2009).

As the growth of *VG* online indicates, the last decade has made the internet look less unruly, and more in line with already established societal institutions – including the journalistic press. The mediated public sphere *has* changed in the digital era, but not primarily on the structural level. While the practices of journalism keep developing, what we know as the dominant journalistic institutions so far seem able to keep their position.

It may well be that the blogosphere in Western democracies today shares some characteristics with pamphleteering as a marginal activity in the mid-1900s. It represents an impressive range of forms and contents, obviously providing valuable channels for novel voices. But much is also 'rubbish', as Orwell put it. As research has shown, blogs that stand out, attract attention and acquire weight in public debate tend to have adopted features from the journalistic press, like strict periodicity and adherence to discursive norms – not to mention that the writers tend to be well-educated, white and still probably male (e.g. Hindman, 2008: 286).

In the 1600s, pamphlets were employed to evade censorship rules and simultaneously propagate ideas about freedom of speech and democratization. In today's societies without basic democratic structures – without an institutionalized journalistic press and without a public sphere proper – blogging and related forms of online public communication may potentially be powerful tools. I am not saying we should look for the equivalent of John Milton in the Chinese blogosphere. The societies are just fundamentally different. Even on a theoretical level, the transfer of a normative public sphere concept built on Western democratic thinking to, for instance, Chinese contemporary society is clearly problematic (e.g. Rankin, 1993). But herein lies a challenge for research. What we should do, then, when we try to grasp the ongoing transformation of the public sphere in a digital era is to pay attention to societal contexts, use analogies carefully and extend our interest beyond established democracies.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Jostein Gripsrud for insightful comments on an earlier version of this article.

Note

1. See De Baecque (1989) for a short history of pamphleteering during the French Revolution, and Warner (1990) for the role of pamphlets in the print public sphere of 18th-century America.

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