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CITIZEN INTERFACE DYNAMICS: CONNECTING POLITICAL DISCUSSION AND NEWS CONSUMPTION IN TODAY'S PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract:
The Internet's expansive and transformative presence within politically relevant discourse spaces, such as news platforms and political forums, has reignited discussions on the structural dynamics of information dissemination and political engagement, and their consequences for citizens. Drawing inspiration from the concept of the "classic public sphere," which underscores the importance of a robust structural and institutional foundation for deliberative democracy, this study investigates the role of Internet usage in shaping the accessibility and connectivity of the modern public sphere. We explore how Internet use influences citizens' access to information and their ability to seamlessly transition between news consumption and political discourse. By delving into these dynamics, we aim to shed light on the evolving landscape of political engagement in the digital era.

Keywords: Internet Use, Public Sphere, Accessibility, Traversability, Deliberative Democracy

Introduction

The Internet, with its vast and often revolutionary array of politically relevant discursive spaces—news sites and forums of political discussion—has stimulated renewed interest in traditional debates surrounding both the structural arrangements of news and political discussion, and their impact on citizens. As suggested by the "classic public sphere," deliberative democracy must have a strong structural/institutional foundation. One sign of strength involves access. Another sign of strength involves the extent to which news and political discussion are meaningfully connected in time and space, allowing people to traverse with relative ease from one to the other. This article is directed toward examining the impact of Internet use on the accessibility and "reversibility" of the contemporary public sphere.

The contemporary media environment has spawned numerous calls for a theoretical reconsideration of the public sphere—what news and political discussion actually mean, and how we might conceive of them against the backdrop of an "Information Age." Yet the theme of a structurally evolving public sphere, spurred in part by advances in information technology, is not at all new to deliberative democratic theory. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Habermas' (1989) aptly titled and seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which he describes the structural foundation that made the "classic public sphere" possible, as well as the subsequent structural transition that ostensibly damaged it. While we should remain mindful of the unique demands of current social environments, Habermas and other political theorists provide useful heuristics for how the public sphere might ideally operate in the contemporary era.

Generally speaking, news use and political discussion are theorized to work together toward the development of deliberative public opinion, with one activity solidifying the other. Habermas conceptualizes the institutional foundation of the 18th- and 19th-century public sphere as being composed of an assortment of discursive spaces and media, including salons, coffee houses, newspapers, books, and

pamphlets, which collectively embodied Enlightenment ideals of rationality and freedom. He emphasizes access to these institutions as essential to "inclusion and equal opportunity for the deliberative process" (1989, p. 413). Along a similar vein, Tarde describes a process by which a rational public was created as a result of the diffusion of newspapers, which had the effect of stimulating political discussion in salons and coffee houses. He theorizes, "conversation at all times, and the press, which at present is the principal source of conversation, are the major factors in opinion" (1899/1989, p. 75). Tocqueville emphasizes the role of the press in stimulating civic association with at least two observations: "newspapers make associations and associations make newspapers" and "nothing but a newspaper can drop the same thought into a thousand minds at the same moment" (1840, trans. 1945, p. 112). Bryce imagines what the "modern day" deliberative process might look like:

A business man [sic] reads in his newspaper at breakfast on the events of the preceding day. He goes down to his office in the train, talks there to two or three acquaintances, and perceives that they agree or do not agree with his own still faint impressions . . . Then debate and controversy begin. (1888/1973, p. 4)

Embedded in these theoretical statements are at least two basic propositions: 1) News media and forums of political discussion should be *accessible* to all citizens, so that "debate and controversy" can, indeed, begin. 2) People should be able to *traverse* with a degree of ease from news use to political discussion—from reading the newspaper over breakfast, in Bryce's (1888/1973) case, to discussing what was read in the newspaper on the train. In other words, the *accessibility* and the *traversability* of the news media and forums of political discussion are normatively desirable characteristics of the public sphere (see Brundidge, 2010 for the initial introduction of these concepts).

Accessibility, in this context, characterizes the degree to which "the structure of the public sphere may be entered into or participated in but also the degree to which people actually perceive that freedom and make use of it" (Brundidge, 2010, p. 66). Beyond the essential existence of the news media and forums of political discussion, accessibility is primarily governed by the porousness of the boundaries between the private and the public spheres. Highly porous boundaries are exemplified by a public sphere that is easily penetrated, especially by disadvantaged members of society (in terms, perhaps, of SES), or by people who are otherwise less politically engaged. *Traversability* comes into play only after people have accessed the public sphere. In this case, "highly blurred and porous boundaries between the categories of news and discussion make travel between these discursive spaces respectively seamless and easy" (ibid.). These boundary conditions give way to news media and forums of political discussion that are tightly connected in time and space, providing people the capacity to discuss news with others around the same time that they consume it. When the news media and forums of political discussion are somewhat more disconnected—when the boundaries between discursive spaces are more clearly delineated and starkly drawn— traversability becomes hampered.

Despite the centrality of accessibility and traversability in public sphere theory and in recent scholarship, it remains relatively unclear how the concepts have functioned historically relative to the current media environment, or what the implications are of a public sphere that is high or low in traversability and accessibility. In the remainder of this article, I attempt to more fully explicate the concepts of accessibility and traversability. In order to do this, I find it useful to first develop a metatheoretical approach to the problem of the public sphere more generally before applying it to the specific concepts at hand. On the basis of this approach, I argue that accessibility can best be understood as being governed by a tension between the structure of the online public sphere and human psychology— a "tug of war" likely to be won by the later (Neuman, 1991), all things being equal. Conversely, traversability

actually seems to be reinforced by both the structure of the online public sphere and human psychology, increasing the overall traversability of the public sphere. Yet the mechanisms guiding accessibility and the normative implications of traversability are also moderated by the dynamics of particular "civic cultures" (Dahlgren, 2009), which vary by time and place. The article culminates in a model of accessibility and traversability as they exist in three key historical moments: the classic public sphere, the industrial-age public sphere, and the contemporary public sphere.

The Structural, Psychological, and Cultural Realms of the Public Sphere

There exists a good deal of academic disagreement over how to conceptualize normative issues related to the contemporary public sphere, which seems to stem, in part, from a lack of theoretical consensus on how to define these issues, as well as from a lack of a broader theoretical perspective with which to analyze them. In particular, academic disagreements about the impact of the Internet seem to hinge on two primary conceptual differences. The first reflects normative concerns. How do we define the public sphere? And of what value is the Habermasian perspective? The second, and potentially more challenging, disagreement involves the level of analysis on which scholars choose to focus. If they focus on broad societal and structural-level themes, they may reach vastly different conclusions about the public sphere than if we focus on micro-psychological or cultural-level themes.

In terms of scholarly disagreement over the normative value of the public sphere perspective, the Habermasian account has many challengers, some sympathetic and some not. By most accounts, the 18th- and 19th-century public sphere that Habermas describes is somewhat idealized. Some critics observe that women and people from lower socioeconomic strata were not admitted (e.g., Fraser, 1992), an important point that Habermas (1989) himself acknowledges. Other critics point to the rationalist bias inherent in the notion of "deliberation," which tends to marginalize alternative modes of communication that may be helpful to democracy, including the poetic, the humorous, and the ironic (Dahlgren, 2005). Some scholars may therefore see little use in casting the "classic" public sphere as a heuristic with which to guide analyses of the contemporary public sphere.

Apart from these criticisms, however, the public sphere remains a normatively and empirically compelling idea for many democratic theorists. Garnham (1992), for example, defends the Habermasian perspective, arguing that it outlines a tragic and stoic pursuit of an almost impossible rationality, recognizing the impossibility of an ideal public sphere and the limits of human civilization, but still striving toward it. Yet while arguing for the concept of the public sphere, Garnham simultaneously raises the question of whether or not a thing called the public sphere can be said to actually exist in contemporary society. Perhaps the public sphere exists only as an ideal, a window that was once open, but is presently closed. Sparks (2001), for example, contends that the public sphere exists simply as a normative vision which has yet to actually materialize.

Certainly, there are problems and ambiguities in conceptualizing the public sphere. Habermas himself has attempted to continually update and revise it (e.g., Habermas, 1996, 2006). Yet Dahlgren (2005) helpfully suggests that scholars can be somewhat less bound to the notion of any one "public sphere," while still acknowledging its conceptual utility. If we are to be realistic, we must acknowledge multiple public spheres at work in the contemporary media environment. That is, "In large scale, differentiated late modern societies, not least in the context of nation states permeated by globalization, we have to understand the public sphere as constituting many different spaces" (ibid., p. 148). Dahlgren (2009) suggests that it is more realistic and desirable to examine particular "civic cultures," rather than any one notion of an overarching public sphere. The public sphere(s) may not exist in anywhere near the form that Habermas

conceptualized it in—perhaps it never did—but it has taken on new forms that warrant examination. We may therefore wish to compare the contemporary public sphere to the classic public sphere, perhaps without a priori expectations that there should be, normatively speaking, a perfect match. Such a match would be certainly impossible and not entirely desirable, especially for anyone who does not happen to be a white, upper-class male.

Yet, even among scholars in general agreement with the heuristic value of the Habermasian perspective of the public sphere, there is still widespread empirical and theoretical disagreement about the extent to which the Internet facilitates its normative ideals. Internet enthusiasts have pointed to the possibility that Internet use could lead to increased political engagement and direct democracy, with an unprecedented potential to reach young, isolated, and minority citizens; to the erasing of boundaries between the public and private sphere; to providing direct links to policy makers; to expanding opportunities for political deliberation (Etzioni, 1997; Porter, 1997). These possibilities have motivated a number of optimistic visions of the Internet by various observers (e.g., Pavlik, 1994). Other observers have been more skeptical, predicting that the Internet would reinforce, not reverse, established patterns of political communication, widening gaps between elites and non-elites. They note that opportunity is a necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for political engagement at the individual level, and that information abundance does not mean that all, or even most, individuals will take advantage of it in ways that advance their roles as citizens (Bimber, 2003; Neuman, 1991; Norris, 2001). Interestingly, these theoretical perspectives seem to be rooted in the particular level of analysis upon which each chooses to focus. The optimistic vision of the Internet seems to focus on the revolutionary structures of the public sphere, with the implied assumption that individuals will make rational use of them. The more skeptical vision seems to minimize (to varying degrees) the impact that structural changes might have at the individual level, in favor of human psychology as the defining influence. Finally, cultural studies perspectives suggest highly differentiated online public sphere(s) that vary widely from civic culture to civic culture (e.g., Dahlgren, 2009).

I therefore suggest that the dynamics of the contemporary media environment, and in this case, of those linked to institutions of news and political discussion, can be better understood by integrating levels of analysis through a focus on three realms of the public sphere: the *structural realm,* the *psychological realm,* and the *cultural realm*. The *structural realm* of the public sphere, as defined here, includes the institutions of the public sphere (i.e., news and discussion) and the ways in which these institutions are organized and bounded. The *psychological realm,* on the other hand, points to the individual-level circumstances and psychological dispositions that influence the ways in which individuals interact with the structural and cultural realms of the public sphere. Finally, the *cultural realm* is embodied by the rules and norms fostered by particular "civic cultures" (Dahlgren, 2009).

Rather than myopically focusing on one or the other, a theoretical understanding of the public sphere requires that the three realms be addressed together. This approach takes a cue from an extensive body of literature in social psychology, which suggests the importance of understanding the ways in which individuals (and cultures, I would suggest) interact with larger sociological structures (e.g., House, 1977; Kohn, 1989). In making the case for a more thorough integration of sociology and psychology, Kohn, for example, states that, "In my view, social psychology has become more oblivious to the macrosocial," (p. 26) and that "sociologists tend to act as though they thought social institutions functioned without the benefit of human participants, or at any rate without participants that act human" (p. 27).

Indeed, a lack of theoretical integration of the three realms of the public sphere has, to some extent, interfered with our understanding of the public sphere, from Habermas (1989) onward. Public sphere

theories have been largely sociological and historical in orientation, focusing on structure, often without specific reference to psychology or culture. With his emphasis on the historical role of news and political discussion institutions, as well as structural economic and governmental arrangements in fostering the classic public sphere, Habermas (1989) acts primarily as a sociological historian. In the case of the classic public sphere, the existence of publicly accessible news media and spaces of deliberation, such as coffee houses, salons, pamphlets, and newspapers—all comprising the structural realm of the public sphere—were key in allowing private people to gather and discuss public matters. This was quite unlike the enclosed Courts of the Feudal economic system that preceded the early capitalist system at work in the classic public sphere. Habermas also describes relatively more abstract structural/sociological arrangements, such as the existence of figuratively and architecturally private homes, made possible by the end of feudalism, which allowed for the development of a public sphere.

Yet there is also an implicit psychological component to Habermas's theorizing, though perhaps not a sufficiently explicit or robust one: The very existence of these structures was not enough, it was the rise of the bourgeois class, a class of publicly interested private *individuals* (not serfs or public mayoral lords) that made the classic public sphere possible. In this sense, the Habermasian public sphere was, at least in theory, a moment in time where certain aspects of structure and psychology were in symbiosis, each reinforcing the other, and in turn, strengthening the public sphere. The necessary structures were in place, and there was a class of private individuals with the ostensible psychological motivation and resources to use them. Yet without empirical data on the structural realm, and especially the psychological realm, of the classic public sphere, it is impossible to know the precise details of how the two interacted, or whether or not a symbiosis between them ever really existed.

Similar arguments are made in reverse about the role of advanced capitalism and the television in contributing to the decline of the public sphere. Theoretical explanations tend to focus on the role that television plays in displacing time from civic activities, and in cultivating a passive, homogenous, disconnected, cynical, and consumerist mass citizenry (e.g., Cappella & Jaimeson, 1997; Gerbner, 1969; Putnam, 2000), and they are often rooted in the timing of the cultivation of the mass audience, beginning at the height of the industrial age and urbanization. Marx, for example, discussed the role of capitalism and industrialization in separating humans from labor, nature, and political community (trans. 1974). Furthermore, some observers suggest that rise of suburbanity compounded this problem (Castells, 1996; Garreau, 1991; Putnam, 2000) by creating greater separation between the workplace and the residence, as well as increased segregation by race. By the 1950s, the industrial age had almost run its course, and it was at this time that television was able to provide a new sense of national community for this "lonely crowd" (Reisman, 1953) of atomized individuals (Neuman, 1991). This "illusion" of community of course had the effect of further disconnecting citizens from "real" communities. Taken together then, a supposed macro-psychological condition of modern society (e.g., anomie) (Durkheim, 1952) combined with modern social structures (e.g., the television, urbanization, suburbanization), facilitated the decline of the public sphere.

Yet these theories tend to assume that structure has its most obvious consequences at the individual level, proposing societal-level anomie, as opposed to individual-level psychological conditions or varied cultural experiences, and thus, they seem insufficiently psychological and anthropological in orientation. Not surprisingly, then, some researchers find that sweeping evaluations of the television's role in facilitating the decline of the public sphere are overly simplistic (e.g., Norris, 1996; Shah, 1998; Uslaner, 1998).

Alternatively, we can better understand the impact of the Internet on the public sphere by focusing on the interplay between specific contemporary structures and specific aspects of human psychology and culture.

We may ask: What are the structures of the Net, and how are individuals and cultures disposed to interact with them? Yet in asking this question, it is important to be specific about the particular issues we are interested in, as well as the specific aspects of the structural, psychological, and cultural realms of the public sphere that work to inform them. Given the sheer vastness of the "online world," summary conclusions about the impact of the Internet on the public sphere seem unrealistic. Rather, it seems more useful to explore particular issues pertaining to the public sphere one by one (e.g., accessibility and traversability), so as to identify the specific aspects of the structural, psychological, and cultural realms of the public sphere that are in play.

Defining the Structural Realm

The structural realm of the contemporary public sphere obviously encompasses an array of phenomena, including media ownership, political economics, and legal frameworks, a thorough discussion of which is beyond the scope of this article. But perhaps most relevant to the concept of deliberative democracy is the structural transformation of the boundaries between information/news and online forums of political discussion—the increasingly blurred and porous form they seem to be taking. In this way, the structural realm creates a kind of "political ecology," setting the boundaries that influence the navigation of information and discussion online (Dahlgren, 2005). As we have seen with the newspaper, television, and now the Internet, the structural conditions of these boundaries are often in a state of flux, as technological advances and other social forces come to shape the characteristics of their perimeters.

Defining the Psychological Realm

Yet there is also a psychological realm. Social structures and the boundaries that they create, however revolutionary, do not inevitably lead to their most rational uses. Ultimately, the effects of technology are shaped not only by structure, but also by the ways people actually interact with it—which is shaped in part, by human psychology, or, as explained by Neuman, "the semi-attentive, entertainmentoriented mindset of day-to-day media behavior" (1991, p. 14). Human psychology is by most accounts a relative constant, unlikely to vary with the passage of time and the vagaries of technological development. This is a key difference between the structural and psychological realms of the public sphere—structures are in flux, while human psychology remains relatively stagnant.

Defining the Cultural Realm

While psychology may be relatively constant, cultures, like the structures they occupy, evolve and change. And it is within individuals (and their psychology) to modify their behavior so that it might better fit the cultural status quo. In other words, individuals do not interact with the structural realm of the public sphere in the vacuum of their own minds and individual circumstances; they interact with, and are influenced by, the norms and rules embodied by the cultural realm of the public sphere. As culture pertains to politics, we can point to particular "civic cultures" and the kind of norms and rules they foster. Civic cultures encompass "those features of the sociocultural world that serve as preconditions for people's actual participation in the public sphere and in political society" (Dahlgren, 2009, p. 104). They range in size from a small group of people who read and comment on a particular blog to a national or even a global civic culture. Whatever the size, civic cultures may reinforce the best or worst tendencies of the people who identify with them (ibid.).

A "Tug of War"?

Together, the structural, psychological, and cultural realms work to create the processes involved with people's use of online news and political discussion forums, and all the related communicative "output" of the public sphere. Perhaps ironically, each of the realms often has different implications; they are therefore

sometimes in tension. Neuman (1991) equates these tensions with a kind of "tug of war" between technological changes (in the structural realm) and human psychology. Here, the structural realm may pull norms of discourse in one direction, while the psychological realm pulls hard in the other direction. Some observers have suggested that, at the individual level, the tug of war is likely to be dominated by the psychological realm. They take what Bimber (2003) has termed a "psychological perspective" to theorizing about individual-level use of the Internet. This position marks a substantial improvement to the somewhat naïve assumption that the Internet will inevitably fulfill its structural possibilities for the public sphere.

Yet conclusions that psychology is universally more powerful than structure, that the two are constantly at odds with each other, and that cultural factors are irrelevant, seem a bit hasty and in need of refinement. It is possible that, in some cases, the structural realm may be more powerful, and the psychological realm may be more ambivalent. In some cases, the cultural realm will overcome the less than civically virtuous aspects of human psychology and speak to, perhaps latent, pro-civic tendencies. As such, a "tug of war" does not seem to be a completely appropriate metaphor for dynamics involved in the contemporary public sphere (nor do I imagine that Neuman would consider it as such). Public sphere dynamics are likely to vary with the specific structures in place and the particular individual and cultural level variables that are in play. By examining certain characteristics of each realm of the online public sphere and how they might interact, a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary public sphere may be realized. The structural, psychological, and cultural realms of the public sphere are in full operation as we now turn our attention to the *accessibility* and *traversability* of the "institutions" of the contemporary public sphere.

Accessibility

Today, it is almost without question that the Internet has become an integral part of the contemporary public sphere (e.g., Best, Chmielewski, & Krueger, 2005; Madden, 2006). Yet questions remain as to whether or not the public sphere is more accessible. The structural realm offers increased availability of news and forums of political discussion online, which could have the effect of increasing the porousness of boundaries between the private and the public spheres, which in turn would make the public sphere more accessible to more citizens, especially to those who might not otherwise engage in news use and political discussion. While not all people have simple physical access to the Internet (especially in less-developed regions), which is to say a viable Internet connection and regular access to a computer to connect to it, it would seem that those who do would be able to access the public sphere with greater ease than ever before.

Classic explanations of political behavior, grounded in rational choice theory, point in this direction (e.g., Downs, 1957). A "rational choice" involves a form of cost-benefit analysis, which may be applied in this case to strategies involved in information/news seeking and decisions to participate in political discussion. In the case of news use, for example, if the potential costs of news (e.g., time, money, mental exertion) for certain individuals outweigh its potential benefits (e.g., uncertainty reduction), these individuals are unlikely to seek news or engage in political discussion. Of course, the exact opposite is true if the situation is reversed and the benefits outweigh the costs. This line of reasoning suggests that if technological developments, such as the Internet, increase the porousness of the boundaries between the private and the public spheres by structurally reducing the cost of news acquisition, providing more convenient and less demanding political discussion forums, people will be more likely to engage in such activities. Most importantly, those individuals with the most to gain will be the most likely benefit from these developments (for discussion, see Bimber, 2003).

Yet human beings are not always rational creatures (Katz & Rice, 2002; Neuman, 1991). The psychological realm of the public sphere suggests that, as the cost of entry to the public sphere decreases and sources of

news and forums of political discussion increase, the "public sphere rich" will actually get richer, while the "public sphere poor" will remain relatively poorer (Bimber, 2003). This is the central proposition of the knowledge gap hypothesis, which is based in schema theory and related research, suggesting that individuals with more complex cognitive schema are better able to process and incorporate new information (Donohue, Tichenor, & Olien, 1975). Thus, it seems, new information technologies beyond the newspaper (which for the first time allowed people to participate in the public sphere) have done little to stimulate accessibility.

Research thus far suggests that the Internet has not closed the knowledge gap, and that it may, in fact, be widening it. Jennings and Zeitner (2003) conclude, for example, that the political involvement gap has widened between political and nonpolitical users of the Internet. Bimber and Davis (2003) similarly find that the more people read about campaigns in newspapers or learn about them through news broadcasts, the more likely it is that they will also attend to such information online. As with users of traditional news sources, users of online news sources tend to be white males, high in socioeconomic status, political efficacy, and political knowledge (Bimber, 2001, 2003; Scheufele & Nisbet, 2002), who have an interest in politics and are more likely to be skeptical of information (Bimber, 2003; also see Shah et al., 2005). A Pew report furthermore finds that people who used the Internet for news and information about the 2006 U.S. midterms elections were predominantly: white (77%) males (53%) under the age of 50 (71%) with a high income (more than $75,000 = 44%), and a college degree (49%) (Rainie & Horrigan, 2007). In a experiment using a nationally representative panel, Price, Cappella, and Nir (2002) found that individuals who participated in scheduled online discussions conformed to a hierarchical model of participation—they were older, highly educated, predominantly white, more politically knowledgeable, more politically interested and active, and had higher levels of social trust. More recently, Hindman (2009) makes the case that political blogs, with all of their highly vaunted egalitarian potential, are used by a small, elite group and are written by an even smaller elite group.

There is even some evidence suggesting that the pursuit of increased amounts of information may actually be counterproductive for some people, who experience information overload (Couldry & Langer, 2005) and uncertainty about what to trust (Dutton & Shepherd, 2006). Furthermore, Prior (2007) finds that an environment of media abundance with unlimited choice contributes to a widening gap between those people who use new media for politically relevant purposes and those who use it to avoid politics altogether in favor of entertainment. Indeed, the psychological realm of the public sphere suggests that individuals cannot effectively enact their roles as citizens on their own. This is problematic for liberal conceptualizations of citizenship, which tend to assume that people are innately and "naturally" prepared for such roles (Dahlgren, 2009).

The Role of the Cultural Realm

Yet there is likely to be some variance in accessibility over time and among particular groups of people; the cultural realm of the public sphere helps to account for this variance. As suggested by Dahlgren (2009), individuals are at their civic best when nurtured by a supportive "civic culture." A supportive "civic culture"—or in Bourdieu's terms, civic "habitus"—that fosters the best in individuals, or a certain "civic virtue" may provide a powerful counterpoint to civically problematic psychological forces. This variation in accessibility over time is illustrated quite well in Putnam's "Bowling Alone" thesis, which connects a 40-year decline in political participation to a corresponding decline in social capital. In essence, he finds that people find the public sphere most accessible (in spite of their mass audience psychology) when they are in a supportive civic environment. Yet a supportive civic culture need not take the form of the bowling

leagues and service clubs of yesteryear; new forms of association may emerge that are more agreeable to contemporary sensibilities.

For now (at least at the U.S. national level), however, the cultural realm seems insufficient to counter the psychological realm. Collectively, these realms work to dramatically complicate the potentially rosy picture painted by some aspects of the structural realm of the public sphere. Increased options for news use and political discussion are insufficient motivation for engagement in the public sphere. Or, as adroitly put by Neuman, If many citizens are ill informed, misinformed, or ambivalent about their civic duties, it is not because the price of a newspaper is too high or because television news is scheduled at an inconvenient time. Such public attitudes and behaviors are not the beginning of a new and ominous trend; they are political constants, they are the backdrop against which all new technologies are introduced. (1991, p. 166) Here, we see Neuman's "tug of war" most concretely—the structural realm is offering increased opportunity for news use and political discussion, but the psychological and cultural realms are resisting (or at least ignoring) these structural changes and pulling hard in the opposite direction. However, once people have managed to jump over the individual-, structural-, and cultural-level hurdles to actually access the contemporary public sphere, questions arise as to how its boundaries influence their experience of it.

Traversability

Some of these questions revolve around the concept of traversability. I have argued that the more intimate the relationship between news and political discussion, the greater the traversability of the public sphere. This relationship stems from a more general dynamic between news media use and political discussion that varies in intimacy, but is relatively consistent in terms of its mere existence.

Indeed, an empirical relationship between news media use and political discussion has been relatively well established in research. Koch (1994), for example, finds that reading *The New York Times* on a daily basis causes a significant increase in political discussion. Kim, Wyatt, and Katz (1999) furthermore find a relationship between newspaper reading and political conversation. Interestingly, however, they do not find a significant relationship between television news use and political conversation. This finding is in line with the notion that television is not particularly useful to the public sphere (Habermas, 1989) and is consistent with the results of other studies. Robinson and Davis (1990), for example, find that newspaper reading is a significant predictor of public knowledge of candidates and political issues, but that watching television news has very small to negligible effects. It is not clear from these studies, however, how certain types of news media connect up to different forums of political discussion

Indeed, traditional news media seem to present no clear connection to particular forums of political discussion. It is difficult to see, for example, how a newspaper is directly connected to political discussion at a volunteer association (commonly invoked as an important forum for face-to-face political discussion) (e.g., Scheufele et al., 2004, 2006). While it is easy to see how reading the newspaper could lead to discussion in any number of forums, a newspaper presents no obvious link to any contemporary forum of political discussion. The boundaries between newspapers and volunteer associations, for example, are not blurred, but clear and easily delineated. The boundaries between these two spaces are also less porous than those found online for at least two reasons: 1) Newspapers and volunteer associations are not aligned closely together in time and space, allowing information garnered from newspapers to be forgotten or made less meaningful in the transition, and 2) volunteer associations are not specifically designated spaces for political discussion, and indeed have other, more explicit purposes, which may make the transition from news to discussion a bit more challenging.

Online news, on the other hand, seems to have its most obvious expression in online forums of discussion. The meaning of this connection is reflected by Dahlgren (2005), who describes the public sphere as a process of citizen interaction within discursive spaces, which he says is accentuated through the use of new media: Interaction [in the context of the public sphere] actually consists of two aspects. First, it has to do with the citizens' encounters with the media—the communicative processes of making sense, interpreting, and using the output. The second aspect of interaction is that between citizens themselves, which can include anything from two-person conversations to large meetings. To point to the interaction among citizens—whether or not it is formalized as deliberation—is to take a step into the social contexts of everyday life. Interaction has its sites and spaces, its discursive practices, its psychocultural aspects; in this sense, the public sphere has a very fluid, sprawling quality (…). With the advent of the Net, civic interaction takes a major historical step by going online, and the sprawling character of the public sphere becomes all the more accentuated. (p. 149)

Increasingly blurred and porous boundaries between "news" and "political discussion" work to create this fluid quality. Or to return to Dahlgren, We tend to think to think in terms of either "one to many" forms of communication, as typified by the mass media, or "one to one communication" that is paradigmatic of interaction. This neat distinction unravels on the Internet, where, for example, group communication can have attributes of both mass communication and interaction. (ibid., p. 150)

All of this has the effect of connecting sites of news and discussion in time and space, and thus connecting the extent to which online news informs or contributes strongly to the frequency with which people discuss politics online. The boundary conditions of the contemporary public sphere allow individuals to traverse seamlessly and with relative ease from one discursive space to the next, creating an environment of increased traversability. For an understanding of how this might practically operate, we turn to the structural realm of the contemporary public sphere.

The Structural Realm and Traversability

In the 18th and 19th centuries, coffee houses, salons, and newspapers were the institutions comprising the structural realm of the classic public sphere. With the intensification of the industrial age in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, newspapers, radio, television, and perhaps volunteer associations, church, and the workplace may be identified as institutions of the public sphere. With the advent of the Internet, the institutions of the public sphere have taken a new structural form—they may include formal news sites, video sharing sites, blogs, wikis, social networking sites, chat rooms, Web site bulletin boards, e-mail, instant messaging, and so on. Blurred and porous boundaries between these discursive domains, allow for increased reversibility.

This may happen in a number of different ways. For example, most news sites now enable readers to comment on certain articles, allowing them to discuss (or at least comment on) what they read in the same space that they read it. Social networking sites allow users to post links to news articles and their opinions or thoughts on political information via status updates on Facebook and Twitter, which may then be discussed among social networks through "comments" and "tweets." Often, news sites even provide links to social networking sites, which allow for easier and faster transitions from one to the other. People can post an article on their Twitter or Facebook pages, by simply hitting the "retweet" or "like" icon, for example. Indeed, most transitions between news and discussion are either seamless or just a click or two away. People may therefore read about or watch the news online, and in the very next moment, blog about it or post a video on a video sharing site, such as YouTube, where it may in turn be discussed, or simply e-mail someone. Other new information technologies besides the Internet may also be involved this process.

Cell phones, particularly "smart phones," enable people to traverse more easily and in more locations from news to political discussion. They also allow for convergence of multiple communication technologies. People may, for instance, be reading a newspaper or watching television news and then use their phone to update their facebook status, send a text message, or write an e-mail to an editor, for that matter.

Occasionally, it is altogether unclear when one is using the news and when one is discussing it (e.g., blogs, tweets). Some scholars see this form of ambiguity as fundamentally postmodern due the unprecedented amount of agency given to audiences (e.g., Landow, 1997; Murray, 1997; Wall, 2005). As Murray suggests (while clearly not referring to blogs or social networking sites, which did not yet exist), "When things are going right on the computer, we can be both the dancer and the caller of the dance. This is the feeling of agency" (1997, p. 128). All in all, in the structural realm of the contemporary public sphere, "news" and political "discussion" appear to be intimately linked—indeed, sometimes indistinguishable from one another—facilitating high levels of traversability.

Traversability and the Psychological Realm

In contrast to "accessibility," the psychological realm of the contemporary public sphere does not appear to interfere with structural-level traversability, and may even facilitate it. This is so in part because once people have gained access to the public sphere, they are already likely to be relatively high in SES, political knowledge, and political self-efficacy, as well as in other qualities necessary to maintain interest in traversing the public sphere. The main remaining psychological-level challenge would then seem to revolve around discrepancies in online navigational skills. Unskilled Internet users who access the public sphere, for example, may understand how to get to a news site, but then may have trouble traversing to various forums of political discussion.

Yet, from a neuropsychological perspective, this challenge would seem to resolve itself over time, at least among those people with structural Internet access and sufficient motivation to engage with the public sphere (i.e., people who find the public sphere accessible). This is because the structure of the Internet in many ways mirrors the structure of the brain, quite likely making traversing through the Internet a relatively intuitive process over time. Theories of human information processing, for example, claim that memory is constructed of multiple nodes that are connected to one another through links (e.g., Collins & Loftus, 1975). In fact, the structural foundation of hypermedia systems, like the Web, are rooted in this model of human memory. Vannaver Bush (1945), often credited with the conceptual invention of the Web, theorized about a machine that would be modeled after human memory. More recently, the term "structural isomorphism" (Eveland & Dunwoody, 2001) has been used to describe the structural similarities between hypermedia and human cognition (Churcher, 1989). A recent UCLA study (as cited in LiveScience.com, 2009), finds that, after minimal amounts of training in online searching, participants with little online experience displayed very similar brain activation patterns to Internet-savvy users. Currently, young people are among the most skilled Internet users, suggesting that people who grow up using the Internet are more adept at using it. For all of these reasons, it is reasonable to suspect that, over time, unskilled Internet users with high levels of contemporary public sphere access will be an increasingly small group of people.

With little "interference" and possible assistance from the psychological realm of the public sphere, Neuman's tug-of-war metaphor seems to be inappropriate—the structural realm and psychological realms of the public sphere are essentially on the same sides of the rope. We should therefore expect to find a relationship between online news and online discussion that is similar to that which exists between

traditional news media and online discussion, but an even more intimate one, given the increased traversability provided by the Internet.

Indeed, empirical research lends credence to this possibility. According to the survey findings of Shah and his colleagues, for example, online information-seeking is positively associated with interactive civic messaging, while newspaper use and television news use are non-significant (Shah et al., 2005). Similarly, Brundidge (2010) finds a particularly strong relationship between online news and online discussion when compared to the relationships between traditional news use and various forums of "faceto-face" discussion.

Traversability and the Cultural Realm

Obviously, traversability is not the only normative requirement for a healthy public sphere. Even when this structural requirement for the institutions of the public sphere (news and forums of political discussion) is met, the normative quality of the discourse that takes place within the structures may still be relatively low. One might even argue that the kind of traversability experienced online, absent of any commitment to high quality deliberation, may, in fact, lead to less civil, off the cuff, less-processed political talk, or less of what we might traditionally call "discussion." Tweeting appears to be quite unlike the high-minded debate that took place in the coffee houses and salons of the classic public sphere. Indeed, Papacharissi (2002) proposes: When individuals address random topics, in a random order, without a commonly shared understanding of the social importance of a particular issue, then conversation becomes more fragmented and its impact is mitigated. The ability to discuss any political subject at random, drifting in and out of discussions and topics on whim can be very liberating, but it does not create a common starting point for political discussion. (p.17)

Yet the cultural realm has powerful sway over just which normative outcomes become associated with traversability. Depending on how broadly culture is defined, we can point to different outcomes at different levels. Papacharissi (2009), for example, talks about an overarching postmodern culture that glorifies self-expression, which has translated into a kind of "civic narcissism" enabled by the interactive and self-broadcasting capabilities of Web 2.0. A public sphere with increased traversability may interact with "civic narcissism," allowing people, for example, to move quickly from reading the news to broadcasting their own thoughts about it (e.g., via blogs, tweets, facebook status updates). This form of broadcasting is not exactly what Habermas (1989) had in mind, but nevertheless, it may be civically beneficial. As noted by Papacharissi (2009), "*This particular breed of* narcissism has a democratizing effect. The subjective focus of blogs and similar forums encourages plurality of voices and expands the public agenda. While narcissistically motivated, blogs are democratizing in a unique manner" (p. 238).

Smaller cultures, rather than postmodern culture "at large," such as the cultures that emerge around particular news Web sites, blogs, and other forums for politically relevant discourse may also be relevant to normative outcomes associated with traversability. More sophisticated viewers of particular news sites, for example, may use the traversability of that site to engage in more rational and civil debates. This may in turn set a kind of cultural norm for those wishing to respond to particular news articles. Or there may be some sort of formal rules set up in the form of a "mission statement," that set the stage for particular norms of discourse. A mission statement certainly does not create a culture, but is just one of many possible factors. The *Huffington Post*, for example, states: [W]e do not allow hate speech, nor do we allow speech that advocates or supports hatred or unlawful violence. We do not allow racism, sexism, homophobia, antiSemitism, or other intolerance. Likewise, threats of violence or threats to anyone or any group's personal safety are not acceptable. We also do not allow false claims or misleading implications that any individual or group perpetuates hate or unlawful violence.

Traversability is thus a necessary, while not sufficient, criterion for a healthy public sphere. For normatively positive outcomes to arise out of traversability, there must be cultural support. A model of how this theoretical process works is depicted in Figure 1.

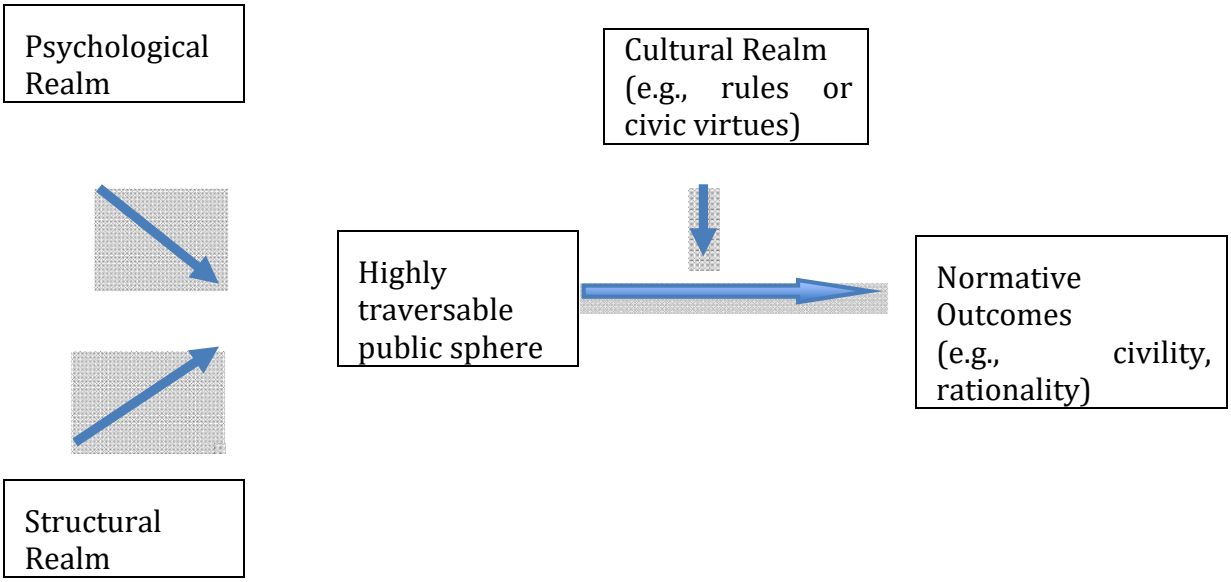

Figure 1. Normative Outcomes of a Highly Traversable Contemporary Public Sphere.

The "Classic," Industrial Age," and "Contemporary" Public Spheres

In terms of accessibility and traversability, then, the contemporary public sphere may be somewhat more like the Habermasian "classic public sphere," and less like the public sphere of the "industrial age." As noted by Papacharissi, both are relatively low in accessibility: "This virtual sphere is dominated by bourgeois computer holders, much like the one traced by Habermas consisting of bourgeois property holders" (2002, p. 21). Yet both are also comparatively high in traversability.

Indeed, the classic public sphere appears to have been traversable, grounded as public deliberation was in the world of Arts and Letters. The salons and coffee houses at this time were, according to Habermas, "centers of criticism—literary at first, then also political" (1989, p. 32), as well as places where "literature had to legitimate itself" (ibid., p. 33). In this sense, the boundaries between the discursive spaces of the classic public sphere were both blurred and porous. They were *blurred* because literary works were, at least metaphorically speaking, both "written" and "discussed" in the coffee houses and salons—literature was discussion and discussion was literature. The boundaries between literature and discussion were *porous* to the extent that the very purpose of the salons and coffee houses was the discussion of literature. It was obviously quite easy, then—and indeed, expected—to broach topics political and otherwise that were related in some way to literature. Collectively, the structural boundaries of the classic public sphere seem to have provided direct mechanisms for connecting literature (including news) and discussion in time and space, allowing participants to traverse seamlessly and with ease from one form of discourse to the other. This is, in fact, at the very core of the idea of the classic public sphere. On the other hand, the classic public sphere was not nearly as accessible as it was traversable, at least by contemporary standards. Though there was an active emphasis placed on the idea of accessibility, grounded in Enlightenment ideals

of equality, questions remain as to how that idea bore out in reality, even among white propertied men. And, as acknowledged by Habermas himself, women, nonwhites, and people of lower socioeconomic status were not admitted.

One of the chief features of the "industrial age public sphere," however, was its tendency to democratize information, thereby increasing accessibility (at least to information). The mass production and distribution of newspapers made politically relevant information widely available to the public and made large-scale democracies possible (e.g., Tocqueville, 1840, trans. 1945). Even the much-maligned television seems to have had, at least initially, a democratizing effect on information. As observed by Blumler (1970): "[Television] conveys impressions of the world of politics to individuals whose access to serious coverage of current affairs is otherwise quite limited" and could "promote the development of more effective patterns of citizenship." In fact, early research findings indicated that voters, not excluding less-informed ones, became more informed through their television use (Blumler & McQuail, 1968). At the same time, a classic line of thought in the social sciences has been in effect that the traversability of the public sphere in the Western world was problematized during the industrial age through increased urbanization and suburbanization, which generally resulted in anomie, the erosion of community infrastructure and available forums for civic association (Durkheim, 1952; Putnam, 2000). Up to a point, Marx (1844/1974) can be placed with this group, for his concern with the structural forces of capitalism and industrialization in separating humans from labor, nature, and political community.

While very much evolving out of, and not at all severed from previous media configurations, the Internet provides a possible departure from the hampered traversability associated with the late 19th and the 20th centuries—a transition from an industrial to an information age. Of course, all things are relative. Accessibility and traversability, while imperfect in Western democracies, are even more imperfect in autocracies. A prominent example of both hampered accessibility and traversability exists in China, which has one of the most tightly controlled information environments in the world, denying the Chinese public access to certain sites, such as Twitter and YouTube, and solidifying (as opposed to making more porous) the boundaries between news and discussion by closely monitoring, censoring, and limiting forums of discussion.

A picture of what the contemporary public sphere looks like relative to other theoretical environments—including that of the "classic public sphere," the "industrial age public sphere," the "ideal public sphere," and the "authoritarian regime" public sphere—is schematically displayed in Figure 2. It is important to note that the figure does not account for variance in civic cultures over time, but rather, conveys the general features of each environment.

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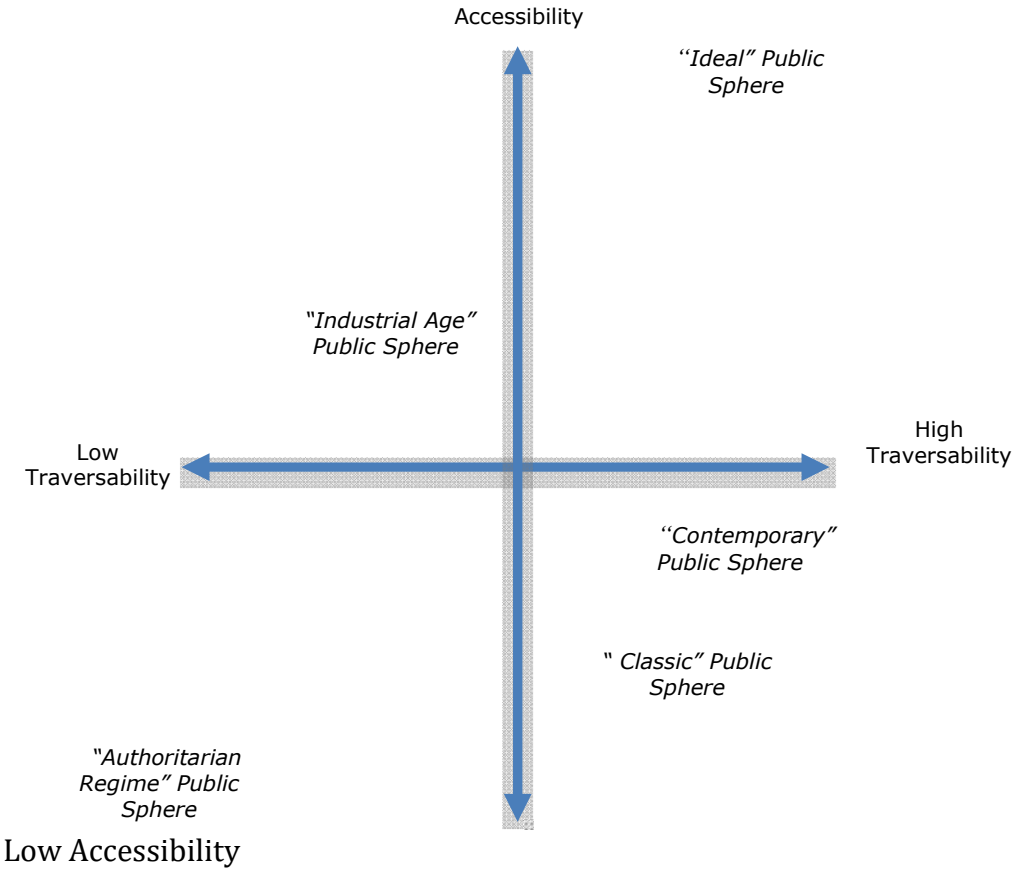

Figure 2. The Accessibility and Traversability of the "Ideal," "Classic," "Industrial Age," "Information Age," and "Authoritarian Regime" Public Spheres.

Conclusion

This article put forth three major propositions: First, there is a fundamental tension between the psychological and structural realms that governs the accessibility of the public sphere—a "tug of war" (Neuman, 1991) most likely to be won by the psychological realm, all else being equal. Yet the degree to which this is the case varies with the cultural realm—the extent to which it fosters civic virtues of participation and informed, deliberative citizenship as the norm. Second, the structural realm and psychological realm work together to create a highly traversable contemporary public sphere. The cultural realm moderates normative outcomes of this environment, such as civility and rationality. Finally, in terms of accessibility and traversability, the contemporary public sphere is actually more similar to the classic public sphere than it is to the industrial age public sphere.

A public sphere with increased traversability and limited accessibility suggests a newly dynamic communication environment for a certain elite segment of the citizenry. While such an environment leads to a greater knowledge gap between elites and non-elites, it also suggests a portion of the citizenry that is more informationally empowered than ever before. Indeed, if the Internet has not changed "who" does

politics, it has changed the way that politics is done (Bimber, 2003). Dahlgren, interestingly compares activist movements stemming from the contemporary public sphere "with the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, where rather small but determined groups could have a significant impact on political agendas" (2005, p. 159), while also adding that today's activists are generally even more sophisticated and effective due to their adroit use of new media.

All in all, it is clear that the various ways in which citizens interact with online news and forums for political discussion have become central to the future of democracy. Policy considerations may be directed toward creating civic cultures that foster a sense of civic virtue and accessibility, and that harness the power of traversability while minimizing its liabilities.

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