Chapter 21
Interrogating and Reimagining the Virtual Public Sphere in Developing Countries

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ABSTRACT

Revisiting the concept of a virtual public sphere, this chapter interrogates the concepts of good governance, digital divide, the role of culture in identifying what constitutes common good and examines how Habermas' conceptualization of the public sphere relates to non-Western contexts where asymmetries in access to basic resources, power to leverage networks, and levels of civic competencies are the norm. Through case studies from Bangalore City, India, where information and communication technologies are being used to empower ordinary citizens to participate in local governance in the face of deep digital divides, it is argued that there is a need to avoid essentialising and privileging online venues and interactions in our discussions of the virtual public sphere and study how people strategically combine preexisting civic and communication networks with the affordances of new media technologies to participate as citizens.

INTRODUCTION

The virtual public sphere has become important to discussions of democratization, citizen engagement and activism following the events collectively labeled the Arab Spring. With the proliferation of new media technologies, it is posited that the virtual public sphere will empower people to engage in meaningful public discourse, and effect political change. In this context, Habermas' deliberative public sphere conception has become a critical ideal for thinking about the democratic role of communication (Dahlberg, 2014). However, understanding the virtual public sphere and the role that communication technologies play in facilitating citizen engagement and how people decide what constitutes 'common good', in non-Western contexts are often influenced by many preexisting social, cultural, political and economic factors.

Scholars have suggested that since online spaces are intertwined with the politics and practice of everyday life (Bernal, 2005); there is a need to analyze the affordances of these media and investigate the extent to which these conversations facilitate democratic discussion and action (Jackson & Valentine, 2014; Dahlgren, 2005; Poster, 1995). This has led researchers to examine whether cyberspace can act as a public sphere (Pappacharissi, 2002, 2009), its' potential to reinvigorate the public sphere (Holt, 2004) and the extent to which online spaces can increase citizens' exposure to political discussion and confrontation (Brundidge, 2010). At the same time, Habermas' conception of the public sphere itself has undergone refinement (Habermas, 2006), critiques (Devenney, 2009; Norval, 2007; Thomassen, 2007) and reassessments (Dahlberg, 2014). The proliferation of interactive media options and social networking sites has also led to debates about whether they lead to greater polarization (Stroud, 2010) or more open-ended public sphere-like modes of participation (Colleoni, Rozza, & Arvidsson, 2014; Jackson & Valentine, 2014). The divergent results synthesized from literature suggest that there is a need to study how the affordances and features of newer communication platforms interact with the culture and practices of users. In addition, the contours of and practices within a virtual public sphere could vary based on social and geographical context, if we admit that cyberspace(s) operates 'as both an extension and evolution of everyday social practice' (Cohen, 2007 in Graham, 2011, p. 220). Within this framework, examining what a virtual public sphere might look like and how it might aid citizens to participate in governance involves looking at not only the technological aspects, but also how people define governance and common good in a specific community. This chapter examines these concepts through research conducted in Bangalore City, India, where information and communication technologies are being used to empower ordinary citizens to participate in local governance in the face of deep digital divides.

BACKGROUND

The Public Sphere, Democracy, Governance, and Communication Technologies

In Habermasian terms, the public sphere is seen as comprised of communicative spaces that facilitate the formation of public opinion and political will, a sphere that mediates between the private domain and the realm of public authority by allowing free access and free flow of information and ideas (Habermas, 1991). The concept of deliberative democracy follows the notion of the public sphere and is rooted in Habermas' idea of communicative rationality. Deliberative democracy underscores the notion of providing reasons for decisions taken and the concept of reciprocity where decision makers owe it to the people to justify their decisions. These ideas are foundational to governance, if we define governance as inclusive of the role of citizens in the policy process and how groups within a society organize to make and implement decisions through the processes of differentiation, networks, trust, diplomacy and coalition building (Rhodes, 1997). Deliberation, reciprocity, and mutual respect are critical to civic interactions that occur as part of the governance process, particularly in situations where deep differences exist, where consensus is not likely, and people have to arrive at acceptable solutions via dialogue. With the advent of newer communication technologies, it has become imperative that we study how people use these technological options to harness their social capital, deliberate and engage in political mobilization. Before addressing these interconnected ideas, it is important to highlight the unresolved debates related to these concepts.

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