Chapter VIII

Creating a Democratic Public Sphere through Political Discussion: The Case of Abortion Discourse on the Internet

Steven M. Schneider
State University of New York, USA

Computer-mediated discussion is an increasingly popular method of engaging in political talk with other citizens. This article presents a case study of a Usenet newsgroup focused on abortion and discusses the creation of public sphere by the conversants. The notion of the public sphere is discussed, and measures allowing an assessment of its democratic character are proposed. A formula for estimating entropy is developed and applied to data obtained from the case study of an ongoing discussion. A high level of inequality in participation among conversants is noted, with very few of the discussants responsible for an extraordinarily high proportion of the content. This inequality, though tempered by analysis of the newsgroup on a day-to-day basis, calls into question the democratic character of the public sphere represented by this conversation.

The emergence of computer-mediated political discussion represents an enhancement of opportunities for individual citizens to talk with each other about politics. This enhancement has important consequences for the structure of what can be termed the public sphere. This article explores these consequences through the structural analysis of an ongoing conversation about a political issue taking place in a Usenet newsgroup. This article presents a part of an analysis from a case study of a year-long political conversation focused on abortion and conducted on computer networks. The project draws on three separate topics in the scholarly literature, each of which is briefly introduced in the following section: public

sphere, computer-mediated communication, and abortion discourse. Part 2 of the article describes a technique for assessing the structure of the public sphere created through computer-mediated communication and presents results from the analysis. The focus of the present work is on the structure of the arena; forthcoming analyses will examine the content of the conversation and the behavior of the conversants. The final section outlines conclusions, suggests implications of the findings to date, and raises issues for further analysis.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: THE PUBLIC SPHERE, COMPUTER-MEDIATED DISCUSSION, AND ABORTION DISCOURSE

Conversation is the foundation on which all political behavior is built (Ackerman, 1989; Barber, 1984; Dewey, 1959; Huspek & Kendall, 1991). Through political conversation, the abstract world of issues and events is transformed into meaningful reality with personal consequences. "Democracy begins in conversation," wrote John Dewey (1959). Bruce Ackerman (1989, p. 6) agreed: "Dialogue is the first obligation of citizenship."

Recent analyses of the state of democracy in the United States lament the lack of opportunities for ordinary Americans to talk with each other in public settings about public issues (Barber, 1984, Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1991; Oldenburg, 1989). These settings include those places occupying "associational space" encompassing the "core settings of informal public life" (Oldenburg, 1989). Oldenburg (1989) and Bellah et al. (1991) have identified the scarcity of associational space as one of the primary ills facing our polity. These opportunities have declined in recent decades as the public sphere has become increasingly focused on satisfying commercial and other private interests (Habermas, 1989). Furthermore, the few opportunities that remain for public conversation have become less meaningful as citizens adopt a consumerist approach to politics and view the public interest as a majoritarian or pluralist construct (Dahl, 1989).

Creating new settings for public interaction and public life may revive our democratic spirit and renew our public consciousness. I believe the changing structure of communication in the late 20th century offers this possibility. By shifting the focus from communication based on transactions with large, homogenous, undifferentiated, and anonymous audiences (Lasswell, 1948; Wright, 1975) to communication based on exchange among small, heterogeneous, distinct, and identifiable participants (Abramson, Arterton, & Orren, 1988; Neuman, 1991; Rogers, 1986; Stevens, 1981), it may be possible to reclaim the resources necessary to support opportunities for effective political discussion.

Among the recent developments in communication technology that offer this shift in focus is the rapidly emerging medium of computer-mediated discussion, in which individuals use computers and computer networks to engage in conversations that take place over time. I believe this type of communication, when focused on politic, can be an important contributor to developing the skills necessary for political discussion, and in fact can serve as the platform for a meaningful forum for democratic political discussion.

The question facing those creating and using emerging forms of associational space is how to ensure that these spaces satisfy desired democratic values. One theoretical domain to which we can turn for answers is concerned with the notion of the public sphere. Scholarly

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