

# The Virtual Public Sphere

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## THE VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE: EVOLUTION

The public sphere does not exist and operate in the same way everywhere. Every country is different with regard to its own economic, social, political, and cultural characteristics and relations; therefore, each country's public sphere has its own roots which grow and develop within a unique set of conditions and circumstances. As a result, the impact of information technology (IT) on a public sphere will also vary considerably from one country to another. According to the German social theorist, Jürgen Habermas (1989, 1996), the public sphere serves as a social "space," which is separate from the private sphere of family relations, the commercial sphere of business and commerce, and the governmental sphere, which is dominated by the activities of the state. Its importance is that it contributes to the strengthening of democracy by, in effect, serving as a forum for reasoned discussion about politics and civic affairs. Furthermore, Habermas regards the public sphere as embodying such core liberal beliefs as individual rights, that is, the freedoms of speech, press, assembly and communication, and "privacy rights" (Cohen & Arato 1992, p. 211), which he thought were needed to ensure society's autonomy from the state. Thus, for the purposes of this article, public sphere is defined as a "territory" of social relations that exist outside of the roles, duties, and constraints established by government, the marketplace, and kinship ties.

Habermas' conception of the **public sphere** is both a historical description and an ideal type. Historically, what Habermas refers to as the bourgeois public sphere emerged from the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment in Europe, for example, England and France, as well as early America, and which went into decline in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a result of the increasing domination of the mass media, which transformed a reading public that debated matters of culture into disengaged consumers (Keane, 1998, p. 160). Along the way, active deliberation and participation were replaced by passive consumption of mass culture. As an ideal type, however, the public

sphere represents an arena, absent of class and other social distinctions, in which private citizens can engage in critical deliberation and reasoned dialogue about important matters regarding politics and culture.

The emergence of IT, particularly in the form of computer networks, as a progressive social force coincides with the apex of mass media's domination of the public sphere in liberal democracies. Since the creation of the World Wide Web (WWW) in the early 1990s, various observers have touted IT's potential to strengthen democratic institutions (e.g., Barber 2003; Becker & Slaton, 2000; Benkler, 2006; Cleveland, 1985; Cropf & Casaregola, 1998; Davis, Elin, & Reehner, 2002). The WWW, it is thought, provides citizens with numerous opportunities to engage in the political process as well as to take a more active role in the governance process. Benkler (2006), for example, asserts the WWW encourages a more open, participatory, and activist approach because it enables users to communicate directly with potentially many other users in a way that is outside the control of the media owners and is less corruptible by money than are the mass media (p. 11). Fulfilling the promise of the virtual public sphere, however, depends on political will; governments must commit the resources needed to facilitate public access to the technology and remove legal and economic barriers to the free flow of information inside and outside national boundaries.

## DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE AND E-GOVERNMENT

From the beginning of the information age, some forward thinking individuals believed that IT might one day serve as a catalyst for social and political change. They believed that the ability of individuals to gain access to, store, and manipulate vast amounts of information, which IT makes possible, would lead to a situation where "vast numbers of people empowered by knowledge...assert the right or feel the obligation to make policy" (Cleveland, 1985). The potential of

IT, then and now, is that it enables a many-to-many, decentralized, and nonhierarchical flow of information. By contrast, the mass media model of information flow is top-down, one-to-many, and centralized. In addition, the mass media require large amounts of capital investment, which effectively places control of a country's mass media in the hands of a small number of large organizations, either multinational or state-run corporations. Moreover, economic concentration often results in the concentration of political power, which explains why the mass media wield an inordinate amount of influence in Western democratic societies.

It is necessary to distinguish between the virtual public sphere and **e-government**. E-government is the use of IT to provide governmental information to citizens and to assist in the delivery of public goods and services. E-government emerged as a phenomenon among Western governments during the mid-1990s; at that time, governments borrowed techniques and processes involving IT already in use by businesses to facilitate consumer access to goods and services and to optimize management and organizational operations. The principal focus, however, was on a "services first, democracy later approach" (Clift, 1998). In other words, the use of IT is to provide governmental services more efficiently, that is, cut costs, rather than as a means to foster greater public engagement and civic deliberation about politics and government (Northrup, Kraemer, Dunkle, & King, 1990). Thus most e-government efforts, while well-intentioned, often fell far short of the activists' ideal of serving as an effective mechanism for achieving e-democracy (see below).

### **IMPORTANCE OF A VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE THAT IS DIFFERENTIATED FROM E-GOVERNMENT**

In this article, the virtual public sphere is defined as the use of IT, particularly the WWW, to empower ordinary citizens to engage in effective public discourse regarding the proper ends of politics and the means to attain those ends. While building the virtual public sphere typically lags behind a service-based strategy in terms of public sector online efforts, more governments, in cooperation with nongovernmental entities, are starting to provide virtual forums for public deliberation and policy making. As the global IT revolution continues to reshape social and economic institutions, the virtual

public sphere will play a key role in bringing about e-democracy or "the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by democratic actors (government officials, the media, political organizations, citizens/voters) within political and governance processes of local communities, nations and on the international stage" (Clift, 2004, p. 38). The theoretical literature suggests that as more individuals go online to participate in discussions, organize for political action, and thereby attempt to sway official decision making, the vast potential for the virtual public sphere to mold public opinion and shape public policies will be realized. Empirically, evidence from research on different countries around the world offers grounds for guarded optimism as governments, civic groups, and activists seize on technology's possibilities to strengthen democratic institutions and processes. However, it should be noted that the focus in this article is on developed countries. The author therefore acknowledges that much of the observations contained herein generally do not apply to developing nations. In those countries, a whole host of issues conspire to render less efficacious virtual participation in governance and the political process (e.g., government control of **Internet** access or blocking of Web sites that are deemed objectionable from the standpoint of the authorities, low levels of computer literacy and illiteracy in general, lack of affordable computers, and frequent interruptions in power supply). Furthermore, the political traditions of many developing countries may not favor a model which assumes considerable experience with democracy and other forms of self-governance.

### **THEORETICAL LITERATURE ON VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERES**

Major theorists, such as Robert Putnam (2000) and Benjamin Barber (2003), have examined the possibility of e-democracy and virtual public spheres. Putnam is most famous for his explication of the decline of civil society in the U.S. and Western societies in general; for example, evinces a profound skepticism of the more utopian claims associated with e-democracy. Nonetheless, even he concedes that computer networks represent a significant trend toward revitalizing civil society (Putnam, 2000, p. 166). Barber, for his part, contends that meaningful public debate regarding major issues can be revitalized by advances in telecommunications

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