The Public Sphere and Information Ethics

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0. Introduction

The relationship between the concept of the public sphere and ICT – and the ethics of the latter

Different aspects of paper:

0.1. On Jürgen Habermas
0.2. Early formulation of the public sphere
0.3. The concept of communicative reason
0.4. Recent statement
0.5. Critical conclusion
1. Habermas biography II

In 2004 Habermas (b. 1929) said his most NB issue are:

1.1. The public sphere as the space for reasoned communicative exchange

1.2. Conceptual triad: public space, discourse, and reason [information here]

In his development some important aspects:

- Physical handicap
- Experience of World War II and Holocaust
- Democraticization & liberalization of Germ. postwar soc.
- Influence of CT (he became Adorno’s assistant in 1956)
- His own appropriation of Critical Theory
2. The public sphere I

*Structural Transformation of the public Sphere (1962)*

Historical and normative study of public sphere

2.1. Historical argument

Feudal society without public sphere

Modern bourgeois public sphere change of powers

Public/private and public (civil society) as space of reasoning in tension with the state

Institutions: press, art criticism, coffee houses for best argument

These discussions carried over to political discussion

Parliament (court) here obvious forum of state and public
2. Public Sphere II

2.2. The normative ideal of the public sphere
Discussions disregard status, prestige, and power
Rational argumentation (critique) sole arbiter of issue
Public sphere seen as a universal auditorium
In this process the state stays in touch with the public
Also new laws, idea of person, rights, property [info.]
Philosophers here: Kant (indiv freedom); Hegel (civil soc vs state); Marx (state and ruling class); Mill/Tocqueville (civil society and educated classes)
BUT, this lasted for short moment: fiction of market/indiv.
Structural change in capitalism since last part of 1800’s
2. The Public Sphere III

2.3. Decline public sphere (late 19th) consumer

Liberal competing capitalism transformed in monopolistic capitalism of cartels and protectionism

Public opinion/argumentation undermined by interests

Even parliaments helpless, Re-feudalization of PS

Bureaucratic/economic interests such as: advertising, marketing and public relations, social engineering

Here the whole enlightened project runs in danger

Danger of culture industry, mass media without criticism

De-politicisation of PS (like Horkheimer e.a.), but with qualifications
3. Theory of Comm. Reason I


2.1. Universal pragmatics & theory of argument

Validity ......... (truth, truthfulness, rightness) (intelligibility)

Three worlds (objective, social, subjective)

Lang. function (cognitive, interactive, expressive)

Action theory (teleological, normative, dramaturgical)

(communicative action)

2.2. Theory of social rationalization

Distinction between *lifeworld / system*

2.3. Theory of modernity; 2.4. Ethics/politics/religion
3. Theory of Comm. Reason II

2.5. Discourse ethics
Act through forceless force better argument/discourse

2.5.1. Critical way of approaching practical questions through rational discourse and consensus

2.5.2. Four requirements for a DE: a) Deontological ethics, not teleological; b) is cognitivist, thus similar to science; c) formal ethics rather than substantive; d) Universal ethics against ethnocentrism

2.5.3. Rational consensus implicit. Norms right/wrong

Discourse principle (D) universalization principle (U)

2.5.4. Pragmatic, ethical, and moral questions
4. Recent work on the public sphere I

4.1. Three normative models of democracy

a) liberal; b) republican; c) deliberative

Delib. model for epistem. function of discourse, rather than rational choice (liberal) or pol. ethos (republican)

Delib. pol. about dem. process: a) publicity/ transparency for delib.; b) inclusion/equal opportunity for particip.; c) justified presumption for reasonable outcomes

H. considers 3 case studies truth-tracking potential pol.d.

From group to mass media: a) Lack of face-to-face communication; b) lack of a speaker/addressee; c) Media’s selectivity and shaping of messages; d) the political and social power of agendas
4. Recent work on the public sphere II

4.2. The structure of mass-communication and the formation of considered public opinions

Centre (strong publics) vs periphery (weak publics)
Centre: parliaments, courts, admin. Agencies & gov.

Public opinion between these actors

How now considered public opinion

Political system must have an open flank to the civil society if it wants to retain its legitimacy

Not enough that media professionals report on issues, but necessary to provide space to (rationally) deliberate / argue about them for considered public opinions
4.3. Pathologies of political communication

Two requirements for deliber. politics under threat are:

4.3.1. Independence of a self-regulated media system

Incomplete different. of media syst. from environments

Examples in Italy, USA; specialized interest groups

4.3.2. Right kind of relationship between self-regulated media system and civil society

Soc. deprivation/cultural exclusion of citizens lead to selective access to/and uneven particip. in med. comm.

The colonialization of the public sphere by market imperatives, lead to a peculiar paralysis of civil society
5. Critical conclusion I

5.1. First liberal, system and Marxist critiques in Germ.

5.2. Reason in the public sphere
Movement away from historical-normative position to normative one. Critical-hermeneutical model of P.S.?

5.3. Idealization of the Publ. Sphere (Thomassen 2010)
Position of women in public sphere and public/private
Only one public sphere not many (as he later accepts)

5.4. H’s pessimism about contemporary P. Sph.
Influence of Hork./Adorno, let him miss potential P. Sph.
No discussion of social movements, weak/strong publics
5. Critical conclusion II

5.5. Public sphere and multilingualism and multicultural societies?

5.6. Public Sphere in Practice: Students

Here about voice for students, but not fetishism of action

Actionism without publ. deliberation leads to irrationalism

Rules and debates about it. Demonstrate non-violent

Learn through trial and error
5. Sources

Duvenage 2007
Thomassen 2010
And others …