

Actuvirtualized Activity and Passivity in the Political Sphere

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the transformation of political discourse wrought by the rise of internet-based communicative media. I argue that the conventional focus on the inter-activity that the internet makes possible (through the availability of blogging sites, sites to display downloaded videos and pictures, commenting, virtual worlds, etc.) is misplaced, or at least in need of modification. I will take a Derridean turn in my analysis of the internet effect to show that the medium carries a new structure of actuvirtuality, the import of which is to potentially emancipate the internet user from the serial, coherent rationality that has dominated the major audio-visual media of modernity, thus opening a space for the virtual problematisation of political reality. I demonstrate how this virtual dimension generates new strategies both for those who seek political change and for those who seek to defend the status quo. It creates a new field, or game, in which they can engage. The possibility of neutralization arises from the same condition that makes actuvirtuality strategically viable: the relative emancipation from rational coherency and fixation. Any radical strategy for change that would privilege the internet must, I will argue, be supplemented by more reflectively oriented approaches.

Key Words: Actuvirtuality, interactivity, Internet, public sphere, reflectivity, world-disclosure.

In this paper I want to discuss how the rise of internet-based communicative media has decisively changed the form of political discourse. In spite of the obvious inter-activating aspect of the internet, I will argue that the internet offers us, as well, various mechanisms that ultimately pacify the end user. Thus, instead of focusing on the internet's interactive dimension and its political effects, I will emphasise another general change in the political public: the turn towards non-serial, experimental political expression. In order to articulate this, I will draw upon Derrida's notion of actuvirtuality.

1. A New Kind of Publicity

In 1962, Jürgen Habermas published *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, in which he famously proposed that there was a symbiotic

relationship between the development of a public sphere (in which political arguments are laid out in the open for public assessment) and the new mass-media (based on the printing technique) in the Early Modern era.

The reach of the public sphere depends on the reach of the media that carries it. The process by which the citizen self identifies as such is, furthermore, dependent on the prevailing public sphere of a particular political entity. This means that the geographical extension of the national community is limited by the media as well. As long as this public sphere was mediated by newspapers that had to be distributed physically, the geographical reach of the public sphere was restricted. As more advanced technologies (the telegraph, electronic media, etc.) made news more quickly available within national boundaries, the public sphere could extend geographically, hereby furthering identification between citizens across local contexts. The emergence of the national state as an object of public identification is thus closely connected with the advent of new technologies.

The newspapers were generally commercial from the beginning. Together with their overall uni-directional character (readers could not respond immediately to reports), the dominant media structure nourished a passive public or audience of news consumers. Gradually this passivity, according to Habermas, infiltrated the character of the media, as it bowed to the public demand to be entertained by sensation rather than use the news as aids to reflection. The political processes became theatrical battles, where it was more important for a side to win than for the ideas represented by each side to be accorded a fair hearing. A critical public sphere evolved into a passive audience, manipulated by publicity and entertainment. The introduction of the first generations of electronic mass-media does not change this setting fundamentally, since the analogue electronic mass-media (mainly radio and television) is uni-directional and commercial as well.

The question is, however, whether and how this setting is changed when the unidirectional flow is changed, as it is with the introduction of the digital mass-media such as the internet. The internet amplifies the transgeographical feature of traditional mass-media. There is, however, at least two other respects in which digital media are generally said to differ decisively from traditional mass-media: the low bar to entry that makes participation as a content producer (whether commercial or non-commercial) on a global scale relatively easy; the second respect is the *interactivity* inherent in the medium. Digital media are on a technological level bi-directional. That means that there necessarily is a *bi-directional* exchange of information in these media. But what about *interactivity*?

2. Interactivity vs. Bi-directionality

It is obvious that, technically, interactive capacity has increased on the internet. This is not to say that *every* internet based communication

presents interactive potential - certain websites are for example created with no options for feedback - but there has been a significant increase in using the media to create interactive communities. One important reason for this is the bi-directional architecture of digital exchanges. Interactivity is not possible through the *analogue* television set, because there is no informational flow from the user back to the broadcaster.

Bi-directionality is however not in itself *identical* with the kind of interactivity that is politically relevant. In relation to the democratic political public sphere, interactivity is mainly desirable because it devolves the power of expression upon the users, instead of treating the users as mere consumers situated at the end of the communicative channel, which is as far as analogue mass-media can take us.

There are, however, at least two ways in which interactivity can be limited (in spite of the bi-directionality of the media): (1) It can simply remain de-activated or hidden. While two-way informational flow is built into digital media, bi-directional features can easily be hidden from the users interface. This is for example the case with many websites: Even though the reading or watching of such sites is technically supported by a mechanical bi-directional exchange, the software does not allow for the user's active engagement through a user interface.

More importantly for our argument (2) are cases where the user is actually allowed to engage in a feedback-process, but the available alternatives for are so restricted that it does not count as genuine interactivity. For example, web polling can be so arranged that the range of options open to visitors is extremely narrow. In these cases interactivity is more of a lure than a reality. Visitors are forced to accent the range of suggested alternatives, but are not engaged in either building the alternatives or allowed to protest against the alternatives given.

It is, however, important to emphasise that I am not concerned, here, to diminish the extent or quality of internet-based politically relevant interactivity. As has been well publicised, many political events have been mediated by and hosted on the internet. For instance: (i) E-mail lists have constituted an inevitable cornerstone for social demonstrations such as the Seattle-and ATTAC-movements; (ii) many political websites often pick up and accumulate political grievances from all around the world that would otherwise have been too fragmentary to acquire influence; (iii) blogs have become an important component of the public sphere in a relatively brief time. This has introduced a whole new trajectory for political media figures; and finally, (iv) recent efforts of the Chinese establishment to control the results of Google-searches demonstrate that the internet is seen by established power as a powerful source for political activity, the effects of which the political establishment may seek to control.

This clearly demonstrates the extent to which the internet has supported interactive features of political activity. In reality, however, the picture is less clear from the standpoint of the end user/producer. Three additional limits come to mind

(i). Psychological fatigue. Participants as persons (with physical bodies and psychological constitutions) often involve themselves heavily in the projects, and the failure of projects are thus not without some personal disappointment in various degrees. Sometimes reality strikes back and collapses the virtual.

(ii). Obstacles and offensive behaviour. Just as it is easy to construct virtual worlds through the internet that express the positive projects of the participants, it is easy to construct obstacles to virtual realisation or to engage in more destructive approaches that push the user back to the passive position in the inter-active circuit.

(iii). Information overload. The sheer quantity of information available on the Internet may in itself overwhelm users, paralysing them into inactivity.

So, just as the internet has interactive features, it also makes sense to say that it has various ways of imposing end user passivity. Internet based media thus *displace* the relationship between activity and passivity - rather than merely furthering political activity. Just as it has the capacity to engage the end user in an activity, it also has the potential of putting the end user back in a pacifying situation. I will therefore in the following suggest an alternative approach to what is significantly new in the internet mediated political public sphere. This will serve as a means to articulate at least one of the sources of the displacement of the political public sphere.

3. The Actuvirtual Character of the Internet

The importance of media in cultural exchanges was a concern of Derrida's in the last phase of his career. Even though he never contemplated the internet systematically, I think that his occasional reflections can be used as a fruitful point of departure for an analysis of the impact of the internet in the political public sphere.

In *Échographies de la télévision* Derrida and B. Stiegler discusses the impact of the electronic mass-media on the cultural landscape. The discussion primarily focuses on analogue media (radio and television), but they are relevant in relation to internet borne media as well. According to Derrida, these technologies displace the sphere of the political:

If we recall [...] that access to writing in the classical sense was the condition of citizenship, this is the very thing that is changing today. The question of democracy, such as it has been presenting itself to us here, may no longer be tied

to that of citizenship - at least if politics is defined by citizenship, and if citizenship is defined, as up to now it has been, by inscription in a place, within a territory or within a nation whose body is rooted in a privileged territory...¹

Derrida thus suggests that the notion of citizenship is challenged due to factors that have been discussed earlier in this paper. The point is that media as such never opens a space for a symmetric communicative relationship. As seen in the previous section, nothing about the architecture of the internet or the range of website user experiences refutes that point. Instead of analysing degrees of interactivity, Derrida thus suggests that the unfolding technology be analysed in terms of what kinds of *arte-factuality* and *actu-virtuality* are coming into being.

The notions of *artifactuality* and *actuvirtuality* point us towards the ways in which facts are presented in the media. On the one hand, the notion of *artifactuality* designates the point that the reality of the media is essentially artificial. Derrida mentions the “speaker” in the news, who apparently addresses (speaks to) the viewers, but actually (s)he merely reads a text on a teleprompter. This is part of the communicative setup. The viewers know that it would not make sense to respond to the propositions of the speaker. The speaker does not “really” address the individual viewer - the appearance of this addressing is artificial.

On the other hand, the notion of *actuvirtuality* (which will be the focus of this paper) designates the point that the virtual character of the mediated relationship “strikes back” on reality. The representations of the media is decisively shaped by a virtual temporality, spatiality and this carries with it a virtual structure of the mediated events. This virtuality “makes its mark even on the structure of the produced event.”² The account of actuality that is presented in the media is shaped by a certain *telos* or *rhythm*.

Returning to the notion of the political public sphere, this means that the public sphere evolved around certain media (newspapers, radio, television – and now: the internet) is shaped by a certain telic or rhythmic structure. Which presents us with the problem: what is the telic and rhythmic structure of the internet-borne political public sphere? I will claim that there is a feedback between the less serial structure of presented ends and the lack of responsibility and commitment which is a distinct feature of the internet. This means that the binding to rational systematicity becomes less urgent - for the benefit for a more experimental attitude.

4. Experimental Potentialities of the Internet

This takes us to the second main feature of the internet - the low bar to entry to content production on the internet. It is possible, as we have mentioned, to navigate and act on the internet without heavy economic or

personal costs. This feature is furthered by the inexpensive access to a transnational and -cultural border-crossing network; and the assurance of personal anonymity (at least in relation to those with whom you communicate). This means that you can join and leave communities as you like. There are certainly limitations to this that spring from what one as an embodied person with a certain psychological constitution can handle. The point is, however, that the low bar to entry also entails that you do not actually have to invest your personal integrity in the social relations on the internet. You can hide behind virtual characters (e.g. avatars) that only exist on the internet. It is certainly possible to engage in communities with heavy personal commitment, but you can chose not to. This means that the investment of the internet user in her personal component of the lifeworld is (comparatively) detached from the urge of coherence, credibility, and veraciousness. This means that you in one community can have certain views, qualities, temperaments that differ significantly from your profile in other communities.

This is an important source for the virtuality of the internet. You can “play” with your personality. You can also “play” with how your personality interacts with other persons, whereby the social relationships as such become a target of collaborative improvisation. You can furthermore setup virtual worlds in which the virtual characters and relationships interact. And so on. The actuvirtual structure of the internet thus furthers an experimental attitude where the quest for linear, coherent rationality is less pertinent. On a legal level the exchanges are certainly just as committing as exchanges outside the internet, but the disentanglement of the agents from physical constraints opens communication on the internet to a greater degree of improvisation. Insofar as the political public sphere is embodied on the internet, the actuvirtuality of the internet will certainly affect the actual shapes of the political public sphere.

The virtualised temporality of the internet definitely has some revisionary potential. The relative independence from fixed, coherent rationalities makes it easy to create alternative scenarios in cyberspace that draw a sharp contrast to the conventions of entrenched power. Such scenarios are, at the outset, not committed to specific truth-claims. The articulation of a virtual scenario with a revolutionary intent on the internet does not necessarily insist on specific truth-claims in a traditional sense, but is rather put forward to *problematise* existing truth-claims. In order for counter-narratives to have problematising effects it is not necessary that they articulate some counter truth claim in a strict sense. Counter-narratives can have problematising effects because they can point out aspects of reality that are not taken into account by traditional narratives. Virtual realities can thus have problematising effects on the political public spheres, but only if they somehow take reality seriously.

The point is that the virtual critic can test *reality* against a given virtual reality. Sometimes such experiments are too trivial or too radical. In such cases, the test of reality will produce nothing. In other cases, however, there will be a fruitful degree of tension between improvisation of experimental scenarios and reality, and in such cases the virtual world will be able to induce significant changes in the political public sphere.

The internet's detachment from fixed, coherent meta-narratives is thus an important corollary to problematising existing narratives. At the same time, however, these alternative narratives are certainly themselves easily problematised by new counter-narratives. As such, the actuvirtual character of the internet can end up serving to pacify the end user - i.e. it is easy for the counter-revolutionaries to setup obstructing narratives that prevent change. The virtual and experimental character of the internet based networks opens to obstructing interferences that have a destructive impact on the aspirations for creative narratives.

5. Conclusion

I would thus not want to claim that it would be desirable if the political public world was occupied altogether by the experiential approach mediated by the internet. On the one hand, experiential approaches are not very good at making *decisions*. Secondly, it is important that the experiments are subjected to meta-reflections, in order to help the participants pre-empt and fend off the more destructive approaches to the actuvirtualising practices on the internet. Reflective approaches do, however, need to be challenged in order to remain creative. And this is where the actuvirtuality of the internet may show its most fruitful impact on a contemporary political public.

Notes

¹ J. Derrida & B. Stiegler, *Échographies de la télévision*, Galilée, Paris, 1996, p. 67-8 [uk: 56-7 - translation slightly modified]

² *Ibid.*, p. 14 [uk: 6]

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