

THE NETWORK AND THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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The contemporary phase of modern society is often called the communication society or the era of communication technology, and computer networks are regarded as paradigmatic signs of the new culture. In this article, there are two main communication technology themes, one dealing with the debate on the contemporary cultural turn and the other concerning the implications of the disputed turn for some core concepts of communication research, especially the concepts of the public sphere, and connected to it, the civil society. The network, for its part, is both subject and object in the process of transformation.

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The Network and Civil Society

The origin of the network, together with its structure and organisation, comprise a proper starting-point for the discussion at hand. The network embraces more than the well-known part of it, the Internet, and the Internet involves more than just a forum of university people and freaks. When I speak of the net I refer to a metanetwork of all networks, a matrix, and not to any single part of it. The phenomenon under consideration is hopelessly chaotic and messy, which actually forces one to apply fairly abstract or formal methods to make sense of it at all. The fact that the emerging networks are both more dispersed and more pervasive in their reach than ever before makes the attempt to analyse them all the more urgent.

The network is here approached with the assistance of Habermas's system model and, accordingly, divided into two parts: the system, comprising the economic world and the administration, and the lifeworld, comprising the privacy and the public sphere. In Habermas's conception the system and the lifeworld are not totally detached from each other but, rather, in many ways in-

terconnected and interacting through various channels. The division applied to the network is primarily analytic since in practice these spheres in part share the same infrastructure and are deeply intermingled. In this essay the concepts of system and lifeworld are not used, but the terms **digital highways** and **cyberspace**, respectively, are employed (Sassi 1995).

It seems clear that in cyberspace, in contrast with digital highways, innovation comes from the ground up. Internet, though it was born from a military monopoly, and because of certain external constraints which dictated its decentralised design, has developed into a chaotic, voluntarist, and unpredictably fertile world (Unsworth 1994). Internet is demonstrably useful for those kinds of communication purposes which rely heavily on verbal information, and particularly when the community of users has agreed on a set of consensual rules of behaviour.

The network as a whole has indisputable implications for civil society as well as for the public sphere, the latter being an elementary part of the former. The idea of civil society can in broad lines be equated to the principles of citizenship and democracy — they all belong to the same old tradition. Currently, the quest for civil society is gaining strength since the civil society appears to us as the only source of solidarity and sense of community available. However, just this longing for an experience of warmth and sympathy constitutes its main problem, both theoretically and in practice. Simultaneously with these difficulties in comprehending such a society, even the national one with its more familiar traits, we are now offered a global civil society by the network. The national civil societies for the first time in history, we are told, can now communicate with each other, and both the silent and the silenced will finally get their voice — all through the network. That is an attraction hard to ignore.

But who, actually, gave us the network and the global civil society along with it — have we behaved that neatly and nicely? I am looking for the answer through the emergence of the network, an event where necessities and coincidences intermingle and which has to be historically understood.

Main Trends of Modern Society

With the network the narrative of progress through communication has again been mobilised, and, in Druck's (1995) words, at the very moment that the collapse of the promise of urbanisation, industrialisation and modernisation is becoming impossible to disregard any longer. Therefore, before coming to the core items, the networked public sphere and the global civil society, I will briefly discuss some generally recognised trends and characteristics of modern society. This framework easily leads to the modern/postmodern discourse and to the dispute over the thesis of cultural turn. The dispute might become a little clearer, if not be resolved, by the examination of certain trends and processes of modernisation, namely **rationalisation**, **differentiation** and **commodification**.

Rationalisation denotes trends and processes of instrumentalisation, rational and technocratic thinking, instrumental rationality, efficiency, all intensified by industrialisation but already initiated centuries ago. There is no doubt about rationalisation still having enormous impact on various spheres of life and, presumably, being as impressive as ever. Its roots are deep in Judeo-Christian culture and history but the thrust towards rationalism and intensified efficiency has never been as clearly seen as in the current capitalist economy. The capitalist system of produc-

