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SCHOLARSHIP

STEVE SCHNEIDER

EXPANDING THE PUBLIC SPHERE THROUGH COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION: POLITICAL DISCUSSION ABOUT ABORTION IN A USENET NEWSGROUP

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE, 1997

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This thesis will be of interest to those examining the nature of political conversation in the public sphere, to those studying discourse about the abortion issue, and to those analysing the structure of computer-mediated discussion. It uses the notion of the public sphere advanced by Jürgen Habermas, and develops specific quantitative measures estimating the goodness of fit between Habermas' idealised vision and an extensive computer-mediated discussion about abortion. It tests the hypothesis that the newly emergent form of discourse fostered by computer mediated discussion provides an opportunity to expand the informal zone of the public sphere. The thesis is presented as a case study of the conversation within the Usenet talk.abortion newsgroup over the period of one year. The newsgroup was very active: nearly 46,000 messages were posted to the group by almost 3,000 different authors in close to 8,500 different threads. A reader of the newsgroup would have found about 800 messages by 150 authors in 225 different threads on an "average" day.

The patterns and content of the conversation were examined for evidence of equality, diversity, reciprocity and quality, four characteristics found in the vision of the idealised public sphere put forward by Habermas. The talk.abortion newsgroup was found to be diverse and reciprocal, but lacking in equality and quality. On two of the four dimensions, the newsgroup resembles what is demanded by the idealised vision of the public sphere.

In the informal zone of the public sphere, equality is achieved with equal access to speaking opportunities and equal distribution of voice among the speakers. Equality is an important feature of the informal public sphere because it signals participants that their voice matters, and that their voice matters in some equal proportion to others' voices. This is a plebiscitary notion, supportive of the one person, one vote model familiar in democratic theory. There is, to be sure, a balancing involved with equality. One could certainly argue that equality in voice is unnecessarily restrictive of intensity — that perhaps it is desirable for those with the most intense feelings to speak the most frequently. At the same time, though, it is clear from the distribution of participation in the newsgroup that participation is not even remotely equally distributed. One half of one percent of the authors accounted for more than 40 percent of the articles; five percent of the authors accounted for nearly 80 percent of the articles. Even if one wanted to argue for intensity over equality, this level of concentration cannot be called consistent with the idealised vision of the public sphere. A more equal representation of speakers in the newsgroup would have brought the newsgroup closer to this vision by ensuring a broader representation of the views of the participants.

On the dimension of quality, the newsgroup was also found to fall well short of the mark demanded by the idealised vision of the informal public sphere. Quality was measured by the tendency of participants in the newsgroup to stay “on-topic;” that is, by their tendency for their contributions to actually be about abortion. The idealised public sphere requires that the merits of the argument, not the characteristics of the arguer, carry the day. This, of course, implies that contributions to the public sphere be about what is ostensibly being talked about. The most frequent authors were found to be the least likely to contribute messages that were on-topic, and the most likely to contribute off-topic messages. This finding exacerbates the implications of inequality. Certainly, a greater commitment among all authors to discussing abortion within the newsgroup — especially among the most frequent contributors — would have brought the group closer to the idealised vision.

The other dimensions on which the newsgroup was evaluated suggest a public sphere closer to what is required by the idealised vision. Diversity in the informal zone of the public sphere focuses on the range of conversational patterns both across the newsgroup and by the participants within the newsgroup. Highly diverse patterns of conversation suggest that participants have the freedom to shape the arena; a narrow range of patterns indicate the presence of constraints imposed on the participants. The newsgroup was found to be highly tractable, as the size of the newsgroup contracted and expanded considerably over time. In comparison, the newspaper coverage of abortion, measured by the number of stories published, was less tractable on a day to day basis. The second aspect of diversity examined the entry and exit of authors over time to determine if the newsgroup featured a diverse set of contributors. The data clearly indicate that the newsgroup featured both a consistent, regular group of participants, as well as a subset of constantly changing contributors. Thus, on both measures, the newsgroup can be considered highly diverse.

The dimension of reciprocity is used to indicate the amount of interaction among authors, and to ensure that the some groups of participants in the newsgroup were not systematically excluded from interaction by other groups of participants. Reciprocity is an important consideration in assessing the public sphere because it indicates the degree to which participants are actually interacting with each other, and working on identifying their own interests with those of the group, as opposed to talking past each other or engaging in simple bargaining or persuasion. In the idealised public sphere, it is essential that participants move beyond the lower levels of political talk, and be able to engage in reflective discussion. It is clear from the data presented that authors in the talk.abortion newsgroup were reciprocal with many other authors. Even one-time authors, on average, interacted with 11 other authors. That reciprocity increases with contributions suggests a lack of author cliques. This finding suggests that reciprocity is not only high, but a function of participation rather than social attributes.

That the newsgroup was found to be diverse and reciprocal, but neither equal nor of quality, poses a challenge for those wishing to understand the public sphere. It could be that the particular topic at hand — abortion — is likely to result in a public sphere with this particular configuration. On the other hand, it could be that the communications technology employed — computer mediated discussion — yields these results. Additional research in which the topic and the technology are systematically varied is necessary to understand the relationship between these two factors and the dimensions of the public sphere.

PETER SIMONSON

THE REPUBLIC OF EXCESS: MEDIA AND U.S. MORAL LIFE SINCE THE 1960S

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Since the classic social theory of the late nineteenth century, it has been commonplace to say that modernity has brought with it disruptions of inherited moral orders. Indeed, this recurrent trope of moral disorder appears in contemporary thought as diverse as Alasdair MacIntyre's, Jürgen Habermas', and Jean-Francois Lyotard's. Competing theories characterise moral disorder very differently — as occasion for tragic lamentation, for disciplined public work, or for potentially liberating self-assertion — but there is a baseline agreement that modern lifeworlds are marked by rival, competing, and sometimes fragmented varieties of moral discourse and that, in addition, some of the inherited meta-narratives have lost their ability to organise broad public affections.

This dissertation charts some of the ways mass-mediated moral discourse has contributed to this overdetermined social condition, focusing on the U.S. since the mid-1960s. It is a qualitative study, combining rhetorical analysis with media studies, foregrounding historical contexts, and broadly sitting within the humanistic camp of cultural studies. After an initial theoretical chapter making the case for a communicative approach to studying moral life (*Sittlichkeit*) and outlining a few relevant changes in U.S. news and information media since the 1960s, it includes four selective case studies: of U.S. medicine, the religious right, the animal rights movement, and communitarians. While medicine has lost some of its moral steam, the latter three have gained public standing and are examples of what might be called moral politics right, left, and centre.

To use a shorthand heuristic, the dissertation claims that significant changes in the sources, channels, and receivers of mass-mediated moral discourse have in the last 30 years helped create a noisy, combative, spectacle-driven public environment which has helped erode broader forms of confidence within the U.S. On the source front, the ongoing evolution of special interest groups with highly sophisticated abilities to use mainstream and specialised mass media, represents a significant development. Special interest groups are more powerful and relentless than independent citizens, less broad-based and expansive than political parties, so their excursions into public forums differ from these two historical predecessors. Meanwhile, channels of communication have expanded, with the rise of cable television, the growth of specialised interest periodicals, and the proliferation of computer-driven direct mail all granting greater power to target more restricted audiences while collectively adding to a sharp sense of competition for crowded public airspace. Finally, message receivers have found themselves anchored, sometimes uneasily, in a social order marked by strain in liberal ideas of progress, by rapid proliferation of the idiom of rights (followed by partial disenchantment with that idiom), by the appearance of a new Protestant revitalisation campaign, and by a growing cynicism about public life.

This diverse collection of factors has helped create fractured and factious brands of moral discourse which, refracted through Byzantine prisms of contemporary media,

often take on an air of strange unreality. Spectacles and sound bites, however, are supplemented by rational public argument, mundane deliberation, and measured criticism, so the contemporary genres of public moral discourse are decidedly pluralistic. The danger, though, is that forces of spectacle and controversy will overstep their proper bounds, colonising spheres of public restraint and civility, and leaving civic life more distorted and less appealing to ordinary citizens who may be voluntarily dissociated from effective mediating institutions.

The medicine study charts the popular discourse of medical ethics as a useful barometer of the moral standing of scientific medicine. Whereas medical science was perhaps the clearest embodiment of human progress in the post-war era, by the early 1970s it was showing signs of strain, and significant numbers of Americans expressed scepticism about its professional methods. Three episodes structure the chapter: the 1965 moral exposé of human experimentation practices penned by Harvard anaesthesiologist Henry Beecher; the 1975 moral quandary of Karen Ann Quinlan, a comatose young woman kept alive against her family's wishes by a mechanical respirator; and the ongoing moral spectacle of Jack Kevorkian and his assisted suicides in the 1990s. The episodes represent three genres of moral discourse (exposé, quandary, and spectacle), each with the potential to erode moral confidence and each disseminated through a variety of media, ranging from professional journals to print and broadcast news to television talk shows.

The next chapter examines key communicative aspects of the rise of politically-minded conservative Protestantism, or the religious right. Forms of public communication have helped solidify moral confidence among conservative evangelicals while at the same time alienating many outsiders and helping create the 'culture wars' of the 1980s. There are five main actors in my account, which implicitly links moral confidence to public prominence: the journalistic spotlight occasioned by Presidential elections (beginning in 1976); public opinion polling in 1976 and after; recognition in mainstream media by religious television personalities like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson; the media savvy of religious special purpose groups like the Moral Majority, Operation Rescue, and the Christian Coalition; and the institutional base of Republican Party politics and campaign rhetoric.

Next, the animal rights chapter examines a moral constellation that, like the religious right, has gained public standing since the 1970s, strengthening the moral confidence of followers while alienating some outsiders. Instead of relying on science or God for moral and rhetorical inspiration, the animal rights movement has turned to nature and to a natural reason reminiscent of the radical Enlightenment. The cause has had three characteristic modes of public expression: philosophical argument, confrontational protest, and playful, celebrity driven public happenings (orchestrated especially deftly by People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals — PETA). While each form has a confidence-enhancing potential for believers, each also has an excess capable of turning others away: reason unfettered can become a blunt instrument hindering judgement; protest unrestrained tramples the dicta of common respect and civility; and hipness run rampant subsumes moral protest to the style-driven vagaries of popular culture.

The final case study lays out a brief intellectual and institutional history of communitarianism from the late 1970s through the first two years of Bill Clinton's presidency before exploring its characteristic communicative forms. As candidate and president, Clinton has often stressed the importance of the middle (the middle class, middle ground) and of a principled openness (of government, of conversation, of attitudes)

which mark him as a centrist moral politics apparently aspiring to overcome polarisation right and left. To convey this ideal, he has utilised communicative strategies ranging from policy speeches to slogans, from small-town bus tours to televised town hall meetings, many of which play on the interrelation of speech and setting. His rhetorical aspirations have been met with two potentially crippling kinds of unmasking critique, however: what Kiku Adatto has called the “theatre criticism” of journalists intent on exposing the artifice behind the event and suggesting words and actions are mere positioning devices, not substantive pronouncements; and allegations about “character” which suggest the man behind the words is duplicitous, his speech unreliable. Both types of unmasking inject a level of suspicion into civic discourse that makes public participation considerably less attractive.

The conclusion of the dissertation is then a brief recommendation of moral context, silence, ironic humour, and service as four praiseworthy possibilities for contemporary moral life suggested by the case studies. It is a list that perhaps suggests Richard Rorty has things backward — public irony and more hidden solidarity may be the best tack in the current media dispensation.

KEVIN MICHAEL DELUCA

MEDITATIONS ON IMAGE EVENTS: THE POSSIBILITIES AND CONSEQUENCES FOR RHETORICAL THEORY OR CRITICAL RHETORIC, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, AND ENVIRONMENTAL POLITICS

UNIVERSITY OF IOWA, COMMUNICATION STUDIES DEPARTMENT, 1996

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This project is rooted in the conviction that industrial civilisation is headed for disaster due to its perspectives on nature, human-nature relations, and how those relations should be mediated by technology. It is inspired by the hope that when nature and progress are understood as ideographs or signifiers on the move in the open social field of relational identities, constructions of nature and progress can become key sites of struggle and hope for people attempting to invent societies less riddled by the domination of nature in all its aspects. In this book I read the unorthodox rhetorical activity of radical environmental groups, such as Greenpeace and Earth First!, as struggles to produce social change. Through their tactics, especially their media tactics (image events staged for mass media dissemination), these groups question “progress”, rearticulate identities, reinvent “nature”, and construct new possibilities for human-nature and human-human relations. Radical environmental groups, then, radically break with traditional politics and enact the political possibilities of a postmodern age characterised by a decentering of the subject; a destabilisation of identities; a lack of belief in any foundations or grand narratives; a change in material conditions; and the rise of image and micro politics.

The primary rhetorical tactic of radical environmental groups — staging image events for mass media dissemination; falls outside the domain of a rhetoric traditionally conceived. Indeed, image events tend to slip the bounds of conventional conceptions of politics, social movement theory, and communication theory, as well as rhetoric. Instead of progressing in a linear fashion in a march to the Truth of image events through the deployment of ready-to-hand theoretical tools, I perform three meditations, designed both to offer insights about image events but also to rethink conventional theoretical perspectives. After introducing image events, their performers, and their stage in Chapter 1, in Chapters 2 and 3 I meditate on image events from the perspective of the rhetorical theory of social movements. Conversely, I rethink the rhetoric of social movements in light of image events. Chapter 4 is a meditation on image events in the context of postmodern politics. In many ways, it is an affirmation of the political potential of postmodernism and image events. An extended meditation in Chapters 5 and 6 deploys and questions the transmission model of communication, the putative heart of communication theory, rhetorical theory, media theory, and dominant ideology analyses of the culture industries. In Chapter 5 I question how much we should celebrate when image events must operate in an electronic public sphere dominated by a few large corporations. Adopting a dominant ideology frame, I perform close readings of image events embedded in television news broadcasts. In Chapter 6 I resuscitate hope with the help of cultural studies and deconstruction, rereading one of the television news broadcasts through the filters of audience research and dissemination. I end in Chapter 7 by considering the roles of critical rhetoric and the critical rhetorician in a postmodern world.

A note on tone. As many have noted, we live in the midst of monumental changes. We are burdened and blessed with the old Chinese curse, “May you live in interesting times.” The Chinese character for crisis (*wei ji*) means both danger and opportunity. Enough has been written about the dangers of image events, the mass media, radical environmental groups, incivility, irrationality, micropolitics, the loss of belief in grand narratives, and image politics. Infused by an irrational feeling of hope, herein I explore the opportunities.

A note on form. The form is designed to question, interrupt, and disrupt a certain drive to clarity, transparency, and a transmission of authorial intentions in a translucent text. I do not think the meditations offer a progression and, indeed, do not think they must be read in order. I also do not think I am giving answers. Instead, I hope this open form of meditations resembles the image events themselves, dense fragments floating in and out of the disparate discourses and contexts of a heteroglossic public sphere, open to many interpretations and having indeterminate effects. In the end, I hope to be raising questions and offering possibilities.