THE HABERMASIAN PUBLIC SPHERE ENCOUNTERS CYBER-REALITY

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Abstract

A number of Internet-democracy commentators have proposed that online communications may facilitate the Habermasian public sphere of communicative rationality. In contrast, Mark Poster and other cyber-postmodernists claim that this public sphere notion is "outmoded" in relation to online practices. They argue that cyberspace represents a "hyperreality" in which the rational subject is radically decentred. As such, cyber-postmodernists argue, cyberspace undermines communicative rationality and the public sphere. The concept is seen to be useless for evaluating democratic interaction through the Internet. In this paper I evaluate this argument by exploring actual cyberspace experiences of selfhood and by looking further at the notion of communicative rationality. My investigation shows that the Internet does indeed alter interactions in new ways, but that the changes that result are not as radically hyperreal as some cyber-theorists claim, and, furthermore, that these changes *are* able to be taken into account by the public sphere conception.

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Introduction

New information and communications systems are seen by a number of commentators as an important element behind the emergence of a postmodern political culture.[1] The Internet has become central to such arguments. According to Nguyen and Alexander (1996, 120), "there is a basic conflict between the coming society of which the Internet is the leading edge and the democratic institutions we inherited from the industrial revolution." The changes to communications effected by the Internet and associated cyber-communications are seen as so radical that modernist forms of democratic interaction have become "outmoded." Given such postmodern practices we must, Nguyen and Alexander argue, question the adequacy of our current conceptual apparatuses: Modernist concepts need to be discarded and new, more adequate postmodern analytical tools developed to understand online political practices.

Possibly the most sophisticated theoretician of the postmodern, or hyperreal, "effects" of the Internet on democratic politics is Mark Poster. In particular, Poster has drawn attention to the implications of the Internet for the Habermasian public sphere, the intersubjectively shared space reproduced through communicative rationality. Communicative rationality involves rational-critical discourse where the "force of better argument" alone moves discussants towards greater understanding and consensus. The criteria for rational-critical debate are: reasoned and reflexive exchange and critique of moral-practical validity claims, discursive inclusion and equality, respectful listening, sincerity regarding one's motives and interests as relevant to the discourse, and autonomy from administrative and economic power.[2]

A number of social theorists have drawn upon such a conception in order to evaluate the possibilities of the Internet facilitating "strong," "deliberative," or "radical" democracy.[3] However, Poster (1997, 209), along with other postmodern theorists of cyberspace, argues that the public sphere conception "is systematically denied in the arenas of electronic politics." According to Poster, the Habermasian model of the public sphere loses its validity in relation to cyberspace because communicative rationality assumes a modernist, rational subject, which is radically decentred in online communication as subjectivity becomes detached from materially fixed, embodied contexts and is dispersed and multiplied continuously through digitisation. Poster (ibid) advises that we "abandon Habermas's concept of the public sphere in assessing the Internet as a political domain" and replace it with a conception of democracy more in tune with the practices and subjectivity found online.

This postmodern argument challenges the very feasibility of the public sphere conception as a socially grounded democratic vision in relation to cyber-interactions. Here I want to explore this argument, asking if indeed online discourse decentres the self to such an extent that the public sphere conception becomes outmoded as a normative conception for evaluating online political practice.[4] This question is not only important to Internet-democracy inquiries but has implications for the continuing usefulness of all modernist concepts. I will first outline the reasons, according to my reading of Poster and other postmodern commentators, why cyberspace is seen as leading to a decentring of self and the undermining of

the viability of the public sphere conception. I will then explore the cogency of these claims through a general examination of cyber-culture and reflection upon the public sphere as conceived by Habermas.

Cyberspace as Hyperreality: The Decentring of the Subject

Mark Poster exemplifies those postmodern cyber-theorists who see Internet communications as leading to a state of hyperreality and a decentring of the Cartesian subject.[5] Drawing upon poststructuralist and postmodern theory, Poster believes cyberspace extends the disruption of modernist conceptions of reality that McLuhan and Baudrillard see arising from electronically mediated relations. Like McLuhan, Poster periodises cultural and psychic shifts by reference to changes in communications technology. However, Poster (1990, 14-15) goes further than McLuhan, arguing that it "is not simply the sensory apparatus but the very shape of subjectivity" that is affected. He sees changes in forms of symbolic exchange as leading to three different stages in the "mode of information," each of which constitutes the subject in different ways:

> *In the first, oral, stage the self is constituted as a position of enunciation through its embeddedness in a totality of face-to-face relations. In the second, print, stage the self is constructed as an agent centred in rational/imaginary autonomy. In the third, electronic, stage the self is decentred, dispersed and multiplied in continuous instability* (Poster 1990, 6).

While print media sustain the Cartesian subject, electronic media undermine the individual's sense of rationality. Poster (1995, 58) argues that "print culture constitutes the individual as a subject, as transcendent to objects, as stable and fixed in identity, in short, as a grounded essence." In contrast, with electronic media we are confronted "by a generalised destabilisation of the subject."

Poster (1995; 1999) further divides the third, electronic stage of the mode of information into a first media age of broadcast communication and a second "new" media age of bi-directional, decentralised communications technologies. The new media, such as the Internet, extend the destabilisation or decentring of the subject begun by the broadcast media by enabling "costless reproduction, instantaneous dissemination and radical decentralisation" (Poster 1997, 205). The multiplication of pure representations (of simulacra) in cyberspace leads to a state of hyperreality, as described by Baudrillard, where binary oppositions – real/unreal, subject/object, private/public, human/machine, and so on – implode and a "simulacral world" becomes the only reality for participants. "The result is a more [compared to broadcast media] completely postmodern subject, or better a self that is no longer a subject since it no longer subtends the world as if from the outside but operates within a machine apparatus as a point in a circuit" (Poster 1999, 15-16). The unitary and rational subject of print media, enjoying an Archimedean perspective by which to fully know self, others, and the world, dissolves. As a result, according to Poster and other postmodern commentators, the public sphere of rational communication cannot be reproduced in cyberspace.

To evaluate this postmodern argument we need to further consider the evidence given for the Internet's decentring of the subject. Two interlinked processes

are seen by Poster and cyberspace hyperrealists as contributing to this decentring and the subsequent outmoding of the public sphere in cyberspace: (1) the dislocation and disembodiment of the subject due to the disintegration of modernist perceptions of space and time, and (2) the fragmentation of the subject due to its proliferation and dispersal through simulation.

Dislocation and Disembodiment

Cyberspace is seen by postmodern commentators as effecting a disintegration of modernist perceptions of time and space. Time frames are radically relativised by the speed of digital transmission. "If there is something that computers have forced into our society," writes Stenger (1991, 55), "it is a different sense of time." With the disintegration of time frames, perceptions of distance, geography, and space, are radically altered. It is not just that distance barriers are reduced. One's sense of space in general becomes radically distorted as conceptions of place and time are reconfigured, online communication being at once close and distant. Waskul and Douglass (1997) refer to the "distantly intimate" interactions of the computer-mediated communications as producing a "spaceless place." Where is this place located? On the one hand, cyberspace is seen as geographically unlocated, deterritorialised, a non-place. On the other hand, given global digital dispersion, cyberspace is everywhere. When we are in cyberspace "[w]e are simultaneously everywhere and nowhere" (Buchanan 1997, 423). "Where is cyberspace," Stenger (1991, 53) asks? Cyberspace, she answers, "is like OZ - it is, we get there, but it has no location. . . . [T]here will be a shifting from the sense of territory, of being an inhabitant of an earthly system of values that includes roots, walls, and possessions, toward a radical adventure that blasts it all." Descriptions of cyberspace offered by Benedikt (1991, 1-3) reinforce Stenger's description of a radical reality shift. Cyberspace, according to Benedikt, is "[a] new universe, a parallel universe ... a virtual world. Everywhere and nowhere … . Recognisable and unrecognisable at once ... taking no space ... free of the bounds of physical space and time." Poster (1997, 205) concludes that "Internet technology imposes a dematerialization of communication ... [which] installs a new regime of relations between humans and matter." Spatially dislocated, subjects are at a loss to explain reality. A collapse of the modernist framework of reality results.

Such claims of the detachment or dislocation of the subject from conventional space-time frames are often accompanied by and overlap with claims about the disembodiment or dematerialization of selves in cyberspace. Waskul and Douglas (1997, 392) argue that online interaction involves "the dislocation of the physical body from the context of interaction" and that it "is a uniquely disembodied experience." Heim (1991, 73) writes that "[c]yberspace supplants physical space. We see this happening already in the familiar cyberspace of on-line communication – telephone, e-mail, newsgroups, etc. When online, we break free, like the monads, from bodily existence." Similarly, Stenger (1991, 53) celebrates cyber-disembodiment, declaring that "[e]ntering this [cyberspace] realm of pure feelings is a decision to leave firm ground that may have more consequences than we think. Watching TV, after all, only commits us to being obese. In cyberspace we lose weight immediately." And Poster (1990, 15-16) also asserts the link between dislocation and disembodiment in cyberspaces.

> *In the perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, we are being changed from "arborial" beings, rooted in time and space, to "rhizomic" nomads who daily wander at will (whose will remains a question) across the globe, and even beyond it through communications satellites, without necessarily moving our bodies at all.*
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> *The body then is no longer an effective limit of the subject's position. Or perhaps it would be better to say that communications facilities extend the nervous system throughout the Earth to the point that it enwraps the planet in a noosphere, to use Teilhard de Chardin's term, of language. If I can speak directly or by electronic mail to a friend in Paris while sitting in California, if I can witness political and cultural events as they occur across the globe without leaving my home, if a database at a remote location contains my profile and informs government agencies which make decisions that affect my life without any knowledge on my part of these events, if I can shop in my home by using my TV or computer, then where am I and who am I? In these circumstances I cannot consider myself centered in my rational, autonomous subjectivity or bordered by a defined ego, but I am disrupted, subverted and dispersed across social space.*

The dislocation and disembodiment of the online experience undermines unity of self and the ability to know one's interests and one's relationship to the world and others. A radical decentring of the subject and rationality results, putting into doubt the possibility of the public sphere of rational communication. A second effect of cyber-discourse is believed to contribute to this decentring: the multiplication and fragmentation of the subject.

Fragmentation

Postmodern hyperrealists believe that digital simulation leads to a fragmented and thus decentred subject. Identity, when constituted through electronic networks, is repeatedly reconfigured at different points in time and space, making it unstable, multiplied, and dispersed (Poster 1995, 59; Poster 1990, 15). While Poster (1990) talks of the "mode of information" effecting fragmentation of subjectivity, Stone (1992, 611) talks of "the mode of computer nets" which "evoke fragmentation and multiplicity as an integral part of social identity." She sees multiple-personality syndrome as a "pre-existing example of such a social mode." Stenger (1991, 53) goes further and talks of such fracturing or multiplication of one's identity in cyberspace as "a springtime for schizophrenia." Turkle (1995) also argues that the self is multiplied online. She believes this multiplication results from, amongst other things, identity play and the presentation of self online, whether via chat groups, MUDs, or Web pages. Similarly, Waskul and Douglas (1997, 394) see multiplication of self resulting from the "virtually unlimited" potential for identity play found online, this being encouraged by the dislocation and disembodiment of subjects – the lifting of material constraints and bodily markers "exposing the potential for hyperfluidity of self-enactment." Rheingold's (1993, 147) understanding of the online self is much the same. He illustrates identity simulation in cyberspace via a description of Multi-User Domain (MUD) personas:

> *I know a respectable computer scientist who spends hours as an imaginary ensign aboard a virtual starship full of other real people from around the*

> *world who pretend they are characters of a Star Trek adventure. I have three or four personae myself, in different virtual communities around the Net. I know a person who spends hours of his day as a fantasy character who resembles "a cross between Thorin Oakenshield and the Little Prince," and is an architect and educater and bit of a magician aboard an imaginary space colony: By day, David is an energy economist in Boulder, Colorado, father of three; at night, he's Spark of Cyberion City – a place where I'm known only as Pollenator.*

Here we seem to have not only a multiplication of identity but also a movement beyond "real life" identities into a self-referential world. Rather than simulating a "real" self, online identity simulates other virtual, media generated identities, leading to a hyperreality of simulacral culture. Waskul and Douglas (1997, 391) illustrate this cyber-postmodernist position, explicitly linking the production of hyperreal culture online to the multiplication of identity:

> *Parallel to the multiple and simultaneous channels of on line communication exist a multiplicity of cyberselves. Each cyberself is an anonymous set of meanings associated with a screen name that may be presented as virtually anything. Such interactions become a form of dramatic communication play – a hyperreal simulacra of communication and a simulacra of the self – all reflective of symbolic interaction situated within a technology of social saturation.*

Combined with dislocation and disembodiment, the fragmentation of the self in simulacral culture leads to the dissolution of the knowing, rational self: Electronic media "reconfigures the position of the individual so drastically that the figure of the self, fixed in time and space, capable of exercising cognitive control over surrounding objects, may no longer be sustained" (Poster 1995, 60). The public sphere defined through communicative rationality, Poster (1995; 1997) argues, fails to account for this decentring of the subject and becomes "outmoded." Participants in cyberspace are unable to fully know and reflexively monitor themselves, the world, and others. They cannot identify and fully represent their motives, needs, and desires. They are unable to distinguish between good and bad reasoning, or separate public concerns from instrumental interests. The notions of inclusion and equality become difficult to apply to multiple and disembodied identities. The "force of better argument" is rendered largely meaningless. The critical judgement of validity claims is impossible. We must forget the public sphere concept and look for emerging, postmodern forms of politics and democracy in cyberspace.[6]

Evaluating the Postmodern Critique

To what extent, then, is the rational subject decentred in cyber-relations and the public sphere conception made redundant? To adequately examine this question, I need to both look at the extent of the decentring of the self online and re-examine how this relates to the public sphere constituted through communicative rationality. I will draw from available computer-mediated communications research to examine the extent of first the dislocation and disembodiment of the self and second the fragmentation of the self in cyber-relations. In each case, I will re-examine the public sphere conception to determine the extent that it can accommodate any hyperreal effects that take place. I will show that, on the one hand, the claims of

cyberspace inducing a state of hyperreality are exaggerated, while on the other hand, the public sphere conception does in fact adequately cater for the forms of interaction and subjectivity that develop through online communication.

A note on the scope of my investigation may be helpful at this point. Sites of "authentic fantasy" online, as O'Brien (1999) notes, can be differentiated from sites of "real authenticity." That is, sites where the intention is to "perform" can be distinguished from sites where the intention is to "be." The former are more often found in the case of MUDs and IRCs, while the latter is more the case with e-mail, e-mail lists, Usenet, and Web publishing. It would probably be quite reasonable to focus in this paper on sites of "real authenticity" since these are more likely to contain rational-critical deliberations. However, Poster and other post-modernists, despite themselves tending to draw from sites of "authentic fantasy" to make their arguments, claim that hyperreal effects occur across cyberspace. In addition, I do not want to risk excluding from my investigation practices that may actually contribute to an extension or enhancement of the public sphere. Hence, I will draw upon studies of a broad range of cyber-culture in my investigation.

Evaluating Dislocation and Disembodiment

The abstraction of the self from material life has been particularly celebrated and promoted by cyber-libertarians, virtual communitarians, and cyber-feminists, who desire escape from state and patriarchal controls (see Barlow 1996; Plant 1997).[7] However, the material detachment and disembodiment of selves from everyday life through cyberspace has been overdrawn. Participants may certainly feel as if they are detached from offline contexts and relationships as they immerse themselves in a context seemingly without material or geographical location, as they experience a change in space-time frameworks, and as they play with the presentation of virtual selves. But cyber-interactions remain very much integrated into offline material existence, drawing from as well as adding to participants' social and mental make up. Online participants, even if they wish to, cannot escape from offline physical, psychological, cultural, economic, and legal restrictions. Bodies make themselves known through sore backs and cramped fingers, mental states inform online experiences, economic constraints restrict participation, and the law lurks behind cyber-interactions whether in terms of surveillance for child-pornography or cyber-terrorism. Even the anonymity of cyber-interactions, much celebrated by libertarians for freeing participants from the constraints attached to offline identity, is difficult to maintain. Offline identity seeps into online communications in various ways: the content of posts are riddled with identity cues such as the poster's interests, values, lifestyle, and relationships; the language and writing style used in online communications may indicate class, culture, and gender; E-mail and Web page addresses, even when pseudonyms are used, can provide evidence of institutional affiliation and geographical location; and nicknames are often gendered. All these signifiers provide evidence for "who one is."

Nor do many participants desire escape from so-called "real life." While it is true that the Internet allows participants a greater degree of anonymity than other mediums, many participants voluntarily reveal and even publicise their "real" identity(s) online so as to build meaningful relationships and extend their everyday worlds (Burkhalter 1999, 64; Donath 1999, 40-44; Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997). Internet communications, from e-mail lists to synchronous chat groups, are often

used as a way of linking up with others around the globe to share, gain support for, and develop very real everyday interests, values, and concerns (Wellman and Gulia 1999). Where anonymity does play a part, it often encourages participants to express "themselves" more openly than they would in offline situations (Danet 1998, 131). Even in some of the more "playful," dramaturgical spaces where participants are encouraged to experiment with identity, such as sexually-oriented Internet Relay Chat and MUDs, participants often try to identify the "real life stats" (offline personal details, particularly physical appearance) of their interlocutors.[8] Moreover, bodies are central to cyber-interactions despite the lack of bodily markers (Argyle and Shields 1996; Kendall 1999; Turkle 1995). Not only are bodies always already present behind computer terminals, which delimits use in various ways, but they are also implicitly and explicitly brought into online conversation through the use of descriptors of emotional states and bodily actions (Argyle and Shields 1996, 58). For example, participants may describe their bodily involvement in online interaction by typing such descriptors as <sigh>, <laugh>, <hug>, or they may provide icons to describe their emotions, such as :) for smile or :(for frown.

Cyber-interactions thus do not fully detach people's selfhood from embodied offline contexts, contexts that include the necessity of confronting the political problems and responsibilities of embodied coexistence. Nevertheless, Internet communication does have some effect on participants' sense of time and space. Cyberspace contributes to what Giddens (1990) refers to as "time-space distanciation" and Harvey (1989) as "time-space compression," where technological mediation has increasingly shrunk temporal and spatial boundaries and transformed inter-subjective communications into highly mediated phenomena. Given this effect, there is no place, as Poster (1997, 209) points out, for a public sphere of entirely face-to-face relations. According to Poster, Habermas fails to account for this. Thompson (1995, 261) and Calhoun (1992, 33 n50) agree. They argue that Habermas's public sphere notion is modelled upon face-to-face conversation and publicness as co-presence. It assumes an unmediated exchange of claims and reasons within a shared temporal-spatial locale. The public sphere privileges the immediacy of oral interactions over textually mediated interactions. It is therefore an unsuitable model for highly mediated communications such as online discourse. There are two questions raised by this challenge. First, does the public sphere conception assume a nad́ve model of transparent communication between subjects, referred to by Poster (1997, 210) as the "fiction of the democratic community of full human presence"? In other words, does the idea of coming to understanding through communicative rationality assume a transparency of meaning and an associated pre-discursive, rational subject such that those involved in rational discourse know themselves and can truthfully represent their interests, values, and feelings fully, and can enter into unity with others and the world in order to share the same meanings? And second, does the public sphere conception account for time-space distanciation? Can it deal with electronically mediated communication?

Habermas does indeed draw upon speech act theory in deriving his model. However, communicative rationality does not assume a nad́ve theory of transparency of power and meaning, where subjects can clearly distinguish coercion from persuasion, good from bad reasons, true from untrue claims, and so forth. The charge that communicative rationality contains hidden assumptions of transparency is based upon a poor interpretation of the notion of "coming to understand-

ing" and a misunderstanding of the subjectivity involved. Coming to understanding does not assume a pre-discursive, knowing subject who can fully identify truth and power in their own and others' arguments. Rather, it involves an exacting and uncertain *process* where understanding is developed with time through an ongoing intersubjective discourse. The very likelihood of *mis*understandings demands this process, with rationality deriving from intersubjectivity rather than from a pre-discursive, knowing subject.

With respect to the second question, face-to-face interactions are not in fact demanded by the public sphere conception. Rather, the spatial character of communicative rationality allows for remote and highly dispersed deliberations (Habermas 1996, 360-361). Habermas (1992, 451) actually emphasises that the public sphere must be conceived of as the result of amorphous, abstract, and mediated relations.

> *If there still is to be a realistic application of the idea of the sovereignty of the people to highly complex societies, it must be uncoupled from the concrete understanding of its embodiment in physically present, participating, and jointly deciding members of a collectivity.*

Even in his evaluation of the seventeenth and eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere, Habermas takes the mediation of public interaction into account, acknowledging communications media (the political press and literary journals) as central to publicity, rational debate, and the development of public opinion. In comparison, Poster's historicisation of a modern face-to-face stage of discourse and a postmodern stage of highly mediated communication risks neglecting the way in which the early public sphere was also extended via space-time distanciating communications. As Hope (1996, 77) states,

> *Poster ignores the possibility that the disjuncture of space from place (cyberspace) is an extension of modernity. Even the early modern public sphere was operable without face-to-face dialogue and geographic meeting points. Now the media-IT revolution has simply extended the domains in which space is a placeless phenomena.*

The public sphere conception does not require a face-to-face model of interaction. Although cyber-communications do impact upon space-time perceptions to various degrees, this impact does not "outmode" the public sphere conception.

Evaluating Fragmentation

The exaggerated claim to bodily abstraction links to the second aspect of cyberspace which is believed to contribute to the undermining of rational deliberation: the fragmentation of subjectivity as it is "multiplied by databases, dispersed by computer messaging and conferencing," and "dissolved and materialized continuously in the electronic transmission of symbols" (Poster 1990, 15). This fragmentation of self through cyberspace has real substance. State and commercial surveillance is able to follow, transmit, and store in data banks virtual identities that have very real effects on individuals. In addition, as in offline life, online interaction involves continual constitution of identity, identity that changes from situation to situation and thus multiplies through cyberspace. However, like claims about the abstraction and disembodiment of selves, the fragmentation of subjectivity that is believed to result from online interaction is overdrawn. The multiplication and

subsequent decentring of subjectivity in cyberspace is neither as radically new or extensive, nor as fatal to rationality, as is sometimes argued.

Living with multiple identities or subject positions is not a new social phenomenon. Both Gergen (1991) and Goffman (1959; 1963), as Kendall (1999, 61) notes, "document numerous pre-Internet examples of this multiplicity of identity performance." A stable universe or unified self has never actually existed, at least under modern conditions.[9] Under modern social conditions people have to learn to live with multiple identities. In order to do so, they have to take on or perceive some degree of coherence and unity. As Flax points out, a fragmented and unstable selfhood would quickly lead to psychosis. She explains that her work as a psychotherapist with people suffering from "borderline syndrome" – an illness in which "the self is in painful and disabling fragments" – shows that without a core self an individual finds it almost impossible to live in the "outer world." She argues that "those who celebrate or call for a "de-centred" self seem self-deceptively naďve and unaware of the basic cohesion within themselves that makes the fragmentation of experiences something other than a terrifying slide into psychosis." Most people are able to successfully develop a "core self" to manage and integrate the various aspects of subjectivity (Flax 1990, 218-19).

As is the case with life offline, the management of multiple and changing identities is an important aspect of being online. The multiple identities in cyberspace are creatively negotiated by those individuals to whom they are attached. From her extensive research of mediated communications, Turkle (1997, 1103-1105) argues that subjects in cyberspace see themselves as multiple and integrated at once. The comparison to multiple personality disorder (MPD) breaks down because healthy participants in cyberspace consciously construct online persona. Despite the flexibility of identity online, the sense of self-knowledge and agency involved is much stronger than that experienced by persons with MPD. People desire and learn how to maintain stable, integral identities. Kendall's (1999, 62) research of online interaction on a MUD shows that "people persist in seeking essentialised groundings" in cyberspace. They "continually work to reincorporate their experiences of themselves and of other selves into integrated, consistent wholes." As well as facilitating multiplication, online practices enable the formation of a core or integrated self. Participants are encouraged to actively (particularly in comparison with more mass mediated forms) construct themselves as coherent identities (Slevin 2000, 177). Participants are called upon to reflect upon their selves and the conditions of their existence when undertaking e-mail communication, online conferencing, synchronous chat, and homepage construction.

Thus, rationality develops through online practice despite fragmentation. This rationality is not subject centred as some cyber-democracy commentators assume, but discursively constituted, developed in the process of online interaction.[10] Such an understanding of the self and rationality not is not only in accord with Poster's (1997, 211) analysis of online culture and politics but is promoted by Habermas's public sphere conception. As already noted, with communicative rationality reason derives from inter-subjectivity, not from an autonomously acting and knowing, pre-discursive self. Subjects develop autonomy and reflexivity only through deliberation (Warren 1995, 172-174). This understanding of the subject allows for two seemingly oppositional existential conditions to be accommodated: the ontological uncertainty of discursive constitution and the relative autonomy, coherence,

and understanding resulting from social integration and self-reflection. Communicative rationality is not made redundant by the multiplication of selves online. Rather, it may actually be facilitated through participants entering cyber-discourse where they come to know and understand themselves, their situations, and others.

Conclusion

Poster, supported by other postmodern theorists, concludes that cyber-interaction induces a decentring of the rational subject to the point where the public sphere conception loses critical purchase in the analysis of Internet culture and politics. However, I have argued that postmodern cyber-commentators like Poster tend to overextend the Internet's hyperreal impact. They extrapolate from present practices to a form of being that only really exists in extreme postmodern theories. This is not to deny the existence of novelty in cyberspace interactions. Poster (1998, 198) is right to point out that such denial by some commentators works to normalise cyberspace and incorporate it into what is understood. He refers to such denial as "the classic gesture of ideology: When faced with an apparent novelty ... place it under the cover of one's already existing position. Two feats are thereby accomplished: the threat of the new is dissolved and one's position is expanded and strengthened." I have pointed out that the Internet, along with other new media, does indeed precipitate major social and cultural changes that impact upon participants' sense of self. But these changes are not in the order of a Baudrillardian hyperreality that disables the possibility of communicative rationality. Identity simulation and time-space distanciation does not stop interlocutors in cyberspace undertaking critical-reflexive deliberation. Moreover, the public sphere conception can take into account the multiplication of subjectivity that occurs online as it does not assume a unitary, knowing, Cartesian subject engaged in face-to-face interaction but an intersubjectivity where rationality is formed in discourse.

There are, no doubt, some radically hyperreal political practices in cyberspace. But these are, at best, very much peripheral or emergent within cyber-culture. Poster (1995, 55, 76) accepts that his claims are developed from trends and possibilities, although he "anticipates a future in which these tendencies will no longer be emergent but dominant." Other cyber-postmodernists are equally reflexive about their musings. Stone (1992, 610) sees her writing in a similar way, as "about science fiction," "emergent behaviour," and "new social forms." The tenacity of these new social forms remains in question for her. And Benedict (1991, 3) admits that the cyberspace he describes "does not exist." Emergent forms, often drawn from futurism and science fiction, may offer interesting and provocative insights into possible futures. However, such forms are becoming increasingly marginal as everyday online practice becomes ever more commercialised and integrated into dominant offline social structures. Poster (1998, 194) agrees that there is some doubt over the final realisation of the envisioned postmodern effects of cyber-communications, stating that "[w]e must acknowledge the possibility that the globalization of a new communications network may not amount to much except the instrumental purpose of speed of interchange. Because the installation of virtual technologies is at an early stage, no firm judgement about its effectivity is possible." In any case, my concern here has not been to envision future forms but to analyse contemporary Internet practices, practices which do not effect subjecivity such as to outmode the public sphere constituted by communicative rationality.

Notes:

1. See, for instance, Buchanan 1997, Lyotard 1984, and Poster 1995.

2. See, in particular, Habermas (1984, 1-26; 1989; 1990, 43-115; 1996, 267-387). Cooke's (1994) and Chamber's (1996) work are very helpful in illuminating Habermas' conditions of moral-practical discourse.

3 Those who have used the concept of the public sphere for evaluating the Internet's democratic prospects include Fernback 1997, Hauben and Hauben 1997, Kellner 1999, Moore 1999, Noveck 1999, and Wilhelm 2000.

4. The cyber-postmodern argument considered in this paper is only one amongst many critiques of the adequacy of Habermas's public sphere conception that must be successfully replied to if the concept is to be used as a critical norm for democratic interaction. Furthermore, examining the viability of the public sphere concept with respect to cyber-communications must be distinguished from evaluating whether the model is actually being realised in cyberspace. For such an evaluation see, for instance, Dahlberg (forthcoming). See also the references in footnote three above.

5.A decade ago, theorists arguing that cyberspace induces a state of hyperreality or a decentring of the modernist subject tended to refer to virtual reality technologies in general. See, for instance, Benedikt 1991, Heim 1991, Stenger 1991, and Stone 1992. More recently, cyber-hyperrealists have referred more specifically to the Internet. See, for instance, Buchanan 1997, Kroker and Weinstein 1994, Nguyen and Alexander 1996, Plant 1997, Slouka 1995, Turkle 1995, and Waskul and Douglass 1997.

6. While Baudrillard's closest followers see silence as the only option available in hyperreal culture, Poster (1995; 1997), amongst others, sees a new postmodern politics emerging from the disruption of the hierarchical boundaries of modernity: rational/irrational, subject/object, male/female, and so on. This disruption opens up new positions of speech for previously excluded voices and identities.

7. The notion of disembodiment is popular amongst Internet enthusiasts, particularly cyber-libertarians who celebrate the escape of the mind from the restrictions of nation-state jurisdictions. Such rhetoric links back into a Cartesian assumption of bodily transcendence. Cyberspace allows an individualised exchange of minds, representing reason's victory over bodily imperfection. In its crudest form this rhetoric refers to a mind/meat dualism, where 'meat' is a vulgar term for the body that is drawn from cyberpunk fiction. Poster and other postmodernists stand in a contradictory position in relation to this dualism. On the one hand, they argue that an implosion of mind/body and transcendent/immanence takes place in cyberspace. On the other hand, they speak of a dispersion, de-materialisation, and abstraction of self in cyberspace, which seems to reassert a separation of mind from body.

8. Kendall's (1996, 217-218) study of identity on Multi-Object-Oriented online spaces shows that people are often pressed to reveal their offline gender.

9. In comparison to the caricature of modernity by some postmodernists, Berman's (1983, 15-17) analysis of modernity paints a picture of endemic social change, in which people experience the loss of the stabilising effects of tradition and persistent uncertainty. A 'paradoxical unity' existed: a 'unity of disunity ... [which] pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.' Hall (1992, 282) argues that within this climate of 'metaphysical doubt and scepticism' the modernist subject could never have been as unified and coherent as is depicted by some theorists, most particularly postmodernists.

10. Some cyber-democracy commentators do start with an autonomous rational subject utilising the latest technological devices for their pre-discursive interests. See, for instance, Shapiro 1999.

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