THE NETWORKED PUBLIC SPHERE

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Abstract

Habermas's late theory of the public sphere is fundamentally about democracy and growing complexity. The network form is at the core of growing complexity, and the centrality of networks in the economy, political system, civil society, and the lifeworld calls for revisions in central theoretical assumptions about the structure of the public sphere. We argue that in order to maintain Habermas's larger democratic project, we will have to rethink theoretical assumptions linked to its neo-Parsonsian systems theoretical foundations and to systematically integrate new network forms of social life into theory.

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Introduction

Why the concept of a networked public sphere? What difference does a "networked" public sphere concept make in theory or practice?

The public sphere is a concept that helps us measure the difference or gap between facts and norms in political life, the degree to which we act according to either the empirical dictates of power and strategy or a normative orientation toward the public good. As defined in Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, the classical concept of the public sphere is rooted in a framework of an emerging bourgeois state and economy, as well as in specific structures of civil society. Classical public sphere theory captures a particular dynamic of history, a point where reasoned discussion of politics is both possible and normative among certain groups.

But in *Between Facts and Norms*, Habermas's most developed account of the public sphere revises the concept significantly. Most importantly, he addresses the problem of complexity in democracy at a number of levels. First, in any advanced society, there will inevitably be more than one public, or the problem of multiple publics. Second, since the public sphere itself depends on a civil society, a lifeworld, and a private sphere to generate opinion, the rationalisation of these spheres toward increased fragmentation and privatisation directly shapes the public sphere. Third, the political and economic systems have increased both in complexity and in their autonomy from the lifeworld.

To supplement Habermas's public sphere theory, we argue that these increases in complexity follow from the growing centrality of networks. Networks are becoming more and more central both within the sphere of social integration in the lifeworld and for the conceptualisation and understanding of complex systems. Furthermore, as the study of network dynamics has evolved toward a so-called "science of networks" (Watts 2004), we are gaining a greater understanding of the specific network structures that operate in social systems, in the lifeworld, and as crosscutting linkages between them. These gains do not leave the concept of the public sphere untouched.

Most directly, acknowledgment of network structures can open up new perspectives on the formation of public opinion across spheres that until now have been conceived as *functionally* connected. These new perspectives would be critically important to the Habermasian project, which still relies for its macro-conceptual apparatus on a neo-Parsonsian systems-functional framework. That framework conceives separate spheres of society as linked by theoretically deduced exchanges or flows. These flows circulate between the political public sphere and the informal public sphere, the informal public sphere and civil society, civil society and the lifeworld, and so on. More specifically, in *Between Facts and Norms* Habermas relies heavily on Bernhard Peters's revisions of the Parsonsian integration framework. As we will argue, these posited macro-relationships still have strong theoretical validity, and they describe important and persisting functional dependencies. But the integration framework also tends to create gaps and to suggest dichotomies where they may not exist. It also tends to imply barriers between parts of the system that are, in fact, complexly and empirically integrated through networks. Since the public sphere is increasingly becoming integrated by networks of opinion formation, its structure is a prime case for studying the importance of networks to both social theory and communication theory.

Here we need to introduce a distinction that is fundamental to our argument, but that can easily become confusing. "Networks" can refer either to *social networks* or to *networks of information/communication technology*, particularly the Internet. For sociologists of community, the social network has become the central form of social integration. Complex networks of relationships ripple outward from personal or ego networks to friendship structures, families, associations, and whole communities. In addition to this role in social integration, social networks also play a powerful role in shaping flows of public opinion and influence (Beck et al. 2002). Social networks, however, are not the same as networked forms of communication (the world wide web, cell phones and text messaging, email, etc.). Networked forms of communication provide the *form* of connection among diverse social networks. In addition, they constitute a *modality* through which social relationships are created, extended, and maintained, particularly among people under 40. So there is a growing isomorphism between social and communication networks. Hereafter when we refer to "networks," we are discussing *social* networks or the network form more generally. When we discuss *communication* networks we will refer to ICT networks, the Internet, or the world-wide web.

Habermas's criticism of the anormative, quasi-phenomenological framework of Luhmannian autopoietic systems theory remains an important anchor of his body of work, and one that we accept in its broader outlines. But the idiosyncrasies of Luhmann's concepts, particularly his radical insistence on the third person stance, should not obscure the more important contribution of pointing toward the role of some forms of autopoiesis, or network-based self-organisation in complex social and communication systems. Even at the heart of the social and political spheres, the existence of autopoietic networks does not necessarily invalidate the normative framework of the theory of communicative action (for discussion of this debate see Leydesdorff 2000). But an emerging scientific consensus on the centrality of networks with properties of self-organisation does insist that we take the real dynamics of autopoietic systems into account, while wrestling critically with how these dynamics might also increase the possibilities for democratic communication under conditions of complexity.

This article is a small first step in this direction. We begin by reprising Habermas's most developed understanding of the public sphere in *Between Facts and Norms*, along with the clarifications and extensions he briefly spelled out in his 2006 address to the International Communication Association. We stress the systemic outlines of the theory, rather than its grounding in the universal-pragmatic claims of *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

We then work through the theory, discussing those areas in which developments in social research on network forms of social organisation point to the limits of its conceptualisation of contemporary system dynamics. Empirically-oriented social theory has largely reconceptualised post-industrial social formations as network forms both at the systems level (economy and politics) and in the lifeworld (civil society and socialisation). Furthermore, as both driver and expression of this phenomenon, communication media are themselves rapidly undergoing a transformation into networks of networks. We conclude that network dynamics increasingly govern the aspects of the public sphere that are geared towards either strategic communication or reaching understanding. We suggest that these dynamics share

some characteristics of open systems, but we also argue that these systems remain institutionally constrained.

The Late Habermasian Theory of the Public Sphere

Since the early 1990s, Habermas has made several revisions and refinements in his public sphere theories. Unfortunately, much of the commentary on his public sphere concept still revolves around his early efforts in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Compounding this reception problem, his recent work assumes that readers will be familiar both with the vocabulary of systems theory and with the complex theories of discourse and social organisation laid out in his monumental *Theory of Communicative Action*. In *Between Facts and Norms* (hereafter *BFN*), Habermas has taken further steps to ground his theories of discourse in a social systems framework that outlines the complex relations among the state, the legal system, civil society, the mass media, the public sphere, and finally "functional systems" like the economy, education, energy, and medicine. Few sociologists and communication researchers have fully analyzed or appropriated this late public sphere theory, and even fewer have acknowledged its new concepts and insights (e.g., relief mechanisms, communicative power, mediatisation). Instead, the most attentive commentary has focused more on the theory's legal, moral, and philosophical insights than on its sociological framework (Bohman 1994; 1996; Rehg 1994). But this complex and sometimes vague framework deserves careful reconstruction. More sociologically informed than the historical and normative account in *Structural Transformation*, Habermas's late public sphere theory represents a major attempt to describe how social complexity affects flows of communication throughout the different parts of the social system. In addition, reconstructing this framework can call more attention to a crucial feature of Habermas's recent theory that many commentators wrongly assume to be absent – its detailed and ambivalent account of how "steering" forces like money and power not only *colonise* but also *mediatise* communicative ideals.

Since we cannot present a full exegesis here, we limit ourselves to reconstructing selected aspects of Habermas's recent ideas on the public sphere's social functions. This reconstruction draws heavily from two sources: Chapters 7 and 8 of *BFN*; and "Political Communication in Media Society" (hereafter *PCMS*), Habermas's 2006 Plenary Address to the International Communication Association Conference. We note in particular how Habermas's accounts of the *process* and *flow* of communication among sub-systemic elements has changed. In both *BFN* and *PCMS* Habermas characterises the process in terms of functional dependencies, and he describes it with quasi-hydraulic metaphors, particularly liquid flows controlled by sluices. Sometimes he gestures towards network descriptions, but the metaphors of liquid flows dominate. These issues are not simply metaphorical but central to the theory itself.

Networks of flows have different dynamics than systems of functional dependencies. They move from the bottom up more freely, they self-organise in "neighbourhoods" that themselves form sub-systems of communication loops, and so on. Simply put, functional dependencies still exist (e.g. the political system's dependency on the public sphere), but they have much more fluidity and increasingly greater mutuality of influence. Closely related to the matter of flow, the

direction of communication throughout the social system becomes more complex and less predictable. During the post-World War II period in the West, the state was strong and the public sphere was dominated by elites. Under these conditions, even though the political public sphere was relatively open to feedback from the informal public sphere, communicative influence flowed "downhill". Recently, however, network logics have reshaped communicative directions and flows. In particular, they have loosened sub-systemic dependencies, increased flows of communication from below, and created greater instability throughout the entire system. Habermas has begun to acknowledge some of these developments, but here we try to integrate them with his most recent ideas about the social location and functions of the public sphere.

In *PCMS*, Habermas outlines a social-systemic and communication model for deliberative democracy. Most normative theories of deliberation put interpersonal communication at centre stage (for a review see Delli-Carpini, Cook, and Jacobs 2004). But Habermas's model attempts to explain how *mediated* communication can help political systems meet the normative goals of deliberative democracy. At centre stage in this attempt is the public sphere, whose role in deliberative democracy is to filter the published and polled opinions it receives so that "only considered public opinions pass through it" (*PCMS* 16). Putting this filtering process in a social systemic context, Habermas defines the public sphere in functional terms as "an intermediary system of communication between formally organised and informal face-to-face deliberations in arenas both at the top and at the bottom of the political system" (*PCMS* 10).

From a social systems perspective, the public sphere lies at the periphery of the political system, and its core is mediated communication. Mediated communication relies on the technologies of print and electronic mass media, and it circulates in the elite discourse produced by professionals like journalists, editors, producers, and publishers (*PCMS* 18). It dominates political communication in general because only the mass media can publish information, worldviews, and opinions to large numbers of people across vast distances. This dominance, however, has both advantages and disadvantages.

Habermas notes that the necessary dominance of mediated communication results in a political communication process that "lacks the defining features of deliberation." In particular, it lacks the features of face-to-face interaction and communicative reciprocity that characterise interpersonal deliberations between claim-uttering speakers and claim-judging addressees (*PCMS* 8-9). To tackle this problem, Habermas proposes a theoretical account of how mediated communication can uphold the norms of deliberative democracy according to its own capacities. This account has not only normative but empirical implications. Its normative aim is to define what counts as legitimate and appropriate political communication in the mass-mediated public sphere. Its empirical aim is to use these normative insights to identify "those variables that explain failures in the maintenance of a self-regulating media system and of proper feed-back between public sphere and civil society" (*PCMS* 27).

The function of mediated political communication in the public sphere is to "facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies." To facilitate deliberation, the media system needs to meet two requirements. First, it should be

"self-regulating," meaning that it must achieve and maintain independence from heteronomous influences like political actors, market forces, and special interest groups (*PCMS* 20). Second, the media system's audiences must be able to "revisit perceived public opinions and respond to them after reconsideration" (*PCMS* 16). If audiences have this ability, the media system can ensure proper feedback between the public sphere and civil society. For shorthand purposes, we can refer to the self-regulation requirement as *media independence* and the proper feedback requirement as *communicative reflexivity*. Media independence refers to the media system's adherence to its own norms of rational-critical debate. This normative autonomy depends on a lack of interference from both state control (political power) and functional system imperatives like market forces (economic power) and special interest influences (social power).

Communicative reflexivity refers to the public sphere's capacity to provide a social space in which feedback from citizens can travel upward from civil society to the political public sphere. This specifically *political* public sphere is the social subsystem where elite opinion is both generated and processed (opinion-formation), and where decisions are made (will-formation). To describe these communication processes, Habermas tends to use the imagery of liquid flows, with the public sphere functioning as a filter or sluice. Ideally, the public sphere filters information so that only "considered public opinion" will be at the centre of public debate.

As we argue below, these filtering and flow metaphors are not so much wrong as overly broad. They capture the theoretical dynamics of system dependencies in the post-war period, but at the cost of fixing these dependencies in ways that obscure large-scale contemporary empirical and historical change. We want to be clear: these dependencies still exist. The political system *does* depend on the economic (functional) system and civil society, and so on. But these functional systems are becoming reorganised as networks, and this reorganisation promises to change the extent, the degree, and the quality of their dependence. So for example, does a networked public sphere remain functionally subordinate to the political system? Or does it instead create new dependencies in the heart of the political system, which begins to rely more and more on influence from the informal, networked public sphere? While we don't attempt to predict the full range of these changes, we do attempt to describe the emergence of these new relationships.

Habermas's framework for the social system consists of the political system, functional systems, and civil society. The political system must accommodate demands that come from the other two macrosocial systems. One of civil society's functions is to communicate public problems to the political system. To differentiate the public sphere from the three macrosocial systems, Habermas identifies its two outputs – public opinions and communicative power. When the public sphere works properly and autonomously, it manages to both circulate and filter public opinions. These filtered opinions are not just any opinions but "considered" public opinions (*PCMS* 17). As opposed to noise, lies, distraction, manipulation, and systematically distorted communication, considered opinions are the desired outcome of democratic deliberation. To influence the political system, considered public opinions need to be backed by a special type of *communicative* power that only the public sphere can supply. Habermas's phrase "communicative power" is actually shorthand for "communicatively generated power," which he distinguishes

from the political system's "administratively employed power" (*BFN* 483). Administrative (a.k.a. political) power is what governmental institutions possess, and it "can only be exercised on the basis of policies and within the limits laid down by laws generated by the democratic process" (Habermas 1996/1998, 244). In contrast to political power, communicative power is more like Hannah Arendt's concept of power [*Macht*] – i.e., people's ability to act in concert, with action amounting to *communicative* action aimed at mutual understanding (Arendt 1970, 44; *BFN* 147-148). For the political system, communicative power "proceeds from political communication in the form of discursively generated majority decisions" (Habermas 1996/1998, 243). The basis of communicative power is mutual understanding occurring in interpersonal relations within civil society.

Since communicative power arises from interpersonal relations, it differs from the political system's administrative power, from the economy's monetary power, and from other functional systems' social power. In keeping with the integrating function of civil society, communicative power is analogous to solidarity. Administrative power, social power, and money (itself a special type of social power) are all "steering" forces. Steering forces "aim to influence the decisions of consumers, voters, and clients and are promoted by organisations intervening in a public sphere under the sway of mass media to mobilise purchasing power, loyalty, or conformist behavior" (Habermas 1992, 437). By contrast, communicative power is a relatively weak "countersteering" force that aims to promote cooperation and mutual understanding.

Even though the public sphere produces only this "weak" form of power, the political system *depends on* the public sphere's capacity to generate legitimacy. If the political system doesn't receive the public sphere's outputs of considered public opinion and communicative power, the public won't regard political actors and institutions as legitimate, and they won't acknowledge administrative power. This loss of legitimacy occurs when the opinions that prevail in the public sphere are backed *only* by administrative power or social power: "Public opinions that can acquire visibility only because of an undeclared infusion of money or organisational power lose their credibility as soon as these sources of social power are made public. Public opinion can be manipulated but neither publicly bought nor publicly blackmailed" (*BFN* 364). The key words in these sentences are "only," "undeclared," and "publicly." As long as opinions are backed by sufficient degrees of communicative power, the influences of administrative and social power in political communication won't lead to legitimation crises. But Habermas's broader point about the public sphere is that it supplies the political system with its own form of power, and that this communicative power is the product of a public sphere that manages to remain autonomous.

At the heart of the public sphere is the media system. In relation to the political system, the media system lies on its periphery. But its peripheral status makes the media system no less important politically. The political system relies on the media system not only to supply but also to filter considered public opinion inward to its own decision-making processes and outward to the audiences who hold communicative power and who therefore determine legitimacy. While the public sphere supplies communicative power, the media system supplies "media power." Habermas attributes media power to professionals like journalists, editors,

producers, and publishers. These professionals produce an elite discourse, and they can exercise their media power in several ways: "in the choice of information and format, in the shape and style of programs, and in the effects of its diffusion – in agenda-setting, or the priming and framing of issues" (*PCMS* 18). A key feature that distinguishes media power from communicative power is its dependence on mass communication technologies. The professionals who possess media power have technologically enhanced abilities to select and transmit information, worldviews, and opinions. Through these abilities, the media system acts as a switching station for the inputs and outputs of political communication that circulate back-and-forth between the public sphere and the three macrosocial systems. Although the media system links to these systems, it remains differentiated from them by obeying the public sphere's internal norms of independence and communicative reflexivity. So long as the media system upholds these norms, it can preserve the public sphere from colonisation by heteronomous influences of administrative power, economic power, and social power.

Habermas's basic normative argument about the media system's role in democratic deliberation is as follows. The public sphere should remain independent from its three environments because it has developed its own normative code of rational-critical debate (1962/1989, 31-43; *PCMS* 18-19; *BFN* 307-308). When the public sphere upholds this code, it generates communicative power. For the public sphere to remain autonomous, this communicative power should not be overruled by either the administrative power of state actors, or the monetary power of economic actors, or the social power of functional systems actors. In addition to preserving its independence, the media system should foster communicative reflexivity to ensure proper feedback between itself and civil society: "The political public sphere needs input from citizens who give voice to society's problems and respond to the issues articulated in elite discourse" (*PCMS* 24). But if audiences are socially deprived and culturally excluded, and if the media system is colonised by heteronomous powers, the public sphere will not be able to carry out its proper deliberative functions. In the contemporary networked pubic sphere, however, Habermas's requirement of media independence and autonomy may no longer be either possible or necessary.

The Networked Public Sphere

Habermas's late public sphere theory is transitional for several reasons. The early revisions of the 1990s took place before scholars systematically recognised the networked organisation of society, and before the rise of the Internet transformed the system of communication. The theory's three macrosocial systems – political system, functional systems, and civil society – were themselves (in varying degrees, as we will see) being transformed by what we will call the network form. Further, the complex linkages between civil society and the lifeworld were also subject to network transformations in both forms of civil association and networked individualism. (Robert Putnam's work, along with the mid-1990s debate it spawned over the decline of social capital, responds to many of these changes (Putnam 1993; 1995). More noticeably than any other system, the media system has been swept up in a global network maelstrom. This development has forced major revisions in theories about the relative positions of the political system, civil society, and the

media system, and therefore the location of communicative power. Finally, advances in theories of open systems self-organised as networks further undermine the stability of systems-theoretical assumptions that have been carried forward from what remains a neo-Parsonsian framework.

Macrosocial Transformations

Habermas's late theory of the public sphere is poised between the systems-functionalist macro-framework that runs from *Legitimation Crisis* through *Between Facts and Norms*, and the quasi-network elaboration of "Political Communication in Media Society." While he has, as we have seen, invoked network metaphors in both *BFN* and *PCMS,* the dominant framework remains that of macro-systems that have varying forms of functional interdependence. Also, as we have asserted, most of these functional dependencies retain validity. But why, then, should we shift our focus to network forms per se? Aren't these just two different descriptive vocabularies?

We argue that they are not. The core institutional configurations on which the theories of Parsons and Habermas rest – the unitary post-war state, the economy of high industrialism in transition to postindustrialism, and the nuclear family – no longer exist in the form of functional dependencies. Esping-Anderson (2000) observes, "As with the times of Marx and Durkheim, ours is also an epoch of massive upheaval. Where is now Parson's family, Blau and Duncan's occupational structure, Berles and Means' business enterprise, or Herbert Gans' suburb?" (59). He answers that the underlying social stability giving rise to these classic sociological analyses is gone. By extension, gone is also the validity of the grand theories that tied them together: "New economies imply new social configurations, conflicts and cleavages. They call for recasting institutions when, sociologically speaking, the status quo divides and atomises more than it integrates."

In his trilogy *The Network Society*, Manuel Castells offers an overarching explanation for these massive shifts. He contends that we have entered a fundamentally new social formation, characterised by the centrality of networks and the network form (Castells 1996; 1997; 1998) . He summarises the central points of his argument :

> *[T]he network society is a specific form of social structure tentatively identified by empirical research as being characteristic of the information age…By Information Age I refer to a historical period in which human societies perform their activities in a technological paradigm constituted around microelectronics-based information/communication technologies, and genetic engineering … What is also characteristic of this technological paradigm is the use of knowledge- based, information technologies to enhance and accelerate the production of knowledge and information, in a self-expanding, virtuous circle. Because information processing is at the source of life, and of social action, every domain of our eco-social system is thereby transformed* (Castells 2000, 15).

Castells's argument represents the strong position on the centrality of networks. According to this position, we are in the midst of an epochal transformation toward a social structure built on networks generally, and on information/communication technology (ICT) specifically. The network form is not simply one important form among many, but the organising principle of the emerging global system.[1]

Castells further argues that the combination of network forms of economic organisation have combined with global networks of ICT to create a new social form. "This form is an interactive system that features feedback effects and communication patterns from anywhere to everywhere within the networks. It follows an unprecedented combination of and task implementation, of coordinated decision making, and decentralized execution, which provide a superior social morphology for all human action" (15).

In *The Wealth of Networks*, Yochai Benkler also claims that the network form represents a "new mode of production emerging in the middle of the most advanced economies in the world." But his synthesis pays greater attention to the working through of specific network processes in the economy and polity. He proceeds from the heart of the liberal market tradition: "The change brought about by the networked information environment is deep. It is structural. It goes to the very foundations of how liberal markets and liberal democracies have coevolved for almost two centuries" (Benkler 2006, 1). He stresses the role of networks in opening up both non-market and non-proprietary production in fields as diverse as software development, information and journalism, and multiplayer games. These new modes of production "hint at the emergence of a new information environment, one in which individuals are free to take a more active role than was possible in the industrial information economy of the twentieth century." These developments represent a "battle over the institutional ecology of the digital environment," and this battle will affect individual autonomy, civic life, cultures, and communities (2). While Benkler acknowledges the weight of existing political, economic, and media systems, he also demonstrates how the growth of networked forms of production open up new public space at the very heart of these systems. Both the network economy and networked public space accelerate the erosion of the old structures with two consequences. First, they no longer dominate from the commanding heights of the economy and polity; second, the functional relations among them are put into play.

We need not accept these arguments in their strongest form to see that the model of the advanced economy based on functional state-level neo-corporatist bargaining that Habermas first systematically advanced in *Legitimation Crisis* is no longer stable. The functionalist model, carried forward in *Between Facts and Norms*, no longer operates in the same economic or political environment. The globalised networked economy theorised by Castells and others subverts the functionalist model from above. At the same time, Benkler's distributed network economy erodes it from within. The "functional systems" discussed above, particularly the economy, now operate within the emerging logic of networks.

As Esping-Anderson notes, both the business enterprise and occupational structure of the high-industrial epoch no longer exist, at least not as self-contained autonomous business units or class strata. This is equally true of the other functional systems cited by Habermas – e.g., the operation of the global energy grid and its markets, the reorganisation of medical research, or an educational system based on eroding community boundaries. Indeed, this network logic cuts across both political and economic systems. For example, large-scale research enterprises increasingly reflect the logic of the "business project." That logic organises networks of the political system, corporations, universities, and civil society (particularly the non-profit sector) in ways that coordinate large-scale, flexible, and finite goals.

Notwithstanding these developments, Habermas's late social theory reminds us that a networked world still has functional dependencies. The political system continues to provide outputs of subsidies and administrative regulation to the functional systems, even if these outputs have changed form. Also, those who monitor the relations between political and functional systems in the areas of energy, war, or research and development can see that the exchange between these two macrosystems remains both robust and close to Habermas's conception (it might even be more tightly coupled). Even in a networked economy, law, bargaining, and social power remain central to the steering relations between the state and the economy.

Civil Society and the Lifeworld

Since the writing of *Between Facts and Norms*, both civil society and the lifeworld have undergone network transformations. In turn, these transformations have begun to affect theoretical debate and empirical research. The traditional institutions of civil society – networks of associations, informal associations, and the private spheres of the lifeworld – have become structured as networks of organisations, networked forms of social capital, and networked individualism. Institutional and individual links have been characterised as weak ties of association that allow for easy entrance into and exit from social relationships (Granovetter 1982; Hirschman 1970).

This shift to a structure of weak ties also transforms the types of interpersonal communication that underpin the theory of communicative action. This transformation occurs both at the level of universal pragmatics and at the analytically separable level of the generation of communicative power in the lifeworld. Communication has moved online, and it is doing so at an ever growing rate among young people all over the world, but particularly in developed nations. The lifeworld of young people is increasingly merging with online space, and the effects of this "secondary" lifeworld interact systematically with the primary lifeworld of socialisation. Also, this secondary lifeworld is penetrating primary socialisation processes at earlier and earlier ages. Children in developed western nations, for example, spend ever increasing amounts of time with television, online computers, social networking sites, instant messaging, and video games. In many ways, this structure in flux affects Habermas's fundamental claims concerning the continuing possibilities of democratic communicative action rooted in the core structure of communicative socialisation.

At times civil society appears to be divided into two realms for Habermas – the institutional core of formal associations and the private spheres of the lifeworld. But there is also a third layer, that of informal association that mediates between them. As with the transformation of functional systems, the sociological understanding of civil society has largely been recast in network terms, and this recasting affects all three of the layers Habermas identifies.

The mid-1990s debate on social capital that grew out of Robert Putnam's work largely refers to the erosion of social capital networks that were stable through the 1970s (Putnam 2000). As early as the mid-1970s, investigations of the relationship between individual and community social networks began to identify emergent structures of "networked individualism," which presaged looser forms of social integration and socialisation (Fischer 1982; Fischer et al.1977; Wellman 1979; 1988).

Although a major synoptic study recently found that the effects of the Internet on social capital were indeterminate (DiMaggio et al. 2001), more recent data suggest that its effects vary according to use and age cohort (Shah, McLeod & Yoon 2001; Zhao 2006). Also, under certain conditions the Internet can even foster civic engagement (Shah, Cho, Eveland and Kwak 2005; Taveesin and Brown 2006). Nevertheless, several lines of argument are clear and well established. First, traditional social capital, the type most consonant with the Parsonsian structural-functionalist analysis of association that informs *BFN*, has undergone a massive transformation, and it has been accompanied by a corollary transformation of traditional community structure. Second, networked individualism, in which individuals disaffiliate from primary groups and associate in ramifying networks of weak ties, has grown rapidly (Hampton and Wellman 2003). This growth has occurred as part of a transformation of social capital into a communicative network structure (Rojas, Shah and Friedland forthcoming). Third, networked individualism is isomorphic with the rise of the Internet and mobile communication technologies (Matsuda 2005). Fourth, and closely linked, networked individualism is growing with each succeeding generation (Miyata et al. 2005). Fifth, social movements themselves are moving online, with network forms of organisation and mobilisation succeeding traditional strategies and venues (Cammaerts and Van Audenhove 2005). Taken together, we see that the structure of civil society has undergone massive, identifiable empirical changes in the direction of network organisation, and that these structural changes no longer fully support the model of *BFN*.

At both local and national levels, the institutional core of civil society is rapidly being recast in network terms. Within this institutional core are the associations, organisations, and movements that distill and transmit reactions to the public sphere. In the U.S., for example, local associations like traditional clubs, mainline religious congregations, or political groups have begun to decline. If other kinds of local associations have not begun to decline, they have been recast as consumer-oriented organisations like checkbook associations in politics (Skocpol 2003) or so-called megachurches in religion. As for social movements, they have moved online, and the most effective ones like MoveOn.org combine money-aggregation with online social networking. Some evidence shows that new forms of community and civic organisation, often supported by government and non-profit investment, can counterbalance these trends (Sirianni and Friedland 2001; 2005). But what's unmistakable is the overall tendency towards looser forms of association based on networked activism.

This tendency also appears in the middle term of civil society, informal association. Direct interactions with neighbours, friends, and co-workers (outside of work) are being supplemented across all age cohorts. Particularly for younger people, this supplementation occurs through the rapidly increasing use of email and other forms of social networking software (Jacobs 2006; Rosenbush 2006). Traditionally, local cafes, taverns, and clubs were "third spaces" where people could meet informally (Oldenberg 1991). But these traditional third-spaces are being displaced by commercialised ones like Starbucks, Dunkin Donuts, or Borders. In addition, the ubiquity of wi-fi connections turns commercialised third-spaces into mobile offices for those in service industries, particularly the knowledge sector. It is difficult to predict whether this networking of informal association will lead to an increase

of association overall. Some evidence indicates that it might, for example in the phenomenon of "meet-ups" during the 2004 and 2006 U.S. political campaigns. In such meet-ups, networks of individuals who were originally connected by the Internet could meet one another in person, or carry out political canvassing on the streets, or stage protests through "swarming" strategies (Rheingold 2002). Regardless of where these developments lead, the informal space of association is without a doubt becoming driven by networks.

Combined with interpersonal communication in the lifeworld, these informal associations are central to the theory of communicative action that underpins the late Habermasian public sphere. We recall that the very basis of communicative power is interpersonal relations within civil society. This realm of interpersonal relations is perhaps the one most rapidly and radically transformed by the extension of networked communication. At the most superficial level, the use of networked technologies has exploded in advanced societies in the past ten years with the rapid penetration of the Internet, cellphones, texting, and wi-fi (International Telecommunication Union 2006). While penetration rises more slowly outside the middle-classes, cheaper cell-based messaging is also becoming more widespread in much of the former third-world (in Africa 74.3% of telephone subscribers are mobile phone subscribers; ITU 2006). In short, like informal association, interpersonal communication is also being reconfigured around the network.

This reconfiguration is even more prevalent among younger people. Use of new technologies by those under 40 has expanded. In the U.S. around 88% of those under 40 are now online, and those under 25 use the Internet comparatively more intensively (Fox and Madden 2005). Social networking sites like MySpace with an estimated 60 million members, Facebook with an estimated 15 million members, Friendster, and new competitors have grown exponentially. Sites like Craigslist, a free user-driven site for personal ads, FlickR, in which users share photos, and YouTube, a mix of personal videos and those taken from commercial media, have led to so-called Web 2.0. This second layer of the Internet entails constant interactivity among users and the growth of a global hypertext. Our goal here is not to review this phenomenon (although we turn to its implications for the public sphere below). Rather, we are pointing to the networked world of interpersonal relations, and the transfer of more and more of these relations online in the context of the discussion of communicative power.

At minimum, the dynamics of online communication now set the parameters for the generation of communicative power, whether the actual effects on public life are positive or negative. Some have claimed that the online space of interpersonal communication forms a new type of public space, especially for young people, with different dynamics that cannot be simply compared to those of twentieth century modernity. They point to the range of online political activism ranging from national politics to Sudan, AIDS, and other global issues. This online campaigning is indisputable. Others point to the merging of online culture and consumer culture, in which "activism" comes to mean visiting a web site, or "clicking through" a product ad which results in the donation of a penny to a marketed cause.

Empirical research is just beginning to sort out the complex and often contradictory effects of life online and their implications for public life. For now, the only plausible stance is one of critical agnosticism. People currently in their fifties and

older who are sometimes nostalgic for traditional forms of community often view the shift to online interpersonal communication with scepticism and trepidation. Those young people who live online describe it *as* a lifeworld, part of the background conditions of communication. For them it's sometimes visible, but only reflexively and in pieces at a time. Even so, this structure will define the lifeworld in the future, and public sphere theory will have to be revised to account for it.

The Emerging Networked Public Sphere

The networked public sphere is both defined and constrained by network transformations in the three macrosystems that form the environment of the public sphere – the political system, functional systems, and civil society. More specifically, Habermas's late theory of the public sphere itself consists of three subsystems – civil society, the strong public sphere of the political system, and the weak or mediated public sphere that includes the media system. We have discussed changes in the political system and civil society above. In both civil society and the lifeworld, the transition to networked individualism established the social preconditions for the dramatic increase in network technologies beginning in the 1990s. In turn, these changes have further shaped the contemporary public sphere. But nowhere has their impact been observed more strongly than in the media system itself. At every scale, media are being reorganised as networked media.

This new networked public sphere systematically increases communicative reflexivity at every level of communication, including the political system, civil society, and the lifeworld. Its network structure erodes the authority and agenda-setting power of the traditional media. Habermas's solution to the potential breakdown of legitimate authority in the media system is to continue to insist on two conditions – *communicative reflexivity* to ensure proper feedback between the public sphere and civil society, and *media independence* to ensure the media's self-regulation according to norms of rational-critical debate. But what if these are unrealisable ideals? We argue that media independence in particular is unattainable in a world not only where the public sphere is inextricably intertwined with networks of journalistic media, but also where these media are themselves embedded in entertainment networks.

These conditions raise a critical question about communicative power in the networked public sphere: Is it possible that both requirements, communicative reflexivity and media independence, are *not* necessary? Perhaps under conditions of *systematically increased communicative reflexivity*, the unattainable ideal of independence is loosened. In addition, we argue that the new networked media system radically, even exponentially, increases the possibilities for reflexivity at every level of society. Indeed, the network characteristics of the lifeworld and civil society discussed above feed these new possibilities, and they increase with each generation.

If the function of mediated political communication in the public sphere is to "facilitate deliberative legitimation processes in complex societies," then the networked media system would have to meet the two requirements discussed above: self-regulation as *media independence* and the proper feedback requirement as *communicative reflexivity*. We recall that media independence refers to the media system's adherence to its own norms of rational-critical debate. In the strong

requirement that Habermas proposes, normative autonomy depends on a lack of interference from political power, from functional system imperatives like market forces, and from the social power of special interest influences. This requirement could perhaps function as a regulative ideal for institutions. But it is almost impossible to imagine a media system in which some, much less all, of these strong conditions would apply. Some western media systems (e.g. the BBC) are relatively insulated from direct political manipulation. But none are free from the influence of what Lance Bennett has termed "the political regime." He defines this regime as a system of rules and norms among elite political actors that govern their behaviour, most importantly in the form of strategic activities that include polling, political advertising, staged news events, and the relentless repetition of messages (Bennett, forthcoming). Under these conditions, communication at the level of the political system is never free from strategic imperatives. This regime theory suggests that the ideal of normative autonomy is nearly impossible to achieve at the place where the media system intersects with the *political* system. Since reporters, news businesses, and politicians depend on one another for sources, content, and publicity, the political and media system imperatives these actors obey constitute an environmental limit on autonomy.[2]

The institutional media subsystem is subject to ever great penetration from two directions – from the political system's strategic imperatives and from the weak public sphere's emerging forms of network communication. Perhaps for the first time in history, the informal public sphere has a medium that in principle allows for large-scale expression of mass opinion in forms that *systematically* affect the institutional media system. These systematic effects can occur through new networked forms of media like the following: political blogging; distributed forms of information gathering, production, and publishing (e.g. wikis, open source journalism); email lists; and individuals' store-and-forward uses of email.

We might say that networked communication has begun to *surround* the traditional media system. In Habermas's understanding of media independence, the media system has been adequately differentiated out from the political system through the emergence of an independent non-party press and broadcasting. It has also been differentiated out from the economic system through journalism that is not wholly or at least primarily driven by commercial imperatives. While political independence has largely been achieved in most Western countries, we have passed the period in which most of the press is able to establish its autonomy from commercial imperatives.

If anything, we are seeing ever greater integration between journalism and the economic aspects of the media system of which journalism is only an institutional subset. The exact causes and extent of this integration lie beyond the scope of this essay. But the basic point is that economic integration both pushes and is pushed by network integration. For example, as established broadcast media reach out to new audiences, they open themselves up to new communications networks. Content is placed online where the public can comment on it. Old news cycles are broken up, and with them much of the agenda-setting power of the traditional media that depended on both access to information and the ability to control the cycles in which it was released. Today in the U.S. it is not unusual for a major story to be leaked via political operatives to a minor website (e.g. The DrudgeReport), and

to have this unverified story picked up by bloggers and spread through the web, to the point where mainstream media can no longer avoid it. Prominent examples include the Swift Boat story that derailed John Kerry's presidential campaign, and so-called Rathergate, in which bloggers argued that documents underpinning a CBS story on President Bush shirking National Guard duty were forged. It's uncertain whether this undermining of traditional journalism's authority will result in a net gain for democratic communication (and there are valid arguments on both sides of this question). Regardless, this authority is in decline partly because of its openness to networked communication. And this openness renders Habermas's ideal of media independence unrealisable.

Perhaps we can further understand this problem by revisiting one of Habermas's examples of failed media independence. In *PCMS*, he points to the White House communication strategy during the build-up to the Iraq War as an example of "temporary de-differentiation" with a grave impact. What was remarkable, he notes, was less the "clever move by the president to frame the events of 9/11 as having triggered a war on terrorism" than "the total absence of any serious counterframing." If the media independence ideal had been more strictly observed, "A responsible press would have provided the popular media with more reliable news and alternative interpretations through the channels of an intermedia agenda setting" (*PCMS* 23). Certainly, this episode represents a failure of the media system. But we need to note that the existing alternatives to the traditional mass media grew out of the networked public sphere. Political networks – like MoveOn.org, political opinion bloggers, and informational or quasi-journalistic blogs that tracked the number of Iraqi dead – developed alternative networks of public opinion. These networks sustained views that countered the temporary consensus in the political public sphere (with Democrats largely silenced or supporting the war). If this episode represents a failure of the traditional media system, it also represents a case in which communicative reflexivity grew out of feedback from citizens. In turn, that feedback travelled upward from civil society to the political public sphere. Our question is how and why could this feedback process take place?

Benkler argues that a combination of factors enable the networked public sphere to work even in the face of the traditional media system's failure. First, the network architecture itself, combined with the radically decreasing costs of becoming a speaker, have allowed individuals to participate in the public sphere on an unprecedented scale:

> *[T]he cost of being a speaker in a regional, national, or even international political conversation is several orders of magnitude lower than the cost of speaking in the mass-mediated environment. This in turn leads to several orders of magnitude more speakers and participants in conversation and, ultimately, in the public sphere* (Benkler 2006, 213).

This reduction of cost in turn leads to qualitative change in the experience of being a *potential* speaker, as opposed to a listener or voter. As a result, individuals are more likely to see themselves as potential participants in a public conversation. This change is made possible by both the tools and the organisation of the network. But the Internet's primary effect on the public sphere in liberal societies relies on the "information and cultural production activity of non-market actors: individuals working alone and cooperatively with others, more formal associa-

tions like NGOs, and their feedback effects on the mainstream media itself." These practices enable the networked public sphere to moderate the two major concerns with commercial mass media – the excessive power held by owners and the tendency to foster an inert polity. Fundamentally, the "social practices of information and discourse allow a very large number of actors to see themselves as potential contributors to public discourse and as potential actors in political arenas, rather than mostly passive recipients of mediated information who occasionally can vote their preferences" (220).

Benkler also argues that the networked environment improves individuals' practical capacities in three ways. First, it enables them to do more for themselves. Second, it improves their capacity to work in loose commonality with others. Third, it improves organisations' capacities to work outside the market (8). For now, though, no one has proved whether a large number of actors actually see themselves as potential actors. Nor has anyone proved how much and under what conditions this potential has been realised. Benkler appeals to *prima facie* evidence that many more people do actively engage in online discussion, and that in any case many more people take active roles online compared to their passive role in the traditional media system. These questions, though, are transitionally and empirically important. Certainly the number of active speakers in the online universe will continue to grow, even if those who engage in politics and civic life remain greatly outnumbered by those in fan groups and small personal networks.[3] But why does the architecture of the online public sphere allow this increase in communicative participation in the public sphere? And what are the potential informational and normative problems in this mediated universe?

There are two major objections to the assertion that the networked public sphere expands discourse. The first is that the topology of large networks leads to new forms of hierarchy and concentration. The second is that the network leads to cacophony or information overload.

The hierarchy objection is rooted in the fact that the networked world of public discussion is a network of networks. That is to say, many smaller networks attach to each other and form denser *hubs* of discussion. In turn, these hubs link to each other, forming dense clusters. Generally in the online political world, hubs are more likely to link to sites that are similar than to those that are different. As a result, we see the formation of relatively dense clusters of progressive or conservative hubs, each of which is able to achieve greater influence by linking to its peers. There is cross-linking, or bridging, between these clusters, often to refute arguments from other positions (or even to "troll," annoy, or issue insults). Within these clusters new forms of hierarchy emerge, with some sites capturing the lion's share of traffic and attention, and many others gaining virtually none. This situation has come to be known as the problem of power laws, after the curve that describes this winner-take-all structure (Barabási 2002; Watts 2003).

The problem with the power law architecture is that it tends to reconcentrate attention into a number of very large sites which, not surprisingly, tend to be those dominated by the mainstream media (CNN, NBC, Fox). Benkler has offered the most sophisticated critique of the power law objection to the networked public sphere (241-261). Without going into the critique's technical details, in essence he acknowledges the existence of power law hierarchies, but he argues that the

attention structure of the Net does not replicate that of the mass media. He bases this claim on the idea that "clusters of moderately read sites provide platforms for vastly greater numbers of speakers than were heard in the mass-media environment" (p. 242). Through processes of peer accreditation, open filtering, synthesis of views, and creation of salience, new information affinity groups are created. These groups form a chain, with small clusters giving access to individuals lower on the chain and passing their views upward as they gain salience. The Web and the blogosphere form an ordered universe in which local clustering leads to strongly connected cores of tens of millions of sites. In other words, visibility remains high at lower levels (to potentially interested participants) while, because of upward filtering, local views have a much better opportunity of being introduced into the broad backbone of the Net (Benkler 247-248).

A simple example can illustrate these principles. Daily Kos, a left-democratic site that receives millions of visits every month, is fed by thousands of smaller sites. From its feeding sites, some views that are sufficiently provocative, interesting, or convincing filter into the Kos hub. In turn, Kos filters into major backbone sites like CNN or MSNBC. Through and around Daily Kos, there is a filtered flow of views from small and local publics to ever larger mediated public spheres. Although the Net's topology incorporates some of the principles of power laws, it turns them on their heads. The tens or hundreds of millions of opinions receiving only local attention "turns out to be a peer-produced filter and transmission medium for a vastly large number of speakers than was imaginable in the mass media world" (Benkler 255).

In contrast to a market-based filter that would allow only a lowest common denominator range of views, the network arouses intense engagement from those who share common concerns. This engagement subsequently makes the "emerging networked public sphere more responsive to intensely held concerns of a much wider swath of the population than the mass media were capable of seeing, and creates a communications process that is more resistant to corruption by money" (Benkler 242).

This emergent order on the Web raises counterclaims to the four "cacophony" objections articulated early on by Sunstein (2001) and others. According to the first objection, the networked public sphere will have too many voices. This overabundance will result in information overload, which will make sifting through the cacophony too difficult for all but those with a great deal of time, attention, and interest. Second, there will be fragmentation of discourse, and third and corollary, this fragmentation will lead to polarisation as people only read what suits their predispositions (following Negroponte, Sunstein calls this the problem of the "Daily Me"). According to the fourth and final objection, all of these problems create a network universe that simply reproduces the structure of the traditional mass media, with time and attention becoming ever more subject to the power of money.

Concerning fragmentation, Benkler responds that the topology of the Net has produced forms of community that create self-organising flows of information. These self-organising flows include "a number of highly salient sites that provide a core of common social and cultural experiences and knowledge that can provide the basis for a common public sphere, rather than a fragmented one" (p. 256). Second, Benkler argues that practices of cross-linking and quoting one's opponents

work against polarisation. He acknowledges that only about 10 percent of political blogs cross the ideological divide. But he argues that this phenomenon represents more of an internal forum than an echo chamber, as like-minded people develop their arguments with each other. As arguments become filtered, strengthened, and tested, they gain in salience. Polarisation, then, does not result so much in a "Daily Me," as a "Daily Us." This outcome precisely represents one central function of lower-level informal publics: to allow like-minded people to work out their similarities and differences in ways that test them and allow them to be presented to others who disagree.[4]

Perhaps an even stronger network-based challenge to the structure, if not the ideal, of deliberation has emerged from Sunstein himself. In *Infotopia*, Sunstein claims that "if we all want to learn what each of us knows, deliberation is full of pitfalls" (2006, vii). He argues that for the accurate aggregation of information, at least three network-based methods compete well with deliberation. First, the statistical average of group judgments can often be more accurate than expert judgments: "If we have access to many minds, we might trust the average response, a point that bears directly on the foundations of democracy itself." Second, in many tasks the price system and prediction markets outperform both surveys and deliberation. Third, closely paralleling Benkler's arguments, the Internet can be used to "obtain access to many minds" through media forms like wikis, blogs, and open source software. Each of these methods, though, is subject to the same pitfalls as deliberation. Information pressures and social influences "contribute to the amplification of errors, hidden profiles, cascade effects, and group polarization" (17). But ultimately, invoking the "wisdom of crowds" (Surowiecki 2004), Sunstein argues that the pressures and influence biases affecting deliberation make it no better, and sometimes even worse, than other modes of obtaining truth.

Conclusion

The networked public sphere poses significant empirical and theoretical challenges to the late Habermasian model in at least three respects. First, it raises serious questions about the underlying structure of communicative action and its relationship to larger structures of public discourse. As we have seen, the new networked structure of communication involves multiple shifts away from the model of communicative socialisation Habermas proposes in *The Theory of Communicative Action*. The model of the well-socialised individual capable of communicatively rational action is, in fact, poised between primary socialisation in the family and secondary socialisation in the world of institutions. The transformation of secondary institutions – the schools, community associations, indeed the family – into networked environments has created a secondary lifeworld in which the media itself becomes a major source of socialisation. "Life online" is more than a metaphor for those under 35 (and many over). It is a new form of life that influences core forms of intersubjective communication and sociation.

Second, the structural-functionalist model of the public sphere requires revision for a networked environment. Habermas generally preserves the model of sluices and flows that he derived from Bernhard Peters. But that model is based on assumptions about civil society and communication in the public sphere that no longer hold in a networked environment. Networked communication allows

the public sphere to be organised distributively, with multiple contributions in an environment that is significantly more open than the sluice model implies. As we have argued, the potential for reflexivity in the system increases exponentially as active publics online form to read, discuss, argue, and challenge the assumptions of elites in the political public sphere. This increased reflexivity potential doesn't entail that institutions will *dissolve* into networks. But dense networks of traditional institutions, structured in hierarchies and markets, are increasingly being integrated into and subordinated to a global network environment. The implication is that the hierarchical order of institutions that underpins structural-functionalist theory, along with the relations of stability and dependence that formed the great arc of theory from Parsons to Habermas, are giving way to the more fluid form of the network.

Third, and closely related, network organisation is a new model for understanding the flow of communication in highly complex, interlinked environments. Habermas's first great achievement is to have articulated a theory of communicative action that encompasses the macro-organisation of social institutions and the micro-foundations of communicative action. In his debates with Luhmann, however, perhaps he gave up too much. The general pattern of self-regulation and organisation of open networks, or autopoiesis, is now a central theoretical framework for understanding network organisation in fields as diverse as physics, biology, and communication. Habermas's second great achievement is his systematic linkage of the empirical with the normative in the structure of communication itself. Preserving this achievement will require a more open confrontation with the network form itself.

Notes:

1. While Castells sees himself as moving beyond a late-Marxist critique of post-industrial capitalism, his synthesis remains tied to it in substance and form. For Castells, the networked form of global capitalism continues to represent a regime of domination and exploitation, but the propelling force is no longer value but the network form itself.

2. In a different theoretical register, this parallels Bourdieu's insight concerning the irreducible heteronomy of the media system (Bourdieu 1998).

3. Benkler and others would argue that the large numbers of people online who are concerned with music, popular culture, and personal life are, indeed, forming cultural publics that are not terribly different from those of the early modern period. The content and scale differs. We sympathize with the argument that the mobilization of private life into a culture of online discussion has the potential to grow into other forms of public engagement, but we are also aware that it represents an extension of the organization of culture by consumption.

4. This raises an important question that we can not begin to answer here. While Habermas's original vision in *STPS*, points to the existence of many, smaller, relatively homogenous publics, which form a larger heterogeneous political public sphere, the image of a deliberative public, growing from the work on universal pragmatics suggests both a larger ideal public and smaller heterogeneous publics that rationally deliberate. This vision has largely been taken up in the vast literature on deliberation and thematised as a debate between proponents of strong deliberation and rational-choice critics. We argue that the vision of deliberation that requires face-to-face rational resolution of differences is overly demanding and sociologically unrealistic, and that mediated deliberation in a complex democracy will require precisely the kinds of relatively homogenous "rooms," actual or virtual, that Benkler describes.

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