On Waxen Wings:
Challenges to the Public Sphere in the Network Age

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Abstract

There is a tendency, particularly among Western pundits and technologists, to examine the Internet in almost universally positive terms; this is most evident in any discussion of the medium's capacity for democratization. While the Internet has produced many great things for society in terms of cultural and economic production, some consideration must be given to the implications that such a revolutionary medium holds for the public sphere. By creating a communicative space that essentially grants everyone his or her own microphone, the Internet is fragmenting public discourse due to the proliferation of opinions and messages and the removal of traditional gatekeepers of information. More significantly, because of the structural qualities of the Internet, users no longer have to expose themselves to opinions and viewpoints that fall outside their own preconceived notions. This limits the robustness of the public sphere by limiting the healthy debate that can only occur when exposed to multiple viewpoints. Ultimately, the Internet is not going anywhere, so it is important to equip the public with the tools and knowledge to be able to navigate the digital space.

Taught to schoolchildren, the story of Icarus is a potent reminder of the unintended, often dangerous, consequences of technology. Soaring across the Aegean on wings of wax and feather, young Icarus flew higher, and higher, exhilarated by the power of flight bestowed by his new invention. As Icarus rose above the clouds, the

sun melted the wax holding his wings together, and he fell to his death, illustrating that even in Ancient Greece, the seductive song of technology was difficult to resist and ultimately fatal to pursue intemperately.

Today, technology's allure is all but impossible to ignore. Indeed, from the very moment we are born, among the surgical instruments, blinking lights, and flashing monitors of the hospital room, technology surrounds us. The advent of technologies like the Internet have given rise to the digital native, a generation that "[has] developed an innate understanding of digital and computer technologies, which have evolved into essential parts of their daily lives" (Puybaraud & Hahn, 2012). Often this means playing catch up, trying to keep pace with the rate of technological change, which has accelerated exponentially over the past two decades. According to Kurzweill (2001), the notable author and futurist who also happens to be Google's engineering director, "we won't experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century—it will be more like 20,000 years of progress at today's rate". As technology advances and grows inextricably attached to human experience, a digital technocracy emerges, where those in power—economically, politically, and culturally— are the ones holding keys to the machine.

The inescapable presence of technology and the economic and cultural influence of the Web 2.0 have led to a widespread belief that technology has an empowering, omnipotent effect on human societies (Morozov, 2011). Benkler (2006), a notable proponent of the Internet's benefits, writes: "the networked information environment...holds great practical promise: as a dimension of individual freedom; as a platform for better democratic participation; as a medium to foster a more critical and self-reflective culture; and... as a mechanism to achieve improvements in human development everywhere" (p. 1-2). The mass media era of

the 20th century consolidated control and ownership in a select few; however, the communication technologies of today are hailed for their participatory nature, allowing anyone to be a "town crier" (Benkler, 2006). According to many, this has a positive effect on the public sphere, heralding new possibilities for political participation and advancing democracy, by allowing a very large number of people to contribute to public discourse (Benkler, 2011; Bohman, 2004). The 2009 Iranian uprising, which many pointed to as an example of the Internet's ability to usher in democratic values into a country, led many political figures and pundits to wax superlatives about Twitter and other communication tools. Gordon Brown, former Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, said that he believed these kinds of technologies would stop future human rights atrocities from occurring: "You cannot have Rwanda again because information would come out far more quickly about what is actually going on and the public opinion would grow to the point where action would need to be taken" (cited in Morozov, 2011, p. 4). Violent crises in Syria and, most recently, Ukraine, suggest such a view to be myopic at best. In Syria in particular, where the government actively monitors social media platforms for dissidents, the Internet has proven to be a double-edged sword, a technology that is just as likely to be used for surveillance as it is for political emancipation (Reuters, 2011).

As Icarus reminds us, there is always a cost—a dark side to invention. The democratization of the Internet has allowed anyone (at least those with an Internet connection) to publish anything, anytime, anywhere. With this democratization, Sunstein (2007) suggests, "there is an omnipresent risk of information overload—too many options, too many topics, too many opinions" (p. 51). Rather than engendering a more informed political citizenry, the structural features of computer-mediated

communication compromise the balanced debate and deliberation required for a vigorous public sphere. As the Internet takes on an even greater role in politics and daily life, it grows increasingly imperative to examine the technology in its totality and consider the full range of implications that the Internet's democratization may cause.

Literature Review
Communication Technologies as Transformative Agents
It was Innis (2008) who first articulated in depth the role that communication media plays in the dissemination of knowledge, suggesting that civilizations are profoundly influenced by changes in communication technologies. Studying the transformative changes of societies as they transition from oral history and hieroglyphics to the mass media inventions of the 20th century, Innis argued that history is divided into specific epochs, each distinguished by the dominant form of media. These media bias the cultural and social values of the society, which is why Innis believed a communications perspective was more revealing than one based on economic production or religion: "[communications] cross-cuts so many features of the social fabric". While Innis was not alive to observe the transformations now occurring because of the Internet, this epoch's dominant media system, he helped to establish the notion that media technologies do not operate in a vacuum; rather, as Castells (2010) observed, "technology *is* society, and society cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools" (p. 5).

The term *network society* first began to be popularized in the 1990s as a way to describe the political, economic, and cultural changes caused by the arrival of digital network technologies. Due to the Internet, Castells (2010) suggests the emergence of a new social structure—what Castells labels as "informationalism"—that reconfigures ontological structures of society. He writes: "Networks

constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power, and culture" (p. 501). Castells goes further by arguing that networks have become a globalized phenomenon, and new technologies like the Web 2.0 and wireless devices are able to connect the local and global instantaneously, distributing information via the Internet to all "realms of social life".

Benkler (2006) furthers many of the arguments set forth by Castells (2010) and looks into the structural features of the Internet now responsible for the significant changes occurring in society. Comparing the mass media era of the 20th century to today's networked economy, Benkler (2006) claims there are two fundamental differences:

> The first element is the shift from a hub-and-spoke architecture with unidirectional links to the end points in mass media, to distributed architecture with multidirectional connections among all nodes in the networked information environment. The second is the practical elimination of communications costs as a barrier to speaking across associational boundaries. (p. 212)

These two changes, according to Benkler, have fundamentally altered the capacity for individuals to participate economically, culturally, and politically. Web sites and blogs are "writable," which enable individuals to modify them easily from anywhere and allows for a greater number of people to participate as speakers. Additionally, in the case of blogs and social media platforms, readers are able to comment and respond, creating a level of interaction between users. All of this is achieved through the universal and standardized hypertext markup language (HTML), which allows for the

easy linking of content between websites, effectively creating a network of content and speakers.

Networks and Challenges Posed to the Public Sphere According to Slade and Volkmer (2012), the original scope of Habermas' public sphere was limited to the nation and the "one-to-one relation between a citizen and a nation-state" (p. 401). Studying the impact of satellite use in Europe, they point out that a number of discourses have argued that "new communication technologies have obviated the need to integrate" (p. 400) by eroding national identities. The Internet, with its capacity to penetrate national and regional borders, has helped to expand the definition of the public sphere to encompass the relationship between democracy, media, and the individuals who occupy the space (Iosifidis, 2011). Like many other technologies, argues Bohman (2004), the Internet was greeted optimistically at first for its potential to improve the public sphere:

> The Internet was thought to herald new possibilities for political participation, if not direct democracy...the high hopes of electronic democracy seem to have faded...Central features of the Internet undermine the sort of public sphere and political interaction that is required for genuine democratic deliberation. (p. 131)

One of the main arguments why the Internet has yet to encourage political discourse and promote democracy is the proliferation of voices and opinions in the digital space. Benkler (2006) labels this the Babel argument: "the concern that information overload will lead to fragmentation, polarization, and the loss of political community" (p. 214). Without a mechanism to separate information from the pabulum, individuals are at a higher risk of becoming misinformed, and public discourse becomes increasingly fragmented.

One of the most notable proponents of this argument is Sunstein (2007), who argues that the public sphere is compromised by many of the innovations introduced by the network society. According to Sunstein, a well-functioning public sphere must meet two requirements:

> 1. Individuals must be exposed to opinions and content that they would not have chosen in advance. As Sunstein asserts: "Unplanned, unanticipated encounters are central to democracy itself" (p.5). This is necessary to ensure against the polarization or crystallization of extremist opinion by exposing people to views and topics outside—or opposing—their own beliefs and opinions.
> 2. Individuals within the public sphere must share a range of common experiences, which act as a "social glue" that enables people to understand one another. According to Sunstein: "A system of communications that radically diminishes the number of such experiences will create a number of problems, not least because of the increase in social fragmentation" (p. 6).

Contrary to what Benkler (2006) suggests, Sunstein argues that the networked public sphere is becoming increasingly fragmented because these two essential criteria are not being met by Web 2.0 technologies.

Discussion

Arguing against democracy is a difficult endeavour. The term has become near untouchable, considered part and parcel with Western society itself. *In The Ethics of Rhetoric*, Weaver (1985) coined such words as "god terms," words that are intrinsically persuasive and appealing because of their deep-seated positive connotations. As Delsol (2003) suggests, our inability to question and criticize such idealized concepts is detrimental to society: "when a socio-political model is viewed as untouchable or

inviolable, the idea of progress—of endlessly transforming and perfecting—becomes impossible... the sacralisation of contemporary democracy consecrates the historical petrification of a model that is considered unsurpassable" (p. 95-96). This notion is similarly seen whenever discussion about the Internet, particularly in its capacity for democratization, is discussed. Often, this manifests itself when Western countries examine the Internet use and policies of other countries, specifically authoritarian states. In almost all examples, the Internet is portrayed as an agent for democracy and, by extension, a tool for good. Network technologies, like the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies, are perceived as tools for the people, because, as Benkler (2006) points out, anyone can become a speaker and political participant. This is a flawed sentiment caused by what Morozov (2011) labels as cyber-utopianism: "a naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside". This belief is almost always Western held, biased towards the Western adoption of Internet policies, and blinded by Western views on democracy. Morozov suggests this treatment is a form of digital orientalism:

> Whenever the Chinese authorities crack down on unlicensed cybercafés, we have a tendency to see it as a sign of encroachment on democratic freedoms rather than of social concerns. It's as if we can't ever imagine that Chinese or Russian parents, too, might have some valid concerns about how their kids spend their free time. (p. 241)

As Sunstein (2007) points out, there is merit in evaluating the downsides of democratization, as contentious as that may be. The Internet has provided opportunities for self-expression, revolutionized the global economy, and created convenience for modern consumers. But it is

essential to understand the implications of these seismic changes, good and bad.

The challenges and achievements of President Barack Obama illustrate the positive and negative consequences of the Internet to the public sphere. Dubbed "Politics 2.0," Obama's web campaign during his first presidential campaign was a remarkable success and has since been used as a case study in political communications (Harfoush, 2009). Despite his success with the web, Obama began to experience the challenges of a network platform that allows anyone to publish *anything*. In the years following his election, conspiracy theories began to circulate on the Internet alleging that Obama was not a natural-born citizen of the United States. Even after he released his birth certificate to prove otherwise, fringe minorities—nicknamed "birthers"—refused to acknowledge it, suggesting that it was yet another conspiracy (Tomasky, 2011). A jaded president would later talk about the Internet environment:

> You're coming of age in a 24/7 media environment that bombards us with all kinds of content and exposes us to all kinds of arguments, some of which don't always rank all that high on the truth meter… information becomes a distraction, a diversion, a form of entertainment, rather than a tool of empowerment, rather than the means of emancipation. (cited in Elliott, 2010)

The concerns articulated by Obama call into question the reliability and truth of information we get from the Internet. This user-generated information resides on the Internet and remains accessible to anyone, which is all the more problematic because of the sheer quantity of facts, opinions, and messages that must be sifted through by the reader. Keen (2007) writes: "Today's Internet [is] anonymous, incorrect, chaotic, and overpowering. It is a

place where there is no concrete reality... where truth is selective and constantly subject to change" (p. 91). As an example, Keen points to a new phenomenon on the Web called "splogs"—a combination of spam and blogs: "Generated from software that allows users to create thousands of blogs per hour, splogs are fake blogs designed to mirror the real blogs in a sneaky ploy to trick advertisers and search engines and drive traffic and thus pay-per-click revenue" (p. 92). According to Keen, splogs make up 56 per cent of active blogs and 90 per cent of all new blogs being produced today.

The proliferation of content and messages found on the web is a result of the democratization of the Internet, which enables anyone to produce content. While Benkler (2006) argues that more people participating in a conversation is a positive thing, this does not always work out in practice. Instead, it often leads to fragmentation, as people become divided between the myriad opinions and voices found on the Internet. As Sunstein (2007) points out, fragmentation has a harmful effect on the public sphere because it prevents people from coming together on a particular issue. "To the extent that choices and filtering proliferate," writes Sunstein, "it is inevitable that diverse individuals, and diverse groups, will share fewer reference points" (p. 105). Though he is quick to assure that, on its own, it is not a bad thing to have freedom of expression and a degree of diversity—in fact, Sunstein thinks this is quite good—the range of options nonetheless presents challenges to the public sphere, a space that is built on a set of common experiences shared by the people who occupy that space.

A second consequence of the Internet and network technologies is the polarization of opinions in what Sunstein (2007) labels as "information cocoons." This engenders a "breeding group for extremism, precisely because like-minded people are deliberating with greater

ease and frequency with one another, and often without hearing contrary views" (p. 69). Exposure to these extreme opinions, such as the birther movement faced by Barack Obama, will move those already predisposed to the view to believe in it. In earlier media, this was simply not possible, because the range of extreme opinions was curtailed by the inability to circulate messages to a wider audience. Such views simply had no platform on which to broadcast widely. However, on the Internet, where the barriers to entry have been removed and the gatekeepers exorcised, messages can reach a global audience. Consider *Loose Change*, a small film made in 2005 about the 9/11 terrorist attacks that was widely circulated on social media channels such as YouTube. Created by three twenty-something amateurs, the film consisted of discredited news clips and quotes taken out of context that suggested the attacks were carried out by the Bush administration. The film rose to number one on Google Video's "top 100" by May 2006, collecting nearly ten million views in its first year alone (Keen, 2007).

The polarization of audiences is a result of the structural and customizable qualities of the Internet. Individuals no longer need to expose themselves to views and opinions that fall outside their own preconceived notions. In the Web 2.0 environment, users can customize their experience based on their own interests, tastes, and ideologies. For example, Google News, the popular aggregate news service, allows users to tailor their news consumption. As their "About" section reads: "No one can read all the news that's published every day, so why not set up your page to show you the stories that best represent your interests?" (Google, 2014). Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube enable individuals to choose and select their content based on the people they follow, which usually consist of friends and families. According to the homophily principle (the

tendency for individuals to associate with similar individuals), people's networks, digital or otherwise, are homogenous and often contain comparable beliefs and attitudes. Keeping such a closeted network has a powerful effect on a person's social experience, limiting the information received, attitudes formed, and the interactions experienced in the digital space (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). These homogenized networks also act as a barrier preventing individuals from considering alternative points of view.

Final Thoughts

The implications of the Internet as a central form of communication are far reaching. The medium has exacerbated changes across the spectrum of human experience, impacting culture, politics, and the economy. Often, this technology is viewed in positive terms, however vaguely defined, and tinged by our Western view that anything that democratizes is inherently a good thing. The Internet's democratization of communication should not be viewed in such biased terms because there are serious ramifications to consider. Creating a digital space that grants everyone his or her own soapbox, the Internet can compromise the health of the public sphere by engendering a media environment characterized by misinformation and polarized opinion. The result is a fragmented, uninformed public sphere as individuals attempt to filter the wheat from the chaff and separate fact from fiction. While it is logistically problematic and even dangerous to society to limit Internet freedom and communication, some consideration must be given towards equipping citizens with the tools and knowledge to navigate an informational space that grows increasingly opaque. Fail to do so, and we are bound to repeat the same error as Icarus: to soar above our means and beyond good prudence.

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