TAMBARA 18 (2001): 201-212

Cyberspace as a Political Public Sphere[1]

Rex T. Rola

People aspire for the opportunity to participate in the political processes promised by a democratic government. In the context of nation-states, however, this mass appeal of democracy makes the very practice of democracy problematic. The citizens are too numerous to be present in the public spaces where political deliberation and decision-making take place. They can only be represented, therefore, by a few that the public spaces can accommodate. Representation, then, simply means the exclusion of the large majority from active participation in the processes of governance.

Research on democratic theory partly includes research on spaces for active political participation other than the parliamentary halls. Technological advances have offered partial solutions to the problem. In his work, the German philosopher Juergen Habermas (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy [Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1982]) explores the contributions of the mass media in expanding spaces for participation. While print and broadcast media have allowed for the massive spread of information, they do not provide opportunities for interaction. They have only promoted a form of governance in which the citizens are mere clients and consumers of political products prepared by press relations officers of the administration.

A very promising area of democratic theory research is that which is opened by the Internet revolution. The Internet revolution has presented itself not only as a technological revolution but, more importantly, as a social revolution. It has generated structures that have important implications on social relations.

For this paper, I will reflect on the virtual reality of cyberspace as a communication medium and a locus of communicative relations, in relation to the social philosophy of Juergen Habermas. I will explore the promising aspects of cyberspace as a public space for active, democratic political participation. The question is: Can cyberspace be a political public sphere in the Habermasian sense? First, I will present cyberspace and its

communicative structure. Second, I will present Juergen Habermas's understanding of the liberal public sphere and the principles operative in it. Finally, I will show how cyberspatial conditions approximate the liberal public sphere, thereby revealing the political importance of cyberspace as an area for discourse.

Cyberspace

Cyberspace refers to that virtual space created by computer systems networked to each other, like the Internet. It was a term first coined by William Gibson in his science fiction novel, *Neuromancer*. In cyberspace, events occur and have relative position and direction, but not in the three-dimensional manner of events in real space (Bryan Pfaffenberger and David Wall, *One's Computer and Internet Dictionary*, 6th Edition, 126). Here, spatial boundaries break down.

Cyberspace owes its being to the United States military through their Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA). They wanted to "increase their command and control capability by enabling communication across a variety of physically dissimilar media, including satellites." They also wanted "to create a robust network capable of withstanding outages, such as those that might result from a nuclear exchange." In the event of a nuclear strike, they planned a scenario wherein the heads of the different branches of government are housed in different bunkers, but are in constant and secured communication with each other. This scenario allows the government to remain in control despite a nuclear war (Pfaffenberger and Wall, 30).

The network's success as a communication medium prompted the expansion of linkages beyond the military and its partner agencies and universities. The network was capable of such an expansion because "its technology allows virtually any system to link to it via an electronic gateway" (Pfaffenberger and Wall, 269). Thus, today, almost every country is wired to the Internet. Millions of government, corporate, educational, organizational, and personal computers and computer networks are linked together into what has been called the "community of networks."

Cyberspace, as a locus created by a network of computer networks, is primarily a medium for communication. Persons communicate through computers linked with each other by means of technology designed for audio, video and data communications. A computer installed with a network card or a modem can hook up through telephone to an Internet

Service Provider (ISP). These ISPs connect their computer network to other computer networks through telephone cables or satellite. Complementing these hardwares are communications softwares that allow a variety of forms of communication.

The oldest forms of communication in the Internet are the electronic mail (e-mail) and the bulletin board system (BBS). The e-mail is the fast version of the postal mail, pejoratively called snail mail. Linked by high-speed data connections that cross national boundaries, e-mail lets you compose messages and transmit them in a matter of seconds to one or more recipients in your office, to another office in another city, or to a friend in another country.

The BBS is an electronic version of the bulletin board. You can dial a BBS, post messages, upload and download public domain software, or play electronic games. Within the BBS, the newsgroup developed. This is a misnomer for seldom is there news here; discussion group is a more accurate name, but newsgroup has already taken root and is more commonly used. The newsgroup is a discussion group that is devoted to a single topic. Users post messages to the group, and those reading the discussion send reply messages to the author individually or post replies that can be read by everyone in the group. Both e-mail and BBS are interactive, but not real-time, communication utilities.

The Internet also offers interactive, real-time communications called "chat." There are four types of chat forums available: the Multi-User Dungeon, Object-Oriented (MOO); the Internet Relay Chat (IRC); the Web (Java) Chat; and the ICQ ("I Seek You"). Chatting usually happens in a forum or conference where two or more callers, on-line at the same time, engage in conversation with each other by taking turns typing. The chat forum is capable of private and/or public exchange in real-time. In public channels, all chatters see in their monitors everything exchanged. Private conversation is also possible; technically, it is called "macking."

All these communications taking place in cyberspace happen largely in the same way as face-to-face or telephone conversation. Unique cyberspatial conditions, however, have introduced new social organizations that traditional forms of communication can never produce. Intelligent, automated communication devices developed more recently have allowed the formation of virtual communities that transcend national, geographic and temporal boundaries.

Juergen Habermas's analysis of the liberal public sphere will help us in understanding this novel phenomenon. The Habermasian theory will

provide us with the criteria for presenting the necessary elements of cyberspace as a political space, as well as the clues for articulating its political implications.

The Liberal Public Sphere

Juergen Habermas's political intention of furthering "the project of the Enlightenment" demanded a shift from a subject-centered "philosophy of consciousness" toward an intersubjective "paradigm of understanding" (Stephen K. White, *Reason, Justice and Modernity: The Recent Work of Juergen Habermas*. Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1980, 27). According to White (1980, 4), "[t]his paradigm focused on the structures of intersubjectivity which are implicit in the understanding achieved in ongoing linguistic interaction, or 'communicative action' as Habermas calls it". Among Habermas's earliest attempts on this paradigm-shift involved the reconstruction of a public sphere in which critical-rational discourse takes place. As Thomas McCarthy points out, the importance of this reconstruction lies in the idea central to democratic theory, which this sphere claims to embody: "that of rationalizing public authority under the institutionalized influence of informed discussion and reasoned agreement" (Habermas, xii).

A Public of Private People

The public sphere generally refers to a space where people gather together to achieve an aim that affects all, that is, the public. Habermas points out that civilized history is replete with public spheres. The *polis* of Ancient Greece was a public sphere. The masters gathered together to leave behind the privacy of their households and appeared before their equals to compete or act in common. In the Medieval Ages, the royal courts served as the public sphere. Monarchs and nobles represented their resplendent authority before the people, dispensing their regulations to loyal subjects. In the era of modern liberal societies, the educated, private people gather together in salons, "table-societies," or townhalls. These modern public spheres are venues for announcing what they think of issues in literature and politics. The public sphere, therefore, is a locus where what is hidden from others appears; where what is absent presences; where what belongs to the individual becomes common. The public sphere, in other words, is that place characterized by publicity, by pronouncements to the public.

Habermas distinguishes the modern liberal public sphere from the classical public spheres of ancient Greek democracies and Medieval monarchies. The classical public spheres were composed of public authorities: masters of households, and monarchs and nobles. They were all public persons vested with the authority to run the state. The liberal public sphere, by contrast, is composed of "private people come together as a public" (Habermas, 27). These are ordinary individuals without public authority who, nevertheless, gather for a public purpose. Habermas traces the beginnings of the liberal public sphere to the rise of the bourgeois class.

The bourgeois class was made up of the educated, such as the doctors, pastors, officers, professors, schoolteachers, and scribes, and property-owning peoples, such as the "capitalists," merchants, bankers, entrepreneurs, and manufacturers. They performed important social functions, but had no power to rule. They were, in other words, the civilians. Thus, Habermas also calls the liberal public sphere as the "public sphere of civil society."

This franchise would later on be expanded. The bourgeois class would be joined by the working class, the black subcultures, and the feminists, to broaden this "public of private persons." This expansion is not surprising. Habermas understands that this public sphere stands or falls on the principle of universal access. "A public sphere from which specific groups would be *eo ipso* excluded was less than merely incomplete, it was not a public sphere at all" (Habermas, 85). Publicity, therefore, also means universality. No individual or group can be excluded from participation in this sphere on the basis of economic status, race, gender, or any other basis for subgrouping.

Moreover, the liberal public sphere, as a gathering of private people completely disregarded status in their dealings with each other. They did not relate with each other as equals in rank; instead, they related with each other based on tact. This means that status and rank are not determining factors within the public sphere at all.

The Political Function of the Liberal Public Sphere

According to Habermas, the Greek model of the public sphere drew the citizenry together to act in common, performing such properly political tasks as administration of law and military survival. The medieval model drew the subjects together only to receive regulations from their rulers. In both models, the public sphere belonged to the sphere of public

authority, performing state-related tasks. These public spheres functioned primarily for the regulation of the *res publica*. The liberal public sphere breaks away altogether from the sphere of public authority and into the private sphere, and turning into the "ruling authorities' adversary".

Habermas explains this shift by reminding us of the primarily private foundation of the triumphant commercial and financial capitalist enterprises in the sphere of civil society. The sphere of civil society is characterized by private initiative and *laissez-faire* operation that leaves everything to market laws. State authorities, however, still maintain mercantilist policies in dealings with private businesses. Habermas argues that mercantilism never favored state enterprises. While the state encourages private initiative to establish commercial and financial enterprises, the same state steps in to regulate these enterprises. The state, therefore, ambivalently promotes "the establishment and dissolution of private businesses run in a capitalist manner" (Habermas, 24). This ambivalence has led to a problematic relation not only between the state and the capitalists, but also between the state and the consumers, who are affected by these public regulations as well.

The state's unwanted interference in the self-regulating system of free-market competition is seen as arbitrary and unpredictable. It precludes the rational calculation of profits that is to the interest of private persons functioning in a capitalist fashion (Habermas, 80). This state interference, therefore, has provoked civil society to become critical of public authority in private matters. Moreover, this public meddling also has transformed civil society's reproduction of life through commodity exchange and social labor from the domain of private domestic authority into a subject of public interest (Habermas, 24). This has led to civil society's critical reflection on and expounding of its interests. The liberal public sphere has attained its political function.

The private people gather together as a public to confront public authority on the issue of the regulation of civil society. They are out to claim "the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves" (Habermas, 27). This does not mean, however, that they are out to wrest control of the state itself and rule in its stead. What they aim at, rather, is the protection of the private sphere and its interests from state interference. They intend to engage public authority in "a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor" (Habermas, 27). Thomas McCarthy expresses it as the attempt to replace "a public sphere in which the ruler's power was merely represented *before*

the people with a sphere in which the state authority was publicly monitored through informed and critical discourse *by* the people" (Habermas, xi). In other words, the liberal public sphere aims to make public authority accountable for its legislation. This is a demand to rationalize domination.

The rationalization of domination can only be achieved in two ways. The first is through the "full publicity of parliamentary deliberations" (Habermas, 63). This means that public authority must keep the public informed of all bases of political decisions. The press and the public hearings conducted by public authorities serve as institutional bases for this publicity. This requirement of publicity accomplishes the demand for rationalization, since it prompts public authority to propose legislation that can be rationally justified, and veer away from those that are purely whimsical. The publication of parliamentary deliberations leads to the inclusion of the public's opinion in legislative matters.

The second way in which the rationalization of domination can be achieved is by submitting the political issues to the forum of the public of private people gathered together in a critical-rational debate. What may be an arbitrary decree of public authority becomes a rationally concluded, universal law when passed through the "public competition of private arguments" that aims at consensus or public opinion (Habermas, 83). In this sphere, power as the exercise of political will is transformed into the implementation of rational agreement. What makes this transformation possible is the public sphere's use of communicative reason as a medium of political confrontation. The guiding principle of this medium is not feasibility, but universal agreement based on the unforced force of the better argument. Within this sphere, therefore, publicity is also operative. In other words, each one is allowed to express his views, his interests, his needs, his opinions and arrive at a position transcending private interests and expressing the public stand.

This rationalization of domination, according to Habermas, can only lead to the dissolution of domination altogether. As Habermas (82) says, "the binding of all state activity to a system of norms legitimated by public opinion already aimed at abolishing the state as an instrument of domination altogether". In other words, in making public opinion the final forum for all political deliberations and decisions, public authority loses its power to dominate. But at the same time, the public sphere of private people renounces this power to rule. They are only interested in maintaining a domain free from coercion. Anyway, Habermas points out, sovereignty also cannot be attributed to public opinion at all.

Cyberspace As A Political Public Sphere

Like the liberal public sphere, cyberspace is a locus of human communicative relationships mediated by a network of computers. As such, cyberspace gathers people together and allows them to be present to each other. While there is interactivity, however, they are not present to each other in bodily form. Instead, their presence is simply as computer bits on a screen, usually in textual form. Their identities are indicated merely by Internet Protocol addresses. The usual bodily indicators of presence are not there. Nevertheless, it offers the advantage of being a broader sphere of interaction. There are no spatial boundaries that limit the number of participants in the public sphere. One of the major problems faced by the liberal public sphere when the franchise was expanded to accommodate everyone was "how to fit everyone inside the townhalls." The public spheres that were physical spaces have to address problems of communication and interaction when the public just became too large to fit inside the spaces. If everyone is to be informed, interactivity has to be sacrificed; if interactivity is to be maintained, the public has to be kept small, resulting in the marginalization of the rest. The broadcast media like the newspapers, the television and the radio solve the problem of information, but have to give up interactivity among the members of the public sphere. Habermas tells us that this compromise has resulted in reducing the public into mere consumers of information. Cyberspace as a broadcasting but interactive communicative structure addresses both problems of a large public sphere simultaneously. Newsgroups and chat forums have been structured by programmers for such a purpose.

Cyberspace, like the liberal public sphere, is also truly public in the sense that it is universally accessible. The liberal public sphere sets minimum requirements of communicative competence; cyberspace also sets minimum requirements of online communicative competence. Online communication competence refers to the ability of a person to hook into the Internet because of his having access to a computer with a modem, a telephone line, and an Internet Service Provider. Notice that I said "access to a computer" and not "have a computer." This distinction is important because public Internet terminals are being established everywhere. For a surfing fee that is gradually becoming cheaper, anybody with a little cash to spare can now go online. Internet access is not anymore simply for the affluent; though it cannot be denied that they still have better access because of their affluence. Many libraries now have public terminals for

their students. In the United States, the Clinton administration has embarked on a free public Internet terminal project for the least privileged members of American society. Most nations in the world are also already hooked up into the Internet. Access to cyberspace is not a First World privilege anymore. Log anytime and you can see people from even the poorest nations logged in also.

The chat software, servers and communication channels are all public domain—that is, free and easily accessible. The softwares have become user-friendly, especially the Windows-based ones. Minimum orientation is required to open the softwares and log into public channels. One Internet Relay Chat (IRC) guidebook boasts that all you need to graduate from "newbie"—jargon for a novice chatter—to professional chatter is familiarity with five basic commands. For those who need more, every chat software comes with an online help file; and there is always somebody online willing to help or boastful enough of his knowledge to tell you what to do.

Registration to these chat servers is also free and usually protective of personal information. While some types of chatrooms ask for personal information as part of registration, there are guarantees of privacy; putting in fictional information is also common practice. Most chatrooms, though, just don't bother you with personal information for admission into the channels. All you need to do is click on a server you would like to join, specify a nickname for yourself, and you're in.

Since the participants enter the channels disembodied and usually anonymous, usual social barriers cannot operate online. Any distinguishing mark of the person and his personality—obvious in face-to-face communication—are absent online. A new chatter can, therefore, easily enter any communication channel without telling who he is in real life. His characteristics and personality only become known when he informs others about them. Everyone, therefore, with the minimum requirements–that is, competence–to communicate online is allowed to participate in almost any chat ongoing in the tens and thousands of public channels in cyberspace. Or you can start your own conversation channel.

I said "almost any chat ongoing," because not all chatrooms are really publicly accessible. There are chatrooms designed by their operators to be private, that is, by invitation only. If you know the nick of the operator, though, you can ask to be invited. But these private chatrooms are more the exception rather than the norm in cyberspace. The norm is still that communication channels are universally accessible.

Cyberspace is also like the liberal public sphere because it remains within the private domain. It has been described as a decentralized communication system. Even though it started as a military-government project, cyberspace evolved into a network that is completely beyond government control. Anyone with access to a computer with a modem and a telephone line can apply for connection with an Internet Service Provider without having to ask for a government permit. Once online, what you do is primarily your own responsibility.

On the downside, this has led to the proliferation of the every kind of abuse imaginable without hope of control. Monitoring of all interactions occurring in cyberspace is impossible, even for the most powerful monitoring agencies like the United States' National Security Agency (NSA). On the upside, cyberspace has become a venue for the most creative projects and interactions today. This lack of limitation and coercion has opened the floodgates of the imagination.

However, cyberspace cannot be said to have assumed a truly significant political function, as the liberal public sphere has. Conversation topics in the Internet vary widely. Most of these are private interests that people think deserve public recognition and discussion. Many of these never acquire their desired publicity though. If one surfs in cyberspace, one will find websites that seldom get visited because the public is not interested in what they offer, or chat channels whose operators are never successful in attracting chatters to come and stay. Conversation topics range from the banal to the profound, from the profane to the sacred. There are channels for teens as well as for the golden aged. There are channels for philosophy, for politics, as well as for a particular nation or religion. These serious channels already have their mainstays, but they remain few in number; very few compared to romance channels that are bursting with chatters. It is in these serious channels that critical-rational discussion in the manner of the liberal public sphere is taking place.

On 23 May 2000, at about 9 o'clock in the evening, I accessed the politics channel of chat server Undernet and stayed there for a few minutes. Two discussions were underway. The first was about the issue of racism. The contenders were white Americans and Latinos. There was the usual labeling, but there was also serious discussion on the implications of sending Latinos out of the United States. The second discussion centered on the basis and implications of the possible Bill Clinton disbarment. One interesting question was whether Clinton, as president, could pardon himself. Ideas were flying around when I left. This experience reveals the presence of serious critical-rational discussion taking place in cyberspace,

but does not yet reveal the political influence that such a discussion may have. Three real cases, however, may reveal that potential.

Also early in 2000, the United States organized an online "townhall meeting." Harking back to the townhall meetings of Revolutionary America, the White House allowed an online, real-time chat with Bill Clinton. A website functioned as a virtual townhall, with Clinton visibly and audibly interacting with chatters who logged in from around the world. Much of the discussion focused on political programs.

A few years back also, Bill Clinton also published an email address that American citizens could use to get to him directly with their opinions. The emails allowed people to tell the President directly what they thought and what they wanted done.

Here in the Philippines, cyberspace was also a very important communication medium in organizing the Anti-Charter Change movement against the Ramos administration. While rallies, demonstrations and press releases were being done nationwide, a website and mailing list were also created. The email list included the email addresses of people who were major rallying points during the event, people who were in the position to observe events, analyze their impact, or mobilize people. The e-mail list became one quick communication utility for circulating on a national scale information and analyses about the event. The significant e-mails were then posted on the website for wider circulation.

Currently, there is the Philippine Forum mailing list, called *phforum*. Its members belong to the under-age-50 leaders from the different sectors of the Philippine nation. The discussions in this mailing list are usually related to policies of the Philippine government. The current discussions in this mailing list are focused on the Mindanao problem.

Here in Mindanao, I know of two politically inclined mailing lists. The older list, founded on 23 November 1998, is a web-based group that posts and discusses issues related to the improvement of domestic and international air linkages in Mindanao. Began during the height of the PAL crisis, the "airlinkages" mailing list includes top business, government, NGO, and academic people in Mindanao.

The newer list is the *mindanao1081*. It is composed of significant Mindanao personalities from the business sector, the government sector, the media, the academe, and the NGO. The discussions within this members-only email list focuses on political issues affecting Mindanao. It serves as a reminder of the danger of Martial Law when people keep their silence. The significant mails are published on their website.

These experiences successfully reveal the potentials of cyberspace for political discourse and action, even here in the Philippines. With the principles of universal access and equal participation operative in this arena, critical-rational discourse governed only by the unforced force of the better argument is now a reality for all who are communicatively competent.

Note

[1]Third Philosophy Faculty Lecture Series, Ateneo de Davao University, 28 June 2000.