

## Chapter 7 Political Freedom Part 2: Emergence of the Networked Public Sphere

The fundamental elements of the difference between the networked information economy and the mass media are network architecture and the cost of becoming a speaker. The first element is the shift from a hub-and-spoke architecture with unidirectional links to the end points in the 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. Together, these characteristics have fundamentally altered the capacity of individuals, acting alone or with others, to be active participants in the public sphere as opposed to its passive readers, listeners, or viewers. For authoritarian countries, this means that it is harder and more costly, though not perhaps entirely impossible, to both be networked and maintain control over their public spheres. China seems to be doing too good a job of this in the middle of the first decade of this century for us to say much more than that it is harder to maintain control, and therefore that at least in some authoritarian regimes, control will be looser. In

liberal democracies, ubiquitous individual ability to produce information creates the potential for near-universal intake. It therefore portends significant, though not inevitable, changes in the structure of the public sphere from the commercial mass-media environment. These changes raise challenges for filtering. They underlie some of the critiques of the claims about the democratizing effect of the Internet that I explore later in this chapter. Fundamentally, however, they are the roots of possible change. Beginning with the cost of sending an e-mail to some number of friends or to a mailing list of people interested in a particular subject, to the cost of setting up a Web site or a blog, and through to the possibility of maintaining interactive conversations with large numbers of people through sites like Slashdot, the 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.

The change is as much qualitative as it is quantitative. The qualitative change is represented in the experience of being a potential speaker, as opposed to simply a listener and voter. It relates to the self-perception of individuals in society and the culture of participation they can adopt. The easy possibility of communicating effectively into the public sphere allows individuals to reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in a conversation. The way we listen to what we hear changes because of this; as does, perhaps most fundamentally, the way we observe and process daily events in our lives. We no longer need to take these as merely private observations, but as potential subjects for public communication. This change affects the relative power of the media. It affects the structure of intake of observations and views. It affects the presentation of issues and observations for discourse. It affects the way issues are filtered, for whom and by whom. Finally, it affects the ways in which positions are crystallized and synthesized, sometimes still by being amplified to the point that the mass media take them as inputs and convert them into political positions, but occasionally by direct organization of opinion and action to the point of reaching a salience that drives the political process directly.

The basic case for the democratizing effect of the Internet, as seen from the perspective of the mid-1990s, was articulated in an opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Reno v. ACLU*:

The Web is thus comparable, from the readers' viewpoint, to both a vast library including millions of readily available and indexed publications and a sprawling mall offering goods and services. From the publishers' point of view, it constitutes a vast platform from which to address and hear from a world-wide audience of millions of readers, viewers, researchers, and buyers. Any person or organization with a computer connected to the Internet can "publish" information. Publishers include government agencies, educational institutions, commercial entities, advocacy groups, and individuals. . . .

Through the use of chat rooms, any person with a phone line can become a town crier with a voice that resonates farther than it could from any soapbox. Through the use of Web pages, mail exploders, and newsgroups, the same individual can become a pamphleteer. As the District Court found, "the content on the Internet is as diverse as human thought."<sup>1</sup>

The observations of what is different and unique about this new medium relative to those that dominated the twentieth century are already present in the quotes from the Court. There are two distinct types of effects. The first, as the Court notes from "the readers' perspective," is the abundance and diversity of human expression available to anyone, anywhere, in a way that was not feasible in the mass-mediated environment. The second, and more fundamental, is that anyone can be a publisher, including individuals, educational institutions, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), alongside the traditional speakers of the mass-media environment—government and commercial entities.

Since the end of the 1990s there has been significant criticism of this early conception of the democratizing effects of the Internet. One line of critique includes variants of the Babel objection: the concern that information overload will lead to fragmentation of discourse, polarization, and the loss of political community. A different and descriptively contradictory line of critique suggests that the Internet is, in fact, exhibiting concentration: Both infrastructure and, more fundamentally, patterns of attention are much less distributed than we thought. As a consequence, the Internet diverges from the mass media much less than we thought in the 1990s and significantly less than we might hope.

I begin the chapter by offering a menu of the core technologies and usage patterns that can be said, as of the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century, to represent the core Internet-based technologies of democratic discourse. I then use two case studies to describe the social and economic practices through which these tools are implemented to construct the public

sphere, and how these practices differ quite radically from the mass-media model. On the background of these stories, we are then able to consider the critiques that have been leveled against the claim that the Internet democratizes. Close examination of the application of networked information economy to the production of the public sphere suggests that the emerging networked public sphere offers significant improvements over one dominated by commercial mass media. Throughout the discussion, it is important to keep in mind that the relevant comparison is always between the public sphere that we in fact had throughout the twentieth century, the one dominated by mass media, that is the baseline for comparison, not the utopian image of the "everyone a pamphleteer" that animated the hopes of the 1990s for Internet democracy. Departures from the naïve utopia are not signs that the Internet does not democratize, after all. They are merely signs that the medium and its analysis are maturing.

#### BASIC TOOLS OF NETWORKED COMMUNICATION

Analyzing the effect of the networked information environment on public discourse by cataloging the currently popular tools for communication is, to some extent, self-defeating. These will undoubtedly be supplanted by new ones. Analyzing this effect without having a sense of what these tools are or how they are being used is, on the other hand, impossible. This leaves us with the need to catalog what is, while trying to abstract from what is being used to what relationships of information and communication are emerging, and from these to transpose to a theory of the networked information economy as a new platform for the public sphere.

E-mail is the most popular application on the Net. It is cheap and trivially easy to use. Basic e-mail, as currently used, is not ideal for public communications. While it provides a cheap and efficient means of communicating with large numbers of individuals who are not part of one's basic set of social associations, the presence of large amounts of commercial spam and the amount of mail flowing in and out of mailboxes make indiscriminate e-mail distributions a relatively poor mechanism for being heard. E-mails to smaller groups, preselected by the sender for having some interest in a subject or relationship to the sender, do, however, provide a rudimentary mechanism for communicating observations, ideas, and opinions to a significant circle, on an ad hoc basis. Mailing lists are more stable and self-selecting, and

therefore more significant as a basic tool for the networked public sphere. Some mailing lists are moderated or edited, and run by one or a small number of editors. Others are not edited in any significant way. What separates mailing lists from most Web-based uses is the fact that they push the information on them into the mailbox of subscribers. Because of their attention limits, individuals restrict their subscriptions, so posting on a mailing list tends to be done by and for people who have self-selected as having a heightened degree of common interest, substantive or contextual. It therefore enhances the degree to which one is heard by those already interested in a topic. It is not a communications model of one-to-many, or few-to-many as broadcast is to an open, undefined class of audience members. Instead, it allows one, or a few, or even a limited large group to communicate to a large but limited group, where the limit is self-selection as being interested or even immersed in a subject.

The World Wide Web is the other major platform for tools that individuals use to communicate in the networked public sphere. It enables a wide range of applications, from basic static Web pages, to, more recently, blogs and various social-software-mediated platforms for large-scale conversations of the type described in chapter 3—like Slashdot. Static Web pages are the individual's basic "broadcast" medium. They allow any individual or organization to present basic texts, sounds, and images pertaining to their position. They allow small NGOs to have a worldwide presence and visibility. They allow individuals to offer thoughts and commentaries. They allow the creation of a vast, searchable database of information, observations, and opinions, available at low cost for anyone, both to read and write into. This does not yet mean that all these statements are heard by the relevant others to whom they are addressed. Substantial analysis is devoted to that problem, but first let us complete the catalog of tools and information flow structures.

One Web-based tool and an emerging cultural practice around it that extends the basic characteristics of Web sites as media for the political public sphere are Web logs, or blogs. Blogs are a tool and an approach to using the Web that extends the use of Web pages in two significant ways. Technically, blogs are part of a broader category of innovations that make the web "writable." That is, they make Web pages easily capable of modification through a simple interface. They can be modified from anywhere with a networked computer, and the results of writing onto the Web page are immediately available to anyone who accesses the blog to read. This technical change resulted in two divergences from the cultural practice of Web sites

in the 1990s. First, they allowed the evolution of a journal-style Web page, where individual short posts are added to the Web site in short or large intervals. As practice has developed over the past few years, these posts are usually archived chronologically. For many users, this means that blogs have become a form of personal journal, updated daily or so, for their own use and perhaps for the use of a very small group of friends. What is significant about this characteristic from the perspective of the construction of the public sphere is that blogs enable individuals to write to their Web pages in journalism time—that is, hourly, daily, weekly—whereas Web page culture that preceded it tended to be slower moving: less an equivalent of reportage than of the essay. Today, one certainly finds individuals using blog software to maintain what are essentially static Web pages, to which they add essays or content occasionally, and Web sites that do not use blogging technology but are updated daily. The public sphere function is based on the content and cadence—that is, the use practice—not the technical platform.

The second critical innovation of the writable Web in general and of blogs in particular was the fact that in addition to the owner, readers/users could write to the blog. Blogging software allows the person who runs a blog to permit some, all, or none of the readers to post comments to the blog, with or without retaining power to edit or moderate the posts that go on, and those that do not. The result is therefore not only that many more people write finished statements and disseminate them widely, but also that the end product is a weighted conversation, rather than a finished good. It is a conversation because of the common practice of allowing and posting comments, as well as comments to these comments. Blog writers—bloggers—often post their own responses in the comment section or address comments in the primary section. Blog-based conversation is weighted, because the culture and technical affordances of blogging give the owner of the blog greater weight in deciding who gets to post or comment and who gets to decide these questions. Different blogs use these capabilities differently; some opt for broader intake and discussion on the board, others for a more tightly edited blog. In all these cases, however, the communications model or information-flow structure that blogs facilitate is a weighted conversation that takes the form of one or a group of primary contributors/authors, together with some larger number, often many, secondary contributors, communicating to an unlimited number of many readers.

The writable Web also encompasses another set of practices that are distinct, but that are often pooled in the literature together with blogs. These

are the various larger-scale, collaborative-content production systems available on the Web, of the type described in chapter 3. Two basic characteristics make sites like Slashdot or Wikipedia different from blogs. First, they are intended for, and used by, very large groups, rather than intended to facilitate a conversation weighted toward one or a small number of primary speakers. Unlike blogs, they are not media for individual or small group expression with a conversation feature. They are intrinsically group communication media. They therefore incorporate social software solutions to avoid deterioration into chaos—peer review, structured posting privileges, reputation systems, and so on. Second, in the case of Wikis, the conversation platform is anchored by a common text. From the perspective of facilitating the synthesis of positions and opinions, the presence of collaborative authorship of texts offers an additional degree of viscosity to the conversation, so that views “stick” to each other, must jostle for space, and accommodate each other. In the process, the output is more easily recognizable as a collective output and a salient opinion or observation than where the form of the conversation is more free-flowing exchange of competing views.

Common to all these Web-based tools—both static and dynamic, individual and cooperative—are linking, quotation, and presentation. It is at the very core of the hypertext markup language (HTML) to make referencing easy. And it is at the very core of a radically distributed network to allow materials to be archived by whoever wants to archive them, and then to be accessible to whoever has the reference. Around these easy capabilities, the cultural practice has emerged to reference through links for easy transition from your own page or post to the one you are referring to—whether as inspiration or in disagreement. This culture is fundamentally different from the mass-media culture, where sending a five-hundred-page report to millions of users is hard and expensive. In the mass media, therefore, instead of allowing readers to read the report alongside its review, all that is offered is the professional review in the context of a culture that trusts the reviewer. On the Web, linking to original materials and references is considered a core characteristic of communication. The culture is oriented toward “see for yourself.” Confidence in an observation comes from a combination of the reputation of the speaker as it has emerged over time, reading underlying sources you believe you have some competence to evaluate for yourself, and knowing that for any given referenced claim or source, there is some group of people out there, unaffiliated with the reviewer or speaker, who will have access to the source and the means for making their disagreement with the

speaker's views known. Linking and "see for yourself" represent a radically different and more participatory model of accreditation than typified the mass media.

Another dimension that is less well developed in the United States than it is in Europe and East Asia is mobility, or the spatial and temporal ubiquity of basic tools for observing and commenting on the world we inhabit. Dan Gillmor is clearly right to include these basic characteristics in his book *We the Media*, adding to the core tools of what he describes as a transformation in journalism, short message service (SMS), and mobile connected cameras to mailing lists, Web logs, Wikis, and other tools. The United States has remained mostly a PC-based networked system, whereas in Europe and Asia, there has been more substantial growth in handheld devices, primarily mobile phones. In these domains, SMS—the "e-mail" of mobile phones—and camera phones have become critical sources of information, in real time. In some poor countries, where cell phone minutes remain very (even prohibitively) expensive for many users and where landlines may not exist, text messaging is becoming a central and ubiquitous communication tool. What these suggest to us is a transition, as the capabilities of both systems converge, to widespread availability of the ability to register and communicate observations in text, audio, and video, wherever we are and whenever we wish. Drazen Pantic tells of how listeners of Internet-based Radio B-92 in Belgrade reported events in their neighborhoods after the broadcast station had been shut down by the Milosevic regime. Howard Rheingold describes in *Smart Mobs* how citizens of the Philippines used SMS to organize real-time movements and action to overthrow their government. In a complex modern society, where things that matter can happen anywhere and at any time, the capacities of people armed with the means of recording, rendering, and communicating their observations change their relationship to the events that surround them. Whatever one sees and hears can be treated as input into public debate in ways that were impossible when capturing, rendering, and communicating were facilities reserved to a handful of organizations and a few thousands of their employees.

#### NETWORKED INFORMATION ECONOMY MEETS THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The networked public sphere is not made of tools, but of social production practices that these tools enable. The primary effect of the Internet on the



public sphere in liberal societies relies on the information and cultural production activity of emerging nonmarket actors: individuals working alone and cooperatively with others, more formal associations like NGOs, and their feedback effect on the mainstream media itself. These enable the networked public sphere to moderate the two major concerns with commercial mass media as a platform for the public sphere: (1) the excessive power it gives its owners, and (2) its tendency, when owners do not dedicate their media to exert power, to foster an inert polity. More 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. In this section, I offer two detailed stories that highlight different aspects of the effects of the networked information economy on the construction of the public sphere. The first story focuses on how the networked public sphere allows individuals to monitor and disrupt the use of mass-media power, as well as organize for political action. The second emphasizes in particular how the networked public sphere allows individuals and groups of intense political engagement to report, comment, and generally play the role traditionally assigned to the press in observing, analyzing, and creating political salience for matters of public interest. The case studies provide a context both for seeing how the networked public sphere responds to the core failings of the commercial, mass-media-dominated public sphere and for considering the critiques of the Internet as a platform for a liberal public sphere.

Our first story concerns Sinclair Broadcasting and the 2004 U.S. presidential election. It highlights the opportunities that mass-media owners have to exert power over the public sphere, the variability within the media itself in how this power is used, and, most significant for our purposes here, the potential corrective effect of the networked information environment. At its core, it suggests that the existence of radically decentralized outlets for individuals and groups can provide a check on the excessive power that media owners were able to exercise in the industrial information economy.

Sinclair, which owns major television stations in a number of what were considered the most competitive and important states in the 2004 election—including Ohio, Florida, Wisconsin, and Iowa—informed its staff and stations that it planned to preempt the normal schedule of its sixty-two stations to air a documentary called *Stolen Honor: The Wounds That Never Heal*, as a news program, a week and a half before the elections.<sup>2</sup> The documentary

was reported to be a strident attack on Democratic candidate John Kerry's Vietnam War service. One reporter in Sinclair's Washington bureau, who objected to the program and described it as "blatant political propaganda," was promptly fired.<sup>3</sup> The fact that Sinclair owns stations reaching one quarter of U.S. households, that it used its ownership to preempt local broadcast schedules, and that it fired a reporter who objected to its decision, make this a classic "Berlusconi effect" story, coupled with a poster-child case against media concentration and the ownership of more than a small number of outlets by any single owner. The story of Sinclair's plans broke on Saturday, October 9, 2004, in the *Los Angeles Times*. Over the weekend, "official" responses were beginning to emerge in the Democratic Party. The Kerry campaign raised questions about whether the program violated election laws as an undeclared "in-kind" contribution to the Bush campaign. By Tuesday, October 12, the Democratic National Committee announced that it was filing a complaint with the Federal Elections Commission (FEC), while seventeen Democratic senators wrote a letter to the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), demanding that the commission investigate whether Sinclair was abusing the public trust in the airwaves. Neither the FEC nor the FCC, however, acted or intervened throughout the episode.

Alongside these standard avenues of response in the traditional public sphere of commercial mass media, their regulators, and established parties, a very different kind of response was brewing on the Net, in the blogosphere. On the morning of October 9, 2004, the *Los Angeles Times* story was blogged on a number of political blogs—Josh Marshall on talkingpointsmemo.com, Chris Bower on MyDD.com, and Markos Moulitsas on dailyKos.com. By midday that Saturday, October 9, two efforts aimed at organizing opposition to Sinclair were posted in the dailyKos and MyDD. A "boycott-Sinclair" site was set up by one individual, and was pointed to by these blogs. Chris Bowers on MyDD provided a complete list of Sinclair stations and urged people to call the stations and threaten to picket and boycott. By Sunday, October 10, the dailyKos posted a list of national advertisers with Sinclair, urging readers to call them. On Monday, October 11, MyDD linked to that list, while another blog, theleftcoaster.com, posted a variety of action agenda items, from picketing affiliates of Sinclair to suggesting that readers oppose Sinclair license renewals, providing a link to the FCC site explaining the basic renewal process and listing public-interest organizations to work with. That same day, another individual, Nick Davis, started a Web site,