On convergent supersurfaces and public spheres online

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Abstract: This essay considers the civic ecology that is afforded via technologies of convergence. I propose that rather than examining the impact of technology, we consider technology as architecture. This permits us to situate civic tendencies and tensions in socio-cultural context. Thus, rather than measuring beneficial against adverse civic uses of online technologies, we concentrate on how newer civic habits, enabled by online networked platforms, shape and are shaped by our civic ecology.

Keywords: online; public; civic engagement; public sphere; internet; convergence.

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1 Introduction

Does it matter? A lot has been written on the civic potential of online media, but most of it rests on the premise of their impact: Will they make a difference? These two companion theme issues of the *International Journal of Electronic Governance* revisit the potential of public service and online media to re(create) public sphere and revive civic interest. It is tempting, when considering the question of impact, to think of technology as cause and/or consequence. Thus, online technologies could enhance civic engagement, or, they might simply reinforce our beliefs and attitudes, thus further isolating us into the echo chambers of our own opinions. We are frequently driven, when examining the impact of technology, to a choice between utopian and dystopian

scenarios. Technology is perceived as empowering or restrictive. Online media are frequently found to be permissive of certain liberating habits but also prohibitive of face-to-face civic engagement. They potentially enhance deliberation by providing access to information and discussion forums, but also overwhelm citizens with hoards of factoids and torrents of self-referential opinions.

While these findings are reflective of civic tendencies online, the self-imposed dichotomy between utopia and dystopia does not aptly summarise the civic potential of online media. Like all media, online technologies (and the variety of platforms that are unjustly generalised into this description) feature centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. They combine and aggregate tendencies, and in doing so, they further organise and delineate boundaries, thus producing new hierarchies and reproducing prior tensions. I propose that rather than examining the impact of technology, we consider technology as architecture. This permits us to situate civic tendencies and tensions in socio-cultural context. Thus, rather than measuring beneficial against adverse civic uses of online technologies, we concentrate on how newer civic habits, enabled by online networked platforms, shape and are shaped by our civic ecology.

2   Technology as civic architecture in contemporary democracies

Technology as simple cause or consequence of human action becomes the deterministic and linear driving force or result of human action. By contrast, technology as architecture is integrated to the rhythms of everyday life, serving as the environment within which the individual becomes civically enabled. Human activity traverses places that are private, public, and social, although not necessarily in that order or in exclusivity. The architecture of these spaces informs human action by suggesting, concealing, or disrupting activities, 'organising', in de Certeau's (1984) words, "an ensemble of possibilities and interdictions … while the walker actualises some of these possibilities" (p.98). Online media contribute to the architecture of contemporary civic spaces around which public, private, and social activity develops, by suggesting possibilities for interaction. These are often understood as the inherent affordances of technologies, that is, intrinsic potentialities, which suggest that it is "easier to use them for some purposes than for others" (Buckingham, 2008, p.12). The technological architecture within which affordances are presented supplies individuals with a collage of choices, further multiplied, adapted, or restricted by human action and reaction. A combination of infrastructure, content, design, and technological architecture refers to the simulation of physicality that virtual environments present individuals with. Technological architecture, like all architecture, is social. It is also political.

There is complex relationship between technology and democracy. This relationship is informed by the mythology of the new; a vernacular that suggests new(er) media could revive old democracy. It is also sustained by the connection between technology and space; the belief that newer media can rearrange space, in ways that are empowering and restrictive at the same time. Finally, the relationship between technology and democracy is shaped by the balance between public and private; a socio-culturally sensitive balance that produces modalities of citizenship across different eras. These evolving modalities of citizenship sustain personal and collective fantasies of autonomy and control.

Yet, it should be emphasised that autonomy and control are effected reflexively, through simultaneous processes of liberation and discipline connoted by the architectures

of newer technologies. Thus, technological architectures that provide empowering options do so by multiplying layers of controlled choices people select from. Deleuze uses the metaphor of the highway, a metaphor popular in narratives of technological empowerment, to explain the process of controlled autonomy:

> "A control is not a discipline. In making highways, for example, you don't enclose people but instead multiply the means of control. I am not saying that this is the highway's exclusive purpose, but that people can drive infinitely and 'freely' without being confined yet while still being perfectly controlled. This is our future." (Deleuze, 1998, p.18)

Similarly, new technologies suggest worlds upon which potential empowerment may be exercised. This may not be the sole function of these technologies, but it is the praxis reflective of fantasies of total control, sustained by individuals and their governments. To the extent that democracies grant absolute individual power or autonomy via a means of representatively elected elites of control, individuals may always experience a powerlessness that drives them to new democratic territories.

In contemporary democracies, this powerlessness is expressed through the following trends:

- nostalgia for past forms of political engagement, frequently wrapped in rhetoric that idealises past iterations of a public sphere (e.g., Calhoun, 1992; Schudson, 1998)

- limitations to civic involvement imposed by the representative democracy model, as it functions in a mass society fueled by a capitalist economy (e.g., Coleman, 2005; Habermas, 2004; Mouffe, 2000)

- the aggregation of public opinion within representative democracy models through polling (e.g., Herbst, 1993)

- declining civic participation through formal channels of political involvement (e.g., Carey, 1995; Hart, 1994; Putnam, 1996)

- the growth of public cynicism and disillusionment towards politics and the mass media (e.g., Cappella and Jamieson, 1996, 1997; Fallows, 1996; Patterson, 1993, 1996).

These five tendencies characterise contemporary democracies, describe civic engagement in mass societies, and situate the media in the overall equation.

Technology then presents a way to counter powerlessness by allowing individuals to propose new spaces, upon which newer, potentially more empowering habits and relations may be cultivated. These social spaces present the sum of experiences past with interpretations present and potential of the future. They capture nostalgia and dissatisfaction with the past along with anticipation of the future through a mix of practices that are both actual/given and potential, thus reflecting "a locus of possibilities" (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p.191). Representing "at once a collection of materials (objects, things) and an ensemble of matériel (tools – and the procedures necessary to make efficient use of tools and of things in general)", these technologically enabled social spaces host civic activities marked by both convention and innovation. These civic activities develop around the praxis of the actual and the promise of the potential, combining internalised perceptions of the political with thoughts of what that which is political might signify in the future.

3   Convergence and democracy

Convergent online technologies afford the social spaces upon which newer civic habits are tested out. I would like to devote the rest of this essay to examining the political potential of these spaces as part of a greater technologically enabled architecture of civics. Technologies reorganise the balance between public and private spaces, thus suggesting an architecture upon which everyday routines are arranged. The unique affordances of newer media technologies enable particular civic habits. The concept of convergence presents a key construct around which the potentialities of online digital technologies are actualised. Convergence describes the confluence of technologies, practices, and spaces enabled by a variety of technologies, but it does not present a defining property of all technology, nor is it a property exclusive to technology. Information communication technologies are driven by a confluence of services and platforms, more so than other past or contemporary media technologies, which does not inherently democratise societal congregations of time and space, but it does render them more interconnected.

On a primary level, the convergence of technologies modifies the means through which citizens become actualised. On a second level, a convergence of spaces, brought on by technology and various other systemic influences, rearranges the actual and imagined spaces upon which citizenship is practiced. Finally, on a third level, a subsequent convergence of practices suggests a continuum of activities along which previously succinct categories of the social, cultural, economic, or political collapse and overlap. The multi-layered influence of convergence adjusts the architecture of what was previously recognised as the political, thus allowing new opportunities for engagement, but also creating dissonance in how citizens are internalising their civic obligations, and how societal institutions are accounting for those citizen behaviours. As a result, declining voting turnouts and similar acts of political disinterest in conventional political habits are interpreted as cynicism or apathy, while other acts of political interest and engagement, such as blogging or 'digging' news stories, do not register on the institutionalised radar of formalised political behaviours.

4   Convergent supersurfaces and contemporary civic modalities

In modern societies, electronic media predispose communication by suggesting a juxtaposition of private and public boundaries that human activity advances from. Meyrowitz (1986) described this as the ability of electronic media to remove, or at least rearrange, boundaries between public and private spaces, affecting our lives not so much through content, but rather "by changing the 'situational geography' of social life" (p.6). In the seminal No Sense of Place, Meyrowitz (1986), likened this potential to the architectural effect that would be created were all walls physically separating rooms, houses, offices, buildings, and all concrete structures to be lifted. The result would combine several previously distinct situations, creating a paradox: an inharmonious continuum of several disconnected conversations, simultaneously aware of but potentially discordant with each other. Meyrowitz (1986) wrote mostly about television, and its ability to juxtapose public and private conversations in ways that changed childhood, re-arranged private/public gender discourses, and demystified politics. Through their tendency to channel or remediate preceding media, information communication

technologies further pronounce this effect. The confluence of public and private spaces is especially prevalent in net-based forms of communication. For example, bloggers voluntarily expose the privacy of diary-form introspection to multiple public audiences. YouTube videos broadcast context-free pieces of deeply idiosyncratic experiences. Online social networks combine audiences in ways that simultaneously group and segment social communication. The result is a loss of the unique connection of interaction to place.

While it is possible for this convergence to displace the situational character of some communication, non-verbal and verbal cues afforded by technology enable the mediation of situational information. Perhaps a more apt metaphor can be located away from Meyrowitz's dramatic collapse of place to what Scannell (1996) has termed the doubling of place. Scannell explains that in late modern life, "public events … occur simultaneously in two different places: the place of the event itself and that in which it is watched and heard. Broadcasting mediates between these two sites" (p.76). This suggestion is not far removed from Lippmann's (1922) pseudoenvironments, created for the convenience of relaying experiences taking place in remote locations. The difference is of course that, with electronic media, the event occurs simultaneously in both locations, creating two equally viable realities. With converged technologies, the effect is further multiplied, creating a plurality of overlapping or mutually exclusive social realities. Consequently, social relationships are multiplied, creating the potential for multiple performances political expression occurring on a variety of different stages (Moores, 2004). Many perceive the 'doubling' or 'multiplying' metaphor a more accurate reflection of the role played by technology (e.g., Couldry, 2000; Couldry and McCarthy, 2004; Moores, 2004; Ross, 2004; Scannell, 1996). The resulting space is a converged continuum, made up by discordant blocks of activity, or "homogeneous, yet at the same time broken into fragments" (Lefebvre, 1974/1991, p.342).

The metaphor of multiplied space communicates an impact of convergent technologies upon space that is of quantifiable nature. Multiplied space, however fragmented, suggests the pluralisation of space. As a metaphor, multiplication speaks to the quantity of space generated, but is not descriptive of the quality of space multiplied. Expressive and connective spaces sustained by online media are multiplied and multipliable, but what types of activities do they tend to lend themselves to? Do they sustain public spheres, and if so, do these public spheres possess a Habermasian deliberative character, or are they indicative of non-deliberative, yet decidedly civic, political tendencies?

Architecture employs the technique of folding to suggest the ways in which multiplied space may be fragmented and rearranged, so as to present not just multiplied space surfaces, but surfaces that lend themselves to the creation of more flexible shapes. I argue that a similar effect is produced by convergent technologies. Space is not only multiplied, it is simultaneously fragmented and reassembled into structures that attain greater reflexivity. Architect and academic Vyzoviti (2001, 2003) has employed the term supersurfaces, to describe the spatial possibilities enabled by the technique of folding. Using paper as an empirical model, she explains how flat surfaces can be transformed into volumes through cutting, weaving, twisting, winding, and further manipulating woven forms. The resulting supersurfaces evolve beyond the fixity of manipulated artifacts, to suggest an appeal that lies in their lightness and flexibility.

Supersurfaces are appealing because they are remixed and remixable, thus they are responsive to convergent technologies that engage citizens as both audiences and

producers of mediated civic content. Similarly, convergent supersurfaces describe the spatial effects of convergent technology on place. Space is disjointed, reconnected, woven, and reorganised into places light enough to rest on the outer landscapes of greater systemic structures, and not heavy enough to dissolve into the systemic core of the institutions of democracy. The concept of a convergent supersurface captures both the promise and peril of cyberspace: flexible enough to sustain a variety of conversations, too flexible to have the weight required for a lasting impact. These spaces develop upon the outer fabrics of traditional democratic institutions, a play upon space bound by its own fixity.

At the same time, unless these spaces bear distinct connections to the systemic core of democratic institutions, their ability to effect institutional change is compromised. For example, bloggers are able to exert power to the extent that they successfully capture the attention of mainstream media or a critical mass. YouTube videos are included in the agenda of public affairs only after, and provided, they go viral. Participants in online political discussion groups feel more gratified and engaged when politicians are involved in the conversation, thus suggesting a connection for the group to the systemic conventions of democracy (e.g., Jankowski and van Selm, 2000). The concept of convergent supersurfaces communicates both the empowerment enabled via the production of multiple reflexive spaces and the challenges offered by spaces that are organically generated, and thus may not always support direct systemic connections to core societal institutions.

While it is important to imagine the opportunities that convergent technologies afford us, it is also necessary to remind ourselves that several of the socio-cultural shifts associated with technology are variably experienced by populations, depending on historical and geographical context. For some populations, space, and by consequence activity housed within that space, has become converged and more fluid. Still, there remain activities that are place-based and exist because of their connection to a particular place. These may be activities of a political nature (voting), socio-cultural nature (marriage), economic nature (trading of non-information goods and services), or legal nature (trial and punishment, citizenship) that are all characterised by association with a particular space. However, as boundaries previously separating the spheres on which these activities occurred are collapsed or multiplied, several activities associated with the work sphere, the home, public life, commerce, and other social landscapes are consequently converged.

The results are complex and varied. Technologies of convergence collapse public and private boundaries, blurring the personal with the commercial. Concurrently, several of the symbols or habits we associate with that which is social, cultural, political, and economic are broadcast over a multiplicity of mediated environments, the nature of which is both homogeneous and fragmented. As Melucci (1999) suggests, the convergence of information flows "ties the world system together and … inflates the issues and arenas of conflict into worldwide proportions", thus rendering "the geo-graphical localisation of a problem [of] secondary importance", and reactivating "ethnic and local conflicts that seek to give a stable and recognisable basis to identity in a space that has lost its traditional boundaries" (p.416). As the physical and virtual geographies along which these activities are formulated multiply and converge, the texture of what was once defined as social, cultural, political, and so forth is subsequently inflicted. In most cases, the social and the political are blurred, as mediated environments fail to distinguish between the two. Political candidates are covered by the

news on the basis of their political record of achievement as well as their social character and repertoire of morally related decision-making (Jamieson, 2003; Patterson, 1993; Thompson, 2000). Successful blogs like The Huffington Post offer a menu of news items covering hard, soft, and pop news all in the same blurb. Blogs like The Daily Kos that offer more politically concentrated coverage do so from a personalised perspective. Popular sites like YouTube or Digg offer no topical categorisation besides that determined by recency or popularity. Websites that are strictly social, political, cultural or economic are rare. Physical spaces that are specifically dedicated to commerce (shops), sociability (cafés), culture (museums), and politics (civic centres, government buildings) are variably remediated into arenas that combine a range of activities.

This does not imply a wholly new trend, nor does it suggest that these spheres of activity were much more neatly divided in the past. One could argue that we have always struggled with specifying the political, thus confronted now with a converged civic context that renders the political ever more elusive (Mouffe, in Miessen, 2007). Concurrently, as the shift towards consensus politics minimises ideological differences among parties, political factions become more voter-oriented rather than member-oriented (Dahlgren, 2009), thus further removing ideology from that which we define as political.

5 A remediation of theory

What these confluent trends suggest is that in order to interpret the civic consequences of newer media we must consult the language of the past, but then advance from it to language that describes the present. Most research reveals that the affordances of newer media are democratic (borne out of democracy), but not inherently democratising. Convergent supersurfaces are capable of serving the expressive and connective needs of multiple publics. They may also enable public spheres, or counter-publics but not of the Habermasian, deliberative variety. It is essential that public service, private, and online media be not understood in terms of their ability to recreate civic ideals that may not have existed in the past to begin with.

Increasingly, research indicates that more than anything, online networked platforms afford opportunities for expression and connection. Expression may on occasion lead to deliberation. Connection may on occasion aspire to community. Systemic and contextual factors may enable this transformation, as in the case of the recent 2011 Egyptian revolution. During the many days of protest and off and on internet access, individuals used new media, among other methods of communication, to turn expression and connection into sustained protest and community. Returning to the question of impact, which permitted me to present this essay, the depth of their impact will depend on their connection to the systemic core of the democracies they serve. Returning to the question that instigated this essay, impact is thus reliant upon the pre-existing socio-cultural architecture.

This of course does not present an epiphany for social scientists. We are all aware of the importance of context. What I would like to suggest, however, is that we adjust our theoretical language to fit the context online technologies afford. Bolter and Grusin (2000) have described the process of remediation as one through which newer media achieve cultural singularity by mimicking, rivalling, and ultimately refashioning earlier media as they fashion a unique identity of their own. Likewise, I suggest that we permit

the theoretical language we use to describe the present to borrow, apply, and imitate theory of the past, only so long as those efforts ultimately result in producing a theoretical language that singularly and irrevocably belongs to, and describes, the present.

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