

Jodi Dean 2001  
Multiple Reality 1  
Part I

Jodi Dean's remarks are about the idea of the public sphere and the relation of this idea to computer-mediated interaction. It consists of three sections:

1. What is the public sphere? What kind of political architecture does it involve?
2. What's wrong with this picture?
3. What might be better? Architecture for neo-democracy (issue networks)

Her basic contention is that the notion of the public sphere is not only inapplicable to the Net, but also and more importantly that it is damaging to democratic aspirations. As an alternative, she will consider the potential of political architecture rooted in a notion of networks, arguing that to the extent that such an architecture can center democratic practice in conflict and contestation so can it open up the democratic imagination in contemporary technoculture.

I. What is the public sphere? What kind of political architecture does it involve?

Most generally put, the public sphere is the site and subject of liberal democratic practice. That is to say, in political theory it is posited as that space within which people deliberate over matters of common concern, matters that are contested and about which it seems necessary to reach a consensus.

We see versions of this notion of the public sphere at work in legal distinctions between public and private spheres, where public refers to the state and private refers to the market and the family. Likewise, invocations of some sort of public are frequent in newspaper and campaign rhetoric. From public opinion polls to statements like 'the public was outraged to learn' and 'the public has a right to know,' we find an idea of the public as that general audience whose opinions matter, as those folks whose agreement or disagreement could change the course of elections or make or break a play, movie, or television show.

To be sure, political theory provides varying conceptualizations of the public sphere. Hannah Arendt, for

example, offers a notion of the public sphere rooted in her understanding of the politics of ancient Greece. For her, what is important about the public sphere is that it is a place of freedom and contestation separate from the demands of work and the necessities of bare life. In contrast, Richard Sennett reads the public sphere more aesthetically, in terms of practices of self-presentation and display. When I speak of the public sphere, I have in mind the work of Jurgen Habermas. His book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, has been vastly influential in numerous fields from sociology and political science to cultural studies and communications theory. So, I use Habermas's conception because of its widespread impact, presuming that most normative invocations of the public have something like this in mind.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* not only does Habermas trace the emergence of the notion of the public in key Enlightenment political theories, but also he looks at the material emergence of a sphere of private persons coming together as a public in the 18th century in German *Tischgesellschaften*, English coffee houses, and French salons. What Habermas finds in these new associations are a set of political norms crucial for democratic practice. First, there was disregard for social status, a fundamental parity among all participants such that the authority of the better argument could win out over social hierarchy. Second, new areas of questioning and critique were opened up as culture itself was produced as a commodity to be consumed. Third, the newly emerging public was established as open and inclusive in principle. That is to say, anyone could have access to that which was discussed in the public sphere. These abstractions lead Habermas, fourth, to conceptualize the public sphere in terms of the public use of reason.

So, we have a set of norms: equality, transparency, inclusivity, rationality. These norms apply to actions within the public sphere. But what is the public sphere? What is its architecture more basically? I break this down into the following components: site, goal, means, norms, and vehicle. What Habermas has in mind with his account of the public sphere, and what tends to be assumed, even if only tacitly in invocations of the notion of the public, are actors meeting face to face according to legal or rational deliberative procedures in order to come to agreement on a matter of national interest. The actors tend to be conceptualized as free and rational agents, as citizens who make rational

choices about their interests, who have looked into various alternatives and made a coherent, explicable choice. Their deliberations with others are thought of, again, in terms of rational discussions if not exactly between friends then at least not between enemies or even strangers. These are people who simply disagree on the matter at hand but share enough common conceptions to have a discussion-and this makes sense, of course, given that the site is already the nation.

Now, this conception of the public sphere has come under all sorts of good criticisms-it never existed, it excluded women, it was built on the backs of the working class. Habermas himself has changed his mind about key aspects of it, even though he still thinks that the norms of the public sphere are those crucial for deliberative democracy. But, even as the details of the concept have been heavily criticized, the concept is still widely used and championed. Indeed, communication as well as political theorists are likely to take it as axiomatic that something like the public sphere is necessary for democratic politics (Nicholas Garnham, Nancy Fraser, Lauren Berlant). Many current uses of the idea of the public try to avoid the criticisms of the concept by adding an 's.' So, they talk about sub-altern counter publics and the like, trading on the normative currency of the concept while trying to avoid its exclusionary dimensions. As an aside, let me add that these attempts to save the concept by adding an 's' to it are worthless: if the groups all have the same norms, then they are part of one public in the Habermasian sense; if they don't have the same norms, if they are exclusive, partial, oriented around specific concerns and interests, then they are not publics but different sorts of groups, interest groups, say. This is important because, to use the example of identity politics, it is precisely the exclusivity of the group that is crucial for its groupness; it isn't supposed to be a public at all.

Anyway, back to argument, the public sphere has been particularly championed or particularly reinvigorated today because of the emergence of new communication technologies. Habermas himself thinks that 'the phenomenon of a world public sphere' is today 'becoming politically reality for the first time in a cosmopolitan matrix of communication.' Folks familiar with Net hype from the early nineties will no doubt recall the emphasis on the information superhighway and the town halls for millions. I recently came across an article from ICANN expert Michael Fromkin arguing that the Internet Standards process not only follows

but provides empirical validation of Habermas's account of the communicative justification of action norms. And, it seems like we even have a version of this when folks treat the Net as the 'commons' (Noam Chomsky, Hardt and Negri).

Computer-mediated interactions, then, seem to many to materialize aspirations long associated with the public sphere. Indeed, contemporary technoculture itself sometimes seems a machinery produced by the very ideals inspiring democracy. Clearly, advances in computer-mediated interaction provide ever greater numbers of people with access to information. No longer a privilege of the elite, information is available to anyone with a computer. Similarly, more people have opportunities to register their thoughts and opinions in political discussions than ever before. Chatrooms, cybersalons, and ezines are just some of the new electronic spaces in which people can participate as equals in processes of collective will formation. Describing the early nineties ecstasy over the possibilities of computer democracy, Hubertus Buchstein writes, If one accepts the claims of the optimists, the new technology seems to match all the basic requirements of Habermas's normative theory of the democratic public sphere: it is a universal, anti-hierarchical, complex, and demanding mode of interaction. Because it offers universal access, uncoerced communication, freedom of expression, an unrestricted agenda, participation outside of traditional political institutions and generates public opinion through processes of discussion, the Internet looks like the most ideal speech situation.

But is the Net really a public sphere? Does the notion of a public sphere help us think better about networked communications?

II. What's wrong with this picture?

As I already said, I don't think the Net is anything like a public sphere. To explain why, I'm going to do two things. First, I'm going to consider how public sphere norms appear in cybertheory. They appear in two completely opposed ways-as cyberia's lack and as its excess. Second, because of this weird oscillation, I'm going to broaden the frame of analysis to consider what interests are served by thinking of the Net in terms of a public sphere. Put in old-fashioned terms, I'm going to consider the problem of configuring the Net as a public sphere as one that can be addressed through ideology critique. That is, the characterization of networked communication as lacking public sphere

norms on the one hand, and as plagued by a surfeit of these norms, on the other, tells us a lot about the ideology materialized in the Internet. And I will argue that it is an ideology of publicity in the service of communicative capitalism.

A. Lack, or why doesn't the Net look more like the public sphere.

Now, I'm sure that we can all immediately think of all sorts of common complaints about the Net that rely on the idea that the Net needs to be more like a public sphere. For example, early complaints that the Net was dominated by young, white, American, men echoed the critique of the bourgeois public sphere for excluding women, ethnic and racial minorities, and the working class. Here, the key issue was inclusion: all that cyberspace needed to really be the public sphere was to be more inclusive. Likewise, as larger and less experienced cohorts of newbies were brought online, hostile environment concerns emerged: was cyberspace too sexist, too racist, too offensive? Did it operate according to norms of equality and rationality, decency and civility? And, if it didn't what sorts of architectures might better secure these norms?

But these are only some of the most general ways that networked communications link up with the idea of the public sphere. I'm actually more interested in how deep down the assumptions are encoded. So, let's consider a passage from the introduction to *Resisting the Virtual Life*. There, James Brook and Iain Boal write that:

virtual technologies are pernicious when their simulacra of relationships are deployed societywise as substitutes for face-to-face interactions, which are inherently richer than mediated interactions. Nowadays, the monosyllabic couch potato is joined by the information junkie in passive admiration of the little screen; this passivity is only refined and intensified by programmed 'interactivity'

This sort of criticism is rooted in the assumption that the Net should be more like a public sphere, that the faults of the Net are those points at which it fails to achieve public sphereness. Its basic point is that the Net lacks what it needs to be a proper public sphere.

Where do we see this? We see this in their worry about 'substitution,' one, and in their concomitant displacement of the Net by television, two.

1. Brook and Boal worry that networked interactions will substitute for face-to-face interactions. For them, face-to-face interactions are somehow more natural and hence better than actions that are not face-to-face. But, face-to-face here (and I will go ahead with the bold claim that this is the case in absolutely any invocation of face-to-face interactions) needs to be understood as purely an imaginary object, as a fantasy that in fact relies on its opposition to 'mediated interactions' for its claim to be 'inherently richer.' All interactions are mediated; there is no pure, immediate, fully-present, fully-transparent encounter. But, by worrying that computer mediated interactions will "substitute" for face-to-face ones, they can occlude this fact. And, this occlusion, this naturalization and idealization of face-to-face interactions in effect produces the subject of these interactions as an embodied individual richly interconnected with significant others in significant, real, relationships—none of which, presumably, are mediated at all. So, the worry about substitution in effect produces the individuated agent of the public sphere.

2. Notice, that in their emphasis on face-to-face interactions in contrast to the simulacra of technologically mediated relationships, Brook and Boal associate unity with allegedly natural interactions and fragmentation with technology: the person (that they created through the opposition between face-to-face and mediation) is alone, passively consuming information in front of a screen. But this is weird—what happened to the technologically mediated relationship? Now the person in their account is totally alone. The interaction is completely displaced by the screen. And, clearly, the screen is really a television screen, not a computer screen at all—this is clear with their reference to the monosyllabic couch potato. And, this displacement lets them treat the person in front of the screen as a junkie, as an information addict, injected with stuff. So, the Net is not a vehicle for rational discussion at all: it's television, injecting banalities into passive consumer-junkies. So, in a nutshell, we can read Brooks and Boal as faulting the Net for lacking key components of the public sphere: individuated agents as the vehicle for discussion and rational, active participants in a reasonable, worthwhile exchange.

B. Excess or ohmygod! The Net is the Public Sphere!

But this is just one side of the coin. Other commentators on computer mediated interaction see the Net as being too much like the public sphere-it realizes the ideals of the public, and that's precisely the problem with it. Consider Esther Dyson. In a 1998 article in Brill's Content she complained that the Net:

allows all kinds of people to enter the conversation. There are still reliable and unreliable sources, but for now, as people move onto the Net, they tend to lose their common sense and believe all kinds of crazy tales and theories. Unfortunately, we as a society haven't learned 'Net literacy' yet. We take a story's appearance online, as well as in print, as proof that it has been subjected to rigorous journalistic standards, but there's so much stuff out there that no one has the time to contradict all the errors.

Now, Dyson doesn't specify which conversation she has in mind, so it's hard to be sure what she's trying to protect here. Presumably, she's thinking about something like the public sphere, something in which 'we as a society' participate, something that requires a 'common' sense. What might such an all-inclusive conversation look like? Dyson's horror at the thought of 'all kinds of people' entering it tells us, first, that the possibility of an inclusive public sphere conjures up anxieties around truth and trust; and, second, that what she defends as the public sphere relies on a conception of rational debate that excludes all but the reasonable few. Who exactly lose their common sense and believe crazy theories because of a cruise on the Web? Dyson suggests that it must be those who are ignorant and unsophisticated, those of us who don't have authorities to tell us what to believe. Moreover, she suggests, in light of the underlying epistemology of the public sphere, that there is one truth and that there are experts out there who know this truth and who should be empowered to enlighten the rest of us. This of course flies in the face of important research on knowledge networks, situated knowledges, and the structures that authorize what is to count with knowledge in specific domains. Moreover, it fails to grasp precisely the epistemological purchase of truth conditions in cyberia: given the competing conceptions of the Real meeting and clashing on the Web, the authorizations previously presumed to attach to one set of knowledge claims (assumed by those with control over dominant institutions of knowledge production) are seen in all their actual conflict with competing claims. And, this isn't a relativ-

ist position-this is a position that emphasizes precisely that point of conflict that Dyson rejects with her emphasis on consensus. (I should add, if not an aside, then at least an advertisement for my book on alien abduction here.)

So, for Dyson, the problem with the Net is the very excesses that make it a public sphere-everyone is included: ohmygod! People who are ignorant are out there not knowing what to think; all sorts of opinions are out there-ohmygod! authority is undermined. There is too much equality! Too much inclusivity! In fact, Dyson's point seems to boil down to the problem that there are too many different opinions and ideas out there on the Net. But too many for what? What is the criterion according to which one can assess too many or too few? I suggest that the criterion, yet again, is the consensus that is the goal of discussion in the public sphere. Precisely because she presupposes that the Net is something like a public sphere, Dyson can worry about too many opinions-she thinks there needs to be agreement.

Finally, notice that in both the cases of lack and excess, the invocation of the public, or, the territorialization of the Net, of cyberia, as a public functions so as to authorize regulatory interventions. Too little security, too little trust to be able to know that one is dealing with rational, fully individuated agents? Better install some sorts of mechanisms that can let us know who one is, codes that will warrant the other person as a responsible subject. Too many opinions? Too many voices? Better put in filters so that the real authorities can be recognized. But if cyberia really is the public sphere, if it really does let in all the voices and opinions and give equal access to all within its domain, what is the problem? Put somewhat differently, why exactly is it a nightmare of inclusion? What is the base line from which this is measured? The answer, of course, is global capital, or in a term I take from Paul Passavant, communicative capitalism. These regulatory interventions are invoked and pursued so as to make the Net safe for commercial exchange, to protect the intranets of financial markets, establish the trust necessary for consumer confidence in online transactions, and to make appear as a public sphere what is clearly the material basis of the global economy.

C. Lack? Excess? It must be ideology: publicity as the ideology of technocultur (or, it's the economy, stupid)

So, since we have these two contradictory renderings of the Net as not enough of a public sphere and as too much of a public sphere, what do we do? We treat the public sphere as an ideological construct and subject it to ideology critique. Publicity is the ideology of technoculture. It is what makes communicative capitalism seem natural, unavoidable. It provides the matrix that tells us how to think, what to see, what to desire. It gives us the protocols by which to engineer our reality—and I mean engineer here in a completely material sense. Publicity is materialized in contemporary technoculture. I'll set this out in a bit more detail.

Technoculture is often heralded for the ways it enhances democracy by realizing norms of publicity. From virtual town halls to the chat and opining of apparently already politicized netizens, computer mediated interaction has been proffered as democracy's salvation (as if all that we ever lacked was information or access). New technologies seem to solve the old republican worry about whether deliberative democracy can work in societies too big for face-to-face discussion. In technoculture we can have the privilege and convenience of democracy without the unsightly mess as millions and millions of people participate in a great big public sphere.

Or, at least that's the fantasy. New media present themselves for and as a democratic public. They present themselves for a democratic public in their eager offering of information, access, and opportunity. They present themselves as a democratic public when the very fact of networked communications comes to mean democratization, when expansions in the infrastructure of the information society are assumed to be enactments of a demos. But, as is becoming increasingly clear, the expansion and intensification of communication and entertainment networks yields not democracy but something else entirely—communicative capitalism.

In communicative capitalism, what has been heralded as central to enlightenment ideals of democracy takes material form in new technologies. Access, information, and communication, as well as open networks of discussion and opinion formation are conditions for rule by the public that seem to have been realized through global telecommunications. But instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the

world's peoples. As Saskia Sassen's research on the impact of economic globalization on sovereignty and territoriality makes clear, the speed, simultaneity, and interconnectivity of electronic telecommunications networks produce massive distortions and concentrations of wealth. Not only does the possibility of super-profits in the finance and services complex lead to hypermobility in capital and the devalorization of manufacturing, but financial markets themselves acquire the capacity to discipline national governments. Similarly, within nations like the US, the proliferation of media has been accompanied by a shift in political participation. Rather than actively organized in parties and unions, politics has become a domain of financially mediated and professionalized practices centered on advertising, public relations, and the means of mass communication. Indeed, with the commodification of communication, more and more domains of life seem to have been reformatted in terms of market and spectacle as if the valuation itself had been rewritten in binary code. Bluntly put, the standards of a finance and consumption-driven entertainment culture set the very terms of democratic governance today. In effect, changing the system, organizing against and challenging communicative capitalism, seems to require strengthening the system: how else to get out the message than to raise the money, buy the television time, register the domain names, build the websites, and craft the accessible, user-friendly, spectacular message? Democracy demands publicity.

So, we're at an impasse: the ideal of the public works simultaneously to encode democratic practice and market global technoculture. Precisely those technologies that materialize a promise of full political access and inclusion drive an economic formation whose brutalities render democracy worthless for the majority of people. The meme: publicity is to technoculture what liberalism is to capitalism. It's the ideology that constitutes the truth conditions of global, information age capital. Publicity is what makes today's communicative capitalism seem perfectly natural.

The ideal of publicity configures the Net as a consensual space. Not only does this pathologize all sorts of interactions long part of computer mediated communication—sex, porn, games, banal chatter—but it completely occludes the way that the Net is the key infrastructural element of the global economy. We see this totally clearly in all those ICANN statements that emphasize the importance of competition on the Net. Competition is associated with the public good, with what is best for all people. It's that same weird thing

that appears in all third way rhetoric: the market is public; the market registers and serves the public interest. Market competition as public good thus displaces attention from the actual antagonisms, the actual conflict going on in the world in various forms and spaces. The Net is one of the spaces where this conflict rages in full-force. When we talk about the Net as a public sphere, we displace attention from this conflict.