How Democratic Can We Get?:
The Internet, the Public Sphere, and Public Discourse

IRENE WARD

We will have to decide how technology can be orchestrated into socially responsible patterns of use.

Richard Lanham (xv)

We have read in scholarly journals and in the popular press about the revolutionary new forms of “interactive telecommunications,” such as the Internet, that promise to enhance U.S. democratic institutions and generate what Lawrence K. Grossman, former president of PBS and of NBC News, has called “participatory cyberdemocracy.” These technologies “offer constant feedback to government officials with a speed and frequency heretofore possible only in tiny ancient Greek city-states and in old-fashioned New England town meetings” (22). At the same time, Lester Faigley hopes that the “revolution” can indeed transform classrooms into places where “literacy for equality” is realized (41). The conjunction of the promise of “literacy for equality” and “participatory cyberdemocracy” seems to provide some challenges and opportunities for teachers of communication skills, especially for curricula that intend to provide instruction in public discourse, however that is defined. One such challenge is to look skeptically at such claims themselves. While the Internet exhibits some institutional features that may enhance democratic interaction, we must also remember that any technology has physical and economic limits, that historical context plays a great role in shaping how technology is used. We need to remember that connecting people via electronic networks and giving them information will not necessarily lead to a more democratic society any more than connecting students via computers in our classrooms necessarily leads to frank, open discussion.

In this paper, I would like to draw on Jurgen Habermas’ account of the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere to discuss the potential for the Internet to become a public sphere, and, hence, a forum that private individuals could use to democratically influence the state. Habermas’ The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere appeared in German in 1962 and was first translated into English in 1989. His work has recently attracted the interest of rhetoricians and
composition scholars because he connects discursive practices to the creation, maintenance and transformation of public democratic practices and in so doing has devised both a discourse ethics and a general theory of communicative action. His work on the formation and transformation of the public sphere has been much discussed, extended, and criticized by Habermas himself and by others. However, this paper will not deal primarily with those critiques. By using Habermas' general theory of public sphere, I put concepts in relationship in the hope of accentuating connections that will make our current situation somewhat clearer. I want to use his theory as a lens through which to query the claims that the Internet and its discursive practices will serve as a transformative tool that will benefit democratic polities.  

In addition, I think that discussions such as the one that follows can help us clarify for ourselves how the Internet can and, more importantly, should be used in our classrooms. For example, is teaching the discourse forms of the Internet something that we need to promote in our curriculum? Will the Internet actually allow more and better citizen participation in democracy? Will citizens need facility with Internet discourse in order to influence public issues? Or will we foster the illusion that students are engaging in public discourse when in fact they are not? As we devise arguments for and against the allocation of our institution’s often scarce computer networking resources to our curriculum, we need to be aware of the warrants and assumptions that will influence decisions about how such resources can and, in fact, do affect curricular decisions, such as the purpose and the amount of time spent in classrooms in teaching students to analyze and produce discourse in electronic environments. Such decisions influence the kinds of literacy that we shall end up fostering via this new technology.

I will first define “public sphere”; then I will examine three institutional criteria that Habermas enumerates as common to the various forms of the bourgeois public sphere as it emerged in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. Although the Internet and the bourgeois public sphere do seem similar in many ways and seem to point to the Internet’s potential to function as a form of public sphere, other factors such as the limits of the technology, economic factors, and differing historical circumstances also seem to undercut that potential.

Private Persons Reasoning Publicly
What does Habermas mean by public sphere? Thomas McCarthy, a translator and critic of Habermas, provides this rather concise definition: “The public sphere, [is] a political public of private persons reasoning publicly, [in order] to exercise a critical function in mediating the relations between the essentially separate realms of civil society and the state” (381). Habermas attempts to theorize a public institution or space or arena in which private citizens can engage in discussion that is free from any coercive constraints or forms of domination so that by such discussions they can determine matters of general interest or common good. In such discussions, citizens’ assumptions are challenged; they in turn challenge others’ assumptions; they eventually arrive at, through
reasoned debate, some agreement or consensus—what Habermas calls “public opinion.” Public opinion is more likely to represent a true consensus when it is formed in such a public sphere—because it has been subjected to the challenges and questions of the community—than would the aggregate of individual opinions. The aggregate opinion may be tainted by dogma and unexamined assumptions that have not been open for challenge and modification through reasoned debate. Habermas sees attempts at the mediation of state institutions and power by private persons who have engaged in reasoned debate and who employ the force of the better argument in an attempt to influence the state as an essentially democratic practice. We might use this practice as a model or benchmark for forms of public communication that are free from the coercion of both the state and the market and that can support democratic political institutions. It is this stipulative definition that I wish to use here as the benchmark against which I will test the Internet as a form of public sphere.2

Moreover, I place Habermas’ model of the public sphere over and against a model that some have called the “liberal-individualist” model, in which “public opinion” is considered to be the aggregation of individual opinions and preferences. Any notion of common good established by deliberation is absent in the liberal-individualist model. Public discussion or deliberation is replaced by negotiation that attempts to satisfy as many of the personal preferences and private interests as possible (Fraser n. 141).

If the Internet is, or were to become, a public sphere in Habermas’ model, it would have to offer a public space or arena for people to debate issues in order to influence civil society and the state; moreover, the public discourse formed in response to such debate will have been “legitimized” by the scrutiny and challenge of other citizens and stakeholders in the debate.

Structural Transformation and Public Discourse
Habermas’ The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society investigates the beginnings of a kind of public discourse that claimed to represent general public opinion in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. As capitalism grew, the new capitalists (merchants, manufacturers, bankers, and so on) needed to gain the cooperation of the state if capitalism was to grow because the traditional powers of the state (the aristocracy and the church) were not concerned with the developing market economy. The new bourgeois society sought to transform the state “to an authority restricted to a limited number of functions and supervised by the public.” (The Declaration of Independence is a notable example of public discourse that intends to transform the state.) One of the ways this transformation was accomplished was through the development of a public sphere (Held 261).

It was in the bourgeois public sphere of coffee houses, salons, societies, newspapers, and periodicals of all kinds that these forums for public debate by private persons emerged. The “public opinion” that was formed in these forums
was thought by the participants to represent the general interest of the people. Newspapers changed from vehicles for reporting the news to true "bearers and leaders of public opinion" and often were in the service of party politics (Held 261). According to Habermas, public opinion that forms in domination-free realms, and the public discourse that grows out of it such as the bourgeois public sphere of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe (even though such a sphere was largely restricted to white males who were propertied), could provide a model for how more inclusive kinds of public spheres might be formed in other contexts. The bourgeois public sphere of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe gradually eroded as newspapers became more and more occupied with their own commercial success and less with political conviction and motivating social change. Although Habermas dates this change in newspaper publishing as late as 1830, the banner of The Observer (London, 1791) read, "unbiased by prejudice, uninfluenced by party... and delivered with the utmost dispatch" (Habermas 184, Trager 334).

Formation of a Public Sphere

Habermas delimits three common institutional criteria of the various forms of public sphere that emerged in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe. First, little attention was paid to the status of the participants at the societies, salons, and other places where people gathered and conversed about the issues of the day. Merchant, aristocrat, and bishop alike had to prove their worth to the gathering by the quality of their public discourse. Second, new subjects were considered of "common concern" to the general public. At first this took the form of commoners talking about the art and literature that was becoming more accessible because of the market economy; later the conversations grew to encompass philosophy, economics, and politics as well. Third, these public forums were "in principle" inclusive; at least they were considered so by the participants because they came to think of these numerous and continuous conversations as part of a larger public conversation of which they were a small part. The next part of this essay will examine each criterion in turn.

A Tact Befitting Equals

The first institutional criterion is an assumed social leveling of the participants. Habermas writes,

[T]hey preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether. The tendency replaced the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals. The parity on whose basis alone the authority of the better argument could assert itself against that of social hierarchy... meant... the parity of "common humanity"... Not that this idea of the public was actually realized in earnest in the coffee houses, the salons, and the societies; but as an idea it had become institutionalized and thereby stated as an objective claim. If not realized, it was at least consequential. (36)
It was less likely that an aristocrat or churchman would be deferred to in these public discussions; their contributions were subjected to the challenge and scrutiny of the gathering in the same way that the merchant's and journalist's were. Social status no longer guaranteed that one's voice would be heard or guaranteed that it would be ignored.

In these new public spaces for intellectual conversation, the mostly male members of the bourgeois met with their equals and with those who were in many ways still "their betters" on a footing more conducive to conversation and the exchange of ideas. Of course, the clubs and coffee houses did not admit women, and only a few of the influential, wealthy women had enough clout to form salons and attract the intellectuals of their day to their homes. As Habermas admits, the opportunity to join and be heard in the bourgeois public sphere was limited to white, propertied, literate males. So, although in principle the bourgeois public sphere disregard status, it was still limited to a small segment of the total population. However, the idea that parity among men (sexist usage is appropriate here) "was at least consequential," is reflected in Thomas Jefferson's "self-evident" claim that "all men are created equal" in 1776.

Habermas claims that the court culture—up until then the primary supporter of art and literature—began to erode in France when Phillip of Orleans, Regent to young Louis XV, shifted the location of the court from Versailles to Paris and the court itself was greatly restricted in size, sometimes limited to the members of the royal family. The intellectual conversation that once flourished in the court moved to the salons. A similar erosion of court life took place in England after the Glorious Revolution, as English court life became increasingly bourgeois and coffee houses emerged in both England and France as locations where intellectuals met, discussing first the arts, and later economics and politics. In Germany the court was replaced by "German Societies," the first formed in 1727, which were composed of some princes but also included "a strong preponderance of middle-class academics." Habermas quotes a founding document from such a society as arguing "that in such manner an equality and association among persons of unequal social status might be brought about" (32).

To what degree does the Internet disregard the status of participants? Postponing, for the moment, the question of access, one could answer in the positive. Since publishing on the World Wide Web is not limited in the same ways that publishing in traditional print media is, anyone who wants to take the time to learn and who has access can "publish" their views about anything, and they often do.3 The anonymity of the World Wide Web pages and many other kinds of Internet discourse, though often unsettling, also can work to focus attention on what is being said over who is saying it. Because the knowledge of who is writing is obscured and often hidden, Internet discourse can sometimes efface status and power differentials. The use of pseudonyms also obscures who is talking. In public chat rooms, this preserves the privacy of the people, an assumed protection; it also allows people to assume false online identities, including establishing false markers of age, gender, ethnicity and so on. While this may
lead to a great degree of freedom for anyone to say anything, it can also lead to a great deal of mistrust of on-line discourse. Lack of the means to establish credibility can undermine reader confidence and potentially undercut Internet discourse's power to persuade.

I in no way wish to imply that people cannot be silenced on the Internet—the Internet is famous for its "flame wars." Something like "flaming" is likely to have gone on in the public debates in the salons and coffee houses of the bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century. One can imagine the paralyzing wit of Jonathan Swift or Samuel Johnson to have closed off any number of debates. However, I think that in the forms as well as in the tradition of the Internet we can discern an institutionalization of parity among participants, a parity not as readily available in other mass media like broadcast and print. What is important to remember, however, is that anyone is able to participate. In the U.S. at least, participants don't need to apply for a license as you do in order to use citizen band radio frequencies, for instance. I'm not denying here that the demographics of the Internet are strikingly similar to the demographics of the bourgeois public sphere: male, educated, and propertied. We can add to this list: living in developed countries. Moreover, sixty percent of the "over 9,400,000 host computers worldwide" are located in the U.S., making the Internet largely an English-only game (ACLU). The absence of women and other groups—groups often already economically disadvantaged—obviously effects the kinds of content being placed on the Net. If the trend of supporting web content with advertizer dollars continues, demographics will increasingly control content. It follows then that the Net would become more homogenous and less controversial as advertisers continue to try to attract customers. The World Wide Web would follow the newspapers of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries in becoming increasingly concerned with its own commercial success and less with fostering public debate and exchange of ideas.

As you can see from the numbers quoted above, the Internet is now a worldwide network, and growing all the time. The degree to which users of the Internet can challenge other users' assumptions and make themselves available for such challenges from others varies depending on the design of the particular interface one is using, but still remains extremely small in comparison to the total population using the net, let alone the total population. Some interfaces such as IRCs and MUDs (Multi-User Domains) offer synchronous, or real-time chatting. Several of these sites are now used to foster interaction between professionals with common interests and as places where classes can actually be conducted. Many World Wide Web pages are now incorporating synchronous and asynchronous conversations; on these pages one can converse with both the editors or authors of the publication and with other readers. Simple "mail-to" links can turn any World Wide Web page into an asynchronous, two-way communication event.

Yet, one wonders if it is feasible to imagine that millions of people could debate public issues. Even at the most interactive of Internet sites such as MUDs, there is an upper limit to the number of simultaneous participants and limits
imposed by the technology—machines lag because the data bases that support them bloat), as well as limits on the participants themselves. There seems to a rather small, upper limit to the number of people participating in a single session and still allow a substantive exchange of ideas, let alone allow Habermas’ goal of the “better argument” to clearly emerge. 6

Unfortunately, at least as currently designed, the Internet is not likely to be able to sustain large numbers of status-effaced people interacting in ways that allow them to make claims and challenge assumptions. In short, it seems unlikely that the Internet will support wide distribution and assessment of multiple points of view and claims about what should be done about issues that affect a nation as large as the U.S. or a city as large as New York or Chicago. Approximately 40 million people around the world can access the Internet; by 1999, that number is expected to climb to 200 million people (ACLU). Even a system as extensive, flexible, and fast as the Internet (compared to the rate of distribution of print media) seems unlikely to be able to sustain substantive public debate on such a scale.

Breaking the Interpretation Monopoly

Habermas’ second common institutional criterion is that new areas of debate came to be considered within the domain of the general public. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, the commodification of cultural products, like literature, made them more generally obtainable by the public, taking them out of the control of the church and state and making them available for interpretation by anyone who could purchase them. In this process art and literature lost their “sacramental character.” Habermas writes,

To the degree, however, to which philosophical and literary works and works of art in general were produced for the market and distributed through it, ... as commodities they became in principle generally accessible. They no longer remained components of the Church’s and court’s publicity of representation; that is precisely what was meant by the loss of their aura of extraordinariness and by profaning of their once sacramental character. The private people for whom the cultural product became available as a commodity profaned it inasmuch as they had to determine its meaning on their own (by ways of rational communication with one another), verbalize it, and thus state explicitly what precisely in its implications for so long could assert its authority. (36)

Habermas talks at length about the fact that, in the salons especially, groups from mixed social positions gathered to criticize art: literature, art, plays, opera. Over time the discussions came to include economics and politics. At this time, cultural products were produced for and consumed by a growing middle-class. The church and state were no longer the primary consumers of art and literature through their patronage. With the loss of church and state patronage of the arts came the loss of their “monopoly of interpretation” of these cultural artifacts. Those who were interested could and did interpret works of art, literature, philosophy, and even economic and political texts through conversations at the
societies, salons, and coffee houses, and in the popular press. The power to
decide what any particular cultural artifact meant was no longer in the hand
of priests, aristocrats, and politicians, but was transferred to a much broader
segment of society.

Clearly, the Internet might again serve as a space where non-specialists and
the general public can interpret a vast array of cultural artifacts for themselves
because of its potential for reproducing and distributing virtual versions of them.
As John Perry Barlow comments, “whatever the human mind may create can
be reproduced and distributed infinitely at no cost” over the Internet. Not only
are more and more canonical cultural artifacts appearing in digital form on the
World Wide Web, but also it is relatively easy to publish one’s original artistic
work. The multimedia capability of digitalization allows digital versions of
graphic and photographic images, even original music, as well as combinations
of text, images, and sound. Just about any symbolic activity can now be digitized
and published on the World Wide Web. Culture products are there for the
viewing, interpretation, and judgment of any one.

This development may seem to promise increased democratization of
education: limitless quality cultural material simultaneously available to stu­
dents in Home, Kansas; Chevy Chase, Maryland; and Fairbanks, Alaska—
anywhere fiber-optic cable can be run or satellite signals beamed. Local school
board budgets need not be taped to duplicate print materials at each school. It
would seem then that the Internet could put more quality material in the hands
of students regardless of the limits of local tax bases and budgets. Suddenly rich
and poor districts are on a more even footing. On the other hand, contrary to
what Barlow believes, Internet content, especially the multimedia kind, is not
produced “at no cost.” One can assume that the suppliers of classroom material
now, the textbook publishers, will certainly not provide educational material
over the Internet “at no cost.” In many educational institutions, hardware and
person hours to produce quality educational Internet material are scarce. Is it
really feasible for each school to produce its own instructional material? Given
the cost, will institutions cooperate in producing material? How will such
projects be funded? Will institutions pour resources into producing material in
hopes of selling it to other institutions? What would such competition do to the
already scarce resource base at institutions that end up with poor market share?
Will state legislatures be inclined to fund projects to develop educational
Internet content that would be used in classes across the country as well as in the
state where the funding allowed it to be produced? Would they be willing to fund
such projects and expect that such services be provided “free of charge” to other
state school systems? It seems reasonable to speculate that those state legislatures
and educational institutions that are already rich in resources and talent, and
hence better able to compete in this new market, could end up reestablishing the
“monopoly of interpretation” that the Internet seems to undermine.
Everyone Had To Be Able To Participate

The third criterion is that access to the bourgeois public sphere was "generally available." Habermas writes,

However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it was always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who— insofar as they were propertied and educated—as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion. . . . Everyone had to be able to participate. (36-37)

Habermas goes on to describe what a small part of the population actually comprised the bourgeois public sphere in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Although the literacy rate had risen dramatically, paralleling the formation of the bourgeois public sphere, much of the population, especially in rural areas, was still illiterate, many living on the margins of subsistence. The bourgeois public sphere, as Habermas describes it, was male, educated, and propertied.

According to Habermas, at the beginning of the eighteenth century this new class of people asserted its power and transformed traditional institutions. For instance, the growing middle-class in Britain was largely comprised of a religious minority, dissenters, who by law were barred from the traditional paths to power: the church and public office. Instead, they turned to commerce and manufacturing, or trade, and began to amass large fortunes. They also had a growing financial stake in transforming existing forms of authority, because in order for capital to flourish it needed the cooperation of the state. Most importantly, as Habermas points out, there were few institutionalized restrictions on access to the bourgeois public sphere. The traditional institutional barriers of birth and landed wealth were eroding as commercial interests grew throughout Europe. The bourgeois public sphere of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe thought that its views—debated and clarified as they were in a public arena to which all, at least in principle, had access—largely represented the "common good" of all.

The issue of access to the bourgeois public sphere is similar to the access issue for the Internet, and to computer technology in general. Currently, in the U.S. at least, there are no "institutional" barriers, other than economic ones. Classes of people are not legally or by any set of institutional procedures barred from accessing the Internet. The cultural lore of the Internet claims that it is and shall remain a domination-free zone for the exchange of ideas and that no amount of encryption software, passwords, government regulation or censorship will be able to obstruct its essentially democratic nature. Barlow fired off an angry but concise statement reflecting this lore in response to the passing of the Telecommunications Reform Act in February 1996. He writes these lines as part of a "Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace":
We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere, may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.

This is indeed a lofty ideal, and Barlow seems to imply throughout the declaration that if you do not see the Internet in this way, you just do not know enough about it. On the other hand, although there seem to be few restrictions on access to the Internet, the restrictions that are there, institutional or not, seem to greatly undermine Barlow’s hope. The kind of access issues that we are now facing, largely cultural and economic, in regards to computerized telecommunications are more insidious and harder to eliminate.

Like the bourgeois public sphere, the market has made the Internet “generally available”; however, just as the cultural commodification of the eighteenth century made access to ideas, culture, and information less of an issue (only those who could read and had the money to buy books, attend concerts and plays participated), today, only those willing and able to spend discretionary income, or who are provided access by virtue of their employment or school, use the Internet. In an effort to make access more available, a number of communities offer Internet access at public libraries, and such access might, indeed, be one way to mitigate lack of access for all citizens. For instance, the public library in the small college town (pop. 30,000) that I live in has two computers with Internet access. Library patrons may browse the World Wide Web for 20 minutes at a time. Unfortunately, one cannot publish web pages from these connections or send or receive e-mail, greatly diminishing the interactive aspects of the Internet for these users. Undoubtedly, while public library access to the Internet still seems promising, areas with a small tax base, rural and inner city communities, already have trouble keeping their neighborhood libraries open.

Perhaps the rush to sell access to the Internet may help make access more affordable. Although the fees of the largest access providers are still rather costly, one can find smaller providers with considerably less glitz and significantly lower cost. It is still not clear the degree to which the Internet itself can be commodified. Clearly, connection to it can be commodified, but the information itself seems to resist the means of being sold. Even Bill Gates hasn’t figured this one out, as he has postponed charging a fee for his online news and issues magazine Slate. However, if corporate America finds that the Internet is not profitable and withdraws its support, then the Internet’s force as the deliverer of information to anyone, at any time, anywhere may also be eroded. While many fear that commodification will destroy the nature of the Internet, such commodification may also be necessary for its survival. Computers, fiber-optic cable, and satellites all cost money. Unless other means of public financial support are devised, the market will have to be a primary means of maintaining the Internet and will drive the cost of access to it. As Grossman writes, without some publicly funded support for the Internet and for access to it,
How Democratic Can We Get? 375

those who pay the most will receive the most exposure for their ideas and views, under
the self-interested domain of a handful of global media conglomerates. These
companies, which are in business to look upon people as consumers rather than as
citizens, will not fill the vital civic, educational, cultural communication needs of the
emerging electronic republic. (26)

Needless to say, the same social and economic forces and institutions—race,
class, and gender—that allow for unequal access to education in this country will
operate to make the issue of access a severe limitation to the ultimate democratic
potential of the Internet.

Public Forum or Sound-byte Site?
The same forces that led to the gradual erosion of the bourgeois public sphere
of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe are still with us and continue to
undermine the possibility of the Internet becoming and staying a democratic
public sphere in the sense of a “private public reasoning publicly.” The very
commodification of culture and news that at first made the bourgeois public
sphere more accessible also eventually eroded its political and democratic force.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the public reasoned publicly
both in print media and in the face-to-face interaction in the salons, coffee houses,
and societies. Some forms of the Internet, perhaps the World Wide Web, can
potentially function in ways that print media functioned in the eighteenth
century by delivering information, points of view, and extended argument to a
growing sector of the public. Some formats of the Internet compare to the face­
to-face discussion of the seventeenth and eighteenth century—namely,
newsgroups, mailists and so forth. However, the more important question for
me is “Will the public find a need to use the Internet is such a way?” In other
words, what is the current exigence for the kinds of “public reasoning” that leads
“a political public of private persons to reason publicly, [in order] to exercise
a critical function in mediating the relations between the essentially separate
realms of civil society and the state”? What may be more important than the
similarities and differences in the Internet and the bourgeois public sphere might
be the differing historical circumstances between seventeenth- and eighteenth­
century Europe and now. Some important material circumstances that led to the
emergence of the bourgeois public sphere are not in place. Where is the growing
class of people with the economic as well as intellectual exigence who wish to
dramatically change the status quo? We can all imagine that if the Internet and
computerized telecommunications continue to grow then social change will
follow, but exactly how those still-to-be-realized changes will affect the shape
of Western democracy and public discourse is still a matter of speculation.

In addition to the altered historical circumstances, the technology itself may
not be conducive to the formation of the kind of democratic public sphere
Habermas imagines. The Internet is still “sound-byte technology,” lending itself
well to brief, fast exchanges. There is sound byte” quality to the World Wide
Web, whether this is due to our own expectations as readers who have not
developed adequate strategies for reading hypertext (a situation that could change) or whether it is due to a limitation of the technology itself—limitations that may evaporate as we become more comfortable and knowledgeable about composing for the computer screen instead of the page. One can immediately see the advantages of hypertextual data bases (the hypertext version of the OED is a good example) where one may wish to sample only a relatively small amount of a much larger store of data and to arrange that data in ways that serve variety of purposes. It remains to be seen if hypertext lends itself to extended, complex argument, to challenging basic assumptions, to representing multiple points of view in ways superior to other media.

A few public administration researchers in the Netherlands studied the use of World Wide Web pages and e-mail by several small communities to determine if, on a local level, democratic interaction between citizens and government was enhanced. The results were mixed and they concluded:

First of all, there is the accessibility of technology. If ICT [Information and Communication Technologies] is used in political and democratic processes, universal access is necessary. At the moment, it is mainly the higher-educated, male part of the population that is using the Internet. To prevent a division in society between the information “have” and the information “have-nots,” governments have to develop an active program to guarantee universal access.

Second, the user friendliness of the system has to be improved. Though this user friendliness has increased with the introduction of the “point-and-click” interface on the World Wide Web, operating on the Internet still requires technical skills and large investments in computer hardware. Also, the capacity of the present-day networks has to be increased, especially when more and more people are accessing more and more graphical data.

Finally, some legal problems have to be solved. Citizens’ rights, duties, and attainments are not suited for the new ways of communication in cyberspace. Notions such as privacy, openness, intellectual property, freedom of expression, and the legal accountability for acts and expression of opinions need to be reformulated. (54)

These researchers see computerized telecommunications as a potential threat to as well as opportunity for enhancing democratic processes. Here in the U.S., one can e-mail a number of members of both houses of congress, but not all of them avail themselves of electronic communication with their constituents, although you can reach all of them at the phone number listed on the World Wide Web page. Moreover, even the most eloquent argument for or against a public issue, no matter how rapidly it arrives at your congressperson’s e-mail address, will be reduced by a congressional aid to a response merely for or against.

To conclude, currently, the Internet seems to be able to offer us something more like the liberal-individualist model of democracy, where polls and surveys might be easily conducted, where “hits” on sites can be counted as an indication of interest, and where common gateway interface (cgi) scripts now allow World Wide Web page authors to gather information from people that access web pages. Claims such as Grossman’s quoted in the opening tend to conflate two types of participation in democracy: polling individual citizens, the liberal-individualist
model, conflated with a notion of public sphere, the kind of rational discussion possible in "old-fashioned town meetings." Whether or not rational discussion and simple "town-meeting" democracy ever existed or can now somehow be brought back and fostered via the Internet seem to be dubious claims. As educators whose learning environments are likely to change dramatically as these new forms of discourse and communication become more common and as the skills needed to analyze and produce such discourse become more necessary for entrance to the work force, we will have some exciting and difficult years ahead. I hope this paper has raised questions and in some degree helped clarify what is at stake as we all become more electronically literate. As Susan Wells reminds us in a recent article, what is often difficult about public discourse is that dialogue is difficult among people who mistrust each other and, despite differences in race, class, age, and gender, who have difficult problems to solve (337). We have enough documented experience now with computer-aided discussions groups in classrooms to acknowledge that at times they efface difference allowing for productive critical discussion, but at other times, that very effacing of identity allows conflicts to emerge that can curtail such debates (Faigley 199). I will end by asking Well's question again: What do we want from public writing? And I add: What do we want from public discourse on the Internet?

Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas

Notes

1 A number of scholars have taken exception to and offered modifications of various aspects of Habermas' formulation of the democratic public sphere. A number of excellent articles are collected in Calhoun's Habermas and the Public Sphere. My purpose in this article is not to argue with Habermas or his commentators, but to merely use his conception of what a public sphere could be in order to help us understand better how public discourse on the Internet does work or could work.

2 I realize that this foregoing discussion begs the question of whether or not "consensus" is ever a true reflection of a common good determined by any group. Habermas is concerned with finding out under what such conditions such debate could lead to a true consensus in trying to establish "discourse ethics" that would more or less validate the debate process and make the "consensus" more valid.

3 Some examples of private persons publishing on the Internet might be these. Both these sites are personal journals, recounting rather devastating life experiences: http://pages.prodigy.com/Hell/Walter; http://shoga.wwa.com/~missyp/index.html. These two sites are examples of individuals who are using the World Wide Web to engage in public discourse: http://www.csra.net/1rand/Default.html and http://www.princeton.edu/~belewis/#propaganda. I located these last two sites by using Yahoo's Society and Culture search category. You can find thousands of others using the same strategy.

4 For example, Post Modern Culture MOO, hero.village.virginia.edu 7777; MediaMoo purple-crayon.media.mit.edu 8888; LinguaMoo, lingua.utdallas.edu 8888; DiversityUniversityMoo, 128.18.101.106 8888. These are all telnet addresses.

5 See for example, Netscape's In-Box Direct Issues and Culture Magazine Salon Magazine's "Table Talk" (Salon: Netscape In-Box Direct <salon_netscape@node55.salonl999.com>); Slate's "The Fray" (http://www.slate.com/contents.asp).
Several of the commentators on Habermas have questioned his assumption that there should be one, large public sphere. Mary P. Ryan demonstrates that there were competing publics to begin with not just in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (in Calhoun 259-88). Nancy Fraser argues that smaller “subaltern counter spheres” make a more feasible model for democratic debate (in Calhoun 109-44).

6 See Levy, for example.

7 For a recent discussion of the difficulties in charging for Internet Content and Slate’s problems in particular, see Mybrvold. Ironically, people seem to be willing to pay fees for online pornography.

8 For a list of the e-mail address of U.S. Senators use this URL on your favorite browser, http://www.senate.gov/senator/membmail.html.

Works Cited


Kinneavy Award Winners Announced

The James L. Kinneavy Award for the most outstanding essay in volume 16 of JAC was awarded to Richard E. Miller for “What Does It Mean to Learn? William Bennett, The Educational Testing Service, and a Praxis of the Sublime.” Honorable Mention was awarded to Nancy Welch for “Worlds in the Making: The Literacy Project as Potential Space.”

The award is generously endowed by Professor Kinneavy, Blumberg Centennial Professor at the University of Texas, and was presented by Professor Kinneavy at the meeting of the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition at the CCCC Convention in Phoenix.