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Online Public Sphere：

Why the Internet Does Not Have a Transformative Impact on the Development of Democratic Public Discourse?

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Abstract

Some deliberative democrats have argued that the advent of the Internet offers a revolutionary change in the way people identify and deliberate upon issues of common concern. After a brief review of the Habermasian analytical framework, this paper examines the practical possibilities of online public discourse by examining the case of OhmyNews. It argues that the practice of the online public sphere should be considered in light of several caveats: 1) general withdrawal from democratic public life, 2) gender-, age-, and occupation-biased participation in online public discourse, 3) implicit exclusion of less rational/critical citizens, and 4) potential fragmentation of political communication.

Keywords : Habermasian public sphere, political discourse, cyberspace, practical possibility, OhmyNews

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Introduction

Do information and communications technologies (ICTs) make democracy work? More specifically, does the Internet improve political communication among citizens? Or does it act as a catalyst for increasing the democratic legitimacy in contemporary democracies? Over the last few decades, scholars, in particular those inspired by Jürgen Habermas, have addressed these questions, exploring the possibility of democratic public deliberation in cyberspace. Based on the Habermasian arguments, this paper seeks to provide a critical evaluation of the online model of democratic public sphere. The first part of this paper presents the deliberative model of online public communication and identifies the core value of deliberation in comparison with the liberal individualist model of democratic society. The following section then critically assesses the practical possibility of democratic discourse in cyberspace by examining the case of OhmyNews, a citizen-driven newspaper website, which has often been cited as a successful practice of online public discourse (Kim and Hamilton 2006; Joyce 2007). The paper argues that while the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere has motivated us to translate the theory into practice, the application of the deliberative model to the real world (e.g. OhmyNews) tends to be flawed due to 1) general withdrawal from democratic public life, 2) gender-, age-, and occupation-biased participation in online public discourse, 3) implicit exclusion of less rational/ critical citizens, and 4) potential fragmentation of public deliberation. Though not an evidence-based analysis, this paper provides basic information that can be used to develop testable hypotheses for future empirical work on this field.

Theory of Online Public Discourse

The public sphere is generally defined as a communicative arena in which common concerns such as public issues and government policies that directly affect our life prospects are deliberated among ordinary citizens for the purpose of achieving a well-reasoned rational consensus. The public sphere acts as a mediator between the state and the public by providing citizens with a public arena for generating and expressing a well-considered political will. This deliberative consensus-building process serves to legitimize the authorities' exercise of power and inform government policy developments.

According to Habermas (1987), the public sphere is part of the "lifeworld," the common, intersubjective understanding of our society or, in his words, "the intuitively present, in this sense familiar and transparent, and at the same time vast and incalculable web of presuppositions that have to be satisfied if an actual utterance is to be at all meaningful, i.e. valid or invalid" (131). The "lifeworld" is clearly distinguished from the "system," the realm of the market economy and the political and administrative apparatus. The fundamental difference between the "lifeworld" and the "system" lies in the assumption of rationality. While

the "lifeworld" is the arena of communicative rationality, the capacity for critical-rational deliberation through which citizens arrive at a commonly acceptable moral standard, the "system" is a realm dominated by the logic of institutional rationality, the use of reason for discovering the most efficient and functional means for reaching a specific goal.

For scholars who have argued that contemporary democracies are facing a serious lack of popular legitimacy, a functioning public sphere is a potential vehicle for reconstructing a democratic public life. They argue that, since the late 20th century, the quality of political communication in Western advanced societies has been undermined by social and cultural changes, such as dominant market logic in politics, increasing socio-cultural heterogeneity, dysfunction of mass media as a watchdog, and declining civil society. Habermasian scholars see this historical process as the extension of instrumental rationality, which is mediated by power (state) and money (market), to the "lifeworld," where the logic of communicative rationality prevails (the so-called "colonization of the lifeworld"). For communicative rationalists, the reconstruction of the public sphere has a critical value because it becomes the primary source of democratic legitimacy and helps in restoring the health of democratic society.

The intrinsic value of Habermasian ideal of public deliberation is best demonstrated in a comparison of deliberative and aggregative conceptions of democratic process. First of all, Habermas's deliberative account of democratic legitimacy is characterized by four critical features: first, the public sphere is inclusive and open to all citizens and does not exclude any individuals/groups from accessing the deliberation process; second, discourse participants are treated equally, and historically structured power relations (e.g. gender, race, social strata) are nullified; third, discussers are well-informed, rational, and morally reasonable, and fourth, the purpose of deliberation is, in principle, to reach a public-minded rational consensus. Such deliberative norms of democratic society are in sharp contrast with the liberal individualist assumption of political communication. For liberal individualist scholars, public discourse is often understood as a platform to provide citizens with better access to a wider variety of detailed political information and to help them in shaping well-informed "correct" preferences. The purpose of public discourse is to ensure that election results correctly reflect the preferences of individual voters. In this sense, the political process is a "market" in which economic actors pursue the maximization of their political interests (Downs 1957; Schumpeter 1943). Within this political "market," the welfare of majority of voters is maximized, and the "greatest happiness of the greatest number" is realized. Political preferences are reflected *directly* from each voter without experiencing communicative interactions with other political views (as illustrated on the left in Figure 1). In this sense, the political will is merely an aggregate sum of independent individual preferences.

Deliberative democrats warn that the economic conception of democracy results in the atomization of society and the predominance of instrumental reasoning. They criticize that the liberal individualist model erroneously treats citizens as passive "consumers" of public services, and the possibility of horizontal,

interactive communication among citizens is largely ignored. The deliberative model of democracy assumes that individual preferences are not fixed or exogenous to the political process but rather change or develop in the process of interactive deliberation. It is posited that individuals develop communal spirit and values in the deliberative public sphere and express a public-minded rational consensus as a generalized political will (illustrated on the right in Figure 1).
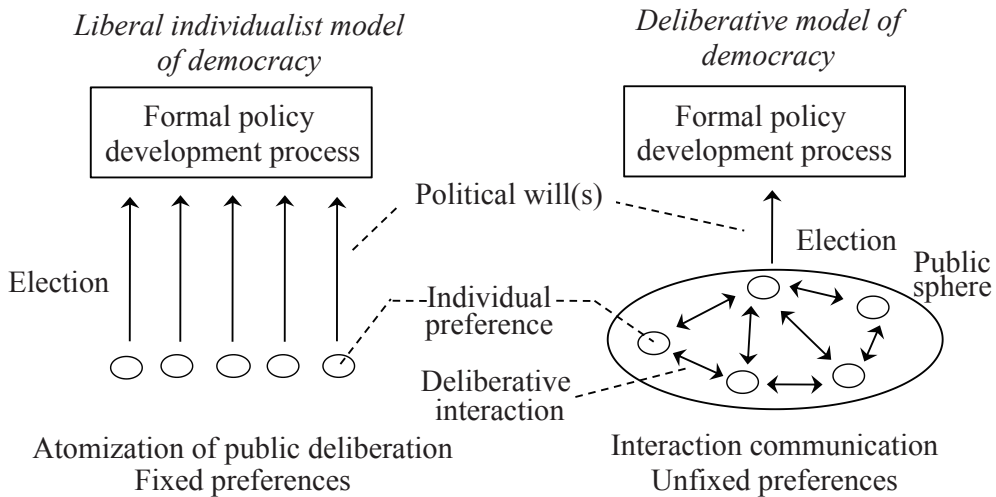

Figure 1. Liberal individualist and deliberative models of democracy

Since the emergence of new ICTs, particularly the Internet, increased attention has been paid to the possibility of translating Habermas's public sphere theory into practice. Scholars argue that online networks provide a locus desirable for embodying the conception of communicative deliberation (Dahlberg 2001; Froomkin 2002). Cyberspace is an open and inclusive ground for greater numbers of citizens to express their political views and beliefs spontaneously with low costs of getting access to relevant information and voicing their concerns (Boulianne 2009: 23). This implies that the Internet has the potential to deconstruct the existing power structure (i.e. the vertical relationship between citizens and political power holders) and help empower civic activism and self-administration (Bendrath 2007; Chadwick 2009; Pina et al. 2007). In fact, numerous advocacy groups/individuals, such as NGOs, labor unions, freelance journalists, and grass-root activists, have provided alternative information channels, promoting civic initiatives independently from the state and the market. Cyber optimists envisage that citizen-driven public discourse plays a significant role in supplementing the top-down policy-making procedure dominated by the logic of "output legitimacy" with the logic of "input legitimacy" and makes the "system" more open, transparent, and trustworthy (Pina et al. 2007; Bertot et al. 2010).

Theory Meets Reality: The Case of OhmyNews

The Habermasian model of online deliberation appears to give a potential remedy to the democratic legitimacy deficit in advanced democracies. The next question would be: does cyberspace actually have a transformative impact on political communication? To address this question, I assess the practical possibility of deliberative public sphere by examining the case of OhmyNews, an online participatory media website.

OhmyNews (hereafter OmN) is a South Korean user-generated newspaper media site founded in 2000 by Yeon-Ho Oh, a Korean journalist. OmN started as a grass-root online newspaper for challenging the existing South Korean mainstream mass media dominated by corrupt, conservative, and then-government-controlled news organizations. Since its establishment, OmN has reported a number of public issues often ignored by the elite media institutions and provided people with alternative news materials free from established media authorities and commercialism (Kim and Hamilton 2006). The particular feature of this online newspaper is that ordinary citizens are allowed to produce their own news articles. Once article drafts are submitted, staff reporters classify them under two headings: "kindling" or "rare species." The articles labeled "kindling" are "authorized and paid for by OmN" (Kim and Hamilton 2006: 545); those classified as "rare species" are "unpaid contributions not authorized or selected for prominent placement" (545). Members of the deliberative online community have opportunities to leave brief comments or express their own views and opinions on the message board. They can also discuss social issues in several discussion rooms or in periodically held public forums.

As mentioned before, the Habermasian ideal of the public sphere has four basic elements: 1) openness and inclusiveness, 2) independence from existing social hierarchies, 3) critical and reasoned deliberation, and 4) rational consensus formation. OmN appears to fulfill, to a certain degree, these criteria. First, OmN is open to all Internet users and accessible from any time and place in South Korea. The discrepancy problem between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not (i.e. "digital divide") seems to be a minor issue in South Korea, one of the most highly wired societies on earth (World Bank 2008). Second, the access to OmN is not restricted or limited by one's social attributes (e.g. gender, age, class, education). Every citizen is entitled to be involved in producing articles and debating over public issues. Third, all articles submitted to OmN are subject to editorial reviews before they are posted on the website. This process skirts the potential problem of articles and comments being filled with hype, lies, and ridiculous allegations. These efforts by administrators ensure a sufficient degree of rationality and sincerity in the anonymous online environment. Finally, given the fact that OmN is a well-institutionalized deliberative online community, it seems to have the potential for generating better-informed rational consensus. Some scholars observe that OmN had a political influence on the actual political process in South Korea, arguing that it played a key role in the "unexpected" victory of Roh Moo-hyun in the presidential election in 2002, where Lee Hoi-chang, the candidate for the

Grand National Party, the largest conservative party, had been expected to win the presidential race (Kim and Hamilton 2006; Joyce 2007). Given that OmN suffices the theoretical criteria of the public sphere and its actual influence on the political process, its practice can be regarded as a successful practice of online deliberation (see Figure 2).
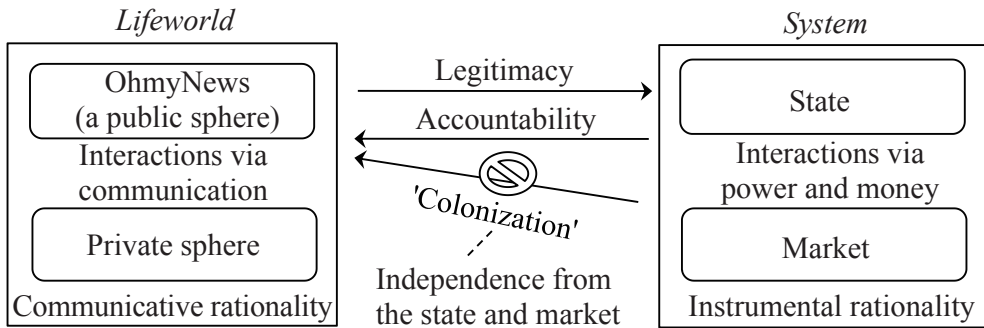

Figure 2. OhmyNews as the locus of the public sphere

However, we should bear in mind that it has several caveats. First, openness and inclusiveness do not generate any civic engagement or help overcome widespread political apathy and cynicism in contemporary democracies. The actual impact of new ICTs is ultimately contextual and contingent on the specific socio-historical situations. The phenomenal success of OmN in the 2002 presidential election seems to be due to the increased political awareness and activism during that particular period of time in South Korea. This implies that the same arrangement does not necessarily have the same political outcomes at a different time and space. In fact, OhmyNews Japan, the Japanese version of OmN, has failed in promoting political participation and mobilizing public opinion in the context of Japan (Joyce 2007). Second, it is difficult to assume that the public sphere is immune to social stratification because the public sphere itself is embedded within a particular socioeconomic milieu. Discourse participants reflect the existing social strata in society. People who actively engage in online political deliberation are, for the most part, a very small portion of citizens (Chadwick 2009) and they are usually well-educated young males. According to Kim and Hamilton (2006), the majority of OmN citizen reporters are in their 20s (30.7%) and 30s (39.7%), and the proportion of female participants is rather small (22.9%). 22.2 percent of the reporters are university students and about 45 percent are white-collar workers. Such a demographically disproportionate participation in public deliberation might jeopardize the second principle of the public sphere (i.e. political equality). Third, the Habermasian model heavily relies on citizens' competence and abilities to deliberate public issues critically and rationally. Most ordinary citizens are, however, not necessarily well-informed and are often unable to discuss complex political issues in a rational and critical manner. The public discourse within the OmN community might unintentionally

exclude all but the rational few.

The fourth and the most important limitation is that it seems somewhat optimistic to consider that individuals can reach a public-minded agreement through a critical-rational discourse in cyberspace, particularly given that political preferences are highly diversified and polarized in contemporary democracies. A dialectical interaction between those who hold different opinions may produce a more community-oriented, inter-subjective consensus. However, some scholars warn that deliberation between "different others" can lead to "a fragmentation of cyber-discourse into mutually exclusive cyber-communities" (Dahlberg 2001). This might cause a situation in which there are numerous online "pseudo-public" spheres separated from one another along ideology/interest-based cleavages (see Figure 3). Cyberspace itself does not have the mechanism to integrate fragmented public spheres into a visible form of generalized political will.
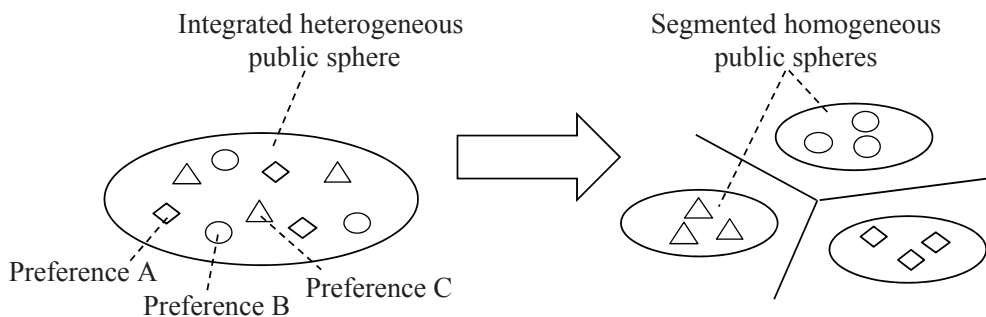
Figure 3. Fragmentation of public deliberation

In a democratic system, the parliament/congress provides an arena in which representatives are "forced" to face opposing political views and reach a certain agreement after a series of careful deliberations and considerations. However, within online public spheres, citizens are not obligated to discuss public issues with those who have different political orientations. They are allowed to promote their views and ideas in politically and ideologically homogeneous spheres in which like-minded "comrades" find each other and discuss public issues based on their political proximity. As Sunstein (2007) argued, cyberspace allows citizens to customize web contents to better meet their particular beliefs, thereby limiting their exposure to "uncomfortable" opinions. Frequent and repeated interactions among like-minded people shift their original political position towards a more extreme point (Sunstein 2007). This process exacerbates the fragmentation of public deliberation and makes it more difficult for citizens to reach a rational, public-minded agreement. In this sense, if OmN cannot appropriately correct the ideological/political bias implicit in online public spheres, it would be immediately degraded to one of many preference-homogeneous online communities.

Conclusion

The Habermasian model of online public sphere has the potential to exert a transformative impact on political discourse and rescue contemporary democracy from its legitimacy crisis. OmN appears to meet several essential criteria for a deliberative public sphere. However, the practice of OmN is overshadowed by 1) general withdrawal from democratic public life, 2) demographically biased participation in online public discourse, 3) unintended exclusion of less rational/critical people, and 4) potential fragmentation of deliberative community. For these reasons, this paper concludes that it is still uncertain and ultimately contingent upon spatial and temporal contexts when one evaluates whether the online public sphere model has a substantial impact on the political process in a given society. New ICTs have provided citizens with alternative means and opportunities for political communication. However, the democratic impact of such new technologies is destined to be trivial and random unless the users become "good citizens."

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