
Peopling the Public Sphere

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There are two thrusts in current debates regarding the nature of communication for the human species. These two thrusts permeate virtually every discourse whether applied to the expanding Internet, communication technologies, journalism practice, communicating in the community, or the creation of public spheres. One of these thrusts is the structural thrust. In its most extreme form, human beings and their communication worlds are enslaved and the public sphere is nothing but a pawn of that enslavement. Whereas once the enslavement was seen as being controlled by feudal lords in kingdoms or tyrants in nation states, now the enslavement is seen as increasingly controlled by capital, and in particular, transnational corporations which, while decreasing in number, control more and more communication channels. Typically, for those writing in this thrust, the hopes for the future are few. The alternative, usually set up in opposition, is often called the postmodern thrust. This perspective points toward human freedom, resistance, and the capacity to transcend even the most enslaving of conditions, to create rapture, bliss, and pleasure in virtually all situations. For those writing in this thrust, nothing is ever totally inscribed, there are always spaces in whatever structures may attempt to enslave us. For this thrust, the new communication technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web, are seen as sites of great hope, of emerging natural communities where like-minded people find each other in order to create moments of community and pleasure and cooperation.

Obviously if one is standing outside of these two perspectives, there are potential compatibilities between them. Unfortunately, our discourses are not arranged that way. The question "how does the postmodern focus on freedoms address the structural focus on constraint and vice versa?" is rarely asked. While there are important moments when authors attempt to bridge these gaps, these moments are not the defining center of these discourses.

The state of our discourses is such that the in-between question is considered to be an unredeemingly modernist question because the in-between, whatever it is, must be made. For the postmodernists, who perceive that anything that is planned or made is by definition potentially tyrannical, this harkens back to the time of utopian hopes associated with the modernist project. In the modernist vision it was assumed that technological advances would allow an end to want and that, with an end to want, truly just societies would be created. Unfortunately, as history has taught us, these dreams were illusory at best.

Postmodernists typically do not focus on planning or utopias, but on an assumed natural propensity for human beings to create, in struggle, approxima-