Public Culture and Social Representations in the Age of the Read/Write Web

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Abstract

A consolidated, propagandized mainstream media, coupled with declining involvement in local community and civic life has lead many to become concerned about America's democratic foundation. The read/write web revolution has encouraged some visionaries who see it as a catalyst to transform the public sphere and reconfigure the power balance between elites and average citizens. This paper attempts to define public culture in the context of deliberative democracy, political conversation, and American mainstream media, as it examines how social individuals collectively construct their reality. It then looks at the impact of the Internet on this social ecosystem, exploring how such technology might be used to restore a public culture steeped in rich dialogue and effective, participatory deliberation.

Don't fret precious I'm here,

Step away from the window

And go back to sleep

Lay your head down child

I won't let the boogeyman come

Countin' bodies like sheep

To the rhythm of the war drums

Pay no mind to the rabble

Pay no mind to the rabble

Head down, go to sleep

To the rhythm of the war drums

Pay no mind what other voices say

They don't care about you, like I do, like I do

Safe from pain and truth and choice and other poison devils,

Just stay with me, safe and ignorant,

Go back to sleep

Go back to sleep

I'll be the one to protect you from

Your enemies and all your demons

I'll be the one to protect you from

A will to survive and a voice of reason

I'll be the one to protect you from

Your enemies and your choices son

They're one and the same

I must isolate you

Isolate and save you from yourself

Swayin' to the rhythm of the new world order and

Counting bodies like sheep to the rhythm of the war drums

The boogeymen are coming

The boogeymen are coming

Keep your head down, go to sleep

To the rhythm of the war drums

Stay with me Safe and ignorant

Just stay with me

I'll hold you and protect you from the other ones,

The evil ones, they don't love you son,

Go back to sleep (Keenan, 2003).

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Introduction

Many journalists and social science scholars are deeply concerned with the current

relationship between politics, mainstream media, and public culture in the United States. As Americans have become progressively more isolated through decreased local community involvement and more frequent television consumption, they have also become more simplistically polarized in their beliefs, values, and perspectives (Manjoo, 2008). At the same time, corporate consolidation of media and government control of information has become increasingly prevalent, leading to great concern about the impact of propaganda on political freedom, democratic deliberation, and our overall wellbeing as a society.

On the other hand, the rise of the internet and "read/write web" technologies have caused some free media advocates to stand up and cheer, They optimistically believe that these technologies can catalyze the re-democratization of media by enabling average citizens to interactively participate in their media experience as well as easily publish their own opinions and unique perspectives to an indefinitely large audience.

In this paper, I will attempt to define public culture in the context of deliberative democracy, political debate, and the American mainstream media. I will also look at the role that Moscovici's Social Representation theory plays in this public sphere as individuals interact and mutually construct the social reality, or realities, that each of us experience every day. I will then discuss the emergence of the read/write web and how it interacts with mass media, as well as explore its positive and negative impacts on public culture in terms of trust, communication, perceptions of truth, social engagement, and civic participation. I will conclude by looking at how Americans can challenge the hegemony of propagandized media by becoming more informed, involved, and connected, both socially and politically.

Propaganda Built into the American Media Infrastructure

One of the biggest critics of America's media institution is Noam Chomsky. He and

Edward Herman constructed a "propaganda model" to describe its current state. This model amounts to a strong indictment of our journalistic system's structure, as it demonstrates why mainstream media can no longer be trusted by citizens to support democracy and factual truth, or adequately communicate policies that are in the best interest of the majority of its viewers, readers, and listeners. Herman & Chomsky (1988) present what they see as "filters" or major flaws in the present structure of the mass media. These include increasingly concentrated ownership by mega-conglomerates, advertising as the major funding and profit source, and the over-dependence of media outlets on "official information" that comes directly from PR representatives for government and business or delegated "experts" that are intimately managed by them.

Putting the Hype of the Read/Write Web into Perspective

Clay Shirky is one of the leading voices and evangelists of the read/write web. In his book, *Here Comes Everybody* (2008), he presents many exciting examples to vividly illustrate the power and potential of this new technology. Shirky's focus is mainly on decentralized, ad hoc group action, and the ability of amateurs to easily broadcast content on a global level. He makes a compelling argument that the read/write web, in its enablement of "mass amateurization", trivially cheap self-publishing, and non-hierarchical, remotely based collaborative action, is indeed a monumental communications revolution. However, the question still remains whether internet-based social technologies are enough to overcome the top-down framing and censorship of a consolidated, corporate-run media. After all, these major players also heavily participate, and in many ways, control this virtual space (both in terms of content and infrastructure). Moreover, they still have a firm hold over the agenda and framing of issues. "We know too well how the powers use the electronic media, making it seem that they are the

only game in town, and we are learning all too clearly how the dramatic gestures of terrorism are amplified by global media" (Goldfarb, 2006, p. 8).

There is no doubt that the Internet provides people greater and easier access to information. It is incredibly exciting to carry around a hand-size device that puts even the most obscure facts within ubiquitous reach. However, simply having easy access to information does not guarantee that people will be more informed. In the same manner, the emergence of new global interactive technologies does not guarantee that people will actually broaden their social connections or cultural awareness. As societies around the world have come online, their connections have certainly become vaster but have they actually become more diverse and have these new connections led to any greater enlightenment? It still is unclear how this communications revolution ultimately impacts everyday civic life, public opinion, understanding of issues, and mutual empathy in regards to personal concerns. Shirky admits, "Social tools don't create collective action----they merely remove the obstacles to it" (Shirky, 2009, p. 159). When talking about collective action, it is critical for a media or political psychologist to look at what extent these social tools remove obstacles on the path towards deliberative democracy, civic engagement, the pursuit of objective truth, and true political reform.

In order to understand the role that read/write web communications tools can play in this political domain, we must first obtain a clear definition of public culture so that we can then attempt to understand the relationship between the Internet, public culture, and civic engagement. Since mass media, particularly television, is the chief tool that government and major corporate powers use to disseminate "official truth" to members of society, we must also look at how this media potentially affects the public culture within America.

Public Culture in Private Places

Jeffrey Goldfarb (2006) provides a solid foundation for us to start with his exploration of the "politics of small things." By intricately studying the everyday life of the Polish during oppressive Soviet rule, Goldfarb offers a glimpse of the level of privacy, mutual trust, and intimate yet subtle social cues required by a culture in order to fully engage in effective political discussions.

According to Goldfarb (2006), a public culture steeped in democracy and freedom begins in the most private of spaces. For the Polish during the 1960s and 1970s, one of these most sacred private spaces was around the kitchen table. It is here that "small circles of intimate friends" and family could get together to tell their own stories and set their own agenda about what was most important and relevant to each of them in their lives. The kitchen table in Poland was ground zero, the home base where hidden public life first was conceived and began to grow and thrive. It was here that intricate social rituals were developed and practiced, while at the same time, new, alternative identities arose: unofficial identities that were reserved only for use within the confines of these safe, private spaces.

At the same time, "The shield and lessons of this privacy, with its free interaction, did expand public freedom" (Goldfarb, 2006, p. 10). Eventually, these cultural behaviors and social practices seeped out of the intimate family circles. "The bookstore represented an expansion of the type of relations found in such intimate settings, creating social bonds that went further beyond the family" (Goldfarb, 2006, p. 15). A public culture of free speech and deliberative persuasion arose within a broader social domain that included an underground, illegal bookstore and a "salon" where artists and intellectuals regularly got together, under the pretense of a common social gathering, to present politically-relevant readings, lectures, and discussions.

In all of these technically private settings, there were two common features. First, each

meeting or transaction required an initial affirmation of mutual trust and a cautious establishment of a personal relationship. Secondly, there was a very deliberate effort to maintain an atmosphere of benign normality and casual ordinariness during all interactions. These features were of course necessary to minimize the risk of the authorities getting suspicious or taking more drastic punitive actions against them. However, such behaviors were also critical for the individuals involved to feel a sense of freedom and participatory public culture that was otherwise denied to them within their official public lives.

"Americanization" and What We Can Learn From the Polish

In a totalitarian society, the stakes are much higher for any individual or group that chooses to openly contest the official party line. Any dissonant or subversive activities may be met with brute physical force by the authorities and ultimately end up becoming a matter of life or death. Since the Polish were subjected to an authoritarian government, they had only a very primal, survivalist motivation to go along with or support the official truth regime. However, their private lives often revealed an entirely different identity. Around the kitchen table, many Polish had a deep distrust and disdain for the ruling party and thus they vitally appreciated the importance of maintaining their own autonomous views, their own history, and their own record of truth.

In societies that are considered to be freer, such as America, political discussion is still significantly restricted, albeit in less spectacular and obvious ways. The mainstream media plays a large part in this message control by both setting the agenda and intentionally framing issues. Agenda-setting preemptively prioritizes what society should be concerned about and consider when voting for candidates or policy measures. Along with framing, it also plays on emotions and prejudices to influence how a person may perceive an issue (Pratkanis, 2000). In 1972,

McCombs & Shaw conducted a survey to determine which issues undecided voters thought were most important. The heavy correlation between the amount of news media coverage for each of these issues and their ranking by the subjects strongly supports the notion that the mainstream media does indeed play a major role in setting the agenda (McCombs & Reynolds, 2002).

Pratkanis (2000) emphasizes the importance of "deliberative persuasion" in a democracy, which he defines as "argument, debate, discussion, and a careful appraisal of the pros and cons of a course of action," (p. 259) and positions at dichotomic opposition with propaganda. While talking about modern political campaigns, he discusses a trend called "Americanization" which includes using television as the main channel of communication between candidates and voters, an emphasis on sound bites, image, and personality over substantial issues, and the careful micro-management of candidates by consultants during any media-based appearance. Essentially, candidates are now marketed and sold as brands, in that the focus is more on how they look and make buyers (aka voters) feel than what they are actually capable of doing. In other words, the candidates communicate through media, using propaganda rather than deliberative persuasion in order to influence voters. More importantly, Americanization produces a culture in which "citizens take on a passive, spectator role of watching events unfold around them with little active involvement or self-efficacy that they can change the course of history. It is as if they are watching a made-for-TV movie" (Pratkanis, 2000, p. 263).

Despite the powerful influence that an increasingly consolidated and centralized media has in politics, Americans still strongly believe that they are living in a fully functioning, free democracy. In stark contrast to the autocracy that the Polish lived in, most Americans today have not witnessed the more coercive and physical forms of social control against those who criticize the government. Consequently, these pacified citizens may not have the same awareness of the

dramatic ways in which hegemonic powers have used television and other forms of propagandized media to compromise the nation's democratic system. Many Americans also may not appreciate the critical responsibility they have as free citizens to set their own agenda and re-interpret issues in an independent, personal manner that is relevant within the context of their own family or community. In their darkest of times, the Polish certainly understood the value of these exercises.

Hannah Arendt, a political theorist who plays a central role in Goldfarb's writings, can help us further understand the detrimental effects of Americanization as described by Pratkanis in regards to democracy and the power that average citizens could otherwise hold. Arendt is concerned with where political power is centered. By imposing a particular agenda, replacing substance with abbreviated fragments, and embracing extreme impression management by candidates and their handlers, mainstream media enables elites to siphon political power away from everyday people. In order for the people to rule, as required in a true democracy, they must be able to share a political space that is grounded in factual integrity.

Arendt suggests that there are two types of truth: factual and philosophical (Goldfarb, 2006). She designates most official interpretations of truth that come from the ruling party as philosophical or ideological. Chomsky would likely also include official corporate communications in this category as well. When official interpretations of truth dominate discussion and debate, deliberative persuasion and democracy cannot function properly and what results is a "modern tyranny," according to Arendt. Herman & Chomsky's (1988) Propaganda Model depicts a co-opted media institution with compromised integrity because it is based primarily around official, philosophical truth. In fact, according to Goldfarb, intellectual experts of any kind, tend to greatly interfere with deliberative democracy whenever they "substitute the

truth for political governance" (2006, p. 19). Arendt believes that this has been a growing problem ever since ancient Greek intellectuals begin engaging in political philosophy. Therefore, Americanization, characterized by an overwhelming dependence on mass media for obtaining public information and forming political opinions during elections, is indeed a major threat to America's democratic process.

Arendt also strongly believed that average citizens must be able to distance public culture from centralized power. Once again, as Herman & Chomsky (1988) argue, the institutional structures of American mass media heavily represent a centralized power, an official party line coming from corporations or the government itself. Once we recognize the mainstream media as a centralized power, it is easy to see how dangerous this institution can be when it interjects itself into the center of public culture, placing a disruptive and distracting filter between citizens who might otherwise directly interact with each other. Instead, citizens too often use contrived media as an intermediary, or worse, a surrogate for peer interaction when involving themselves with politics.

Through Goldfarb's notion of the "politics of small things," the Polish dissidents used private spaces to craft a public culture that was detached from official, centralized power (2006). This laid the groundwork for the Solidarity movement, which ultimately contributed to victorious freedom from the clutches of the oppressive Soviet party, allowing these individuals to bring their carefully rehearsed public culture out into the daylight for the first time. Goldfarb elegantly sums up the groundswell of democracy in Poland by stating, "People acted as if they lived in a free society and a free society resulted" (2006, p. 33). This spirit is what Arendt refers to as "The revolutionary tradition and its lost treasure" (1963, p. 215).

Unfortunately, in America, that revolutionary tradition has been temporarily lost, or at

least subdued, perhaps as a result of the central media influence discussed earlier. In ironic contrast to Poland, it is almost as if citizens technically living in a free society are acting as if they live in a non-democratic society and thus a more oppressive society is resulting. Clearly then, the alternative to this hegemony, for Americans, is essentially the same as it was for the Polish under autocratic Soviet rule. They must carve out a political space, a public culture, distanced from mass media, where they can interact and engage in deliberative persuasion. "When people talk to each other, defining a situation on their own terms and developing a capacity to act in concert, they constitute a democratic alternative to terror and hegemonic force" (Goldfarb, 2006, p. 8). In Poland, this public culture initially had to be simulated and rehearsed within the context of a secure private culture, for fear of retaliation by the totalitarian government. In America, citizens still technically have the right to form such a public political space openly and loudly. The question in this paper is whether that space must be physical or can such an atmosphere be effectively created (and sufficiently maintained) within a virtual environment as well? More importantly, what does it take to get people, en masse, to participate in a public culture based on democratic deliberation in the first place? Before these questions can be answered, however, we must delve deeper to discover how the public sphere becomes the staging ground for constructing a social reality.

Reality Constructed from a Plurality of Individual Perceptions

Now that we have a working definition of public culture, as seen through the lens of Arendt and Goldfarb, I will attempt to demonstrate why a strong public culture is so important to a society and why Arendt and Goldfarb find it critically necessary for a democracy to thrive. Arendt asserts that appearance is reality. Erving Goffman, another major influence of Goldfarb, believes that situational reality is generated by individual interactions. Referring to the title of

one of Goffman's famous essays, Goldfarb proclaims that this interaction between equals is "where the action is." (2006, p. 12). So what is this action, this interaction, all about? What makes it so important within a diverse, free society? It all comes down to definition and representation. In order for a society to function, there must be some consistent beliefs across all individuals, a common understanding of how things work and how things should work.

Of course, mainstream media is one such unifying social force. As a one-to-many, broadcast form of communication, the same messages, ideas, beliefs, values, etc. can be propagated to many individuals across many different cultures and groups all at once. Through agenda setting, framing, and attention-grabbing stimuli, mass media attempts, from a top-down level, to shape our social definitions and representations; to conform all individuals within a society into a particular set of cognitive and behavioral patterns. As discussed earlier, such mechanics are explained well by Pratkanis (2000) and McCombs & Reynolds (2002), while Herman and Chomsky (1988) convincingly show how these media strategies are used as a propaganda tool on behalf of special interests that own and control the media institution itself.

Such a propaganda model, however, does not tell us the whole story nor does it give enough credit to the capability and potential of perceiving humans to actively construct their own realities based on the stimuli presented to them. Visual perception research has shown us that our eyes are not like cameras that capture a single, stable snapshot and seeing is not a passive experience. "Perceiving is rarely a matter of the passive registration of light energy patterns; rather, it is the end result of a complex active process of organization, interpretation, and construction" (Mack, 1982, p. 962). Mack also explains how the perceptual system is adaptable and altered by previous experiences, unique to the individual. According to Jonah Lehrer, an author who explores relationships between neuroscience and art, "Our human brain is designed

so that reality cannot resolve itself. Before we can make sense…the mind must intervene" (2007, p. 107). A picture or painting "emerges, not from the paint or the light, but from somewhere inside our mind" (2007, p. 98). This active construction of reality, at an individual level, has dramatic implications within a social environment and a public culture.

This active construction of reality is the premise that Moscovici starts out with in his Social Representation (SR) theory, which has now become increasingly widespread throughout social psychology literature, and is especially popular among European social psychologists. Like Arendt, he is critical of Western philosophers who prefer "to speak of Man as a universal category rather than of human plurality" (Javchelovitch, 1995, p. 82). For example, he disagrees with Durkheim's strict dichotomy between social and individual representations. He believes that Durkheim's static, uniform view of social cognition is simplistic and ignoring individual variances in interpretations. Rather than looking at social representation as a final, cemented outcome, Moscovici is more interested in the generative or constructive process of a representation, as well as how it continues to morph and evolve over time. Consequently, Moscovici criticizes social psychologists that focus primarily on conformity and majority influence. He prefers, instead, to look at the effects of minority influence on collective representation and understanding of reality. To illustrate the power of minority influence, he points to influential social movements, including religions, which were started by individuals or small, nonconforming groups. In particular, he is interested in whether a *consistent* minority voice could make the majority question their own entrenched beliefs and eventually lead to changes in these conforming beliefs, values, and perceptions.

As Moscovici (1988) lays out in his SR theory, individualized perception and cognition are critical in the construction of collective, social representations. "A representation always

links a cognitive form with a content widely accepted by the group" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 221). In fact, social cognitive processing is quite similar to individual cognitive processing in that it involves organization, classification, drawing comparisons, understanding symbolism and asserting meaning. At the same time, we must recognize how important social representations are to individual sense making and interpretation as well. It is very much a symbiotic relationship and this is why Moscovici finds it inappropriate to draw strong distinctions between individual and collective understanding. One cannot exist, isolated from the other. Also, as Jovchelovitch (1995) reminds us, "Just as the social is more than an aggregation of individuals, social representations are more than an aggregation of individual representations" (p. 86).

Moscovici states:

> We derive only a small fraction of our knowledge and information from the simple interaction between ourselves and the facts we encounter in the world. Most knowledge is supplied to us by communication which affects our way of thinking and creates new contents. (p. 215)

Here, he suggests that it is not only the variance in individual perception that affects the makeup and evolution of representations. It is also the very communication of individual perceptions that can define and shape representations within a social environment. This is because communication strategies and techniques inherently transform ideas and beliefs as they are passed from one person to another. "The multitudinous forms of knowledge and beliefs with which we deal every day are the outgrowth of a long chain of transformations" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 215). Bartlett's studies (1920) illustrate such transformations through the retelling and recall of folklore. Bartlett demonstrated that significant transformations take place in both repeated (individual) recall and serial (social) recall of a story, in the same manner children often

experience while playing the popular and commonly known "telephone game." In a similar vein, Loftus & Palmer (1974) shows how suggestive social interactions (e.g. questioning, framing, definition) could strongly impact recall of various events and past experiences. This is why Moscovici insists that representations must be understood within the context of "the actual social laboratory where they take shape, namely the social setting of communication" (Moscovici, 1988, p. 215).

In the 1960s, Harold Garfinkel (1984) developed a method called *ethnomethodology* in an effort to understand how people make sense of their social world, while attempting to avoid structuralist rules and assumptions. Like Moscovici and Arendt, this philosophy tends to focus on interactive processes and adaptation to the environment or particular social context. According to ethnomethodology, the major function of communication between individuals is to contextually make structural sense out of a social environment. Each individual becomes a subsystem of a complex, collective social system, using internal mechanisms to functionally adapt and interpret social order within the environment, thereby allowing the higher social system (i.e. business, government) to exist and be recognized in relation to the individual's own actions. This collective recognition legitimizes and mobilizes the social system so that it can fulfill its function as a purposeful organization (i.e. to make a profit or design legislature for a sovereign state). In order to understand how this sense making occurs, Garfinkel collaborated with Harvey Sacks, a linguist who specializes in the detailed microanalysis of everyday conversational language, and incorporated these practices into his ethnomethodological framework (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970)

Garfinkel's method parallels Goffman's central theory that social reality is constructed and based upon how people present themselves in everyday life (Goldfarb, 2006). Social reality

is most accurately defined as a fluid, emergent, situational reality that is continuously generated and maintained by a collective set of individual interactions. Tying this back to Arendt and Goldfarb, we can see that, within the public sphere, freedom and politics are ongoing processes that require continuous active discourse and interaction rather than the permanent solidification of philosophical positions. This is also where Moscovici's conception of a "thinking society" comes into play.

Thinking in Lieu of Expertise

Moscovici, once again like Arendt and Goldfarb, takes issue with those such as Lippmann who believe that the masses always require specialized experts to simplify, abstract, process, and explain political ideas to them. Moscovici (1988) laments, "Many believe that only individuals think and that groups think badly, if at all. There is a tendency to say that the majority of society merely reproduces and imitates the thought of its elites, its avant-gardes, and nothing more" (p. 224). He continues by describing the nature of "thinking societies" and how they relate to the construction of social representations:

> We know many kinds of meeting-places, cafés, pubs, parish halls, drawing-rooms, etc., where individuals express their sociability by talking together. In these special places, thinking is not a mere luxury but a shared effort, in which political, religious, personal, or psychological topics are scrutinized. The outcome of all these exchanges then circulates in the adjoining chambers of a city or country…These are the settings where social representations take shape and from which they spread like rumours. (p. 224)

This "thinking society" of course sounds familiar because it is virtually the same concept as Goldfarb's "politics of small things" (2006). In Poland, the oppressive political environment required that these sorts of public political conversations occur under a stealth blanket, but it was

across kitchen tables or within makeshift bookstores and meeting halls that social representations were mutually formed and propagated. According to Goldfarb, the "struggle over social definition is a key component of the politics of small things" (p. 7). Eventually, a larger movement, Solidarity, emerged out of these small, everyday interactions, and the social representations spread outward to the greater masses of Polish society until even the all-powerful Soviet Communist party could no longer contain such shared ideas, beliefs, and values. When "individuals interact with each other, it gives rise to a situational reality that is a significant political force, opening the possibility of controlling the power of the state and global corporations and checking the power of personal conviction" (p. 7). Apparently, average people do have the ability to define a situation and reality on their own terms, generating a "democratic alternative to terror and hegemonic force" (p. 8).

Moscovici (1988) identifies 3 ways in which a representation can become social: Hegemonic, Emancipated, and Polemical. Hegemonic is essentially the official or philosophical truth that Arendt discusses. It is the top-down party line and there is no doubt that such representations play a major role in the social reality of all who participate in a highly structured group (e.g. nation, company, church, political party, etc.). Emancipated representations come from specialized knowledge that is circulated and propagated in various abstracted forms by different related groups with functional and informational dependencies on each other. Finally, polemical representations are perhaps the most organic and unpredictable. They emerge out of social conflict or controversy within the public sphere and often they are catalyzed by the introduction of cultural differences or other minority influence into a stable group.

Hegemonic representations are a great concern to many of the individuals cited in this paper who are interested in preserving a free society in which a transparent, public political space

can exist and democratic deliberation can openly take place. Much of their concern is based on Arendt's concept of where the power is centered, with elites or with the people. If we are to accept Herman & Chomsky's Propaganda Model from an institutional standpoint, then we can assume that the mass media is the chief communication medium used by elites in governments and major corporations to introduce hegemonic representations into the public culture. Therefore, the most logical way to lessen the impact of hegemonic representations is to create more opportunities for individuals to converse directly within a public sphere while, at the same time, bypassing centralized, consolidated media altogether.

The mass media also plays a large role in emancipated representations through the use of subject matter experts. Walter Lippmann (1922/2010) advocated "the manufacture of consent" because he believed that most people are either not interested, too distracted, or simply not informed enough to critically determine what policy choices are most appropriate for the common interest of the public. Consequently, he suggested that a centralized, independent panel of elite, political science experts should summarize complex, specialized issues and topics for the public, essentially dictating to people how to think about the world within and beyond their own reality.

Today, Farhad Manjoo (2008) calls expert opinion the "soul of modern media" (p. 104). According to Manjoo, "As the controversies that dominate our lives become ever more complex, as arcane information from outside our own experience overwhelms the public discourse, the world is increasingly rendered comprehensible only through the eyes of the expert" (p. 105). Unfortunately, the use of official experts in mass media sometimes becomes nothing more than a propaganda ploy. Manjoo points out that these supposed experts often have questionable objectivity and their credentials are commonly irrelevant or misleading. For example, some

experts are referred to only by their former government job title (i.e. "former senator") and the host does not necessarily reveal that the individual now presently works for a particular defense contractor, health insurance company, or lobbying firm. Such a scenario is certainly a far cry from the independent panel of experts that Lippmann (1922/2010) advocated for. Moscovici (1988) accepts that, as social representations are generated, "most specialized knowledge will eventually be assimilated by non-specialists" (p. 216). However, it becomes problematic when these non-specialist subgroups rely heavily on co-opted experts during the knowledge assimilation process, because such expert opinions are really nothing more than disguised, hegemonic social representations. In fact, the effect of such a propaganda strategy can be quite powerful in terms of public opinion. Citing political scientists, Page & Shapiro, Manjoo (2008) reports that experts can "push public opinion more than 3 percentage points toward the position they're calling for" (p. 104).

Now that we have a clearer understanding of what public culture is, why it is important, and how groups of individual people collectively construct a reality for themselves, it is relevant to look at the impact that recent Internet technologies have made since they were introduced into the social ecosystem of American public culture. In this next section, I will explore the numerous ways, both positive and negative, that these new technologies have affected people's relationship with mainstream media and each other.

The Read/Write Web Takes on the Mainstream Media

Shirky (2009) suggests that the key to the read/write web as a major communications revolution is the transition from one-to-many to many-to-many. Today, anyone has the capability to instantly publish and broadcast his or her ideas to a global audience with little to no overhead or economic risk. On the surface, this appears to be a profound shift in power from elites to

average citizens in that "mass amateurization" can now legitimately occur, thus reducing or at least transforming the role that mainstream media plays in public culture. The recent stories uncovered by the international organization, WikiLeaks, certainly demonstrate that governments and corporations now have significantly less control over information and this affects their ability to effectively inject purely hegemonic social representations into the public sphere.

With many-to-many communication, agendas also cannot as easily be controlled from the top down. Because mainstream media organizations are inherently driven by ratings, competition, and profit, they can sometimes be pressured into covering a story that was initially introduced by amateur bloggers, especially when the story is controversial or holds mass interest and appeal across a wide spectrum of the population at large. For instance, back in 2006, a user uploaded footage onto YouTube, showing incumbent Virginia senator, George Allen (Republican) referring to a campaign volunteer as "Macaca", a French term with historically racial connotations (Haskins, 2007). The video caught fire across the blogosphere, enticing the mass media to not only heavily air the story but also further investigate other related incidents, depicting Allen as a racist. This destroyed his re-election campaign and Democratic candidate, Jim Webb, ultimately defeated him. Amateur blog contributions can also occasionally re-frame or re-characterize a seemingly benign or trivial mainstream media story, and thus keep it alive on television, radio, and in major newspapers long after it might have otherwise disappeared. Shirky (2009) recalls back in 2002, when bloggers seized upon a comment made by Republican Senate Majority Leader, Trent Lott, during Strom Thurmond's 100th birthday party, painting Lott as nostalgically in support of segregationist policies, and eventually forcing him to give up his majority leader status. While these examples of amateur bloggers temporarily controlling the mainstream media agenda are intriguing case studies, I must note that these are still rare

exceptions. According to Joe Pompeo (2010), a writer for the Business Insider website, a recent Pew Research Center study showed that 99% of the stories that bloggers link to in their own articles come from mainstream media sources. This is not to say that these bloggers don't have unique, fresh perspectives to share, but it does support the idea that today's blogosphere remains more an echo chamber of the mainstream media rather than a utopian, emancipated, alternative media that autonomously sets its own agenda.

Finally, as Goldfarb (2006) illustrates in his depiction of the Internet-powered Howard Dean campaign, the read/write web provides everyday citizens with simple but effective tools to collectively act as mainstream media watchdogs. The campaign's ad-hoc structured "Dean Rapid Response Network" meticulously combed through media reports, searching for inaccuracies, distortions, and mischaracterizations. This activist network made a lot of noise about their findings, but they also actively pursued the media outlets, putting constant pressure on them to make corrections and paint their candidate in a more favorable light. For the first time, amateurs were able to instantly take over roles usually reserved for highly paid editors, lobbyists, and public relations managers.

Fragmented Media and Dueling Realities

While this communications revolution has lead to many exciting transformations in the way that people interact with news and media, we now face a new problem, according to Manjoo (2008). He introduces this problem by asking the question, "How can so many people who live in the same place see the world so differently" (p. 7)? Manjoo insists, "No longer are we merely holding opinions different from one another; we're also holding different facts" (p. 2). With infinite choices of content to consume and interact with, people quickly run into very real human cognitive limits, in terms of information overload. Using Festinger's cognitive dissonance

research as a base, Manjoo discusses how people naturally come to rely upon selective exposure and selective perception as an adaptation response to this endless stream of content.

Manjoo sees the Internet as fragmenting the media, and thus dividing people up into isolated islands or niches. Cass Sunstein, appointed by the Obama administration to head up the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, shares Manjoo's concerns. Sunstein (2009) believes that web-based communications are creating "enclave extremism", encouraging people to bunker down into like-minded groups and polarizing them to the point that they are incapable of having productive conversations across groups. He warns, "To a significant extent, people are learning and passing along 'facts' from narrow niches of people, most often comprised of like-minded others," (para. 10) and that "As group polarization occurs, misconceptions and falsehoods can spread like wildfire" (para. 9). As Manjoo illustrates through his analysis of *Loose Change*, an independently produced documentary covering alternative theories about the 9/11 terrorist attacks, access to such massive amounts of raw information and fragmented viewpoints can paradoxically encourage us to "indulge our biases and preexisting beliefs" (p. 17). Sunstein concurs: "With just a few clicks, you can find dozens of Web sites to show you that you are quite right to like what you already like and to think what you already think" (para. 1).

Goldfarb (2006) addresses the fragmented versions of social reality as well, stating, "There is a concern by activists and observers alike that the Internet is balkanizing political discourse and that, as a consequence, public discourse and democratic capacity are being undermined." (p. 85). However, he defends online interactions with partisan activist groups and websites, claiming that these "enclaves" (as Sunstein refers to them) are not meant to replicate the general public sphere. Rather, these like-minded groups offer an opportunity for the "politics of small things" to occur, as participants develop interpersonal trust, familiarity, situational

relevance, and shared social representations. This allows them to reach the top of Shirky's (2009) social "ladder" and engage in organized, purposeful collective action.

Privacy is so Passé

The read/write web, with its many-to-many communication capabilities, also presents a new challenge because it often blurs the lines between private and public space, boundaries that would be more obvious in a physical setting or with more traditional communication tools. Shirky (2009) recognizes that, "Most user-generated content is created as communications in small groups, but since we're so unused to communications media and broadcast media being mixed together, we think that everyone is now broadcasting" (p. 87). The reality is that much of the content we come across on Facebook, blogs, forums, etc. is really written for a personal audience, which in effect can make the rest of us feel confused or voyeuristic if we happen to stumble across this content through a web search. Of course, in the physical world, one might accidentally overhear a conversation between two strangers in an adjacent room, but web-based conversations are quite different because they leave a persistent record of the interaction that can be re-traced, word-for-word, even years and decades later.

For some social groups and societies, the distinction between public and private life is much more critical. It certainly was for the Polish in Goldfarb's accounts (2006). Although, they often participated in disguised, public activities within technically private spaces, these Polish citizens were always hyperaware of what environments and contexts were mutually considered private and thus safe from Soviet Party authorities. In fact, under the shadow of such oppression, they found it necessary to consistently engage in various introductory social rituals (e.g. upon entry into the unofficial bookstore) to verify interpersonal trust and confirm that the business transactions, conversations, and other activities that occur are never revealed outside of those

walls.

On the Internet, groups can conceal conversations behind a password-protected firewall, but this may not guarantee a private space within a system inherently built for open, globalized communication, where detailed records of conversation can be broadcast within milliseconds across the entire network. There is a good reason that militaries communicate primarily within physically separate, closed networks and many politicians are wary about using email or texts to conduct business. Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg, generated quite a bit of outrage when he made comments insinuating that privacy was no longer a “social norm” (Kirkpatrick, 2010). Because the Internet globally connects all of us, this controversy over privacy may ultimately require the construction of what Moscovici (1988) refers to as a “polemical” social representation. At some point, people around the world will need to come to some level of universal consensus over the definition of private vs. public space on the Internet. This is not a trivial issue when spanning across such diverse and disparate public cultures in which age, race, nationality, and historical politics all potentially are a factor.

Social Capitalism: An Investment in Trust

This discussion regarding social networking and privacy brings us to perhaps the most important issue surrounding the read/write web and public culture. Shirky (2009) and Manjoo (2008) both offer very different visions in regards to the Internet’s effects on public culture. Shirky (2009) primarily focuses on how people self-publish within the read/write web and how these published pieces transform into social objects when they attract like-minded people in ways that engender effective ad hoc collaborations or perhaps even sustained collective action. Manjoo looks at the Internet more as an extension of an increasingly fragmented media and society in which reality has split into opposing islands of truth. People choose to reside in one

reality or another, based on their pre-existing beliefs and affiliations. The truth they subscribe to merely polarizes these individuals more and as their viewpoint is justified through selective exposure or perception, this worldview becomes cemented and increasingly extreme. Despite their different perspectives, both these technologists eventually come around to reach the same conclusion. A healthy, successful society is dependent on trust and social capital. In fact, when discussing these virtues, both authors point to research from the same Harvard sociologist: Robert Putnam.

According to Shirky (2009), Putnam explores how local communities have gradually become weaker in America and this significantly decreases the amount of social capital that such communities (and the nation as a whole) are able to generate. Also citing Putnam, Manjoo (2008) explains that communities are failing because Americans are essentially staying home and watching television rather than going out and physically interacting with each other. Consequently, participation in sports leagues, community associations, and even religious-based social groups has dramatically declined over the past 50 years in this country.

The levels of social capital in a community can have very tangible consequences, from the health of individuals to crime rate to economic metrics such as earning potential and business growth. Social capital can most simply be understood as "habits of cooperation" (Shirky, 2009, p. 192). It essentially means, "paying it forward," to quote a popular expression, or as sociologists call it, "generalized reciprocity." The philosophy states that if one person in a community does something helpful for another person, that person will adopt this cooperative behavior by doing something helpful for a third person sometime in the future (Shirky, 2009). As these positive actions continue to propagate, a culture of reciprocity emerges within the public culture and becomes a collectively recognized social representation of how people should act in a

community or society.

Social capital and trust are mutually dependent on each other. In other words, one struggles to exist without the other. Manjoo (2008) makes a distinction between “generalized” and “particularized” trust and analogously likens them to good and bad cholesterol. Generalized trust is what feeds social capital whereas particularized trust only thrives within a tight-knit group, such as a small town or perhaps a mafia gang. Particularized trust cannot engender social capital because it involves a great distrust of outsiders and an “us vs. them” mentality. Particularized trust is enacted each time someone chooses one enclave or island of truth over another.

With his concept, “the politics of small things,” Goldfarb’s philosophy is much more inline with Shirky than with Manjoo. For Goldfarb, the social objects that bring people together are banned books in a totalitarian Polish society or a fresh, new presidential candidate, running on an anti-war platform. These are the nucleuses of an active, vibrant community and they are what spur collective action. Goldfarb would likely classify Manjoo (and Sunstein), however, in the same camp as Michel Foucault, who neutrally believes that there are only alternative powers and alternative truths. Power and truth often go hand-in-hand in that the truth is based on knowledge controlled by those who are in power. It is also interesting to point out that Goldfarb actually supports the idea of particularized trust when it fuels like-minded people to come together and cooperatively engage in the “the politics of small things.”

Deliberative Dialogue to the Rescue?

Obviously, the weakening sense of community, waning generalized trust, and social capital deficit in the United States make the possibility of deliberative democracy within a thriving public culture seem very bleak. Therefore, it is important for us to look at how this trend

can be reversed, as well as what kind of environment or atmosphere would be most likely to engender these desired virtues of political empowerment and civic engagement. According to Witschge (2004):

> The advocates of deliberation and a vivid public sphere can be roughly divided into two camps. On the one hand there are the scholars who stress deliberative democracy's ability to resolve conflicts and make public policy choices, and on the other the ones that stress the ability to build community and citizenship. (p.113)

Instead of just choosing one of these camps, McCoy & Scully (2002) decided to take an assimilative approach to this problem by combining community organizing with both trust-building dialogue and democratic deliberation. The dialogue component involves the establishment of bonds, empathy, and honesty in communication, whereas deliberation encourages critical thinking and rational debate, with the goal of collectively making public policy decisions. Based on this philosophy, they developed a model in which "small, diverse groups— study circles—meet simultaneously all across a community to address an issue of common concern" (p. 119). In addition, they recommended that these smaller groups occasionally hold a single, community-level meeting in order to position the study circle conversations in a larger context, as well as help the citizen participants identify potential connections between the separate conversations going on in each small circle.

Diversifying and Building Bridges

McCoy & Scully (2002) strongly emphasize diversity when organizing people into these civic-minded study circles:

> For us, the most compelling vision of an ideal democracy is one in which there are ongoing, structured opportunities for everyone to meet as citizens, across different

> backgrounds and affiliations, and not just as members of a group with similar interests and ideas. (p. 119)

This philosophy directly addresses Manjoo's (2008) and Sunstein's (2010) concerns about fragmentation of truth and the tendency for people to form intellectually homogenous enclaves. However, such focus on diversity contrasts with Goldfarb's concept of the politics of small things (2006). As I alluded to earlier, Goldfarb believes "speaking to the converted" is sometimes valuable and perhaps necessary to "develop a shared definition of the situation" and "engage in a common course of action" (p. 85). In defining these social niches, Manjoo and Sunstein simply see alternative, polarized versions of reality, whereas Goldfarb and Shirky see opportunities for collective action, especially within a virtual environment.

As Manjoo (2008) showed through Festinger's cognitive dissonance research, people naturally gravitate toward other like-minded individuals. While perhaps theoretically optimal for deliberation, the diversity requirements within McCoy & Scully's (2002) "deliberative dialogue" model may not be realistic unless these diverse groupings can somehow be achieved through an intervening, contrived community organization effort. On the other hand, if trust can be achieved through open and honest dialogue, as McCoy & Scully advocate, than perhaps particularized trust can later be converted into generalized trust. As social capital is generated through bonding and empathy within smaller groups, these behaviors may become contagious and spread outward into the greater community at large.

If we look at this dilemma through the lens of Moscovici's (1988) SR Theory, we are reminded that fragmented social realities cannot remain permanently divided forever. At some level, all these enclaves will face broader crises and public policy dilemmas that

commonly affect individuals across many isolated niches within a larger community. If each small, action-oriented group is considered a minority influence on the majority community as a whole, then gradually this majority must morph to assimilate these various minority influences in order to alleviate the tensions that these unfamiliar representations and definitions have caused. Modified or new polemical social representations must be constructed in order to restore a negotiated, collective understanding. In other words, Moscovici is much more forgiving and comfortable with these opposing social realities as long as they exist within a public sphere that is trusting and interactive enough to commit to broader dialogue when it truly matters. Of course, this requires greater social capital and community and less reliance on mainstream media. Otherwise, hegemonic social representations may continue to dominate the majority's worldview.

Shirky (2009) uses the Dean campaign to contextually explain the difference between "bonding capital" and "bridging capital" within and between what he refers to as "Small World networks" (p. 223-225). He explains that the Dean campaign was very good at generating bonding capital, but failed at creating enough bridging capital to tip the results of the election at the polls. He exclaims, "The Dean campaign had accidentally created a movement for a passionate few rather than a vote-getting operation" (p. 224). According to Shirky, the increase of bridging capital between isolated clusters within a larger social network may be most affected by what Gladwell (2000) calls "Connectors." Connectors are unique individuals who have inexplicably large numbers of people within their own personal social networks and have an innate skill for bringing disparate people from all walks of life together. Therefore, it is these extraordinary individuals who developers of social networking

tools should most energetically target and support in order to bridge polarized or specialized clusters and engage them in inter-cluster, heterogeneous dialogue (Shirky, 2009).

Chomsky (1988), Manjoo (2008), and others often paint elites and average citizens as incompatible, opposing forces. In the same vein, it is easy to cynically make overgeneralizations about the competitive relationship between mainstream media and user-generated content such as blogs. Unfortunately, vilifying elites or mainstream media and assuming that a contentious relationship is inevitable could be a fatal mistake if the goal is to ultimately increase trust and social capital.

McCoy & Scully (2002) state, "If the process does not include a way to establish trust and mutuality between citizens and government, it will fall short of helping them work together more effectively" (p. 126). They recommend that citizens create a process that engenders horizontal rather than vertical conversations between citizens and elites. "The process should bring 'us' and 'them' together in the conversation, so that the conversation is about 'all of us' making a difference in the community" (p. 126). If the public is able to partner with politicians and discover common ground, not only will trust increase, but it will give people an opportunity to politically help elected officials reframe policy debates in a more relevant and productive manner.

Likewise, citizens should encourage the mass media to dig deeper on stories by offering additional perspectives and relating their own personal experiences to broader issues that are being covered. This might enable mainstream journalists and citizens to mutually construct richer social representations that move beyond caricatures and stereotypes. With the undeniable influence that the mainstream media has on public culture, this may be the

most effective way for a society as a whole to establish bridging capital and begin to defragment dueling realities. Elites often control the media through hegemonic means to establish a superficial majority consensus. However, citizens have great power in numbers and the read/write web considerably amplifies the power of minority influences, allowing them to more easily disrupt these hegemonic social representations and redefine them in order to improve society for all who participate.

Taking it Personally

McCoy & Scully (2002) place a high importance on personal relevance in democratic deliberation. The more that people can link their own personal experiences to community-wide issues or public policies during the open dialogue stage, the more engaged and invested they may be once it comes time to deliberate. Moreover, putting issues and polices into a personal context is one of the best ways for people to understand and make sense of them. This can help combat the intimidation, avoidance, confusion, and apathy that often surround in-depth political discussion in America. Additionally, personal relevance gives people the opportunity to reframe an issue on their own terms which empowers them to seize back control of the public agenda from the mainstream media (McCoy & Scully, 2002; Witschge, 2004). Finally, from an SR Theory standpoint, personal relevance helps people more effectively communicate their own individual perceptions of a situational reality. This can benefit the community through the introduction of fresh ideas and innovations, thus leading to new, more insightful social representations.

Redefining the Role of Experts in the Media

Along the same lines, objective information and facts are obviously important to help

groups better understand a situation and make smart decisions, but McCoy & Scully (2002) warn that individuals can easily become overwhelmed by too many facts. They suggest introducing just enough background information to give participants a baseline level of knowledge to work from, but not so much as to induce intimidation and encourage selective exposure or perception. This is the trouble with Americans' overreliance on expert opinions in media (Manjoo, 2008). In stark contrast to Lippman's (1920) philosophy, specialized experts ideally should act more as educators or facilitators as opposed to elite opinion-makers. This, some argue, is a more appropriate role for experts within a participatory democracy.

In the mid-90s, the Public Journalism Movement attempted to do this very thing. Goldfarb (2006) discusses how journalists and various academics decided to play a more active role in various communities around the United States by not just reporting news but also analyzing it in a way that might lead to public enlightenment. Rather than simply present citizens with a small set of pre-packaged alternatives to choose from, as experts in media often do today, they tried to partner with the general public. The overall objective was to engage people, encouraging them to participate in dialogue, take action, and deliberate over various political issues. Not only did these public journalists take on a community-organizing role, but they also polled citizens to help them set their own agenda and they provided context to catalyze legitimate discussion and deliberation. The journalists, however, stopped short of providing their own strong opinions on issues, leaving that for the people to ultimately figure out for themselves. In many ways, this movement was very similar to McCoy & Scully's (2002) "deliberative dialogue" efforts. It would certainly be valuable to

research how today's read/write web technologies might help such a public journalism movement engage the public.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show how the Internet, and the read/write web in particular, can be both valuable and problematic when integrated into the social ecosystem alongside mainstream media and offline interaction. As new communication technologies continue to evolve, it is important to understand how they can be most effectively used to combat hegemonic media forces, while at the same time, promote democracy and civic engagement.

In 2004, Witschge researched online conversations to see if a digitized medium better supports democracy and deliberation by "reducing the aversion to difference and disagreement in political conversations" (p. 110). Her hope was that anonymity and reduced social cues could make people feel safer since it is not as easy to perceive and judge based on social status, appearance, or other biasing characteristics. Unfortunately, the results of these online deliberation experiments were mixed at best. Although anonymity and reduced social cues beneficially remove psychological obstacles for people who are otherwise more intimidated to share their personal views, this environment also encourages uncivil behavior, including flaming and aggressive attacks against those who offer dissenting views within a homogenous group. Witschge (2004) concluded, "We would have to see how the online world interacts with the offline, to see its real potential to harm or do good for democracy" (p. 119).

From Witschge's study, we learn that interacting via partially disguised identities may not be the best way to communicate online. Perhaps it is better to engage others on the web using more open strategies that create mutual trust and accountability both online and offline. Regardless, the read/write web appears to be most valuable when used as a networking tool.

Today, people are able to make connections on a grand scale that formerly was impossible before they gained many-to-many communication tools. Now, minority voices have a broader reach and people are at least exposed to alternative viewpoints outside their own private circles. Whether people choose to subscribe to an alternative viewpoint or not is somewhat irrelevant. The main point is that this peripheral exposure still makes them aware that such minority influences exist and that awareness alone could potentially alter their own individual perceptions, leading to a more rapid evolution of social representations across various communities. Moscovici (1988) recognizes that such transformations are dependent on the speed of communication and the medium in which the message resides. With the Internet as this medium, social representations become less rigid and change much more quickly. This can, of course, have destabilizing effects, but it can also lead to greater innovation and progress.

"Think globally, act locally" is a common phrase used to define an active yet informed civic life. Ironically, the Internet, in its current usage, doesn't support either very well, at least from a daily educational perspective. Fildes (2010) reports that despite the hype about the Internet opening our eyes to the world, most users only get their information from sources within a small number of wealthy countries. Furthermore, even on the most popular news sites around the world, 95% of traffic comes from domestic users. Social networks, such as Twitter, have compounded the problem by filtering information down into homogenized worldviews. Internet users are apparently not thinking globally, even if they believe they are. In terms of acting locally, avid social network users are also 30% less likely to know their neighbors (Hampton et. al, 2009, p. 12). Meanwhile, 24-hour cable news networks, designed for a national audience, naturally emphasize Washington-based politics over local politics. Consequently, Americans are caught in the middle, armed only with a superficial, fragmented understanding of abstract

national issues, but few opportunities to personally relate the issues to their own lives or place them in a greater global context. Such a diluted representation of reality can potentially produce a confusing, politically apathetic atmosphere where stereotypes and propaganda thrive. What we can conclude from all this is that diversity of information is good but it must be manageable and contextual so that it doesn't overwhelm the social ecosystem in a way that generates hostile tensions. Bias, stereotyping, and prejudice are fear-based reactions that come from the introduction of uncertainty and unfamiliarity into the environment (Moscovici, 1988).

This is perhaps the biggest reason that neither mainstream media nor the Internet can be exclusively relied upon by citizens to maintain a functional democracy. Dialogue and deliberation must also occur directly between citizens without filters in between. Logistics aside, online interaction should ideally be mixed or balanced with offline, face-to-face meetings. Shirky (2009) and Goldfarb (2006) highly tout Meetup.com for this very reason. Web-based social networking can advantageously broaden our connections but it can also suppress the fidelity of our interactions with each particular individual in this network, thereby removing opportunities for learning and growth in relationships. When people substitute meetings with friends at coffee shops for short bursts of Facebook wall post exchanges, something gets lost in the translation. What's gained in social breadth is lost in social depth, while people attempt to multi-task and communicate with too many peers all at once. As mobile web devices continue to evolve, there is no doubt we will also see new hybrid ways of integrating technology into the physical world itself (e.g. augmented reality) and this may profoundly transform social representations within the public sphere yet again. Regardless, Shirky (2009) reminds us that, "Revolution doesn't happen when society adopts new technologies----it happens when society adopts new behaviors" (p. 160). Shirky also recognizes that much of America's past success is based on generalized

trust and social capital. This implies that when Americans relearn how to technologically disengage and civically engage with fellow members of their local community, that is when the Internet revolution may really start to get exciting!

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