

## MASTER'S THESIS

### **The networked public sphere vs. the broadcasting public sphere: a qualitative analysis of communicative & strategic rationality in a USENET newsgroup and radio phone-in talk shows**

Pang, Cheuk Fung Thomasindiana

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**The Networked Public Sphere vs. The Broadcasting Public Sphere:  
A Qualitative Analysis of Communicative & Strategic Rationality in  
a USENET Newsgroup and Radio Phone-in Talk Shows**

**PANG Cheuk Fung Thomas Indiana**

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## Abstract

*Research on public sphere has long been the central subject for many political communication researchers who consider it the vital factor for a healthy democracy. Before the advent of the Internet, in order to cope with the communication need of a mass society, researchers placed much concern on mass media as the major sites of public sphere or even equated them to each other. However, mass media, in their very nature, are deficient in the ability to provide citizens with an opportunity to engage in direct and face-to-face dialogue which is central to Habermas's theme of public sphere. As Internet communication becomes more and more popular and enters as a brand new choice of public communication for citizens, more attention should be paid to it in mass communication research.*

*Following this line of thought, many questions are worth asking. Central among them is how we can assess if USENET qualifies as a public sphere. Based on Habermas's conception, a public sphere is a realm in our public life, where public opinion could be formed out of reasoned critical public discussion. In this paper, I would argue that the notion of 'reasoned critical discussion' has much to do with what Habermas later called "communicative action" and its counterpart "strategic action". With the distinction between communicative and strategic actions and the distinction between conventional and post-conventional mode of communicative action, I will compare discussions on a local newsgroup called hk.politics (network paradigm) and discussions on three local radio talk show programs (broadcast paradigm) in this study. Data were mainly collected by employing the participant observation method.*

*Discussions from both samples are coded into nine general categories. Through comparison of the distribution of number of discussions in these nine general categories in the two samples and some complementary statistical data, it is found that the USENET newsgroup sample shows characteristics similar to the radio phone-in talk show sample in the dimension of the conventional - postconventional dichotomy, but the discussions on USENET newsgroup sample are found to be lower in communicative rationality than discussions on the radio phone-in talk show sample. It is argued that the difference is mainly due to the lack of order and accountability on the newsgroup. On the other hand, it is also found that the quality of discussions on radio phone-in talk shows is highly dependent on the host style. So we can only conclude that radio phone-in talk shows 'with good hosts' are better public sphere than USENET newsgroups.*

*In view of this finding, it is suggested that future research direction on USENET newsgroups as public sphere shall be on how to incorporate minimal values or regulations into USENET to make a better public sphere.*

# Table of Contents

<b>Declaration</b> .....	<b>i</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>ii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>iii</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>iv</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of figures</b> .....	<b>vii</b>
<b>I. Prologue: The Dream of Public Sphere</b> .....	<b>1</b>
1.1 THE BOURGEOIS PUBLIC SPHERE .....	1
1.2 REFEUDALIZATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE .....	1
1.3 THE PROBLEMS OF TRADITIONAL MASS MEDIA AS PUBLIC SPHERE .....	3
1.4 THE PRIVATELY DISCUSSING PUBLIC .....	5
1.5 THE DREAMED MARRIAGE OF MASS MEDIA AND THE PRIVATELY DISCUSSING PUBLIC IN INTERNET .....	5
<b>II. The Aim and the Theoretical Significance of This Study</b> .....	<b>7</b>
2.1 OVERVIEW OF HABERMAS'S THEORY OF COMMUNICATIVE ACTION .....	7
2.1.1 <i>Habermas and his Frankfurt school predecessors</i> .....	7
2.1.2 <i>The colonization of lifeworld by system</i> .....	8
2.1.3 <i>How social pathologies are produced</i> .....	9
2.1.4 <i>What type of social pathology is created if public sphere is encroached by strategic and instrumental rationality</i> .....	10
2.1.5 <i>The relation of Habermas's social theory of communicative action to this study</i> .....	10
<b>III. Concepts in Question</b> .....	<b>11</b>
3.1 COMMUNICATIVE ACTION VS. STRATEGIC/INSTRUMENTAL ACTION .....	12
3.1.1 <i>Communicative Action</i> .....	12
3.1.2 <i>Strategic Action</i> .....	12
3.1.3 <i>Possible confusions on terminology concerning communicative action and strategic action</i> .....	13
3.1.4 <i>A common misunderstanding on the meaning of communicative rationality</i> .....	13
3.2 PUBLIC SPHERE.....	14
3.2.1 <i>Definition</i> .....	14
3.2.2 <i>Focus and scope of the present study of media as public sphere in theory</i> .....	15
3.3 REVISION OF HABERMAS'S CONCEPTION OF COMMUNICATIVE RATIONALITY AND STRATEGIC/INSTRUMENTAL RATIONALITY .....	16
3.3.1 <i>Revision point 1: Problems with classification of strategic action and communicative action</i> .....	17
3.3.2 <i>Revision point 2: distinction between conventional and post-conventional modes of communicative action</i> .....	19
3.3.3 <i>Revision point 3-4: Problems with Habermas's classification of speech acts and validity claims</i> . 20	20
3.3.4 <i>Summary of revision discussed in this section</i> .....	22
<b>IV. Clarifying the real critical thrust in Habermas's critical theory</b> .....	<b>23</b>

<b>V. A framework of comparison: USENET newsgroups and radio phone-in talk shows as public sphere</b>	<b>28</b>
5.1 THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK EMPLOYED IN THIS STUDY	28
5.2 THE INHERENT TECHNOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE (COMMUNICATION PARADIGMS) BETWEEN USENET NEWSGROUPS AND RADIO PHONE-IN TALK SHOWS	28
5.3 THE REASONS FOR CHOOSING USENET NEWSGROUPS AND RADIO PHONE-IN TALK SHOWS AS THE ANALYTICAL MEDIA TYPES TO REPRESENT THE TWO COMMUNICATION PARADIGMS FOR STUDY	29
5.4 RESEARCH QUESTION	29
5.5 SPECIFICATION OF THE THREE TYPES OF COMMUNICATION IN QUESTION	30
5.5.1 <i>Paradigmatic case of conventional mode of communicative action</i>	30
5.5.2 <i>Paradigmatic case of post-conventional mode of communicative action</i>	31
5.5.3 <i>Paradigmatic case of strategic action</i>	31
5.5.4 <i>Summary</i>	32
5.5.5 <i>Possible confusion</i>	32
5.6 THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN THE TECHNOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO MEDIA TYPES, AND THEIR CONTENT / SOCIAL USE	33
<b>VI. A Review of Previous Researches on Internet Discussions and Radio Talk Shows</b>	<b>34</b>
6.1 PAST RESEARCHES ON INTERNET AND USENET NEWSGROUPS	34
6.2 PAST RESEARCHES ON RADIO PHONE-IN TALK SHOWS	36
<b>VII. Research Design</b>	<b>38</b>
7.1 THE CHOICE OF METHODOLOGY	38
7.2 THE SAMPLES	40
7.2.1 <i>The selection of newsgroups and radio programs</i>	40
7.2.2 <i>The USENET newsgroup discussion data sample</i>	41
7.2.3 <i>The radio phone-in talk shows discussion data sample</i>	42
7.2.4 <i>Other samples</i>	42
7.3 THE THREE STAGES OF ANALYSIS	42
7.3.1 <i>Stage One</i>	42
7.3.2 <i>Stage Two</i>	44
7.3.3 <i>Stage Three</i>	47
7.4 THE PRINCIPLE OF IDENTIFYING SUSPECTED STRATEGIC ACTIONS FROM COMMUNICATIVE ACTIONS	48
<b>VIII. The Findings</b>	<b>49</b>
8.1 COMPARISON OF USENET NEWSGROUP DISCUSSIONS AND RADIO PHONE-IN TALK SHOW DISCUSSIONS BY DISCUSSION CATEGORIES	49
8.1.1 <i>Result of Stage Three Coding</i>	49
8.2 INSIDERS' ACCOUNT ON THE DISCUSSION CULTURE IN HK. POLITICS	72
8.3 HOST EFFECT IN THE RADIO PHONE-IN TALK SHOW DISCUSSIONS	75
8.4 COMPARISON OF COMMUNICATIVE RATIONALITY BETWEEN HK. POLITICS AND THE THREE RADIO PHONE-IN TALK SHOWS BY "REASONED REPLIES TO CHALLENGES RATIO SCORE"	77

8.5 COMPARISON OF CRITICALITY LEVEL BETWEEN HK.POLITICS AND THE THREE RADIO PHONE-IN TALK SHOWS.....	79
8.5.1 <i>Comparing the criticality scores derived from the variable "Balance between criticism and agreement"</i> .....	79
8.5.2 <i>Analysis of discussions originated for criticisms</i> .....	79
8.6 INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS & CONCLUSION.....	80
<b>IX. An Afterthought: The Problem of Order and the Unknown Potential of Reflexive Discussions on hk.politics.....</b>	<b>82</b>
9.1 THE PROBLEM OF ORDER.....	82
9.2 THE POTENTIAL FUNCTION OF REFLEXIVE DISCUSSIONS.....	83
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>Appendix A.....</b>	<b>88</b>
<b>Appendix B - Stage Two Code Sheet (For USENET newsgroup discussion).....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Appendix C - Stage Three Code Sheet .....</b>	<b>91</b>
<b>Curriculum Vitae.....</b>	<b>92</b>