

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.

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