Jürgen Habermas: Media Ecologist?

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MEDIA ECOLOGY involves the study of media environments and emphasizes the social, cultural, and psychological impact of media and technology (Barnes & Strate, 1996, p. 180). Drawing from the work of scholars such as Harold Innis (1951), Marshall McLuhan (1962, 1964), Walter Ong (1982) and Neil Postman (1985, 1992), media ecology studies the impact of media forms on individuals and society, including political, economic, and social organization (Barnes & Strate, p. 181). Media ecology's diversity, breadth, and depth include social and cultural theory in conjunction with media as part of the ecology of communication as it embraces history, philosophy, anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

Media ecology, in its earliest formulation at New York University, centered largely on the work of Marshall McLuhan and was conceived of as the interaction of people, messages, and media systems within the context of media effects on perception (Postman & Weingartner, 1971, p. 139). Media environments pose invisible impacts that media ecology strives to raise to awareness and to discover the ways that media structure experience (p. 139). Also central to McLuhan and media ecology is the notion that media foster cultural and social biases (Barnes & Strate, 1996, p. 182). The book, for example, privileges a linear mode of thinking. As illustrated by Innis, Ong, McLuhan, and Postman, media biases constitute successive, broad, historical communication eras in which the dominant media forms have widespread influences on institutions and consciousness. Media history moves from oral culture, to chirographic or manuscript culture, and then to print or typographic culture, and on to electronic culture. Ong, Postman, and McLuhan also add the notion that media are metaphors that provide ways of knowing and shape other areas of cultural and social activities to resemble those media's formal properties.

Technology and culture scholars who have influenced media ecology provide evidence of the breadth and diversity of media ecology. This perspective embraces not only the works of Innis, McLuhan, Ong, Postman, James Carey (1989), and Joshua Meyrowitz (1985), but also those of an interdisciplinary collection of scholars, including Jack Goody (1977), Eric Havelock, (1963), Lewis Mumford (1963), Jacques Ellul (1964, 1965), and Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979). In short, media ecology has incorporated the thinking of a diverse group whose commonality is a shared attention to the relationship of the media—whether a symbol system, or a means of production, or something else keying on communication—to some aspect of culture, be it the history of science, philosophy, theology, sociology, classics, or another discipline.

This essay will argue that another philosopher should be incorporated into this pantheon of media ecology's orbit: late Frankfurt School philosopher and communication scholar Jürgen Habermas. This paper will explore the possibility that media ecology's concept of media environments and Habermas's concept of public spheres as developed in his early-written but recently published book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) share some vital elements. After summarizing several scholars' readings of Habermas, it first will be suggested

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that media ecology's notion of print culture is comparable to Habermas's idea of the bourgeois public sphere—although the translation into English of Habermas's most celebrated phrase is an unfortunate choice from a media ecology perspective. Second, media ecology's concept of electronic culture will be compared to Habermas's notion of the manipulated or manufactured public sphere. Third, media ecology's concept of secondary orality, or retribalization, and Habermas's notion of refeudalization will be compared. Fourth, the possibility that Habermas's theory of communicative action and the ideal speech situation bears similarities to media ecology's notion of synæsthesia will be considered. Overall, the paper hopes to suggest that media ecology's approach to the study of technology, culture, and history would be enriched by the inclusion of Habermas's neo-Marxist critical theory.

Two Readings of Habermas

IDENTIFIED as "the most prominent latter-day descendant" of the Frankfurt School, Habermas held similar views about Marxism as a flexible, critical approach. He agreed that the working class was no longer revolutionary and that the Soviet version of Marxism was highly distorted. He also agreed that many of Marx's concepts needed to be revised as capitalism had changed markedly (Giddens, 1985, p. 123). Habermas transcended the work of the early Frankfurt School in creating his own system of thought (p. 124), although his media analysis has been seen as heavily influenced by Horkheimer and Adorno's model of the culture industry in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Outhwaite, 1994, p. 12).

Habermas's focus on communication as an emancipatory opportunity identified two types of action—rational–purposive action and communicative action. The former, which involves technical knowledge that includes manipulation in order to achieve social goals, has been highly developed under capitalism. Communicative action, by contrast, is related to praxis and the realization of human potential (Hallin, 1986, pp. 122–123). Underlying Habermas's communication theory is the concept of dialogue, in that all forms of communication, regardless of how unequal, derive from dialogue between human subjects, and must be evaluated on that basis (p. 142).

British sociologists Thompson and Stevenson have recently compared the media and social theories of media ecologist McLuhan and Habermas. Thompson (1990, 1995) explicitly weaves together the critical theory of Habermas, the "medium theory" developed by Innis and McLuhan, and hermeneutics (1995, pp. 6–8). Thompson credits McLuhan and Innis for emphasizing the effects of media forms on social interaction, writing that they "argued, rightly in my view, that different technical media help to create different environments for action and interaction; they argued that the form of the medium itself, quite apart from the specific content of the messages it conveys, has an impact on the nature of social life" (1990, pp. 225–227).

Thompson feels that the strength of Habermas's early work in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is that it "treats the development of the media as an integral part in the formation of modern societies" (1995, p. 7). With the rise of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas puts "particular importance" on the rise of the press—critical journals and moral weeklies that appeared in the late 1600s and 1700s—along with coffee houses and salons. Habermas argued that the "critical discussion" stimulated by the press transformed the institutions of the state (p. 70). Although he finds Habermas's account of the decline of the bourgeois public sphere

to be his weakest argument (p. 73), a central component of its decline was the radical change of its key institutions, including the commercialization of the media in the 1800s and 1900s. This process turned "rational–critical debate" into "cultural consumption," as the media became part of a "quasi-feudal" kind of public life in which politics becomes a managed show of leaders who exclude most people from discussion and decision-making in the "refeudalization of the public sphere" (p. 74). In this manipulated or managed public sphere, the media bestow aura and prestige upon authorities similar to that bestowed on royal figures under feudalism.

Thompson notes that Habermas moved away from addressing the normative issues of his early work with an immanent critique of a historical set of ideas because it did not explain why the principles of the bourgeois public sphere should hold sway today. He moved toward his theory of communicative action and discourse ethics to show that a conception of rationality that is binding and unavoidable can handle the problems confronting a critical theory of society. Under this theory of rational consensus, a norm would be valid only if it was openly discussed and consented to by everyone affected by it under conditions without constraint (p. 260).

Stevenson (1995) finds McLuhan and Habermas to be the only theorists to consider the impact of media other than television, as social theory neglected the importance of the media until the television age was well under way (p. 115). McLuhan "continues to offer challenging perspectives to those who are concerned to map out the contours of our culture" (p. 142). Stevenson's exploration of the relationship between mass communication and social theory accepts the importance of McLuhan's emphasis on distinguishing between different modes of cultural transmission, such as oral, literate, and electronic, as well as on the ways the media structure social relations (p. 115).

Stevenson's account of Habermas's work notes that despite the impact of his thinking on a variety of disciplines, his work on mass communication has not received the attention it should (p. 47). The transformation of the newspaper industry is offered as an illustration of the "tragedy" that the bourgeois public sphere was eventually destroyed by the social forces that created it (p. 49), and eventually led to the refeudalization of the public sphere (p. 50). More recently, Habermas deals less with refeudalization than with the "pulverisation" of the cultural sphere and the "colonization of the life-world," as well as "cultural impoverishment" (pp. 51–52).

But Habermas ultimately breaks with the early Frankfurt School's pessimism by developing a means of emancipatory politics. Against the philosophy of consciousness represented by the early Frankfurt School, Habermas builds his theory of communicative rationality, which provides the basis for an "ideal speech situation." In this situation, a statement is true only if it gains the free consent of everyone affected by it—a type of radical democracy far removed from present practices (pp. 51–52). Through the theory of communicative action, Habermas provides a basis for rebuilding the public sphere (p. 53).

Stevenson contrasts Habermas's characterization of the bourgeois public sphere, a product of print culture which focuses on the potential of print-based social institutions, with McLuhan's understanding of the "rationalizing impulse of print" and its creation of hierarchical and specialized culture (pp. 122–123, 142). Media ecology and McLuhan draw attention to the relationship between media and the public sphere. Print culture separated the public and the private, but the relations of these spheres have been restructured by electronic media and recreated village-like qualities of oral society (p. 123). Print fosters private space needed to create the individual and

rational discussion; electronic media, by contrast, alter these patterns and create a more interactive space (p. 140). Although Stevenson finds McLuhan's arguments regarding the public sphere "misguided" because, in part, they discount any links between the media and a culture that promotes critical debate, he acknowledges that the new media have "radically reformulated the public sphere" (p. 141). And despite his limitations, McLuhan's notions about the effects of the medium on the future of the public sphere should be addressed by supporters of more democratic cultures (p. 143).

Media Ecologizing Habermas's Shape of the Public Sphere

Before turning to the suggestion that Habermas is a media ecologist, the shape of the public sphere or media environment—sphere or square, line or circle—relates to the heart of media ecology's focus on visual/literate culture and oral/electronic culture. It is unfortunate that Habermas's term *Öffentlichkeit* has been translated as "public sphere." It is perhaps also unfortunate that the term *bürgerliche* has become "bourgeois."

To media ecologists, a sphere suggests the integrated sense of acoustic space, which is "spherical, multisensory, and multidimensional" (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, p. 18). Ong (1982) also characterized sound as having a "centering effect" because sound is perceived "simultaneously from every direction at once: I am at the center of my auditory world, which envelops me, establishing me at a kind of core of sensation and existence" (p. 72). Both McLuhan and Ong suggest that sound surrounds, and, if one thinks of broadcast media signals, emanates in circular waves from a source. Acoustic space has no boundaries, center, or sense of direction. Associated with oral and electronic culture, acoustic space is multisensory, simultaneous, immediate, resonant, natural, and analogical. Acoustic space encompasses history before the introduction of the alphabet and since the invention of the telegraph. By contrast, print or literate space is linear, sequential, and logical. Created by the enclosure of space as a static quantity in architecture, visual space encompasses history from the introduction of the phonetic alphabet until the invention of the telegraph (Marchand, pp. 123–124). Visual space is a human-made artifact, opposed to the natural, environmental form of acoustic space. Visual space, created by the eyes when their operation is abstracted from the other senses, is continuous, connected, homogeneous, and static (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1988, pp. 17–18; 22).

To a media ecologist, a bourgeois publicness created by print culture would not be shaped like a sphere. However, this stock phrase of Habermas's really is a translator's creation. Strictly speaking, *Öffentlichkeit* means public, or publicity, or even, more literally, "publicness." "Keit" as a suffix is used with abstract nouns, such as in the German words for happiness and thoroughness, for example. If Habermas had meant to say "public sphere," he had a number of words at his disposal, most logically, *Sphäre*, which means "sphere." In fact, Habermas's term for the "private sphere" or "intimate sphere," is exactly that: *Intimsphäre*. That reflects more accurately the sense of a sphere, an intimate, small group, shielded from intrusion, at which the individual is the center.

The translation of *bürgerliche* as "bourgeois" also presents the problem of overlooking the larger context for the word as "civil," or "citizen." As the translator notes, "for better or worse," the term "*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*" is rendered as "bourgeois public sphere" (Burger, 1989, pp.

xv–xvi). To render a translation that more correctly reflects the media ecology concerns of Habermas's theory and suggested the print culture nature of the "bourgeois public sphere," which should connote rationality, linearity, individuality, and logic, among other qualities, "civil publicness" might be more apt.

Bourgeois Public Sphere/Print Culture

S UPPORTED by Thompson's and Stevenson's emphasis on the centrality of the media in Habermas's notion of the bourgeois and manipulated public sphere, Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* will provide evidence for equating the bourgeois public sphere with media ecology's concept of print culture. Habermas's bourgeois public sphere is primarily "private people come together as a public" who claimed they "regulated from above against the public authorities themselves" (Habermas, 1989, p. 27). Connecting the private realm to public authority, the three parts of the public sphere in the eighteenth century included the public sphere in the "world of letters," composed of clubs and the press, "through which the vehicle of public opinion it [the public sphere] put the state in touch with the needs of society" (pp. 30–31). The institutions of the public sphere, after coffee houses and salons, included art and cultural criticism journals (p. 41) and "moral weeklies," which expanded the circle of the coffee houses (p. 42). Their "dialogue form" attested to their closeness to the spoken word (p. 42) and thereby the "public held a mirror up to itself" (p. 43).

In England, the end of licensing in 1695 was one of three events that marked the emergence of the public sphere—along with the founding of the Bank of England and the first cabinet government. The end of censorship allowed the "influx of rational–critical arguments into the press" and made the press into an "instrument" to bring political decisions before the public (p. 58). Throughout the 1700s, the public sphere's development was measured by the degree of confrontation between the government and the press, as the latter was "raised to the status of an institution" (p. 60). The press uncovered accusations against public authorities in the 1760s–1770s that were brought forth "in a manner that ever since has been exemplary of a critical press" (pp. 60–61).

In France, the critical public arose more slowly in the mid-1700s, foremost because "[n]ot a line could be published without the consent of the censor; a political journalism could not be developed; the periodical press as a whole remained scanty" (p. 67). It was the French Revolution that created, overnight, what had evolved in England for a century: a political daily press (pp. 69–70). In Germany, the rational–critical debate took place in private gatherings revolving around the "blossoming journals, including political ones" in the late 1700s (p. 72)—although the most popular political journalists faced death and imprisonment for their efforts (p. 73).

According to most media ecologists, literate and print culture favors the linear, detached, abstract, rational, and individual, while print culture, by extension, encourages individualism, nationalism, and democracy. All of these qualities are encompassed in Habermas's bourgeois public sphere, which is created primarily by the press and which furthers critical–rational debate within the newly media-created space of civil society.

Manipulated Public Sphere/Electronic Culture

I N HABERMAS'S analysis, it seems that even as the bourgeois literary public sphere was form-
ing, it was also beginning to collapse, owing in part to the type of privacy that evolved in the
1700s to create the literary public sphere. The world of letters' public sphere and its ra-
tional–critical debate gave way to the "pseudo-public or sham-private world of culture consump-
tion" (Habermas, 1989, p. 160). Habermas centers this collapse on the broadening of the reading
public to include almost everyone as readers, thereby creating the "mass public of culture con-
sumers" (pp. 167–168). Reflecting this change in the early 1800s was the rise of the penny press
throughout Europe and America, beginning in 1816 in Germany. The penny press depoliticized
content to maximize sales. This trend intensified in the latter 1800s through the yellow press and
the human interest story, the weekend press, and illustrated magazines, all part of what he calls
the "'American' form of mass press" (pp. 167–169).

As the mass press, which was based on commercialization of the public sphere, offered the
masses access to the public sphere, this expanded public sphere lost its political character. This
"consumption of culture" was fostered as picture- and sound-based media, still visible in the
daily press, eventually replaced the literary press and encouraged the disappearance of critical
debate (p. 169). This change progressed further in the "new media":

> Radio, film, and television by degrees reduce to a minimum the distance that a
> reader is forced to maintain toward the printed letter—a distance that required the
> privacy of appropriation as much as it made possible the publicity of a ra-
> tional–critical exchange about what had been read. With the arrival of the new me-
> dia the form of communication as such has changed; they have had an impact …
> more penetrating … than was ever possible for the press. … In comparison with
> printed communications the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions
> of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public
> under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance … deprive it of
> the opportunity to say something and to disagree. (pp. 170–171)

Thus, according to Habermas, the mass-mediated world is a public sphere only in appearance,
as is the private sphere that the media promise to consumers (p. 171). Habermas called the prod-
uct of mass media culture one of "integration" of information with critical debate, journalistic
formats with novel forms, and advice shaped by human interest. The "culture of integration" also
assimilates advertising as a "kind of super slogan" and is a means of political and economic
propaganda while becoming unpolitical and "pseudo-privatized" (p. 175).

Habermas documented the shift in the function of the public sphere in the "transformation of
the public sphere's preeminent institution, the press" (p. 181). Habermas traces the early press's
emergence as a "small handicraft business" that followed the tenets of early capitalism (p. 181).
Evolving from "pure news reporting" to include literary journalism, the press became political as
well as economic. With scholarly journals, moral weeklies, and political journals, this literary
journalism put commercial needs in the background in pursuit of critical–rational reflections (p.
182). Publisher–printers dominated, yielding in the 1800s to independent editorships (p. 183).

With the formation of a constitutional state and a legal political public sphere, the press was released to focus on profits, and in the 1830s in Europe and America the press began the transition from an ideological press to a press that was primarily a business (p. 184). Throughout the 1800s, editor–publisher relations changed, major newspaper chains emerged, and technological advancements made economic growth possible (pp. 185–187). The degree of concentration of ownership was modest by comparison to that of film, radio, and television, which in Europe were initiated by government and turned from "private institutions of a public formed of private people into public corporations" (p. 187). The rise of public media corporations has reversed the original basis of the press as institutions protected from government by being privately owned. With commercialization and economic concentration, the private media have become "complexes of societal power" that threaten their critical role (p. 188).

Media ecology similarly marks the beginning of electronic culture with the penny press in the 1830s and the introduction of the telegraph in 1844, as McLuhan argues. This electronic media culture only intensifies with the sound and images of film, radio, and television. The effect of electronic media culture is a reversal of the cultural effects of print culture: the loss of rationality, detachment, linearity, nationalism, and individualism. The new values are involvement, simultaneity, globalism, and the collective.

Refeudalization/Retribalizaton

HABERMAS describes in detail the process by which the manipulated public sphere of consumption resembles the process found in a medieval feudal system more than it resembles rational–critical debate. Habermas called this "refeudalization." The "flooding" of the public sphere with advertising arose as economic concentration increased in order to assure market stability and share (Habermas 1989, p. 189). Economic advertising became political with the development of public relations, and "public opinion management" invaded public opinion by creating and exploiting events (p. 193). The result is the "engineering of consent" with features of a "staged public opinion" (p. 194). A consensus created by "sophisticated opinion-molding" lacks the criterion of rationality of a consensus reached by "the time-consuming process of mutual enlightenment." Shaped by public relations, the public sphere takes on "feudal features" as the public is presented a "showy pomp" that it is ready to follow. It is feudal in that it imitates the "aura" of "personal prestige and supernatural authority" given to the publicity of feudal courts (p. 195). In short, refeudalization. Within the "decayed form of the bourgeois public sphere" (p. 215), and the "manipulated public sphere" and "manufactured public sphere" (p. 217), the media both represent political ideology (p. 215) and are ineffectual in political communication except as advertising (p. 217). In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas offers no emancipatory alternative.

Media ecology's broad historical sweep moves from an initial stage of oral culture and tribalism to a second stage of print culture and nationalism, then into a third stage of electronic culture and retribalization, characterized by the creation of the "global village." In part, retribalization recovers the orality of pre-print culture. Medieval culture, although a thousand years into scribal culture, is described by media ecology as oral culture. Orality, to McLuhan, Innis, and Ong, represents a balanced stage of dialogue and the interplay of the human senses. In part, retribalization

is the recovery of synæsthesia through the electronic media that overcomes the fragmented visual sensory system created by print media. Electronic and oral cultures integrate thought, feeling, and action and erode national identities in favor of the global village.

Ideal Speech Situation/Synæsthesia

Aᴌᴛʜᴏᴜɢʜ communication clearly was a significant element in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* with the notion of rational–critical debate, Habermas followed an "important new direction" in the 1970s with work on communication theory (Outhwaite, 1994, p. 38). Following Habermas's "linguistic turn" (Holub, 1991, p. 10) toward communication theory is well beyond the scope of this paper, but hinting at its implications for a comparison to media ecology's emancipatory alternatives may be worthwhile.

The "ray of hope" that allowed Habermas to move beyond the "pernicious" writings of the Frankfurt School became "the sunbeam shining on communicative action" in Habermas's later theory. Rational discourse is free of domination, oriented toward consensus and understanding, which is seen as the most appropriate type of activity for the public sphere (Holub, 1991, p. 8). Communicative rationality is the basis for critical social theory and has an analytical as well as utopian aspect. It is able to criticize distorted communication by basing the theory on the validity claims of normal speech. At the same time, it provides as an end the "never-realizable … state in which unconstrained, perfectly free communication occurs. With the theory of communicative action, Habermas has come full circle and arrived back at his starting point in the public sphere." But, instead of a historical structure that has collapsed, Habermas projects "a state of affairs whose realization lies in the future" (p. 15).

Simply put, communication action "is the (verbal or non-verbal) interaction between two or more actors who 'seek to reach an understanding about their action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement'" (Outhwaite, p. 71).

His system offers two types of action. Rational–purposive action involves technical knowledge that includes manipulation in order to achieve social goals, while communicative action is related to praxis and the realization of human potential (Hallin, 1986, pp. 122–123). Underlying Habermas's communication theory is the concept of dialogue, in that all forms of communication, regardless of how unequal, derive from dialogue between human subjects and must be evaluated on that basis (p. 142).

Habermas moved from a bleak critique of modernity in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* to communication theories based on emancipatory potential. Habermas offered a utopian model of rational–critical debate through communicative action with a model of oral communication culture. Even as he criticizes the "refeudalization" of the media, Habermas returns to an oral mode of communication for his ideal speech situation, an oral mode that last existed in the feudal era.

Media ecologists, too, have a tendency toward idealism and utopianism centered on communication. Ong's study of orality and literacy (1982, pp. 2, 5–15) rehabilitates orality as integral to human communication. Innis clearly prefers the balanced dialogue of oral culture in his plea for time (1951, pp. 41, 68, 105–106, 190). McLuhan's transformation of print culture's alienation by electronic media culture's integration of the senses through synæsthesia also is based on a

privileging of the oral, of dialogue, and conversation. McLuhan described synæsthesia as the unified sensory and imaginative experience that is the crowning effect of electronic media culture, as television provides an all-enveloping extension of the central nervous system (McLuhan, 1964, pp. 274–275). Even Postman, in his championing of typographic culture, attends to the orality of dialogue and debate, and the rationality that print culture makes possible (1985, pp. 44–48). In Habermas's early writing, media ecologists may find another founding philosopher who examines the impact of media environments on culture and history, and who offers a media ecological approach for communication as a liberating activity.

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