Public Spheres in Private Spaces: How Capital Undermines Social Media's Democratic Potential

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Abstract

In the late 1990s and into the early part of the new millennium, the vast, open, seemingly free space of the Internet allowed for many communication and political science scholars to bask in the optimism of a new communication system that would allow for increased debate, deliberation, and flow of information (Kellner, 1998). Notable scholars like Castells (1996) and Benkler (2006) led the charge of conversation in regards to the network society, and the democratizing impacts that such communication technologies could potentially provide. More recently, Internet optimists, like Shirky (2008, 2011), have expressed the role that digital technologies, mostly in terms of the Internet, can have in allowing for widespread democratizing communication, social movements and political action in its ability to organize and mobilize individuals, both in online discussion spaces, and in the "real" world.

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Introduction

O ne can find examples of democratizing potential and online forums facilitating public speech in recent social movements such as the global Occupy movement, Idle No More, and the Arab Spring, which has since been attributed the name of the "Twitter revolution" by Internet optimists. While acknowledging and praising the use of digital technology in these recent events certainly helps strengthen the argument of the Internet's democratizing possibilities (indeed, Shirky may actually point to these examples as democratic realities), they fail to consider the systems of control and capitalism that such discussions are taking place in. Before we can truly accept the Internet, and Web 2.0 technologies that have spawned from it, as creating a more democratic public sphere, we must look to the spaces where such discussions and uses of these technologies are taking place, and take into account the control, ownership, motivations, and architecture of such digital spaces.

This paper will seek to expand the discussion on the political economy of the Internet, specifically in relation to the optimistic claims that the web, and in particular emerging social networking technologies, acts as a democratizing tool and helps to reinvigorate the public sphere. Instead, I will argue that such approaches to the Internet ignore the larger issue that many of these so-called democratic spaces fall under the control of private, capitalist ownership. As such, I propose that the question that must precede emphatic acceptance of the reinvention of the public sphere is whether such a public sphere can ultimately occur in these private spaces, which exist solely to further economic, not public, interests. Ultimately, I will argue that it is misguided and problematic to seek the revival of the public sphere in private digital spaces. By doing so, we are falling into a false sense of control over these spaces, which in fact are built to further profits, not politics, and that we must primarily view power, ownership, and control as the most important factors in shaping social media development and use.

To begin, I will look at the complicated notion of the public sphere that has emerged in more recent literature that connects the Habermasian theory to the contemporary digital media environment, and seek to discover the common characteristics of the democratizing potential that the Internet provides. After establishing a working framework for the notion of the digital public sphere and democratizing web, I will look at three central positions that dispel such views, and will instead reveal these spaces as places of control that limit any democratic potential. First, the paper will look at the domination of online use by major Internet and media corporations, which dictate and limit the users attention and action. This discussion will begin in the era of megaportalization

(Dyer-Witheford, 2002, Dahlberg, 2005) of the early 2000's through to search engine optimization (SEO) and a monopolization of social media on the contemporary web. From there, the paper will then shift its focus to a more theoretical look at the concerning issues of institutional control and corporate interest that exist in these technologies, the strong relationship between these businesses and government in relation to Internet policy, and the commodification of the supposed digital public sphere. Lastly, the paper will turn to direct examples that illustrate direct infringements on, and control of, democratic speech through censorship and collaboration with state governments, to help put in perspective the consequences of seeing these spaces as a place for democratic speech.

Defining the Public Sphere and Democratic Web

The notion of the public sphere comes out of the work of Jürgen Habermas (1991), in relation to the public sphere of eighteenth century Europe, which existed in French salons and British coffeehouses and emerged at the same time as Bourgeois capitalism and parliamentary democracy, (Barney, 2003) argues for, "a public of private people engaged in rational-critical debate" (Habermas, 1991). Within this forum, or public, the people come together to form a public opinion and legitimate authority (Habermas, 1991; Barney, 2003). The major characteristics of Habermas' public sphere are rooted, according to Dahlberg (2001), in six crucial criteria: autonomy from the state and economic power; a focus on rational-critical discourse that fosters ongoing discussion; reflexivity and the internal process of critical reflection; ideal role-taking, or the putting of oneself in another's shoes, so to speak; sincerity; and, lastly, inclusivity and equality. Barney (2003) further adds in the crucial notion of universal access. Here then, exists a well-rounded framework of the Habermasian conception of the bourgeois public sphere. The public sphere, as it is used in more recent literature in relation to digital technologies, however, has simplified that notion and veered off-course, to an extent.

Discussions on the theory of the public sphere have been thoroughly intertwined with the evolution of the Internet (Dahlberg, 2001, 2004, 2005; Papacharissi, 2002; Winseck, 2002; Barney, 2003; Bohman, 2004; McChesney, 2008; Chadwick, 2009; Gerhards & Schafer, 2009; York, 2010; Loader & Mercea, 2011; Valtysson, 2012), with Internet optimists quick to refer to cyberspace and its services as a rejuvenation of Habermas' vision. However, in their work to build the discussion of the digital public sphere, the notion of the theory changed somewhere along the line. Indeed, the idea of the public sphere, in more recent communication literature linking the theory to the web, has become quite reduced and one-dimensional, instead referring today simply to citizen access to rational-critical discourse (Dahlberg, 2001; Chadwick, 2009; Valtysson, 2012) and platforms that allow for the free exchange of information and ideas (York, 2010). As such, the language used to describe this public sphere has also been used in discussion of the democratizing potential of the web, in the sense that it allows for citizen participation in this space of critical, logical discussion and lead to a public opinion (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002). As such, the two ideas – democratic participation and the public sphere - have become synonymous and interchangeable with one another in literature on the virtual public sphere (Chadwick, 2009; Dahlgren, 2009). This paper will use the idea of the public sphere in relation to its more contemporary, definition of participatory rational-critical democratic discourse.

Such reductionist approaches allow for much criticism of these notions of public spheres as they do not fulfill the criteria originally envisioned by Habermas. One of the largest criticisms that has resulted from hailing the Internet as a public sphere is the question of universal access and inclusivity (Barney, 2003). The digital divide, speaking both of the divide between the Global North and Global South as well as access within national or even municipal borders, proves problematic for allowing the Internet as a public sphere (Chadwick, 2006). The issue of legitimate rational-critical

discussion and the political competence actually existing place within these digital spaces has also been questioned (Bohman, 2004; Gladwell, 2010; Christiansen & Bengtsson, 2011). Morozov (2011) and Gladwell (2010) further question the actual impact that such technologies and spaces have in foreign countries that they are supposed to be democratizing. For example, bloggers within Iran wrote that Twitter was not actually very popular within the nation, and many of the people using Twitter to discuss the revolution were from Western countries (Morozov, 2011). While these approaches do reveal some critical questions regarding the Internet as a public sphere, they still fail to take into account the most important part of the public sphere as envisioned by Habermas and the first characteristic outlined by Dahlberg, that being a need for autonomy from political and economic influence. I will now begin to explore three critical ways that corporate influence and control over the web, particularly those sites offering forums of discussion, undermine the nature of democratic participation and discourse.

Megaportalization & Walled Gardens – Early Systems of Control

One of the major advances in moving away from a mass mediated environment, in terms of opportunity for democratic communication and participation, was said to be the openness of the Internet. Gone, supposedly, were the gatekeepers of the newspapers, the limited choice provided by television outlets, and the enclosure of public discussion. Instead, the Internet presented a cyberspace that would provide an open field, with low barriers of entry, of opportunity for anyone to reach large audiences, and usher in an era of mass self-communication (Castells, 2007), free from the walls, which reduced citizens to nothing but passive receivers, built by the major media corporations in the mass mediated era preceding it (Gerhards & Schafer, 2009). Such optimistic approaches, while warranted at the time, seriously underestimated the motivation and capability of capital to control and privatize the emerging World Wide Web.

These same revelations about the inherent openness of the Internet that brought optimism to many scholars hoping for democratic revitalization, instead faced corporations with a major challenge. Indeed, controlling the Internet was an impossible task. Instead, these corporations came to the conclusion that it was not necessary to own and control all, or even an extensive amount, of Internet space to have a major impact on communication and use. The route to domination of online practice was instead through the domination of online attention (Dahlberg, 2005). And so, a process of control of not space, but of attention and use, began to formulate within these corporate companies. Within the boardrooms, this strategy was referred to as the "walled garden" strategy (Aufderheide, 2002).

Perhaps no company better executed the walled garden strategy in the early portion of the new millennium than AOL. The actual goal behind such a strategy is to channel the choices that the user makes, and thereby own and control their online activities (Aufderheide, 2002). For instance, the much praised virtual community website, GeoCities, was bought by Yahoo! (Dahlberg, 2001). As such, GeoCities was brought into the family of Yahoo! networks, also referred to as a portal, which also included a news section, classifieds, photo sharing (Flickr), etc. Indeed, with the cases of AOL and MSN, which also acted as internet service providers (ISP), many times these megaportals are set as the user's home page by default (Dahlberg, 2005). The point of this, then, is to actually inhibit the user's choice and ability to discover the wide open space of the web, by keeping them contained within the corporately-owned portal. Such a process totally transforms the action and role that the individual is fulfilling, in essence redefining them as a customer within a proprietary environment, rather than a user in an open network (Aufderheide, 2002). In the case of AOL, they were able to pitch their portal to advertisers and investors by channeling its users to such a point that 85% of the time AOL users spent online was within the walls of AOL (Aufderheide, 2002). In 2001, in the

midst of the discussion of the democratizing potential of the free and open Internet, 50% of all American users' online minutes was controlled by just four companies (Dahlberg, 2005), while Noam (2009) showed that three portals (Yahoo!, AOL, and MSN) controlled 80% of the American online market share. The accruing of traffic and information to online walled gardens, and this type of closed communication, as evidenced here, creates what Innis terms monopolies of knowledge (Milberry & Anderson, 2009). Such figures demonstrate the ways that capital influenced and manipulated the architecture of the Internet so as to limit the user's ability in actually experiencing the free and open web and bring order, as defined by capitalist institutions, to online activity (Dyer-Witheford, 2002), and to narrow the range of motion of users (Milberry & Anderson, 2009). Such a discussion, however, would be irrelevant to this paper without further revealing the effects of such virtual colonization on democratic practice and rational-critical discourse in the online realm.

One of the great threats to the public sphere, as envisioned by Habermas, was the evolution of the mass media to a structure built around limited homogeneous discussions, which made decisions on and about what was important enough to present to the public usually on economic grounds (Gerhards & Schafer, 2009). Furthermore, the mass media were seen as highly regulated and privileging to powerful, institutionalized actors while excluding smaller organizations and everyday citizens (Gerhards & Schafer, 2009; Valtysson, 2012). The problem with such privileging of powerful actors, limited choice, and control of information and communication is that, aside from the lack of participation it offers citizens, it actually circumvents public debate (Gerhards & Schafer, 2009; Valtysson, 2012). The Internet, then, was seen as a way to open up choice of and access to various sources of information, that would allow for greater public debate. The megaportalization of the web (Aufderheide, 2002; Dyer-Witheford, 2002; Dahlberg, 2005), then, sought to limit this choice, in the ways of controlling user activity as noted above, but also in terms of the sources of information that users were receiving.

While the web seemed to offer a shift away from such mass mediated control, these megaportals brought cyberspace right back into it. The most obvious example is the 2001 merger between AOL and Time Warner, a massive media conglomerate. Indeed, as Winseck (2011) points out, this merger may have been the signaling point of the corportization of the web, as AOL had previously fought for open access to networks, but quickly changed their tune to one that was profit-driven, resulting in the powerful megaportal as discussed above. What is important here, though, is the type of collusion that such a merger allowed. As Dahlberg (2005) argues, these megaportals may seem to facilitate articulation and contestation of positions, but in reality the news stories they feature are often drawn on from a few authoritative sources, typically owned or in some type of agreement with the portal, rather than offering a diverse web of multiple voices. Such limiting architecture that funnel users back to the corporate dominated sites hasn't disappeared in the same way that AOL has, however.

While megaportals still exist, the influence they exert is nowhere near where it was a decade ago. Instead, a new monster has emerged. Its name: Google. Google has become a force to be reckoned with in terms of its capability as a search engine, sitting as the world's top Internet company in terms of capital and revenue (Winseck, 2011), commanding over 60% of the American market share in 2008 (Noam, 2009), and as high as 68% of the American market in 2012, and over 76% of the global market share, according to various search engine industry blogs (Goodwin, 2013; Sullivan, 2013). Much like the portals that served users before it, Google has made users reliant on its services, and creates a wall between the user and the rest of cyberspace (Milberry & Anderson, 2009). More importantly, however, the Google algorithm, and the resultant search engine optimization tactics that have spawned from it, favour large institutionalized actors (Gerhards & Schafer, 2009; Loader & Mercia, 2011). In terms of the information that Google tends to provide at the top of its results, it comes mostly from the major traditional corporations, which have the ability

and resources to fulfill the requirements of the algorithm. In news coverage, the Google News outlet relies on the major, Western, traditional sources, while independent outlets and blogs tend not to be included in the algorithm, or if they are, must compete with the established news giants (Dahlberg, 2005). The margin of maneuver, which corresponds to the degree to which individuals can adapt and use a system to meet their own needs, is seriously reduced by the enclosing nature of Google, just as it was by megaportals before (Milberry & Anderson, 2009; Loader & Mercia, 2011). As should be evident now, the control of dominant Web spaces, tools, and services is held by a small number of powerful media companies who network their online spaces to constrain online navigation, and keep users within a restricted portion of cyberspace (Milberry & Anderson, 2009, p. 409).

I hope that I have provided a comprehensive illustration of the early, and continued, architecture of the corporately owned web that controls and limits user activity, in essence undermining the democratic openness and range of choice first promised by the technology. Of course, discussion could also be had on the physical architectural control of ISPs and information communications technology corporations, but that is best left for another place as because of space constraints, I will now shift the paper to acknowledge the same ideas of control from a more ideological level and offer discussion on the ways in which the commercialization of the Internet undermines its democratic potential and uses as a public sphere.

Commercializing the Web

Hailing the newest communication technology as providing opportunity to drastically enhance and improve democracy and the public sphere is not unique to the Internet. AM radio in the 1920's, as well as FM radio and UHF television in the 1950's, all fell into similar discussions of providing radical new developments and offered potential for change and creating more democratic discourse, only to be thrown aside once the commercial aspects of such media were realized (McChesney, 2008). Such realizations have increasingly become evident in relation to the Internet, as well. As Morozov (2011) succinctly puts it, "in virtually all cases where technology is praised as helping democracy, they tend to overpromise and underdeliver" (p. 275). In taking approaches that place new technologies in this light, scholars ignore that the Internet does not exist in a vacuum, but is embedded in the antagonisms of capitalist society (Fuchs, 2009). Indeed, the mass commercialization of the net, and capital's mission to generate profit off of it, seriously undermines its public sphere potential. Of perhaps even greater concern, individuals fail to recognize the capitalist pressures and influences on the Internet, and the political/economic nature that is inherent in such a technology (McChesney, 2008; Morozov, 2011).

The notion that discussion spaces online must remain free from corporate influence and interest to fulfill any sort of democratic public sphere criteria was raised in even some of the earliest discussions on the Internet's potential. Dahlberg (2001) demonstrates this early concern, writing, "Online deliberative forums must fear being marginalized by corporate, commercialized, and privatized forms of participation" (p. 628). Eight years later, Dahlgren (2009) expressed the same concerns, saying, "Market logic and commodification, together with the political economy of its infrastructure, and its emerging legal frameworks, threaten to diminish the net as a civic communicative space" (p. 170). McChesney (2008) argues, "The critical strain of democratic theory argues that the structural basis for genuine democratic communication lies within a media system free from the control of either the dominant political or economic powers of the day" (p. 368). Unfortunately, these fears have become a reality, especially as online discussion spaces have increasingly moved to largely profitable social networking sites. Such commercial and capitalist approaches to emerging Web 2.0 technologies constrain the opportunity for democratic discussion.

In much the same way that the previous section discussed how corporations are trying to control the scope and range of users activity and behaviour online, newer forms of corporate influence try to control people's online interactions (Wittel, 2012). Simply put, the "public sphere" of the Internet is becoming increasingly privatized, making it ever more difficult to describe it as a public sphere. This trend could be seen as starting in 1995, when the United States government passed the Communications Act of 1995, which explicitly stated that the market, and not public interest, would dictate the future of the Internet (McChesney, 2008). Indeed, as McChesney (2008) quite succinctly(**) puts it in speaking of these emerging technologies that are labeled democratic,

> We did not elect to have these technologies, nor did we ever debate their merits. They have been presented either as some sort of product of inexorable natural evolution or as a democratic response to pent-up consumer demand, because they are profitable and because a market was created for them. (377-378)

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind the lessons presented by Lessig (2006), ultimately, that these technologies and their architecture are created by individuals and are the result of human choices and actions, not some preexisting order (Lessig, 2006; Breen, 2002). With this market-based approach to web technologies, it becomes evident that it is not the responsibility of those directing the economy to make their activities meet the democratically determined aims of the public, or be held responsible for the consequences of their actions (Winseck, 2002; McChesney, 2008). This can be demonstrated in the case of modern social networking sites. Twitter and Facebook both refused to join the Global Network Initiative, an industry-wide pledge by other technological companies (Google, Yahoo, Microsoft) to behave in accordance with laws covering freedom of expression and privacy embedded in international documents like the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Morozov, 2011). Facebook, suspiciously, cited a lack of resources for its reason, despite putting up $700 million in profit in 2009 (Morozov, 2011).

Demonstrated within these examples of capitalist approaches and attitudes to the Internet is the realization that these companies don't have the public interest in mind, or if they do, it takes a back seat to more economic goals. Indeed, what can be seen is a commercialization of these technologies that allow and provide online discussion forums. We can see that efforts to create and embed markets within electronic networks formalize what markets already do in enhancing administrative control as well as accelerating and intensifying the circulation of commodities, capital, transactions, and information (Winseck, 2002). As Habermas concludes in discussing the bourgeois sphere, private enterprises and the state don't treat people as citizens, but as consumers, and that the instrumental rationality of money and power colonize rational-critical deliberation (Valtysson, 2010). The fact that such mediation of these online communicative spaces can be considered a colonization of such space. In the case of Facebook, then, groups and pages that allow and encourage discourse are created not to push for democratic ideals or rational-critical discussion, but instead to further data gathering techniques that allow them to maximize and expand profits. Facebook provides the environment and sets conditions and rules, users fill it with content, and Facebook gets the profit, creating an obvious act of colonization (Valtysson, 2010). Corporations, then, are in the process of commodifying relationships and collecting profits by serving as brokers of those relationships (Aufderheide, 2002).

This colonization reveals the true nature of these Internet companies, which is that cyberspace resembles private property more than initially thought (Milberry & Anderson, 2009). The architecture of social media and networking platforms is not in the hands of the users, however. They may freely access and use these tools, but they do so via the hands of a profit-oriented company that shapes and constrains unique cyber enclosures (Milberry & Anderson, 2009). The

level of commercial incursion into personal communication commodifies users and their content into resources for marketers, showing how control rests with the owners not the participants (Milberry & Anderson, 2009). In the way that capitalist companies have established these websites in these ways, they commercializing the social interactions of users, and immediately into the alleged public sphere (Papacharissi, 2002). An easy example here is the appearance of banner ads that appear in Facebook groups and discussion pages that are thought to be encouraging critical-rational discourse. Through creating this notion of consumer capitalism, these websites are actually recreating and reinforcing the dominant discourses of capital (Dahlberg, 2005). This discussion demonstrates the somewhat covert way in which users are dispossessed of autonomous interactions. However, public discussion is pushed to the margins of these websites, and capital ideology and discourse is actually strengthened among these digital public discussion spaces.

While the literature cited above has provided an overview of the way that capitalist ideology seeps into online public spaces, it provides only abstract discussion and doesn't necessarily offer a concrete method of understanding how these approaches actually infringe on any democratic or public sphere potential of the Internet. In the final section, I will provide specific examples that demonstrate how this capitalist ideology and commercialization of these spaces actually restrict the democratizing public sphere function of contemporary web technologies. However, this discussion above should help place government and institutional approaches and policies within the discussion of social media sites like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter limiting critical-rational discourse. As David Bunnel, a former Microsoft executive puts it, "The communication corporations don't have our best interest, they have their best interests at heart" (McChesney, 2008, p. 366).

Infringements of Freedom in the Digital Public Sphere

Lastly, this paper will turn its focus to demonstrate the corporate nature of online deliberative forums and the ways in which a public sphere cannot exist in this environment. Bohman (2004) was perhaps ahead of his time in seeing the ways that such corporate infringements would restrict the type of speech guaranteed within a legitimate public sphere. The notion of a democratic public sphere must commit itself to freedom and equality in the communicative interaction of the forum (Bohman, 2004), but this commitment has taken a back door to what these corporations deem appropriate and acceptable, be it for economic reasons or to continue operating in harmony with governments. The fundamental problem is that social media governance is driven by necessary commercial considerations, namely monetization, which can hurt activists just as much as it helps them (Youmans & York, 2012), as can be evidenced in the final examples featuring Facebook, Youtube, Twitter, and Microsoft.

Kacem El Ghazzali was a Moroccan activist who created a Facebook group that argued for a clearer dividing line between religion and education in his home country (York, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Youmans & York, 2012). His group, which consisted of over 1000 members, was deleted without warning and for no apparent reason (York, 2010; Morozov, 2011; Youmans & York, 2012). It's expected, however, that the deletion came as a result of obscure community policing standards that Facebook utilizes in order to keep their service as marketable, and therefore, profitable. Users have begun to find ways to exploit these reporting mechanisms to take down content that they don't agree with, however, such as an Arabic-language group that asked its users to flag and report accounts that were atheist, in order to have community policing standards take them down (Youmans & York, 2012). Other forms of corporate policy also seriously threaten the consideration of Facebook as a public sphere. Allowing anonymity in social action is considered essential for basic rights such as liberty, dignity, and privacy, yet there is a push for "real" identity requirements on the Facebook platform (Youmans & York, 2012). One of the most known examples of this policy in

action is the case of "We Are All Khaled Said". The "We Are All Khaled Said" Facebook page was created by Wael Ghonim (a former Google executive) under the pseudonym "ElShaheed." Facebook deleted both the account and the page, stating their policies don't allow for account using pseudonyms (Youmans & York, 2012). This push for identification is largely due to the fact that real identities allow for gathering greater user data and therefore commodify the user, boosting Facebook's ability to sell itself on the premise of providing advertisers with correct and highly detailed information. Compounding the problem is the fact that Facebook has all but monopolized the social networking market, so few other options exist for online users (Noam, 2009; York, 2010). As these examples prove, Facebook, which is assumed to play a significant role in the public sphere (York, 2010), is more interested in making money than upholding aids to civic action, and its policies reveal conflicts with any public sphere functions.

Facebook is not alone in having policies and terms of service that seriously question the existence of the public sphere in emerging web technologies. YouTube also has strict content removal policies, which allow them the right to remove any content that is deemed "offensive" (Morozov, 2011). During the Arab Spring, for instance, YouTube was seen as a vital communication outlet, taking the place of the mainstream journalism that didn't exist. Many videos were uploaded showing the regime's extreme violence, including one showing the battered body of a boy, Hamza Ali al-Khateeb, who was tortured and killed by the regime, allowing users both in the midst of the revolution and watching from afar the ability to see the brutality of the Syrian regime (Youmans & York, 2012). YouTube took the video down as it was against their community guidelines, despite its important role in global discourse and spread of information. Although YouTube would change their policies as a result, to allow uploading educational and documentary videos even if they may be considered offensive, they did so on a case-by-case basis, often taking videos down and then reinstating them. This seriously undermines the impact of sharing these videos (Youmans & York, 2012).

Other cases can also be found within other dominant online media companies. Orkut, a social media platform that is owned by Google, has been criticized for overcensoring content they consider to be calling for religious violence against Hindus and Muslims, while Microsoft censored users in the UAE, Syria, Algeria and Jordan in what they could search on Bing, to an even greater extent than the governments of those countries did (Morozov, 2011). Twitter, meanwhile, has actually taken a rather progressive, hands-off approach to user communication, stating they do not consider themselves mediators and will not intervene in user disputes, and will allow users to post potentially inflammatory content (York, 2010).

Twitter has, however, run into problems regarding its relationship with various governments, an unfortunate reality in having public discussion spaces in private spaces. For example, during the Iranian revolution, the U.S. State Department asked Twitter to withhold on scheduled maintenance to allow for Iranian users to continue tweeting. Despite denying influence, Twitter complied, and it will remain unknown what the influence was (Morozov, 2011). Furthermore, due to a sanction on U.S. companies doing business in Iran, the use of Twitter actually was in violation of American law (Morozov, 2011). While the government didn't impose any sanctions on the company, the fact that they could have shut down Twitter's service in Iran show how precarious these privatized communication forums are for allowing free speech. In a more extreme example, Yahoo! provided Chinese authorities access to e-mails of Shih Tao, a controversial Chinese journalist, which eventually led to his being sentenced to ten years in prison, while civil liberties groups believe Facebook turned over Fouad Mourtada's information to Moroccan authorities, resulting in his arrest (York, 2010). The fact that we are entering a culture that is dependent on these large intermediaries (216), who have the right to remove content and only stipulate those strategies or guidelines within extensive user agreements, is extremely troubling and deserves much more critical attention before

we can accept any democratic motivation or public sphere capabilities provided in the spaces made available by these private companies.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that before hailing the Internet as a technology capable of transforming democracy and rejuvenating the public sphere, scholars must primarily look to the social, political, and economic context that it is being utilized in. It is impossible, and dangerous, to consider these technologies inherently democratic, and hopefully, the practical examples provided in this paper help to illustrate this point. Furthermore, it is an important consideration to critically analyze the architecture and motivations of these social networking sites and the massive capitalist companies that run them. This ideological approach and produced architecture commercialize these online discussion spaces and commodify the user, seriously undermining one of the primary notions of Habermas' public sphere, mainly that it be autonomous from economic and government influence. In order to transform the web into a legitimate public sphere that provides democratic, rational-critical discussion, we need to radically transform the way that these online discussion spaces are created. What that radical transformation might look like is up for debate, however it will require a total shift in both government and public views on the Internet. Policy may have to undergo a total reconfiguration to better provide nonprofit, noncommercial outlets the resources to not only exist, but also thrive on the web. Within a publicly funded, nonprofit technology, such a public sphere could exist, but again falls into concerns such as regarding the ownership of Internet access, for example. We must critically analyze these online discussion spaces in terms of the control and power existing in the architecture, use, maintenance, and motivations of these technologies.

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