

ISSA Proceedings 1998 - Public Argument In The Post-Mass Media Age



In recent years, the demise of the “public sphere” has been a frequent subject for discussion, among philosophers, political scientists, sociologists, cultural critics, and argumentation theorists (Goodnight 1982; 1987; Hauser 1998; Verstraeten 1996). The discussion has been provoked, at least in part, by Jurgen Habermas’ (1975; 1979; and 1989) declarations that the public sphere had been “colonized.” Habermas’ argued that we needed to emancipate public discourse and identify new communication practices that could both create and sustain a more democratic “lifeworld.”

Our own interest in this topic has resulted in a series of papers that examine both argumentation theory and pedagogy. In previous studies we explored the demise of the argumentative free marketplace for ideas, the importance of having students engaged in “real world” disputes, the poverty of conventional forms of argumentation in politics and democratic processes, and proposed alternative sites for a democratic lifeworld (Hollihan, Riley & Klumpp 1993; Klumpp, Riley & Hollihan 1995; and Riley, Klumpp & Hollihan 1995). This essay extends our project by considering how the changing media environment may impact the possibility for public argumentation and civic deliberation.

We argue that the era of the mass audience and mass media is ending. While an optimistic reading of the future might lead one to claim that the advent of new media technologies will enhance the possibilities for civic participation by increasing the opportunities for citizens to express themselves, the new technologies may serve only to further isolate citizens and decrease their political influence.

The paper proceeds by:

1. considering the origins and emergence of the notion of the public sphere and the liberal political philosophy it reflects;
2. discussing the development of mass society and the mass media as a modernist invention;

3. arguing that the era of mass media is coming to a close;
4. assessing the consequences of a post-mass media society on the ability to form a democratically engaged citizenry; and
- 5) identifying some responses mandated for argumentation study and pedagogy by the new media world.

This essay raises many new questions as it offers insights on changing publics and arguments. It is only through such preliminary discussions and criticisms, that argumentation scholars can help ascertain the approaches available for public argument that can strengthen the citizenry's voice in their own governance and place in the global milieu.

1. Origins of the Public Sphere Concept

The notion of an engaged, civic minded public capable of forming themselves through social interactions emerged as enlightenment thinkers contemplated the requirements for democratic civic engagement. This was an essentially bourgeois vision, conceptually described as a forum accessible to as many people as possible, where a wide variety of social experiences could be expressed. The public sphere, thus came to occupy a space between the state, and the private spheres of life where questions of individual beliefs or conduct remained autonomous (Habermas 1989; Balthrop 1989). This sphere was the salon, the coffeehouse, the pub, or in the early days of the American republic, the town meeting. Citizens engaged in the public sphere provided a rich storehouse of public opinion, defined as a body of discourse and arguments constituting public will and values, from which governmental officials and other societal leaders could draw rhetorical sustenance and legitimacy.

In the public sphere, opinions, deliberations, and ultimately, democratic choices were framed in rational discussion. Individuals and communities negotiated the meaning of their everyday experiences and developed a texture of preferences for political action. This notion of the public sphere, explicitly liberal in philosophy, was best suited to a politics of place. Citizens contributed to the public discussions based upon their personal experiences or those of their kin and neighbors with whom they came into contact in their daily lives. Most citizens lived their lives within fairly proscribed geographic spaces, and thus had few opportunities for learning about life outside of their village. Indeed, one source of power for the ruling class, and especially for monarchs, was that they alone possessed knowledge about life in other villages, because they had access to

information gleaned from their agents, like tax collectors, military attaches, etc. (Tarde 1898).

The notion of a public sphere fulfilled an almost mystical faith in the possibility that citizens might willingly submit their prejudices and predispositions to the risk that they might be dislodged by the force of competing ideas and arguments. According to this view, a public is created through its argumentation. For this to occur, a “required agreement” on some fundamental terms or issues - a “universe of discourse” - is necessary (Blumer 1946: 191). People engaged in meaningful public deliberations must take into account each other’s opinions and must be willing to compromise in order to determine an acceptable course of action. This debate and interaction may be highly emotional and prejudiced, rather than highly intelligent and thoughtful, but the very process of discussion enhances deliberative consideration and helps to ensure a more or less rational outcome (Blumer 1946).

By the late nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries, the idealized public sphere, assuming the idealized form ever took practical form, was gone. A combination of forces of modernization dramatically reshaped the day-to-day patterns and life experiences of civilization, and fundamentally altered public discourse. Knowledge of a new world beyond the horizon, and access to ships capable of transporting settlers to this new world to begin life anew in colonial outposts, uprooted communities and societies that had lived in ethnic isolation and forced them to make contact with other cultures and peoples. Military invasions, urbanization, industrialization, education, and mechanized agricultural production also changed the ways in which people lived, put bread on their table, and sustained their family and communal experiences. Increasingly this modernization meant a diminished level of interpersonal contact and influence and an increased level of formal social control and influence. As societies modernized and industrialized, people were more likely to work for others rather than to produce the foods for their own table. Rather than barter their produce, they worked for money, and increasingly entered the marketplace as consumers (Sennett 1974).

Modernity meant that workers punched time cards, adapted to schedules imposed by others, dressed in appropriate fashions or even uniforms, and educated their children in accordance with a standard core curriculum designed to instill the appropriate cultural, consumer, and political values. For example, the expressed purpose of many 19th century “settlement” houses, such as Jane Adams’ Hull

House in Chicago, was to help the city's newest residents adapt their lifestyles to the new urban industrial values so they could take their place in capitalist society. Likewise the original goal of the Urban League was to help Southern, rural African-Americans adapt to life in Northern cities.

By the mid-twentieth century, this trend had produced a mass production and consumption society. "Where there once existed relative independence (pig-rearing, smallholdings, weaving and sewing, etc.) there now existed a dependence upon capitalistically produced and marketed commodities. The reproduction of social life was fueled by the products of capitalist factories - not only its material reproduction, but also, and increasingly its psychic reproduction" (Robins & Webster 1988: 4).

As societies modernized, the means of communication changed as well. Citizens increasingly acquired the information they needed to monitor the events in their world not in the interpersonal communication settings envisaged by the liberal enlightenment philosophers, but from the mass media. The media permitted citizens to acquire information, and ultimately to form opinions about life beyond the borders of their own village, and as local contact and identity were diminished, national identity and class identity were strengthened (Tarde 1898).

2. Politics and the Shift to a Mass Society

While the rush to modernize and incorporate new scientific discoveries into daily life was greeted enthusiastically by most citizens, social critics warned that the shift from "public" to "mass" society might diminish the prospects for citizenship and democratic participation. Walter Lippman (1922: 29) wrote that: "Accurate knowledge of public affairs, on which sound opinions must be based, is simply unavailable to the ordinary citizen. The political world is out of reach, out of sight, and out of mind." According to Lippman, most citizens form their ideas from sorely incomplete accounts.

Having little or no contact with actual events, they filter all they see and hear through their prejudices and fears. Lippman was dismayed by the prospects for democratic governance, or for a political rule formed through the careful cultivation and respect for public opinion. He thought the world - of the 1920s, mind you - had become too large and too complicated for most citizens to comprehend or navigate.

Lippman's suspicion of ordinary citizens' ability to govern was as old as the republic (Wood 1991) but he believed that the current century had yielded citizens that had become passive spectators in public life (cited by Price 1992).

Perhaps they were passive because mass society gave them so little opportunity for interaction or self expression. Mass society is composed of anonymous individuals and is marked by little interaction or communication among its members. It is extremely heterogeneous, and includes people from all strata of society. It is widely dispersed geographically, more loosely organized than the public, and its members are typically unable to act in concert. What binds together the mass is neither shared emotions (as in a crowd), nor disagreement and discussion (as in a public), but instead a common focus of interest or attention (Price 1992). This shared attention is essentially the only common link among members of the mass. They do not act together through collective will, they are unable or unwilling to effectively communicate with each other, and they are left to act separately in the pursuit of their own self interests (Price 1992).

Blumer (1946: 187) noted that mass behavior was becoming common as increased mobility, the mass media, and education all “operated to detach individuals from customary moorings and thrust them into a wider world.” Mass society caused people to withdraw from local life and civic discussions, and to rely on the mass media for virtually all political information. Thus the twentieth century was the century of mass communication. For most of the century, communication was linear in fact as well as conceptualization - a singular source formulates a message which is disseminated to large, assumed homogenous individuals isolated physically but united into a uniform audience of the communication technology. In totalitarian societies, mass communication became a mechanism by which political leaders controlled society. In democratic societies, tremendous pressures of cultural sameness imposed similar pressures to conformity. In the latter, mass communication dictated a particular economy of discursive practice. C. Wright Mills (1956) described democratic politics within a society of mass communication:

In a mass,

1. far fewer people express opinions than receive them; for the community of publics becomes an abstract collection of individuals who receive impressions from the mass media.
2. The communications that prevail are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect.
3. The realization of opinion in action is controlled by authorities who organize and control the channels of such action.
4. The mass has no authority from institutions; on the contrary, agents of

authorized institutions penetrate this mass, reducing any autonomy it may have in the formation of opinion by discussion (p. 29).

Mass society was created and sustained through the mass media. By the selection of issues, and the tenor in which they were covered, the media determined what views and behaviors were acceptable or even praiseworthy, and what was unacceptable or outside of the mainstream. Audiences learned how to conduct themselves in social and work settings, how to cope with their personal crises, how to evaluate their social institutions, and what issues were important or significant. The media shaped the standards of justice and morality, and in the process gave life to a set of cultural values that most audiences accepted. The media helped overcome the pervasive regional, cultural, and even ethnic differences in the United States, and led to the creation of a more homogenous society. As the U.S. media companies exported their programming and brand name advertising abroad, the media helped assure that other countries and cultures would become more like America (Graber 1993).

Critics complained about the “narcotizing dysfunction” of mass communication, and protested that the public was exposed to a continuous stream of tidbits about public affairs that allowed them to settle into their role as spectators rather than as participants in their own societies (Lazarsfield & Merto 1948). These mass audiences may come together to view the same situation comedies or half hour news shows, but the only discernible patterns of collective behavior or shared social action that they seemed to take was to purchase those products that the capitalists who controlled these media relentlessly advertised throughout the day and night.

In addition to fueling the engine of modern consumer capitalism, public opinion in the media age was no longer shaped by ongoing civic discussion. Instead, opinions were the feedback that the public gave when they responded to questions from pollsters. The use of social scientific public opinion polling treated public opinion as merely an aggregate of what individuals believed, and not as a force that emerged from organized society (Habermas 1989; Crespi 1989; Herbst 1993). Public opinion research revealed that people were willing to express “strong” views on matters on which they had almost no information (Lane & Sears 1964). Research suggested that as many as 33 percent of the opinions gathered in general population surveys were “top of the head” responses offered without the benefit of previous thought or discussion (Bishop, Oldendick, Tuchfarber &

Bennett 1980). This type of polling reinforced status quo assumptions and policy choices, discouraged minority opinions, and inhibited political expression that might challenge existing hierarchies (Miller 1995). Polls reduce the range of acceptable political choices, pressure respondents to commit themselves to opinions that are not well thought out or that they might not have been able to articulate on their own, and have difficulty measuring the intensity of belief (Rucinski 1993; Lau 1994).

Polls help shape public opinion rather than merely reflect it. They can have a “bandwagon” effect on the emergence of support for a candidate, and as a consequence they influence how the press covers issues or candidates, how campaign funds might flow to the candidates, and ultimately how voters may choose from among candidates (McAllister & Studlar 1991; Bartels 1985). Poll results may inhibit, or even end the conversation on significant social issues by communicating to the public and the media either that people are not interested in this topic, or that their minds are already made up so further deliberation is unnecessary (Anderson, Dardenne, and Killenberg 1994).

Peters (1995) argued that the public opinion industry had essentially created a “visible fiction” of public opinion. He claimed that citizens did not create public opinions through their interactions with fellows, but instead had their opinions represented to them through the machinery of modern polling. If the public opinion in mass society is a fiction, however, it is an important fiction because political candidates, elected officials, media moguls, and others are always claiming that they have acted in response to the “will of the people” (Bennett 1993; McGee 1975).

3. The End of the Mass Media Era

While political and cultural communication in the 20th century were dominated by the mass media, as the century draws to a close changes in the economics and technology of communication are eroding the immense power of the mass structure for media communication. Some of these changes have resulted from changes in the economic organization of the media. The late twentieth century, for example, has seen the development of highly segmented media markets. Advertisers and other proponents of the mass structure for media dissemination have begun to reorient their planning toward differentiated markets. Differentiation may come on geographic or demographic characteristics, but either way messages are designed for smaller and smaller market segments. Technologies of printing, delivery, and broadcasting have facilitated these

changes.

The structural result of market segmentation has been the growth of narrowcasting as a substitute for broadcasting. The explosion of cable networks, for example, address interests from gardening to the law. Radio stations now think of “good numbers” in terms that would have led to the unloading of unprofitable stations in an earlier day. In large media markets, stations consider themselves successful with ten to twenty percent of their audience.

The end of the unlimited power of the mass media has come also from technological innovation. The growth of cable television was a critical element in the demise of the massification of the media. Cable systems are now available to 92 percent of American homes (Broadcasting and Cable 1996) and provide somewhere between 40 and 500 channels, in many cases with public access programming providing opportunities for minority voices.

But the variety of programming pales beside the earliest of the technological changes – the growth of home videocassette recorders (VCRs). According to one study, 95 percent of American homes own video cassette recorders (Broadcasting and Cable 1996). With the spread of VCRs, commercial tapes multiplied to provide programming on demand from previous producers of mass media content. The VCR provided access to home television sets not only for the products of the film and television industry, but for tapes generated by various political and religious groups. From the Iranian revolution to “the Clinton Tapes” the VCR provided a means to infiltrate the video market with ideological and political material.

Potentially, none of these changes has as dramatic an impact on the splintering of the mass audience as does the Internet. The Internet is a global computer communication network that already connects millions of users around the world. The number of Internet users doubled every 53 days in 1995, a rate of growth that may be unachieved by any other new technology (Kelly, cited in the Year of the Internet 1995/1996). The number of Internet users is certain to continue to increase as more people acquire personal computers, as the technology improves and becomes easier to use, as the speed and capacity for network connections improves, and as the quality of the Internet content improves (Hoffman, Novak & Chatterjee 1995; Krantz 1996). Internet users send and receive electronic mail, see text and graphics posted by individuals and organizations, communicate with interest groups and government agencies, acquire news and public information, learn about and purchase products, meet new friends, develop relationships, and satisfy their sexual urges and curiosities through pornographic Web sites, some of

which are highly (if not yet technically capable of being fully) interactive. Most major newspapers and many television stations have Web sites, so readers are no longer limited to their local newspaper for in-depth and up-to-the-moment coverage of issues. They can via telephone and computer modem log on to almost any major newspaper (and many minor papers) in the world.

Together these many changes define what we call the Post-Mass Media age. The days of gatekeeping control over the media are gone. The reorganization of communication dramatically alters the potential for argument in the public sphere.

4. The Possibilities for Citizenship and the Civic Community

The changes in the media of communication inevitably transform the character of the public sphere. We see the changes that result as inherently neither positive nor negative - their outcomes depend on the structuring of communication and argumentation within the choices presented by the post-mass mediated age. We call four important changes to your attention.

First, and most obviously, the new media increase exponentially the number of voices that have access to the public sphere. The mass media's pattern of the single speaker with media power addressing the masses has been replaced by a multiplicity of voices in the greatly expanded commercial media, on alternative channels in the increasingly fragmented world of narrowcasting, and in chat rooms and web sites across the Internet. Anyone with a videocamera or a computer terminal now has an electronic threshold. The new organizational patterns provide access to others with VCRs or computers, and often to narrowcasting beyond.

Second, this media involves increasing interactivity to replace the passive audience of the mass media era. The most dramatic of the new media to exemplify this greater interactivity are the chat rooms and on-line conferences made possible by the Internet. But other, more subtle ways also increase interactivity. The media increasingly use various "town hall" devices to give voice to those previously unheard in direct response to leaders and spokespersons from the public sphere. The passive audience is disappearing amid the inevitable choices that the proliferating media present to those formerly thought of as a mass audience. The broader choice of media and of content within media gives the consumer power that was unthinkable two decades ago in selecting the communication circle within which s/he will participate.

The third change follows from this greater consumer choice: the increasing

importance of the media consumer's construction of the message as the central activity in media behavior. Today, as never before, messages are fragmented, multiple, and disjointed. The assembly of coherence has become a task for those selecting the media rather than for those formulating the message (McGee 1990). This postmodern condition has created vital new importance on communication skills not previously featured. For example, where students first exposed to public issues once expressed difficulty in gathering information on a topic, the recent experience is that they find multiple sources of information of varying quality and ideological bias. Today, knowing how to assemble reliable and useful information and arguments from diverse sources to make sense of an issue is a vital skill.

The final change we point to is the fragmentation of the public into publics (Fraser 1992). With the gatekeeping function of the mass media diluted, and many more entering the communication milieu, something akin to Habermas' salons are now possible again. The result is an altered structure of public discourse. Those who participate in the new media often find themselves developing voice within confined spheres of interactive communication. These may be among like minded communicants or - just as likely - interacting with those with whom one disagrees to try out ideas in dissent. We have earlier argued that where the development of social movements - social factions in this viewpoint - were once controlled by access to the media, the new media permit the use of multiple communication sites to encourage development of localized positions (Riley, Klumpp & Hollihan 1995). In chat rooms and other spheres where public argument proceeds unabated by the constraints of access to mass media, new ideas and new voices are incubating, giving them confidence and preparing them for a broader public stage.

While these developments are neither inherently positive or negative, certain potentialities are clear. Several dangers to the public sphere could result. Perhaps the most important is the alteration in the balance between stability and anomy presented by the loss of mass media control. Gone is the era when the political rituals of nations that tied a people together in a common community were daily fare on the media. Certainly important rituals will continue to be televised, but with decreasing audiences. Even something so basic as the common experience of evening news is now a thing of the past. A President of the United States today delivers a State of the Union Address with its ritualistic celebration of national identity in competition with sitcom reruns, sporting events, garden shows, videotapes of legal cases, and even Matt Drudge. Just as important is the

potential for home-based communication channels such as the Internet to pull people from a physical public sphere into a virtual public sphere. The fear is that people will retreat to virtual spaces and communicate only with others who share their beliefs and views. Rather than reach out and form bonds of communities with their neighbors inhabiting their shared local spaces, they will communicate through the Internet with those who may be far away from them in distance, but close to them in experiences and ideology. Academics interested in argumentation theory, for example, can easily keep in touch with colleagues in Asia, Europe, and the United States via electronic mail and can have rousing discussions about their concerns viz. a viz. the public sphere. Engaging in these discussions is much easier than engaging with one's neighbors in the community about the deplorable state of the public schools (at least in many American cities), or about the widening rich-poor gap.

Also of concern are the related issues of privacy and personal freedom as the individualized post-mass media society seems to hold even more dangers than did mass society. Mass society was created in part through surveillance of consumer viewing, buying, and voting habits. Public opinion polls, marketing studies, television ratings, etc. were all designed around measuring the will and interests of the masses to assure that political candidates, product manufacturers, advertisers, and television programmers could satisfy their whims and desires. With cyberspace, however, we are seeing the emergence of technology that will go further still toward identifying audience interests and desires. No longer are the purveyors of products and programming able to respond only to the needs of masses. Now the technology permits them to tailor their products or messages directly to individual users.

Every time a user logs on to an Internet Web site, an electronic record is created. Thus, one can determine who is logging on to the site; what sites they are coming from or will go on to; how much time they spend on a site; what stories they read and what stories they ignore; what advertisements they pause over and which they skip; etc. Like Jeremy Bentham's (1843) well-known "Panopticon" (a circular building of cells where a guard could look into each cell to monitor the behavior of those inside without those in the cell from being able to determine whether or not they were being watched), Internet observers are omnipresent and omniscient, while the communicator is marginalized and monitored. On the Net, the virtual panopticon arguably has a chilling effect, limiting the range of acceptable arguments and behaviors. In the United States, for example, the

Federal Bureau of Investigations is known to closely monitor Web sites that involve discussions among anarchists, political radicals and reactionaries, and pedophiles. The Web is not just a means for communication then, it is also an integrated system of surveillance, intelligence, and control. Access to information about electronically mediated activity - cable viewing, electronic financial transactions, telephoning, computer usage, etc.- creates records that provide in-depth information about individuals and the groups with which they associate. This information gives insight into their whereabouts, movements, daily patterns of work and recreation, friends, tastes, and preferences. Such information is a valuable asset to governments, industry, and media producers, the diverse centers of power in the new age (Robbins & Webster 1988). In this sense, the information society in the post mass media world expresses conflicting patterns of centralization and decentralization, of concentrated political power and of fragmented public impotence, the hallmarks of the new era (Robbins & Webster 1988).

It is clear that some common topoi of argument will disappear as society loses the common experience of mass media. Common metaphors, analogies, and other figures today are more likely to be grounded in the shared experience of the mass media than they are common literature such as the Bible. Dan Quayle's references to Murphy Brown are particularly egregious but illustrative examples of the place of the mass media in public argument. The fragmentation of communication threatens to rob even this common mass media experience of its power to provide usable themes. Without these, the construction of community through discourse may be a more limited process. As public argument's home is more regularly located in virtual or isolated communities of discourse, we are threatened with a balkanization of society with all the implications that metaphor has on social progress and peace. This is the dark side of the post-mass media age.

The move toward a global society has already changed the fundamental relationships between citizens and the political state as evidenced by the newly emerging European Union. The citizens of Western European nation states shaped by distinct cultures, languages, religious experiences, senses of history and identity are being asked to overcome centuries of hostilities and competition in order to form a common union, despite the fact that they do not have any newspapers or television networks that transcend their political boundaries. Indeed, the closest thing to a European multinational television network is the U.S. owned and dominated news channel CNN. What are the opportunities for a

shared political culture and for the creation of a civic society when the symbolization, representation, and construction of self-interest remain deeply embedded in the psyche of individuals and in their indigenous cultural practices (Capelli 1995)?

One vision for the success of the new European Union is that the citizens of these disparate nations are drawn together by their common problems to overcome their historical differences and to engage in arguments that search for common solutions. Another vision, however, is that these citizens and their governments have become virtually irrelevant, in a world in which it is multinational corporations and not people and governments who make the decisions that shape societal destinies. Technological information systems that empower elites, weaken citizens, and that create an illusion, rather than a real sense of political and discursive power and influence may be the most effective way to “manage” the citizens (or should we say inmates?).

But the changes provide obvious potential for the improvement of democracy. Primary among these possibilities is the enhanced ability to participate in public arguments. No longer silenced or circumscribed to friends in their interaction with others, public voices and their arguments have a chance to be tested across a broad spectrum of issues. The increased volume of public discourse provides a much richer mix of public opinion – in the original, non-quantitative sense of the term – for those social and political leaders who will connect with the new publics. The result is not simply an avenue to sample public opinion in a different way, but also an opportunity for exposure to new ideas outside the control of media elites and a sort of public arena to witness the strength of various arguments for and against particular positions. Issues can emerge and be explored in a much richer framework.

These opportunities could greatly enhance the health of the public sphere. Greater participation can facilitate a greater pool of ideas and strategies for addressing public problems. Greater contact between the public sphere and the governmental sphere can enhance the legitimacy of leadership and support for governmental officials. A vibrant structure of public argument would facilitate the quality of public life.

5. The Direction of the Study of Public Argument

Perhaps not surprisingly, the study of argument in the public sphere during the twentieth century assumed a mass media model of dissemination. That model assumed several characteristics of communication:

1. that communication originates in a source with access to the mass media for the dissemination of the message (Head 1972);
2. that messages are designed to appeal to the needs, interests, and aptitudes of the masses (Graber 1993);
3. that mass audiences are understandable in terms of quantitative expression of attitudes, preferences, and responses (Peters 1995); and
4. that consumers of media are essentially passive receivers and processors of messages, open to influence (Reardon and Rogers, 1988).

Our present understanding of public argument similarly posits that:

1. the arguer with access to the media is the key source of argument,
2. s/he appeals to his/her audience by identifying enthymatic premises common to both social and local knowledge, and
3. s/he can measurably impact attitude or opinion change in those who listen to the argument and vote or respond to polls.

These assumptions are challenged in the post-mass media age. Just as media theorists have begun to revise their models and questions in the face of the changing media landscape, argumentation scholars must also redefine public argument. The effect of these challenges is to alter both the questions asked and the grammar used to view the public argument process.

First, we should shift our model of argument to recognize the increased importance of the structure of the argumentative sphere and particularly the role of public participants as receivers as well as generators of argument. This requires a new grammar in which the focus is placed on the texture of discourse and participation in interactive relationships within argumentative communities (McKerrow 1990). Are our old notions of argumentative practices that contribute to a healthy public sphere altered by the new media and the proliferation of spheres? What strategies will assemble arguments from the fragmented messages of the new media environment and return them to the public sphere? How do participants sort arguments? Accompanying these important questions is a reaffirmation in our pedagogy of the importance of assembling fragmented messages as a key process in public argument. This component has traditionally been taught as a preparatory skill to making arguments oneself. It now takes on an increasing importance.

Second, we must focus beyond the governmental sphere on various public spheres formed by interest groups, particular ideologies, and movements. What is

the character of arguments in these groups? What closes such discourse to refutation and criticism? What opens it up to the full advantages of critique in argument? How can we not just encourage participation but meaningful exchanges that facilitate the objectives of a healthy public sphere?

Third, we must better understand the relationship between the multiplying public spheres and the governmental sphere that manifests concentrated power in our culture. How do arguers pass from sphere to sphere and how do they adapt arguments from other spheres? How do we assure that the quality of argument in one sphere energizes the other? How do we balance the advantages of the public spheres as incubators of argument and arguers against the dangers of public spheres that become insular and exclusive?

Fourth, we need to reconceptualize the place of the media in leadership to better reflect the new media. The mass media era lent itself to a highly manipulative environment, manifested by governmental control in many nations and cultural control in others. The techniques of manipulation have adapted nicely to the new media. Already in place are manipulative schemes such as sophisticated audience segmentation techniques, direct mail to a confined base, the use of strategies of exploitation of “enemy” interest groups. Similarly, governmental regulatory strategies designed to control the mass media are being adapted to the new media: controls over software dissemination, national security justifications for limitations on and access to Internet traffic, and even controls over pornography. How do arguers resist such manipulative strategies? What regulatory policies and/or individual behaviors will free control of the new media from the constraints of the mass media era?

Finally, we must rethink the priority we place on old questions about important arguments being covered by the media. In the mass media era, a primary concern for many academics, and at least some government regulators was to assure access to the media, through the creation of educational television channels, public access channels, etc. As Shapiro (1998: 37) argues:

The task is different, however, in a post-television world of converged media, where “channels” are essentially unlimited and almost anyone is able to speak. The problem is not scarcity of space but the opposite: an abundance of space – and content – which creates a scarcity of attention. In other words, the good stuff will be out there, but with so many competing information sources it will be difficult to get anyone to know about it, let alone listen.

At this point, the questions are probably more important than whatever answers

are available. The new media are here and they are changing the nature of argumentative exchange. Furthermore, they represent open opportunities that will structure argument for years to come. Standing on the threshold of the mass media age in the early twentieth century, choices were made that created the environment that we have lived with throughout the century. We are given such a choice again. What choices will be made? Perhaps the questions we have posed will spark an ongoing dialogue and conversation that goes beyond this conference and fosters a considered shaping of the potential of the new media to improve the quality of democratic life.

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