

THE CITIZEN AND CYBERSPACE

Mike Featherstone

The growth of “global cities”—megacities at the heart of the information networks of the global economy—and the continued development and spread of information technologies raise profound questions about public life and the civic engagement necessary for citizenship. Will there be a progressive privatization of public life, Featherstone asks, with the replacement of the citizen by the consumer, a McCitizen without means or basis for association? On the one hand, Featherstone argues, if we conceive of the public sphere, as Habermas does, as essentially a dialogical one, with individuals interacting in a shared locale as equal participants, then the prospects for new spaces of participation and citizenship appear to be dim. On the other hand, the new information technologies also appear to have the potential to create new forms of solidarity and bases of deliberation, suggesting a need to rethink citizenship in a broader key. Featherstone considers both the possibilities and problems of cyberspace for generating the trust and empathy necessary for democratic community.

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JOHN THOMPSON'S BOOK *The Media and Modernity* was published in 1995, yet it fails to discuss the Internet and the development of cyberspace. These are important developments in terms of his typology of face-to-face interaction, mediated interaction, and mediated quasi-interaction.¹ The Internet is clearly a form of mediated interaction, sharing some of the characteristics of the letter and telephone. Like the letter it is a scriptural form, yet it is almost like the telephone in that the exchanges between parties can be almost instantaneous and relatively simple to initiate. It is like a conversation, except that it uses the written word; it is also possible for multiple users to participate in the same "conversation."

Yet the next stage of the Internet, which we are just seeing emerge, really deserves a classificatory category of its own; for simplicity we can call it virtual interactivity, although this only captures limited dimensions of its characteristics. It is a multimedia form, combining text, speech, music, video, and images; hence it has the combined characteristics of the telephone, radio, video, television, newspapers, books, etc., yet with a massive potential difference from the conventional media in the extent of programming and archive material available for access through increased "bandwidth." Also important is the capacity to configure material in databases, which can be accessed and searched rapidly from many points of view. The data is hypertexted or hyperlinked so that non-narrative modes of investigation entailing jumps within and across texts become the habitual mode, in contrast to the linear mode we are used to with reading books and other texts. New discontinuous, parallel-accessing modes of reading and viewing akin to channel-hopping with television are in the process of being developed.

In the first place, these developments promise the fulfillment of a long-held dream of humanity, that of completeness—every piece of written or recorded knowledge (image/music/text) will be immedi-

¹ See John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

ately available. Yet the corollary is the problem of navigation, selectivity, and sense: now that everything is available, where do we go and why do we go there?

But along with completeness there is an important second feature to this next stage of the internet: interactivity. This does not mean that the Internet can be used like a telephone, but that the material downloaded, or used in conversational mode, can be edited and reformed. With text it is possible to write in the middle of other people's text—to effectively become a co-author—which threatens to make available a whole mass of co-written hybrid versions of texts, as well as to undermine the authority of book writers and intellectuals. In addition similar possibilities of co-production are possible with imagistic forms—it will be easy to alter, morph, and reconstruct existing film and television output, or construct new output which is not based on montage, but mixing or morphing through digitalization.

A third and potentially radical feature of the new medium is the possibility of three-dimensional representation and fuller sensory replication. There are already three dimensional programs available on the Internet that have the potential to reconfigure the existing flat page format to a move-through data-architecturally constructed space (VRML, it is predicted, will replace HTML). Yet the potential of cyberspace, by incorporating virtual reality into the process, is to simulate a highly realistic space, which offers a high degree of instantiation or immersion—a space which one can rapidly move or “fly” through, which is highly realistic and transmits not only aural and visual information, but touch and feelings of force or gravity.

What are the implications for public life and citizenship? In such a (parallel) world there are clearly new possibilities of public space. In the first place the prospects of a Habermasian public sphere emerging with the Internet and cyberspace do not look very good. How can one have public interaction when one will never meet the other interactants, when the routine tests of sincerity or goodwill we operate with in everyday interactions become impossible? How can trust be generated?

Yet there are those like Rheingold² who argue that virtual communities can revitalize citizenship democracy. People will form personal relationships in cyberspace; indeed it is interesting to read the accounts of BBS (bulletin board), MOO, and MUD (multi user domain) friendships, where people develop intimate, emotionally rewarding attachments with complete strangers, reversing some of our long held sociological assumptions about primary and secondary relationships. For Rheingold the loss of community which many bemoan in contemporary societies will now be regenerated through BBSs and MOOs, which have relatively democratic access and modes of address undistorted by external power and authority.³ One can rediscover one's citizenship rights and involvement in a whole range of issues. One can escape from the rigid interdependencies and power balances within which one is normally placed and escape the significant others and superiors who "know what you think" and feel entitled to "speak on your behalf." Violence—both actual and symbolic—which silences the voices of the less powerful becomes more difficult to operate. New forms of trust may become generated. In a society where many of the major dangers are cumulative and invisible—e.g., ecological threats, pollution, radiation, AIDS, etc.—we rely more and more on information about them. A technology which is in part a "super-telephone" can aid verification of information by the ease with which it can be exchanged and checked.⁴

These are the conditions for the development of what some would call the postmodern public sphere⁵—a notion that contests the myth

² See Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1993).

³ Jim McGuigan, *Culture and the Public Sphere* (London: Routledge, 1996) 182.

⁴ Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Jaron Lanier Interview," *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*, ed. Hershman Leeson (Seattle: Bay, 1996) 51.

⁵ See John Hartley, *Popular Reality: Journalism, Modernity, Popular Culture* (London: Arnold, 1996); and Mark Poster, "Postmodern Virtualities," *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (London: Sage, 1995) 79 - 97.

of the extendibility of the Enlightenment public sphere and asks us to see the democratic potential of the mass media and cyberspace forms. Hartley asks us to reflect on and reconsider an intellectual tradition which has favored production over consumption, urban over suburban, masculine over feminine, authority over the popular, truth over desire, word over image, and the printed archive over the popular screen.⁶ The Internet and cyberspace, then, may well force us to rethink our notions of citizenship and public space.

Yet there are also clear problems with this pioneering and subversive vision. In conventional terms, as we have just mentioned, trust is generated over time as we get to know people, as we digest their actions and words and observe their gestures and bodily betrayals in co-present interactions. Liminal moments are usually well circumscribed, at least if one lives in Anglo-Saxon, North European, or North American cultures, although consumer culture and advertising generate a wider range of liminoid repertoires and sense of the constructability of persona and performing selves, which invade everyday life. In the Habermasian discourse on the public sphere, masks and disguises are misinformation to be filtered out; they are resonant with the lack of seriousness of the carnival, or with the artfulness and deception of the courtier in the court society, to be contrasted with the solid, serious, purposeful bourgeois gentleman—the clarifier of truth.⁷

The Internet and cyberspace will make masking and disguise both easy and routine. Already we see that in MOOs and BBSs there is the phenomenon of computer cross-dressing: age, gender, ethnicity are all seen as reconstructable. Indeed there are also accounts of people interacting on the Internet with ‘bots’ (computer programs which masquerade as persons, being coded up to give a sophisticat-

⁶ Hartley 156.

⁷ See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

ed and flexible range of responses).⁸ If one develops regular interactions with a person who is in disguise, or with a machine, how does this effect trust? There are clearly gains as well as losses to be considered here, for example, the loss of the ideal of pure communication, of complete truthfulness and trust: a romantic ideal of complete and self-sufficient identity which draws on Rousseau and others. Instead of the masculine and bourgeois ideal, there may well be more realistic possibilities for communication and participation by accepting masking and performance as part of everyday life and not seeking to eradicate it. Many academics and intellectuals often inhabit the tradition of Rousseau and have a long-standing prejudice for sincerity over acting.⁹

Likewise, it has been argued that the Internet and cyberspace will encourage us to accept the notion of multiple selves.¹⁰ The Windows format many of us operate with when using personal computers already encourages parallel processing, carrying out many tasks at once. The lack of a strong identity, the possibility of fragmentation and splitting into multiple selves, formerly regarded as a pathology, it is argued, is now increasingly normalized and brought into the psychological orthodoxy and surfaces in the popular psychology how-to-do-it literature.¹¹

There exists a further problem in terms of the generation of the "civic bodies" Sennett speaks about.¹² The simulated puppet bodies

⁸ Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Sandy Stone Interview," *Clicking In: Hot Links to a Digital Culture*, ed. Hershman Leeson (Seattle: Bay, 1996) 105-115.

⁹ Norbert Elias's *The Court Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983) is an important correction to this tradition; see also the discussion in Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) and in Gerhard Vowinckel, "Command or Refine," *Theory, Culture & Society* 4 (1987): 2-3.

¹⁰ See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995).

¹¹ See John Shotter, *Cultural Politics of Everyday Life: Social Constructionism, Rhetoric and Knowing of the Third Kind* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1993).

¹² See Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York: Norton, 1995).

we use to represent ourselves in virtual reality seem a long way from the body in pain, the aging body which reminds us of our common human fate and vulnerability. One can know little about the body in pain from the representation the person chooses to employ: it could well be a sick and invalid person who chooses a youthful, active body to represent him- or herself. One can seemingly escape the lived body and interact only with the virtual body, something which, it has been argued, reveals a continuity between the cyberspace aficionados and the idealistic tendencies of Western thought with its long-held preference for the mind over the body. Cyberspace offers the seductive possibilities of pure, unencumbered mind, able to travel and transform itself, to float free of the messiness and disgust of decaying bodies, of what is contemptuously referred to as “the meat.”¹³ It offers a technological dream of mastery, of the elimination of death and suffering bodies, which Sennett is critical of in respect to the urban plan: the city swept clean of the refuse of human misery. Yet it may well be that the new forms of association have potential to go beyond the type of opposition Sennett speaks of and that technological mastery of the planned kind ceases to have a coherent world view anymore in a time of greater pragmatism and syncretism. Indeed, some of the dichotomies between human beings and nature, humans and machines, are being actively deconstructed by social developments and theoretical formulations. We may well develop respect and emotional solidarity with a range of pre- and post-human natural and mechanic forms and fusions¹⁴—something which points to a range of citizenship possibilities and takes us away from the unitary models.

¹³ See Mike Featherstone, “Post-Bodies, Aging and Virtual Reality,” *Images of Aging: Cultural Representations of Later Life*, ed. Mike Featherstone and Andrew Wernick (London: Routledge, 1995) 227-244; and Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows, introduction, *Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk: Cultures of Technological Embodiment* (London: Sage, 1995) 1-20.

¹⁴ See Mike Featherstone, “Beyond the Postmodern Future? Posthuman Development and the Question of Citizenship,” ISS Global Futures Lecture, The Hague, June 19, 1997; and Mike Featherstone, “Global Networks and the Question of Technology: Some Considerations Arising from the Work of Norbert Elias,” Elias 100 Years Conference, UNICAMP, São Paulo, November 21, 1997.