

Reason in the City? Publicity, communication and urban politics

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I'd like to add to this discussion with some reflections on various ideas of urban rationality and its relationship to publicity, communication and urban politics.

The rise of mass circulation newsheets was a critical component for Habermas in his understanding of the constitution of a public sphere. The coffee houses of 18th century London and Paris provided a social space in which the issues of the day gleaned from the newsheets could be openly discussed. Urban rationality here lay in the ability of speakers from different social backgrounds to situate their responses to these issues in an environment that allowed the responses to act as perspectives in a discourse that circulated in a social public space. The newsheet provided a common focus of substantive content, out from which different validity claims could extend.

Richard Sennett has sought to replace these assumed ties between the urban public and the rational by replacing it with a relationship between the public and the performative. The coffee house was significant for Sennett because it was a space of performance, rather like the urban theatres that were so well attended by all social classes at this time. Speakers could communicate across difference about the issues of the day, not because of calm and considered communication, but through emotional performance in which speakers of different classes and backgrounds all adopted the common convention of communication using theatrical styles. Emotional force and non-discursive communication centred on the gestures of the body were equally important as forms of communication. The validity claim in play here was credibility. Speakers transcended their own particular concerns and became a public, not through the circulation of validity claims and their rational examination but through losing themselves and communicating effectively in a wider performance. The newsheet provided the common script for the transformative performances.

For the purposes of our discussion Habermas and Sennett suggest, in a stylized way, how the media in the city can promote rational forms of deliberation or open up new performative spaces that may help constitute an urban public. On the other hand the media can be implicated in forms of what Habermas called 'distorted communication' that serve the capitalist and bureaucratic system through the use of strategic (means ends) rationality, or be part of dominating discourses that support elite power (not least of whom are the media owners themselves). Bent Flyvbjerg has demonstrated how this discursive power in the city can render rationality a poor consolation for

those with less power. In these scenarios power co-opts or trumps rationality and closes off democratic possibilities.

In *Reason in the City of Difference* I tried to explore the possibilities of an understanding of rationality that acknowledges the constant pressures of discursive power but that also looks to democratic possibilities of a deeper form of communicative rationality (one that takes in non-discursive action as well as the linguistic action that concerns Habermas). Following the lead of contemporary pragmatist philosophers such as Lenore Langsdorf and Sandra Rosenthal this is an idea of communication and rationality that sees as a continuum the rational and the performative, the emotional and the rational, cognition and embodiment, discursive and non discursive communication. The inspiration is the pragmatist philosopher John Dewey and his idea of rationality as the acknowledgement and management of diverse impulses both within the individual and social organism. This is a deeper idea of communicative rationality (what I have called transactional rationality), one that is fed by diverse impulses (from embodied emotion and embodied intelligence to reflective intelligence), via multiple relations (that Dewey called transactions) that involve media, technology as well as other non human actors. Rationality is a disposition towards difference and a way of institutionally and individually responding to ongoing agonistic relations. At its heart is the idea of communication as constitutive practice and practice as a form of ongoing enquiry. This opens up the terrain of just what might constitute communicative action that has a bearing on urban politics.

The idea of transactional rationality starts to connect all kinds of media practices to an understanding of urban rationality and democratic politics. Here are a few speculative suggestions. First the substantive content of news reporting can act as a platform for further deliberative debate on the street corner, on local radio phone-ins in the letter pages of local newspapers, for example. Second the emotional force of certain news stories or the way they are reported may resonate in an urban context. Sennett was rightly critical of the rise of the politics of intimacy replacing the public realm, however human interest stories with high emotional content can act as a spur to further communicative action or mobilisation over an issue (this has been especially true in the area of municipal public services). Other emotional responses can lead to parochial or prejudiced reactions but must eventually come into contact with other responses (Dewey's normative test here is to favour those responses that encourage human growth via the individual and the community). Emotional communication might also be revelatory and have the element of world-disclosure. Dewey did not make a strong distinction between rationality as reason giving or world disclosure (Duvenage 2003).

A third aspect of media and transactional rationality might be to consider the media as a transactional infrastructure – the way different media mediate relations. In his consideration of *The Public and Its Problems* Dewey had already realised the impact the increasing complexity of human relations that came with modern industrial society. That complexity makes it more difficult for a public to find itself. Equally the diversity of mediated relations over time and space may open up the possibilities of multiple publics and distanced interest groups. Cities are exemplary spaces of this kind of transactional porosity. The role of social networking sites, blogs and chatrooms can be significant in the formation of proto publics, or helping constitute

what Nancy Fraser called subaltern counter publics. City media can also help connect discursive spaces or make wider examples of certain actions (such as Archon Fung's citizen participation examples of turning around a local school or improving neighbourhood policing in the south side of Chicago). As well as connecting diverse spaces media can also connect across time. Long running, or recurrent stories or investigations have the potential to serve an evaluative function in urban politics. Fung rightly points ongoing policy evaluation as an important component of deliberative democracy (that is, deliberation is not just about discussion and decision making).

A fourth consideration is media as a quality of transaction. Dewey used the term transaction rather than interaction to avoid the assumption of inter-relations between fully formed or finished off things, persons or objects – all are in process through their relations. Artistic communication is the consummate form of communication for Dewey in this regard. In *Art as Experience* he focuses on artwork - the communicative work done by the artist and the audience, rather than privileging the art object itself. Art should be taken out of the gallery where it tends to be the preserve of the critical habitus of an elite class and be re-insinuated in everyday life. The communicative and connective possibilities of various artistic or aesthetic media – street theatre, graffiti, music gigs, sculpture, photography, gardening - can act as points of connection that have proto political possibilities. As Dewey argues democratic processes must always have an experimental edge and various artistic media in the city can be at this cutting edge.

In 1892 John Dewey and Robert Park were both involved in the abortive attempt to launch a newspaper *The Thought News* that, for Dewey, would break down the barriers between philosophy, social commentary and the investigation and analysis of social problems and would equally offer a style of journalistic investigation that was more scientific. Naïve as this may seem, and as it did to many at the time, this breaking down of barriers suggests how various media in the city can still have an impact as social/democratic commentary - in substantive terms, in terms of emotional force, technologies of connection and aesthetic resonance and be a vital component of a more dispersed communicative rationality.

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