

Individual as the “Other”: Lacanian reading of digital public sphere

Garima Singh

Introduction

The most celebrated definition of 20th century public sphere has been given by Jurgen Habermas (1962, 1991) in his doctoral thesis “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere”. Discursive in nature his theory leans heavily on optimistic equality and communicative action (Habermas, 1983, 1987). Equal chance of: contribution, raising questions, expressing needs, and speakers’ right to discuss the procedure or report in-discrimination, hence, characteristically Utopian. It is historical, as it differentiates between the early and present state of bourgeoisie public sphere, is political, as it explains the changes in notions of democracy and publicity, and is social as it delineates formation of public opinion in the beginning and its manufacturing now amidst the socio-cultural transformations. His polarization between life-world and system is similar to production and interaction. It overlooks the fact that change does not take place in isolation. The scale of change is global in nature and thus influences all aspects. In all of these we hear echo of Adorno and Horkheimer (Kellner, 1989).

This article builds on the “Semiotic Theory of Public Sphere” as given by Ari Adut (2012). Adut defines types of public sphere access: Physical, Representational and Sensory. As the access to media provided space that fits into representational is excluded in physical access Adut refuses to use it. He forbids the application of representational as it inwardly takes into account that section which might not have desired or agreed upon the representation. And thus, validation of sensory access that opens itself to all modes of access by focusing on ‘spectator-ship’. He expounds public sphere as an apparatus of signs with three essential

features outlining the notions of visibility and publicity. First feature, is a gathering or a collective force of humans in a virtual or physical space which leads to spectator-ship. A performance that is being watched by a spectator, is at its center. The “spectator” with general rules of maneuvering among strangers entails objectivity. With omission of private know how and intention behind an act, “appearance”, (second feature) forms the base of judgement for spectators and “representation”, (third feature) leads to formation of generalized groups. Assigning groups and creating profiles put stress on the nature of a heterogeneous public that thrives on common base to communicate and judge.

Application of Jacques Lacan’s (1966) psychoanalytic theory to decipher the personality of an individual is multifarious but rewarding. He warns us against the use of an incomplete and ambiguous psychological description of psyche (subject) that rests on conscious (Cuéllar, 2009). He considers ‘unconscious’ a repertoire of ‘signifiers’; it is structured like a language (Lacan, 1966). An individual or a subject is defined by signifiers that constitute language which is his/her own. Language constitutes and divides a subject. Representation of a subject to others and to himself is on signifier to signifier basis “The subject as the effect of the signifier” (Cuéllar, 2009).

In the virtual world the signifiers of the ‘other’ is intensely chaotic. The ‘other’ as represented by the signifiers is in flux, the flux of symbolic father. Lacan employs use of ‘little object’ or ‘other’ and the ‘big other’ along with phallus, castration, names of the symbolic father etc. as tools to read the language of signifiers used by a subject in reference to ‘other’ (Lacan, 1966). For him “symbolic father” is one who takes away the mother from the child/subject. ‘Mother’, is (not the biological) anyone who fulfills the basic needs of food and caressing. “Names of the symbolic father” are the titles that are fixed identities of the ‘symbolic’ father, desired by the mother and thus, is the source of separation of a child from his/her mother. This separation is mandatory to be able to learn the language and represent oneself using signifiers. Separation comes with a mental contract that forbids the use of “Names of the Father” allowing a subject to move ahead of demand and recognize desire.

One reason for the absence of “Names of the Father” in digital public sphere is that the identity is deceptive (Profile names on social media). Second, it is infinite, not in literal terms but in a mystical way, an unconscious enjoyment. (Lacan, 1966). In absence of “Names of the Father” there is no contract or there is foreclosure of contract that results in psychosis (Theoretically). Psychosis is blaming alien forces for trauma and giving birth to imaginary “Names of the Father”. In the digital world, it takes the form of trolling and harassment that individuals involve themselves into.

The search for ‘real’, individually or collectively marks the “return of repressed” (Lacan, 1966). Expression and repression as contemplated by Lacan go hand-in-hand. What we ex-

press to make ourselves better understood or to be understood in the desired way, especially in terms of the plays of publicity of public sphere brings back what we have been trying to repress. The deception of ego doesn't allow the desires to surface explicitly through signifiers. Here, the four formations of unconscious that helps in reading the language of signifiers comes into play (Lacan, 2016). We can equate jokes (First) with memes that characterize the world of social sites from Twitter to YouTube. Famous Freudian slip (Second), also known as "An error of everyday life" is present in the options an individual gets overly excited about on social media like: manifold deleting menu, undo on Messenger and Instagram, vanish/incognito modes and now 'fleeting' option provided by twitter. Dreams (Third), the visual form of desires, exclusively the repressed desires could be delineated by observing the working of videos that play in the search section without our intentionally looking for them. Their presence signals connection with repressed desires that have surfaced in different forms via signifiers. Multivariate digital platforms would require a detailed reflection on what actually are the symptoms (last formation) of an individual. Symptoms are the source of unconscious enjoyment while manifesting the trauma in disguised signifiers. In terms of "phallus" (power to change/an object of desire) the power in digital media is acquired in unique forms like followers, likes, comments, shares, views etc.

In digital sphere publicity and visibility norms work differently with the features of appearances and spectators. Following the civic mindedness to attain focus is side-lined, appearances are scandalized not just by aspiring political actors but equally by the spectators. Spectators, who, in the digital repertoire of signifiers are confirming the "other" to direct signifiers to locate the direction of representation forms the conflicting ground on the social sites, for instance, the micro-blogging world of Twitter. Twitter being the new source of news for not just the people but in fact for mainstream media too affirms it.

The act of retweeting, sharing in multiple options connecting all sub spheres of this wider digital public sphere, acknowledgement of forwarded messages intending on authenticity, pretentious knowing (Lacanian Misknowing or *meconnaissance*) and source less blooming information complicates the already complicated act of representation. That is "the signifier represents the subject for another's signifier". Knowing it all and having the access to real, is an illusion, an impossibility. If one considers knowing all by forming a non-conflicting ego, the idea of being able to capture real leads one to figure out the presence of an ultimate self, one that is present within oneself. This is precarious from the fact that it will lead us to a dead end. As it would mean there is something or someone that controls the 'one' within oneself and it will thus become an endless search for the one holding the ultimate switch. And consequently, Misknowing, not being able to trace the real while trying it every time is, what life is. An interminable fight with the deception of ego. To accept sufferings only to know

that there is no end to these (Lacan, 2016).

All social networking sites are players in structuring the gap between actors and spectators (essential feature of Public Sphere). Digital public sphere calls out for open acknowledgment of actors by displaying titles of public figure, blue ticks that symbolize the prestige of an actor in terms of publicity. The group-ism is critically temporary with change in its axiology. Individuals co-exist within different groups which blurs the rigid acceptable limits of public sphere groups in general. It is not only the individual that is joining a group or assigning groups to political performers. Search engine optimization digitizes the admission into a group by an individual and crowning of actors for that group. Hence, objective distant attitude of spectators is replaced with subjectively opinionated comments, posts, status updates and tweets.

Conclusion

What is a man if not the language he speaks? Lacanian theory offers a telescopic lens for researchers to peak into the layers of digital public sphere. The researcher has tried to define an Individual, who is at the core of public sphere using theoretical perspective of Semiotic theory and Lacanian Psychoanalysis. Theorizing individual as the “other” is projecting the representation of a subject in relation to signifiers used in the symbolic sea of digital public sphere. Here, ‘other’ is the demand that a subject brings to the digital public sphere as a consequence of being able to act rather than being a spectator. The demand is ‘not real’, it is an attempt to realize its insatiability that paves the way to address the real issue i.e. desire. The “desire is the desire of another’s desire” that brings individuals to digital public sphere. Addressing the individual in these terms is an attempt to look at the digital public sphere from the lens of psychoanalysis that opens the gate for future in-depth studies incorporating a wider audience.

References

- Adut, A. (2012). A Theory of the Public Sphere. *Sociological Theory*, 30(4), 238–262. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112467012>
- Pavón Cuéllar, D. (2009) ‘Untying Real, Imaginary and Symbolic: A Lacanian Criticism of Behavioural, Cognitive and Discursive Psychologies’, *Annual Review of Critical Psychology*, 7, pp. 33-51 <http://www.discourseunit.com/arcp/7.htm>
- Habermas, J. (1962) *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*. Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand.

Habermas, J. (1983 and 1987) *Theory of Communicative Action*, Volume 1 and 2. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1991). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press

Kellner, D. (1989). *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*. Cambridge and Baltimore: Polity Press and John Hopkins University Press.

Lacan, J. (1966). *Ecrits: A selection* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: W.W. Norton.

Lacan, J. (2016). *Book V: Formations of the Unconscious*. (J.-A. Miller, Ed., & R. Grigg, Trans.) Cambridge: Polity.