

Private and Public: Communication Technologies Between Two Cultural Spaces

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The commencement and mainstreamization of ICTs strengthened (and from some point of view revived) academic and political discussion on public sphere and public space, as many authors pointed in recent 15 years. The arrival of ICTs also rejuvenated discourses dealing with issues of private space, privacy and intimacy and their relation to technological mediation of everyday social activities. There used to be accentuated a kind of uniqueness of the cultural impact of ICTs in both ways, and public and private dimensions were often analyzed separately as distinctive areas of enculturation of ICTs, or without a more complex emphasis on historical aspects of these phenomena.

This paper aims to put limitations of these approaches in question by employing wider historical and theoretical perspective—this text deals with ICTs in a context of

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‘older’ technologies and in a context of development of modernity and it shows that mentioned ‘uniqueness’ has rather different quality than it was expected. The basic assumption is that communication technologies (as cultural forms, not as ‘technologies per se’, contrary to technodeterminists’ arguments) shaped the configuration or relation between private and public cultural spaces—the two dialogically formed spaces significantly describing the inner metaphorically ‘spatial’ character of modernity. From an introduction of the very first journals to an arise of mass press, telegraph, telephone and electronic mass media of radio and TV, a map of relations between public and private was always deeply impacted by every communication technology, culturally adopted in nationwide range, and by new, subsequent, communication praxis and institutions.

In this article, I briefly outline the history of communication technologies—I sketch it from the point of view of the relation between private and public spaces. I show that every technology re-models communication and cultural landscape of modernity and accentuates and builds up some specific aspects or layers of modern social communication. And on the bases of this ‘historical’ explanation I finally explain the ‘nature of novelty’, which comes along with ICTs.

Approach – in the shadow of technodeterminism

On the very first place, it is necessary to clarify my epistemological position. As mentioned, I try to avoid of

the seduction of simple technodeterministic arguments—those arguments tending to reduce technology into the pure technological artifact or artifactual form (what, thus, comes with essentialist supposition of some specific, inherent and inevitable character or bias of the technological artifact) and to reduce the relation between technology and culture/society into one-way causal model (where the technology plays the role of an agent of social and cultural change).

In an inspiration by a spirited Lincoln Dahlberg's (2004) analyses of deterministic tendencies of media and technology research a Lievrouw and Livingstone's (2002: 7) definition of new media, I approach the communication technologies as a social phenomenon opened to definition and analysis in three dimensions. In the first of them, technologies are defined by what McLuhan uses to call form of media, by which use to be meant set of 'virtual' technological qualities, a technological nature of the artifact. In the second dimension, technologies are defined by the use—by specific, institutionalized social practices that surround them, actualize their potential and make them possible as a cultural form. In the third dimension, communication technologies are defined by their role in wider social/cultural/economic context (which shapes them and which is shaped by them).

In other words, from this point of view, communication technologies should be understood as social practices enabled by technological artifact and settled in socio-economic context; and all those three dimension influence the 'quality', the 'complex and unreduced character' of technology, the role it plays in society.

(Thus, when I write below about ‘telephone’ or ‘television’, I do not mean the technological device itself, but the whole complex as mentioned here.)

Obviously, further this definition could be accused of banality—all I say is, that to offer an appropriate insight into the ‘technology’ (via the language of social sciences) we have to analyze ‘who does it’, ‘with what’ and ‘in which milieu and under which conditions’. However, it is at least clear that this approach to communication technologies quite complicates any attempt for simple, linear analyses of causality—and this is the, among others, one the most important goal of this kind of reflection.

From ‘Habermasian times’ to mass press

According to Habermas (1989), the early modernity of the 18th century witnessed emerge of two distinctive social spheres, differentiation of two social spaces—of private sphere (including the intimate space of family, characterized by face-to-face communication and personal knowledge of the others) and public sphere (communication space localized ‘out of the family’, separated from the state and economics and feed by the public discussion and action, transcending the boundaries of ‘private worlds’ of private sphere). It is not necessary to follow the longstanding discussion on historical and ideological limits of Habermas’ arguments to be sure to underline one received and influential finding: The very necessary condition of the emergence of the distinction was, among others, the creation of an appropriate communication platform. The platform which allowed

social actors (on the beginning just the very narrow stratum of middle class townsman) to construct ‘the public’ as a valid communication space. The platform was, of course, the first periodical press.

The first periodical press of the 18th century—by Habermas described as a kind of ideal media of public communication—served as a two-ways communication channel between public and private individuals (from the public space to the individual and vice versa). Being read and discussed in public areas and being pitched to local community, it enabled the communication flow to literate and properly positioned individuals and also a direct entrance into the public communication.

But, as the arrival of socially a territorially more opened mass press of the 19th century pointed, the communication path of the most of printed periodical media had (and still has) a quite different direction. The mass press became mostly one-way mass communication technology—on one hand, it covered wider social and geographical territory than local and elite bourgeois communities (and so led to creation of definitely ‘national’ public—cultural and political—space), but, on the other hand, it changed itself into channel carrying communication from shared, but abstract (e.g. not constituted of intimately or from face-to-face contact known others) public space to specific private spaces of private individuals.

If I at least partly apply the above mentioned triad of dimensions of technology, I would say what could be (with exception in the dimension of the form) said even about the bellow discussed electronic mass media:

- Mass press is opened to the communication from the national public space to private spaces—it enables to multiply (written, printed communication) and distribute it nation-widely.
- Mass press was being used as an important, irrecoverable source of contact with ‘nation culture’, embodied by national politics, culture, public debate etc.—leaving Habermas with his claims on ‘re-feudalization of public’ aside, I would follow Raymond Williams (1974) and his argument that nation-wide mass media serve as an important cultural form enabling the integrity of complex and geographically mobile modern society.

The first generation of electronic media – the telegraph

The invention of electric telegraph (in the mid of the 19th century) and its spread (during the second half of the century) brings communication technology with very different communication capability. The telegraph was not mentioned as a media designed primary for private use (and if it, however, was being used for private purpose, than it was enabled through the filter of contact with state officials), but it served—in relation to the topic of this paper—as a communication tool of mass press redactions and press agencies in national and later even in international context. In other words:

- Telegraph could be conceived as a two-way communication technology enabling

communication between distinct public spaces, as a technology setting up a connection between them—on this level, telegraph gradually substituted the media of written mail.

- Therefore, telegraph was being used mostly as a non-private communication channel, as a tool of state and economic communication and of meta-mass-communication (communication between news agencies and particular media organizations).
- Telegraph could be also conceived as a two-way private-to-private communication technology. However, with respect to dimension of this kind of usage, it is possible to claim that on the private-to-private level telegraph never reached the extensity of use as—and was used as a complement of—traditional written mail (and later of the telephone).

Private to private – the telephone

The mass press connected the private spaces to the communication flows of the public space; the telegraph and related technologies interconnected distant public spaces. And the telephone technology—invented and spread during the last quarter of 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century—saturated other important cultural need (which emerged in the context of spatially diffused society, membered into cells of nuclear families). It provided a possibility of two-way and instant communication contact between distant private places.

The telephone, firmly located in the middle of the geographically bound private cell (institution of phonebook, combining information about phone numbers and addresses is nice expression of this fact), served at the level of private spaces to the same purpose (not literally, of course) as the telegraph and his advanced successors did at the public level. Shortly summed up:

- Telephone sets up an instant, two-way communication connection between steadily located cells of private spaces.
- Telephone is being used as medium of privately-oriented communication, as a tool of social contact between specific social actors—it is the first media filling up the mediated symbolical spaces (later called cyberspace) by a dialogical conversation; thus, telephone answered to swelling tendencies to further privatization of the private spaces, because it offers—as a mediator bridging the necessity of physical contact—quite potent tool of more strict demarcation and isolation of the private sphere.
- Telephone locally fixes the private space on the specific place—it posits a communicator's presence on a specific location.

Radio and TV

An arise of electronic mass media of radio and television meant, on one hand, further reinforcement of the role of simplex (one-to-many) model of communication (which is significant for mass media from their definition)

introduced by mass press: Radio and television deliver public world into private spaces of households, it serves as a one-way connection between the sphere of ‘outer society’ and ‘inner circle’ of privacy and intimacy of family. Many authors—among others Raymond Williams (1974) in his concept of ‘mobile privatization’, Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) in his claims on impact of technologies on social experiencing of place and time and even more provocative judges of technologically streaky world such as Baudrillard or Virilio—insightfully recognized the character of dynamics of the relation between public and private in the age of television culture. The media-constructed symbolical world of radio and television (representing the ‘un-mediated reality’ with surprising complexity and replacing wide scale of ‘direct experiences’ in unprecedented extensity and intensity) intensified the strict separation of (mediated) public space and (directly lived) private, domestic space. The isolation of private space (which could be ‘symbolically saturated’ without any necessity to disrupt or step over its own boundaries) was strengthened—and at the same time mobilized. Relatively portable technology of television (or radio), a cultural mammilla connectible to cultural mainstream of the well known represented world from any place across the country (for the very kind interpretation of this in the context of discussion on public service, see Curran 1998), made the private spaces mobile. Moveable in their wholeness. The privatization gradating from the very beginning of the modernity became mobile and in its mobility obtained a powerful cultural support in the form of television, as Williams noticed.

On the other hand, the closure of the ‘private’—which became dynamic in relation to the static and ubiquitous mediated ‘public’—emphasized a kind of un-placement of public space, following its ‘final symbolization’. Sennett (1977), Meyrowitz (1985) and others draw their attention to the fact that public space became a pure metaphor without any referent in real spaces—and real spaces lost their public dimension. Thus, the technology of television plays in the private world of family a key role. It has a monopoly to bring the metaphorized, symbolized universe of non-private directly into the center of the private—it embodies the whole outer world, the whole public, and therefore it structures factual time and factual space of the private sphere (because it turns at certain times certain parts of a household into clues, mediated proofs of ‘public’).

- Mass media of radio and TV offer one-way communication channel from the national public space to private spaces—it delivers a continual, in time structured, but spatially untied stream (cultural mainstream) of contents.

ICT – final mobilization of private sphere

Consequences of so called new media (or, in other words, of information and communication technologies based on digital data coding and processing) for the dynamics between public and private spaces should be analyzed with respect to the fact that we still face an ‘unfinished business’ (to use Lunenfelds’ term; Lunenfeld 1999), of course. However, after fifteen or twenty years of massive

spread of these technologies and of their cultural colonization and mainstreamization, it is possible (and, after all, necessary) to realistically notice the main features of the new techno-cultural situation.

At first, I can say that all of the (often unexpected and delicate) novelties coming along with ICTs are related to well known characteristics of them:

- ICTs offer a possibility of duplex, two-way communication.
- ICTs have become meta-media including and reshaping older technological forms (we witness the massive technological convergence), and thus permeating all the levels of social reality.

It is obvious that the socio-cultural implications of new media (which means even praxis surrounding them) is, as our everyday experiences indicate, very complex, contradictor and ambiguous. (Probably more complex and extensive than in a case of the technology of television; whether so intensive, is still in question, of course.)

The relation of ICTs and the public space is being discussed intensively for almost two decades (Poster 2006; Papacharissi 2002; Dahblerg 2001) and, following this widespread discussion, we could soberly claim that ICTs, on one hand, foster the trends of de-localization of public space and, on the other hand, fragmentize it and change the 'one-way' direction of the public mainstream carried by mass media. Nevertheless, many important questions still have a character of hypothesis. Do the uses of ICTs lead to re-creation, re-actualization of public spaces into public locations? (In other words, do ICTs serving local communities strengthen the sense of

locality, sense of place, as, for example, William Mitchell, 1995, promises?) How do the 'new', through ICTs mediated public spaces affect the 'old' mass-mediated public space of television, radio and mass press, and what nature is their relation? And do the ICTs, in spite of their tendency to fragmentize the public communication space into opinion- and interest-oriented sub-spheres, lead to creation of the sense of public space of some more general, covering kind?

The relation of ICTs and the private sphere establishes the other side of the 'public-private' story of ICTs. The ICTs, again, strengthen the older trends. As Margaret Morse (1998) noticed, they accelerate tendencies toward mobilization of privacy, previously described by Williams in relation to TV. The trend of 'customization' or 'personalization' of technologies could be understood as a euphemistic sign of further individualization of the private space (where the individual actor, and not the relatively compact unit of nuclear family, is final bearer of privacy) and the increasing portability of communication technologies (symbolized by the spread of cell phones, PCs and the 'omnipresence' of the internet connection). The cells of private spaces were—in contrast to Williams' 'world of TV culture'—pulled off the specific places (and this is what happened to public spaces many decades ago) and now they, as bubbles of privacies, cruise the outer 'physical' (public) world. Former public places (towns and cities, public transportation, pubs, clubs, universities, etc.) are thus privatized by private individuals carrying their instant techno-cultural connections to other public spaces and as well as to other individuals' private spaces.

Some author, as Shapiro (1998), claim that this dramatic arise of private mobility (term coined by Spigel, 2001, contrary to Williams, 1974) leads to disruption of symbolic and even physical boundaries between public and private, between the virtual (symbolic) space and physical place. This claim is one of the hypotheses referring to the issue of the impact of ICTs on private space that are to be accepted or refused by means of research. *Do* the ICTs really disrupt the boundaries of private, intimate sphere? How do the social actors using ICTs construct their privacy and intimacy? How do the ICTs affect private places, how do they shape the spaces of households? (At least these questions are being partly answered by contemporary research leded mainly from positions of social anthropology and psychology; see Livingstone 2002.)

Mentioned trends and asked question (or formulated hypothesis) point out that ICTs serve to the ‘older needs’ of modern society and as cultural forms developed in consistency with older cultural tendencies towards increasing mobility of ‘private’ and of de-localizing of ‘public’. ICTs also recompense the lack of two-way communication, typical for older mass media (as TV and radio recompensed the insufficiency of the mass press and as telephone filled up the deficiencies of telegraph and written mail).

Thus, we can literally say that ICTs are technologies between two modern cultural spaces—between public and private. We can say that they again, as older media technologies, change and reconfigure the relationship between these spaces and even these spaces at all.

However, to understand satisfyingly the quality of this transformation means to answer at least mentioned questions. The only suitable way is to study the way we construct our privacies with digital gadgets in our hands, the way we solve our private troubles via cell phone on bus stations and with notebooks on coffee tables. The way we construct the public and our relation to it, the way we overstep the topography of private, the way we drag public world into our homes and vice versa. And we have to do that before the last pieces of older techno-cultural period disappear.

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