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# Conflict and seduction in the public sphere

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## Keywords

pornography, public sphere

In a critical but sympathetic reading of Habermas's work (1984, 1987a, 1987b, 2003), Luke Goode (2005) recently sought to rework his theory of deliberative democracy in an age of mediated and increasingly digital public spheres. Taking a different approach, Alan McKee (2005) challenged the culture- and class-bound strictures of Habermasian rationalism, instead pursuing a more radically pluralist account of postmodern public spheres. The editors of this special section of *Media, Culture & Society* invited us to discuss our differing approaches to the public sphere. Goode holds that the institutional bases of contemporary public spheres (political parties, educational institutions or public media) remain of critical importance, albeit in the context of a kaleidoscopic array of unofficial and informal micro-publics, both localized and de-territorialized. In contrast, McKee sustains a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' toward the official, hegemonic institutions of the public sphere since they tend to exclude and delegitimize discourses and practices that challenge their polite middle-class norms.

McKee's recent research has focused on sexual cultures, particularly among youth (McKee, 2011). Goode's recent work has examined new social media spaces, particularly in relation to news and public debate (e.g. Goode, 2009; Goode et al., 2011). Consequently, our discussion turned to a domain which links our interests: after Goode discussed some of his recent research on (in)civility on YouTube as a new media public sphere, McKee challenged him to consider the case of pornographic websites modelled on social media sites.<sup>1</sup> He identifies a greater degree of 'civility' in these pornographic sibling sites than on

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YouTube, requiring careful consideration of what constitutes a 'public sphere' in contemporary digital culture. Such sites represent an environment that shatters the opposition of public and private interest, affording public engagement on matters of the body, of intimacy, of gender politics, of pleasure and desire – said by many critics to be ruled out of court in Habermasian theory. Such environments also trouble traditional binaries between the cognitive and the affective, and between the performative and the deliberative.

In what follows we explore the differences between our approaches in the form of a dialogue. As is often the case, our approaches seemed less at odds after engaging in conversation than may have initially appeared. But important differences of emphasis remain.

## Goode

Although I don't give any credence to claims that body, sex and sexuality are somehow 'private' matters that do not therefore 'belong' in the public sphere, Alan's challenge raises the question of whether pornography per se might legitimately be understood as a part of the contemporary public sphere. An affirmative answer would require that pornography fosters reflection and even deliberation around matters of body, gender, sex and sexuality, and is not merely a vehicle for the commodification and consumption of bodily images and pseudo-intimacy or, as many critics allege, for the normalization of sexual aggression and misogyny. Similarly, do user-generated pornography sites merit the label 'citizen porn' as opposed to, say, 'prosumer porn'? Again, an affirmative answer would require that there are genuinely deliberative encounters whereby users gain some new knowledge or understanding through exposure to the ideas, perspectives and identities of others, and where users perceive their practices to have some social or cultural impact (perhaps challenging sexual stereotypes?) beyond transitory experiences.

Research on so-called 'citizen' media as sites of participation in news and journalism often highlights novelty and 'disruptive' technologies, neglecting continuities with the 'old' mediascape. I would emphasize how much 'new' modes owe to the so-called 'big media' they appear to challenge. Professional news media continue to shape this new environment both through the provision of source material, information and agenda-setting, and through many of the generic conventions (aesthetic, discursive, etc.) that reverberate through citizen media. Consequently, when we consider user-generated pornography, we should ask how far the textual (and behavioural) codes of professional, commercial pornography continue to shape this ostensibly more 'democratized' mode of production and consumption.

Another parallel between these sites and the social media news sites I have been researching concerns monetization. One facet of the blurring boundary between amateur and professional media production (and I suspect these pornographic platforms are a good example of the rise of 'prosumerism') is the growth of aspiring cottage industry-type cultural production. On many social media platforms, individuals' aspirations to make money remain just that, an aspiration rather than a reality. Meanwhile, the corporate owners of these digital networks extract value from this army of relatively free labour. Regardless of outcome, the presence of financial *motivation* should temper any temptation to presume or to overstate the voluntaristic nature of these social media spaces.

If, as Alan suggests, such sites challenge public sphere theory, it is partly because these platforms, in common with social media news environments, don't fit standard distinctions between deliberative-political and expressive-cultural public spheres. Standard renditions of the public sphere distinguish a sphere of pre-political creative expression and criticism (Habermas's 'literary public sphere') where human values and articulations of the 'good (and not so good!) life' are explored and which then feed into political deliberation. However, this distinction only makes sense as a continuum, rather than a binary, and various cultural media (e.g. documentary film) steadfastly resist such categorization.

Pornographic media platforms may be primarily expressive and performative, but comments beneath videos (which I suggest are rarely very incisive or analytical) and the inclusion of videos intended to be 'instructional' suggest some co-existence of the deliberative and the expressive. Indirectly, of course, platform and interface design raise cognitive and normative validity claims pertaining to sexual politics. Categories and themes (based on acts and preferences) are structured and hierarchized, for example, in ways that seem superficially obvious or natural but which are, of course, highly constructed. For example, one site's landing page offers users a navigational choice of gay or straight while another asks users to choose between men, women or both. Discussions of digital environments have often revolved around the distinction between taxonomy (designer-driven information architecture) and 'folksonomy' (user-generated architecture such as the use of tags and hashtags). Although, these sites have the appearance of organic chaos, we need to keep in mind the extent to which that chaos is organized.

The point is not that that structure per se undercuts the public sphere characteristics of such a forum. My work on the public sphere has led me to the view that media, educational and political institutions are vital aspects of a democratic public sphere. Rather, it is important to recognize how *commercial* institutions and imperatives underpin practices that have the surface appearance of spontaneity and freedom. In my view, postmodern readings of the contemporary public sphere risk sidestepping critical questions about commercial and consumer culture in their resolve to challenge 'traditional' public sphere institutions.

A pre-requisite for any interactive public sphere is a level of civility that keeps channels of communication open rather than closing them down. The cultural history of civility is complex and variegated (e.g. Davetian, 2009). To value civility does not mean valuing a particular cultural code of civility, such as middle-class politeness and restraint. In fact, notwithstanding the relative lack of established conventions and the many misunderstandings in social media environments, I think that spaces like YouTube lend themselves more readily to 'agonistic' (Mouffe, 2005) models of civility, which prioritize engagement over restraint and embrace conflict without violence (physical or symbolic), and which account for the ludic and carnivalesque dimensions of new digital environments.

Nevertheless, I am ambivalent about Alan's suggestion that pornographic social media environments are 'more' civil than the notoriously uncivil YouTube on which they are modelled. A brief survey of sites suggests that comments display a consistently high level of positivity: compliments and thanks predominate, while any criticism appears to be relatively rare and mild. While this may be preferable to the

preponderance of ‘haters’ on YouTube, to what extent might the level of restraint exhibited (or imposed?) prevent users from a meaningful exchange of views about the videos and their responses to them?

The final question I want to raise is one of identity. There are growing concerns regarding the level of control that users (especially young ‘digital natives’) exercise over their online identities. Issues relating to the ‘digital footprint’ are currently topical in European, American and Australasian policy debates. Palfrey and Gasser (2010: 53) invoke the dramatic metaphor of the ‘digital tattoo’, which seems pertinent to our present topic of discussion: forms of self-disclosure initially experienced as liberating can later become a problematic legacy as identities change over time. A pornographic playground for self-disclosure may occasion later regret, as noted by a raft of educational advice designed to warn (especially young) people against risky online behaviour. Freedom to explore one’s identity, to change and be changed, to take risks and to learn from making wrong turns – these reflexive capacities, I would suggest, need to be seen as both the condition and consequence of ‘healthy’ public spheres in contemporary modernity. I wonder if the risk is that these platforms offer this with one hand, yet take it away with the other.

## McKee

During the 2012 Queensland election campaign in Australia, the leader of the Liberal National Party Campbell Newman was condemned in the press as ‘Octopus Newman’ for his ‘public displays of affection’ with his wife. His advisers told him, ‘Cam, we’ve got to tell you straight, your hand is going too low. No lower than the waist, OK’ (Barrett, 2012: 8). Irrespective of whether Newman’s behaviour was appropriate, I am interested in the questions it raises, how they can be discussed, and what changes in actions might flow from such discussions. What are appropriate forms of sexual interaction? What role do public/private boundaries play in answering that question? And should the state become involved in managing the boundaries of appropriate sexual relations?

I agree with Luke that matters relating to the body and sexuality are not ‘private’ but belong in the public sphere. And if the public sphere is ‘a domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed [where] citizens ... deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion ... [to] express and publicize their views’ (Habermas, 1997: 105), then where are citizens to deal with these matters? Where can they express and publicize their views about sexual practices? Newspapers do some of this work, but are limited in what they can do in this area. Like Campbell Newman’s hand they can go this far but no further in describing and discussing sexual acts. However, there is one area of culture where the public is allowed to talk explicitly about sex. We call that area pornography.

Luke and I are both interested in the limits of the public sphere – what can be included and what must be excluded in our definitions of this imaginary space. He is interested in the role of online media in the evolution of the public sphere. I’m interested in pornography. In contrast to Luke’s focus on the influence of commercial institutions on public life, I focus on the question of civility. Should we worry about the degree to which amateur pornography works within the textual and behavioural codes of commercial

pornography? Is commercialization or commodification a problem? In McKee (2005: 87, 78), I argue 'no', echoing Habermas's view that early mercantile capitalism was a necessary precondition for the development of a public sphere – it was the 'commodification' of information, turning it into an object that anybody with money could buy rather than something owned by the church or the state, that freed information from institutional control. And does the research show that pornography causes sexual aggression? No, although many researchers have claimed that it does (McKee et al., 2008: 75–9).

Civility matters both in sexual interactions and in our discussions about sexual interactions. If newspapers cannot openly discuss these issues, perhaps pornography can. Luke, like many other writers, distinguishes between user-generated pornography and that which is produced for a profit. I do not draw such a binary distinction. Pornography produced for a profit can range from the biggest of businesses such as mainstream vanilla porn (e.g. Vivid Inc), ethical niche pornography (e.g. Kink.com) or violent work that raises challenging issues about consent (e.g. Max Hardcore), right down to the work of sole-traders who star in and profit from their own porn whether mainstream (e.g. Jenna Jameson) or niche (e.g. the website of Amazon Amanda). Work produced not for profit can range from the artistic and transgressive, with an explicitly political intent (such as the work of Tanya Bezreh), for the aim of producing a sense of community (such as the material posted on social networking site Fetlife), or purely for sexual pleasure (as with many of the videos of xxxtube). For me, the more useful distinctions concern the ethics of the material and its address to its audience.

I have found some of the most interesting and persuasive thinking about the nature of civility emerging from the most confronting areas of the pornographic public sphere. Like Luke, I am wary of how the concept of 'civility' can be mistaken for 'middle-class' manners; instead, I use the term to mean something like ethical public behaviour. As the guidebook, *The Ethical Slut* (Easton and Hardy, 2009) makes clear, members of non-normative sexual communities such as BDSM (Bondage and Discipline, Sadism and Masochism) and polyamorists have a well-developed tradition of thinking about what constitutes civility in sexual engagements. Ethical sluts, they assert, 'are *respectful* of others' feelings and when we aren't sure how someone feels, we ask' (2009: 21). Thus they ask:

Is anyone being harmed? Is there a way to avoid causing that harm? Are there any risks? Is everybody involved aware of those risks and doing what can be done to minimize them? On the positive side: How much fun is this? What is everybody learning from it? Is it helping someone to grow? Is it helping make the world a better place? (2009: 20)

Is this purely a personal issue? Luke doesn't think so. He places civility at the heart of a functional public sphere. And so do many practitioners of non-normative sexual practices. Ideas of what constitutes civility in sexual practice have emerged through discussions within and across diverse sexual communities that both ask what constitutes civility and try to model civility themselves through their engagement. Rebecca Randall interviewed young BDSM practitioners in Brisbane; her findings demonstrated the importance to these participants of the website Fetlife, a pornographic online community for non-normative sexual practitioners. They emphasized how this online space had allowed

them to discover the rules for appropriate behaviour, to learn civility in this community. Significantly, the Australian government has proposed an internet filter that would block sexually explicit websites that address non-normative sexualities. Under Australian censorship law, explicit representations of sadomasochism are illegal (OLDP, 2008). If the filter excludes explicit sadomasochistic material, the young practitioners see a danger that this would: 'take away that entire safety net that we've spent ages building. And that really, there's not that – whole other way especially for new people and they are the ones who are most at risk' (quoted in Randall, 2011: 40).

Luke recognizes the level of civility in pornographic websites. Indeed, he worries that they may be *too* civil, preventing users from engaging in meaningful exchange. However, if pornographic websites are judged too civil, even though they provide valuable ways of thinking through the ethics of sexual relations, then academics' tendency to see truth as the result of adversarial conflict tells us more about our masculinist philosophies than it does about the truth (Hartley, 2009). Campbell Newman touched his wife's bottom during an adversarial election campaign. Perhaps this is an important contribution that pornographic websites can make to the public sphere – illustrating non-adversarial ways of thinking about human interaction. In the sexual interactions recorded and performed on Fetlife, there need not be a winner and a loser; people communicate from differing perspectives and with different expectations, and everyone can emerge with smiles on their faces. And, perhaps, the world is, in just some small way, 'a better place'?

## Goode rejoinder

I think adversarial encounters have a place in our political and public life, but I agree they are not a privileged vehicle for establishing 'truth': in judicial and political settings they can provide a useful spectacle which onlookers (jurors or voters, say) can use as the starting point for their deliberations. Conflict, dissensus and critical argumentation can be productive and, indeed, necessary means for advancing ideas and debate. However, adversarialism as an end in itself blights much of our public life both offline and online. To confront others in public life with no expectation of finding common ground amounts to a kind of cynical bad faith. By suggesting that we can identify, theoretically, a 'deliberative' mode that lies somewhere between adversarialism and tolerant, polite restraint on the other, I don't mean to imply that this can be easily identified (less still, created) in practice: public culture continually veers back and forth across the spectrum between vitriol and hatred and blind devotion to charismatic idols and groupthink. I think it is useful to try to steer between those poles and seek out what is most constructive (and least destructive) in criticism, argument and disagreement.

This is the Socratic bias in public sphere theory which many academics find hard to see past. Yet the diverse forms that our public spheres take today challenge us to be sufficiently pluralist in outlook. In our dialogue, Alan has challenged me to take pornography seriously not only as a substantive aspect of the public sphere (a place where sex can actually be discussed) but also as a challenge and counterpoint to the forms (and formalities) of socially 'legitimate' public sphere institutions. Though not ready to give up all my preconceptions about civility and the public sphere, and notwithstanding various questions I still have about the sites we began by discussing, Alan's



work demonstrates how much more pluralized public sphere research and scholarship must become if it is to remain relevant given the diverse forms of public life in which today's citizens are taking part.

## McKee rejoinder

During this interaction with Luke I have changed my thinking about the nature and place of civility in the public sphere. How has that happened? Has he 'challenged' me to think differently? Was there 'conflict' in our encounter? These metaphors are aggressive and masculine and I'm not sure they fit. I didn't feel unsafe during the exchange, even as Luke disagreed with me. Perhaps there is another term in our philosophical lexicon we could apply to the process. Perhaps, instead, Luke has 'seduced' me into shifting my thinking (Baudrillard, 1990) – a feminized and non-confrontational metaphor for understanding an instance of human interaction in which intellectual positions are changed.

Taking this insight back to online pornographic communities, what forms of interaction can I see there? Take the example of a document posted on one sexually explicit website which proposes a set of rules for sexual relationships based on power play. At time of writing this posting has attracted 347 comments. Many of them, as Luke notes, are affirmations with posters thanking the writer for writing something they agree with. But is it fair to call these comments 'groupthink'? I don't think so. Several posters thank the writer for putting into words something that had found themselves unable to articulate although they wanted to: agreement need not signal excessive restraint. Another poster asks, considerately, if she can link to the post from her website so that potential partners can see from the outset what she seeks from a relationship. The author immediately agrees – and the life of the poster may then change without any conflict taking place.

A change in the way someone thinks can surely be a political outcome – hence the importance of 'consciousness raising' in feminist politics. And these actions need not be directly related to the nation state or any other formally constituted political body – another feminist insight is that 'the personal is political'. These considerations challenge the alignment of the public sphere with citizens (to the exclusion of consumers) and assert the political character of associations that have nothing to do with state politics (McKee, 2002). We can be citizens in communities without formal state apparatuses provided we recognize the importance of institutions in understanding the work of the public sphere – they manage discourses, relationship and access to information. I suspect, though, that my definition of 'institution' is wider than Luke's – for example, I would include a sadomasochistic community group as an 'institution'.

In our interaction Luke and I set out our understanding of the requirements for culture to function as part of a public sphere. We have agreed that they should promote deliberation and have some kind of wider political impact (in the broadest sense – including the feminist sense). In doing this, we have rubbed up against the familiar fault lines between what I have elsewhere characterized as the 'modern' and the 'postmodern' approaches to the public sphere (McKee, 2005: 17–18) – the question of whether citizenship can or should be separate from commercial culture, and whether knowledge and argumentation



can or should be disembodied. Without resorting to aggressive language, or attempting to force the other to think differently, we have effectively seduced each other into evolving our thinking. Perhaps seduction is the way forward for the public sphere?

## Note

1. For example, [www.youporn.com](http://www.youporn.com) and [www.xtube.com](http://www.xtube.com).

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