KNOWLEDGE CONSTITUTIVE INTERESTS AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB: CAN THE INTERNET BE AN EMANCIPATORY MEDIUM?

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet has great potential as a medium for social change in international relations. It provides a forum where ideas can be explored, transmitted, and archived in real time. People and groups can publish their ideas and make known their struggles without the editorial filters of traditional publications. The Internet makes such publications available to millions of viewers at a minimal cost. E-mail and web sites can also be used to rally and organize activists. The Internet's communications technologies make discourse possible that builds consensus and thus speeds the process of reconstructing international relations and our society at large. Yet, the Internet may not be the panacea for social change and reconstruction that many would hope. The digital divide prohibits access to Internet technology based on class and income. The Internet's reliance on centralized servers and communications networks permits those with political power to intercept messages for surveillance and to censor information. Authorship of web sites can sometime be obscure, concealed, or fabricated, making it difficult to evaluate the intent and validity of claims made on the sites.

Can the Internet be an emancipatory medium in international relations? Addressing this question first requires a theoretical and conceptual definition of emancipation in relation to international relations. That definition is found in two bodies of related literature--Jürgen Habermas' work on cognitive interests, discourse, and communicative action, and the metatheoretical approach to international relations that has come to be known as constructivism. Framing the discussion in light of these two literatures allows for examining the potential of the Internet both as a medium for emancipation and as an emancipatory medium. To be a medium for emancipation is to be a tool for liberating peoples oppressed by political or economic power structures. To be an emancipatory medium is to provide a forum by which those structures can be critically examined and altered in our construction of social reality. The semantic difference in these two goals belies their obvious connection. One liberates people while the other liberates theory and practice. To succeed at one without the other is, ultimately, to fail at both.

This study introduces paths to answering its question. It proceeds by first examining the conceptual definitions of emancipation and emancipatory interests in the work of Habermas and his critics and the recent literature on social constructivism. Next, the study examines the possibilities for and barriers against emancipatory interests on the Internet. It is hoped that this examination will yield some guidelines for evaluating web site content within the framework of the question. The guidelines for content will be applied to some web sites and some conclusions will be drawn about the potential and reality of the Internet as an emancipatory and constructivist medium.

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HABERMAS, CONSTRUCTIVISM, AND EMANCIPATORY INTERESTS

It is true that there is no unified school of social constructivism in the study and practice of international relations.[1] Yet, the approaches to constructivism that lead down from Onuf's defining work share at least one common tenet - that language matters - for it is in words that international relations is defined (constructed) and played out.[2] Müller goes so far as to call it an "undeniable fact that international politics consists predominantly of actions that take the form of language."[3] A number of authors, including Onuf, have turned to the work of Jürgen Habermas to find theoretical foundations for the connection between language and social construction in his theory of communicative action. Communicative action is derived from discourse between agents that is "oriented towards achieving, sustaining, and reviewing consensus - and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticisable validity claims."[4] In Habermas, constructivist theory finds an ally that locates action as a means for building consensus and thus reifying an intersubjective socially constructed world.

In addition to the theory of communicative action, three other theories of communication by Habermas' add to the understanding of emancipation and emancipatory interests and the Internet. The three theories are his taxonomy of cognitive interests expressed in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, the concept of the public sphere,[5] and his approach to discourse ethics.[6]

Habermas defines emancipatory interests in relation to a taxonomy of knowledge constitutive interests, also referred to as cognitive interests. David Held states that Habermas' approach to knowledge is "historically rooted and interest bound."[7] Habermas defines human interests in terms of the need to produce for material existence and the need to communicate with others. This translates into two types of cognitive interests - interests related to controlling the environment (both physical and social) and interests related to developing common meaning of phenomena. The first of these he calls technical cognitive interests and he claims that it is the underlying interest of the empirical-analytical sciences. The empirical sciences use information to secure and expand control over feedback monitored action. That is, "technical control over objectified processes."[8]

1 Lars Lose, "Communicative Action and the World of Diplomacy," chapter in *Constructing International Relations - The Next Generation*, edited by Karin Fierke and Knud Jørgensen (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), p. 181.
2 Karin Fierke and Knud Jørgensen, *Constructing International Relations - The Next Generation* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001).
3 Harald Müller, "International Relations as a Communicative Action," chapter in *Constructing International Relations - The Next Generation*, edited by Karin Fierke and Knud Jørgensen. (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2001), p. 161.
4 Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol 1: Reason and Rationalization of Society*, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984), p. 17.
5 See Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article," chapter in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, edited by Stephen Bronner and Douglas Kellner, translated by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 136-144 and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, translated by Thomas Burger with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).
6 See Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, translated by Christian Lehnardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).
7 David Held, *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1980), p. 254.
8 Habermas (1971), p. 310.

Habermas calls the second type of cognitive interest practical cognitive interest. He claims that this is the underlying interest of the historical-hermeneutic sciences. "The historical-hermeneutic sciences gain knowledge by meaning, not observation."[9] They disclose reality

". . . subject to a constitutive interest in the preservation and expansion of the intersubjectivity of possible action-orienting mutual understanding. The understanding of meaning is directed in its very structure toward the attainment of possible consensus among actors in the framework of a self-understanding derived from tradition."[10]

There are biases that distort communication and knowledge bound up with the cognitive interests of both of these approaches to knowledge. The technical cognitive interests of the empirical sciences distort communication and knowledge because of their need to standardize method as a way to validate claims. Habermas claims that "in the empirical-analytic sciences the frame of reference that prejudges the meaning of possible statements established rules both for the construction of theories and for their critical testing"[11] and that ". . .facts relevant to the empirical sciences are first constituted through an a priori organization of our experience in the behavioral system of instrumental action."[12] Thus, the requirements of the scientific method itself (falsifiable hypotheses, replicabilty, etc.) and the means for validation, such as the arbitrary alpha level of .05 in statistical inference, while necessary for the creation and transmission of technical information, bias the knowledge generated from the information. Knowledge gained from practical cognitive interests carry biases as well. These are derived from the parsimony that meaningful communication requires. Habermas claims that "... the rules of hermeneutics determine the possible meaning of the validity of statements of the cultural sciences."[13] Later, he states

"It appears as though the interpreter transposes himself into the horizon of the world or language from which a text derives its meaning. But here too, the facts are first constituted in relation to the standards that establish them. Just as the positivist self understanding does not take into account explicitly the connection between measurement operations and feedback control, so it eliminates from consideration the interpreter's pre-understanding. Hermeneutic knowledge is always mediated through this pre-understanding."[14]

Because of the direct connection to human history through the need to control the environment for production and the need to communicate, most forms of knowledge are based in either technical cognitive interests or practical cognitive interests.

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9   Ibid.
10   Habermas (1971), p. 310.
11   Habermas (1971), p. 308.
12   Habermas (1971), p. 309
13   Ibid.
14   Ibid.

Habermas speaks of another cognitive interest that is, as Held points out, derived from the human capacity to be "self-reflective and self-determining, to act rationally."[15] Emancipatory cognitive interest "releases the subject from dependence on hypostatized powers."[16] Hypostatized refers the condition of hypostasis which is defined by The *American College Dictionary* (1966) as "a. that which stands under and supports; b. the underlying or essential part of anything as distinguished from attributes; substance, or essential principle." Thus to be released from dependence on hypostatized power is to lay bare the "thing in itself," to borrow a phrase from Kant. According to Habermas, emancipatory interests are the cognitive interests of the critically oriented sciences.[17] Knowledge pursued by the critically oriented sciences attempts to "achieve human autonomy and self understanding by bringing to consciousness previously unapprehended determinants of the human species 'self-formative process.'"[18] That is, knowledge derived from emancipatory cognitive interests is the knowledge that is needed to recognize historically and socially constructed behavior and, ultimately, to restructure it to abolish oppression and exploitation and achieve freedom.

Habermas' concept of the public sphere is an idealized communication forum where all citizens have equal access and where a semblance of public opinion or public consensus is formed through discourse. The public sphere "mediates between the public and the state."[19] Habermas traces the history of the public sphere as public discussions about political power that "grew out of a specific phase of bourgeois society." In this history, he illustrates that the public sphere first grew out of the coffee houses and salons of the late 18th and early 19th century where the new bourgeoisie tried to find consensus to promote policies affecting their interests derived from a growing capitalist economy to arcane absolutist monarchies. Habermas documents how the idealized public sphere of the 18th century Parisian salon and the town meeting of 19th century New England gave way to a mediated public sphere first captured in the print medium of newspapers and later in the electronic medium of radio and television. In the age of public relations, the public sphere must now be "arduously constructed case by case, a public sphere which earlier grew out of the social structure."[20] The public sphere contributes to the possibility of emancipation by providing the forum in which public discourse can critically evaluate claims and examine alternative social constructions.

From the previous discussion, emancipation is obtained through autonomy of the agent. For the public sphere to be an effective medium for emancipation, first it must be free from interference of prior power commitments that prohibit free expression of ideas and second it must have rules of operation that encourage and permit the kind of discourse that will lead to critical examination of ideas and public consensus. Evaluation of the first of these two criteria involves careful examination of the sponsorship and intent of the forum itself. Such an evaluation is relatively easy in the transparent world of the town meeting but is more difficult in the mediated environment of the Internet. Habermas himself sets forth guidelines for the evaluation of the second of these criteria for an emancipatory public sphere in his discussion of discourse ethics.

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15 Held, p. 255.
16 Habermas (1971), p. 311.
17 Habermas (1971), p. 308.
18 Richard K Ashley, "Political Realism and Human Interests," *International Studies Quarterly*, 25:2. 1981.
19 Habermas (1989), p. 137.
20 Habermas (1989), p. 141.

In the discourse ethics, Habermas sets forth the conditions for communication that can lead to democracy, freedom, and emancipation. Discourse in the public sphere, properly done, can lead to emancipation. The discourse ethics centers around the idea of an ideal speech situation. For such a situation to emerge in a public sphere, its participants must adhere to the following set of rules:[21]

"1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
2a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
2b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
2c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.
3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2)."[22]

The ideal speech situation emphasizes the autonomy of the participating agent. The agent is autonomous in relation to other agents engaged in the discourse while at the same time the agent is autonomous of other power commitments that derive from the political or economic setting of the discourse. The agent is not independent, however, of the exegesis of the discourse itself. Each participating agent must acknowledge the autonomy of the other agents, especially in relation to claims of validity. Perzynski notes three criteria for validity claims attributed to Habermas:[23]

- All of those affected by a norm must agree that they accept its consequences and side effects. All must understand that the norm may bring constraints and that any constraint satisfies all interests.
- The conditions for the practical discourse out of which universally valid norms may emerge include the participation and acceptance of all who are affected by such norms, as such norms meet their interests.
- Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse.

It is this communally accepted intent of the public sphere that sets the conditions for ideal speech.

For Habermas, the emancipatory interests of knowledge and emancipation of individuals from social, economic, and political forces of oppression are inextricably linked. He refines this idea in his theory of communicative competence[24] in which he claims that all speech is an attempt to achieve consensus through discourse[25] – an attempt that is often

21 Dennis Gaynor, 1996, *Democracy in the Age of Information: A Reconception of the Public Sphere*. Downloaded from http://www.georgetown.edu/faculty/ bassr/gaynor/intro.htm on February 22, 2003. Quoting Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, translated by Christian Lehnardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), p. 86.
22 At the time this paper was written, a copy of *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* was not available to its author. Therefore I am relegated to using others' characterizations of Habermas' words with hopes and expectations that they are correct.
23 Adam Perzynski, 2001, "The Internet and the Theories of Jurgen Habermas," http://socwww.cwru.edu/~atp5/habermas.html (accessed February 15, 2003).
24 Habernas (1984).
25 Held, p. 256.

doomed to failure. Its failure provides a measure of the degree to which it embodies so called distorted communication. Consensus reached under coercion is systematic distorted communication. Held captures Habermas' connection between consensus and emancipation as follows:

"The process of emancipation, then, entails the transcendence of such systems of distorted communication. This process, in turn, requires engaging in critical reflection and criticism. It is only through reflection that domination, in its many forms, can be unmasked."[26]

In summary, then, Habermas believes the public sphere has the potential to be emancipatory *because* it is capable of discourse that leads to communicative action, but only if it is free of prior power commitments (political, economic, social, or personal); its discourse is conducted by implicit rules that permit equal and free access for all its participants; and its participants explicitly recognize the communal intent of finding consensus. Thus, if the Internet is to be an emancipatory medium, it must first be sustainable as a public sphere. It must also permit equal and free access for all persons concerned and it must not be constrained or regulated by political, economic, or social forces. Finally, those who engage in online discourse must explicitly recognize the intent of coming to general consensus. The next section of this study will examine the Internet at large in relation to these criteria and identify barriers to their being achieved.

EMANCIPATORY INTERESTS AND THE INTERNET

Much has been written, online and off, about the possibility of the Internet becoming the new public sphere. One of the most influential of these articles is by Mark Poster. Poster notes that much of the discussion about the impact of the Internet has centered on the transformative effect of its technology. This discussion has focused on access, technological determinism, encryption, commodification of information, and intellectual property.[27] He claims that few approaches to the impact of the Internet address the question of cultural identity formation. For example the commodification of information "translates the act of shopping into an electronic form" but more important is how it "institutes new social functions."[28] The question concerning the effect of costless reproduction of communication of information is the wrong question. The Internet imposes a "dematerialization of communication and in many of its aspects a transformation of the subject position of the individual who engages within it." The Internet "installs a new regime of relations between humans and matter . . .reconfiguring the relation of the

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26 Ibid.
27 Marc Poster, "CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere," in D. Porter (ed.), *Internet Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 201.
28 Poster, p. 202.

technology to culture and thereby undermining the standpoint from which, in the past, a discourse developed . . . about the effects of technology."[29] He proceeds to use a somewhat dubious analogy to make his point by claiming that

". . . the Internet is more like a social space than a thing; its effects are more like those of Germany than those of hammers. The effect of Germany upon the people within it is to make them Germans . . . . As long as we understand the Internet as a hammer we will fail to discern the way it is like Germany."[30]

Rather than focusing on the instrumentality of networked communication, Poster asks whether there are new forms of relations occurring within the Internet "which suggest new forms of power configurations between communicating individuals?"[31] He then frames the question in terms of the possibility of the Internet becoming a new public sphere and asks

"If there is a public sphere on the Internet, who populates it and how? In particular one must ask what kinds of beings exchange information in this public sphere? Since there occurs no face-to-face communication, only electronic flickers on a screen, what kind of community can there be in this space? What kind of disembodied politics are inscribed so evanescently in cyberspace?[32]

Poster characterizes Habermas' concept of the public sphere as a "homogeneous space of embodied subjects in symmetrical relations pursuing consensus through the critique of arguments and the presentation of validity claims" and then contends that it is systematically denied in electronic communication.[33]

One of the barriers to the Internet becoming a public sphere that Poster identifies exists in the creation of an individual identity on the Internet. He claims that, "On the Internet, individuals construct their identities in relation to ongoing dialogues, not as acts of pure consciousness." The benefit of this fluid definition of the self is that it permits people to step out of identities imposed by sensory cues such as visual identification by race or gender or auditory identification by inflection or accent. There are problems, however, with this self identification. First, it is transitory. Poster gives the example of a man who entered an Internet discussion as a woman to experience the intimacy he had observed in conversations between women.[34] While the man may have learned something about such intimacy, the women were exploited and hurt upon discovery of the man's identity. Another problem with self identification is that it is not based in true historical and cultural experience. The man's communications in the previous example could only be based on what he thought a woman's interaction might be – not based on the cultural and social history that a woman would bring to the discourse. Such fabricated identities distort communication and can hardly be the basis for Habermas' ideal speech situation.

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29 Poster, p. 205.
30 Ibid.
31 Poster, p. 206.
32 Ibid.
33 Poster, p. 209.
34 Poster, p. 212.

Other barriers to ideal speech on the Internet derive from the atomized access that decentralized communication permits. The typical mode of Internet access involves the person sitting alone at a computer interacting only through the keyboard and the monitor. Joseph Lockard notes that ". . . the netsurfer rides alone, solitary even amid electronic crowds."[35] Lockard believes that this lonely approach to community building fails.

"Instead of real communities, cyber consumers sit in front of the Apple World opening screen that pictures a cluster of cartoon buildings which represent community functions (click on post office for e-mail, a store for online shopping, a pillared library for electronic encyclopedias, etc.). Cyberspace software commonly imitates 'community' in order to further a nonexistent verisimilitude. What the software addresses is desire for community rather than the difficult-to-achieve, sweated-over reality of community."[36]

Lockard further condemns cybercommunity as "an element in the ideological superstructure over the material base of cyberspace (computers, software, labor costs), an element that facilitates technological acceptance, integration, familiarity, and consumption."[37] If his characterization is correct, then the public sphere of cyberspace is not free of prior power commitments – especially those that derive from an attempt to instantiate a sense of online community for the purpose of furthering commercial interests of the marketplace.

A significant question that must be addressed in the examination of the Internet as a tool for emancipation is whether or not communication behavior is affected differently by computer mediated communication than face-to-face communication. That behavior is different in this medium is not disputed. For example, a recent study of online commerce shows that cognitive barriers to unregulated buying are directly attacked by the nature of cyber commerce, increasing the problem of compulsive shopping.[38] Lincoln Dahlberg identifies a number of additional factors of computer mediated communication that create barriers to development of an emancipatory public sphere on the Internet.[39] Among these barriers are a dearth of reflexivity in computer mediated discourse, a lack of respect for the views of others, and domination of discourse by certain individuals and groups. Another study indicated that cooperation in computer mediated communication is less stable than cooperation that emerges in face-to-face communication.[40]

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35 Joseph Lockard, "Progressive Politics, Electronic Individualism, and the Myth of Virtual Community," chapter in *Internet Culture*, edited by David Porter (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 223.

36 Lockard, p. 224.

37 Ibid.

38 Robert LaRose, "On the Negative Effects of E-Commerce: A Sociocognitive Exploration of Unregulated On-line Buying," Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, volume 6, number 3, 2001,accessed at http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol6/issue3/ on February 23, 2003.

39 Lincoln Dahlberg, "Computer-Mediated Communication and The Public Sphere: A Critical Analysis," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, volume 7, number, 2001, accessed at http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol7/issue1/ on February 23, 2003.

40 Elena Rocco and Massimo Warglien, 1996, "Computer Mediated Communication and the Emergence of 'Electronic Opportunism,'" Technical Report 1, CEEL (Computable and Experimental Economics Laboratory), downloaded from http://eprints.biblio.unitn.it/archive/00000034/ on February 23, 2003.

Some differences in computer mediated communication behavior may enhance the ability of the Internet to establish ideal speech. Sirkka Jarvenpaa and Dorothy Leidner found that trust develops more quickly in computer mediated communication but that it also tends to be more fragile and temporal.[41] Other studies have shown that computer mediated communication can help people overcome shyness.[42]

The digital divide presents one of the most significant barriers to the Internet becoming an emancipatory medium. Equal and free access to the discourse is clearly one of the most important criteria for the public sphere - although it must be noted that Habermas' own examples of the 18th century salons and coffee houses were hardly all inclusive. While access to the Internet is growing significantly, it is still a medium affected by class, income, and wealth. Barriers to access go beyond the ability of individuals to remedy. Until world wide satellite access becomes a reality, access to the Internet still requires substantial local network and server hardware. Figure 1 shows the growth in the estimated number of people who have access to the Internet world wide from 1995 through 2001.
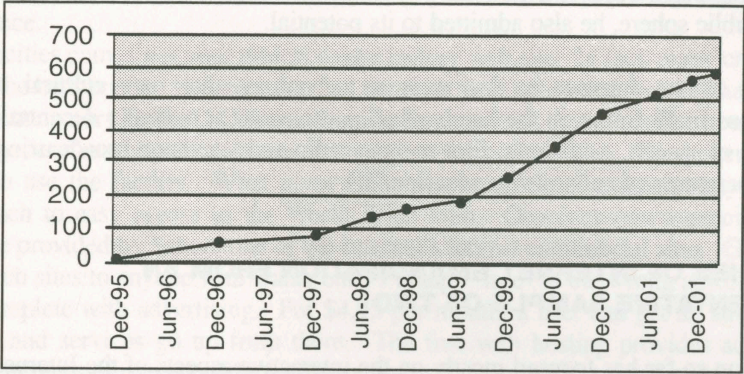

Figure 1: Number of People World Wide with Access to the Internet from 1995-2001. Compiled from data from NUA Internet Surveys at http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/world.html.

While it is clear that the number of people with access to the Internet is growing, two other facts about figure 1 are important to note. First, the total number of people with access in May 2002, the most recent data, point is 580.78 million, which is only an estimated 9.57% of the world's population. Second, the Internet grew rapidly in its early years, but the rate of growth has been falling off since December 2000. This is probably due to an increasing saturation of the market in the developed world and the lack of capitalization of the Internet in the less developed world.

This digital divide is emphasized when the rates of access are compared across continents. It is estimated that in January 2002, approximately 164.14 million people in the United States had access to the Internet. That is approximately 58.5% of the

41 Sirkka Jarvenpaa and Dorothy Leidner, "Communication and Trust in Global Virtual Teams," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, volume 3, number 4, 1998, accessed at http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue4/ on February 23, 2003.
42 Derek Lane, "Computer-Mediated Communication in the Classroom: Asset or Liability?" Workshop presented at the Interconnect '94 Teaching, Learning & Technology Conference, October 14, 1994, download from http://www.uky.edu/~drlane/techno/cmcasset.htm on February 23, 2003.

population. This compares with 26.28% in France and 1.61% in Kenya in approximately the same time frame (Data are taken from the NUA Surveys web site at http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/). The Internet is a long way from providing the universal free and equal access that is required of ideal speech in the public sphere.

This divide of access also affects content of the Internet. English is still the language of the web, further limiting access and empowering American-centric and Euro-centric content. As Joseph Lockard puts it, "In the chaos of globality, an American identity imprints itself on the Internet by default of any other seriously contending ideology."[43]

From the above discussion, the chance for ideal speech in a public sphere of the Internet seems bleak. Possibly the pessimistic outlook is due to the youth of the Internet. While e-mail and USENET date back to the 1960's and 1970's, the Internet we know today did not come into existence until the creation of the world wide web by CERN in 1991 and the first graphic browser (Mosaic) in 1993.[44] The medium is only 10 years old and it is growing and changing rapidly. While Mark Poster provided a thorough critique of the use of the Internet as a public sphere, he also admitted to its potential.

"The magic of the Internet is that it is a technology that puts cultural acts, symbolizations in all forms, in the hands of all participants; it radically decentralizes the positions of speech, publishing, film-making radio and television broadcasting, in short the apparatuses of cultural reproduction."[45]

CASE STUDIES OF INTERNET EMANCIPATION FROM AN UNREPRESENTATIVE SAMPLE OF TWO

The discussion so far has focused mostly on the interactive aspects of the Internet such as e-mail, list-serves, discussion groups, USENET groups, or MUD's.[46] The emancipatory potential of the Internet is also found in the one-way communications of the World Wide Web. To be emancipatory, in Habermas' context, in addition to contributing information to the discourse of the public sphere, web sites must derive from emancipatory cognitive interests.

There are examples of web sites that approach the requirements for emancipatory interests. One such site is the home site of the Independent Media Centers (http://www.indymedia.org/). The Independent Media Center (IMC) is a collection of web-based grass-roots news groups that operate their own web sites and interconnect to each other through the Internet. IMC started by covering IMF/World Bank anti-capitalist protests (specifically the "Battle in Seattle" in 1999). IMC covers protests and demonstrations from inside - that is, from the perspective of those organizing and participating. Each IMC is an autonomous group that organizes its own structure and mission. The indymedia.org group that sits at the center of the organization does not try to

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43 Lockard, p. 228.
44 Robert Zakon, *Hobbes Internet Timeline*, 2002, http://www.zakon.org/robert/internet/timeline/.
45 Poster, p. 211.
46 MUD stands for Multiple User Dimension and is a multi-user programming environment in which users meet and interact in a fabricated social setting. Its origins come from online role playing games but variations on MUD's are now being used in education, business, and other endeavors.

direct the organization. It merely manages the communication and provides a central web page for communications. Global decision making is explicitly democratic and decentralized. The site operates an open publishing newswire to which anyone can submit a story. Editors do clean up the stories and perform some filtering to avoid duplication. Instructions for creating and uploading digital image, audio, or video files are included on the web site. Articles in many different languages are accepted.

The Independent Media Center meets many of Habermas' criteria for emancipatory interests. Access is open to those who have the technology to use it. While there is little interaction directly, the information on IMC forms a part of a larger body of information that underlies public discourse on politics, economics, and society. The decision making within IMC is distinctly democratic and attempts to empower participants equally. The IMC is no more inhibited by prior power commitments than any other Internet site. Finally, due largely to the types of people who participate, the content of the material on the Independent Media Center newswire explores power commitments that form the hypostatized forces of social interaction thus providing a critique that could reduce their influence.

Geocities.com is not your typical emancipatory web site. In fact, many critical theorists might be hard pressed to accept that any commercially sponsored web site has the potential for emancipatory content. One must remember, however, that the coffee houses and salons of Habermas' early public sphere did not give the coffee away. There were prices to be paid to use the facility. What gives Geocities its potential emancipatory content is its approach to easy access to the World Wide Web. Geocities (www.geocities.com) is a service provided by Yahoo, one of the Internet's largest commercial sites. Geocities offers free web sites to anyone who wants one. Perhaps "free" is the wrong adjective since they come replete with advertising. For $4.95 per month, a user can get an ad-free web site. Prices and services go up from there. The free web hosting provides access to many different types of content. Much of the content is commercial or personal in nature. Some of the content is clearly political and some of the content embodies emancipatory cognitive interests. For example, a subject search of Geocities sites for anarchism returned 539 sites. A search on the keywords "feminist politics" returned 8 member pages and 939 web sites, one self-proclaimed to be a site for "teenage anarcho-feminists" - complete with bomb making recipes.

CONCLUSIONS

It is unclear how much either Indymedia.com or the political content of Geocities.com add to the emancipatory discourse of the public sphere. Both sites have exclusionary qualities, if for no other reason than it takes a computer to access them. Neither site provides two-way communication that is necessary for discourse. The unregulated content of Geocities succumbs to the criticisms of computer mediated discourse raised by Dahlberg. Yet, both sites provide some hope for the nascent emergence of a public sphere in the Internet. Both sites provide free access of a sort and both sites encourage unregulated participation.

The Internet does not yet yield the ideal speech situation that a truly emancipatory public sphere would. There are many barriers to such a situation – some of which may be insurmountable with the current technology and organization of the Internet. Nevertheless, the medium is young and by decentralizing communication and as Geocities does, the Internet may yet develop its emancipatory potential.