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ARTICLE

# Power, reason, closure: critical perspectives on new media theory

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### Abstract

This article addresses the question of new media studies' meta-theoretical premises. It is argued that the field's exceptional openness towards theory and method is a valuable asset, which needs to be cultivated by means of a more explicit meta-theoretical debate. Drawing on critical theory, three meta-theoretical criteria concerning power, reason and closure are suggested and applied in a review of common theoretical perspectives at use in the field. A discussion of political economy and postmodern perspectives prepares the ground for an analysis of approaches inspired by Habermas and Foucault. The article concludes by advocating the theoretical concept of the *dispositif* or social apparatus, developed by Foucault and Deleuze. It is argued that the concept provides an effective tool to map the intricate relations of power and knowledge around the internet, as well as a possibility to analyse how processes of subjectification are fostered or circumscribed in specific settings.

### Key words

critical theory • *dispositif* • Foucault • Habermas • internet  
• power • public sphere • reason • social apparatus

### INTRODUCTION

Although it has not been used widely for more than a decade, the internet has shown an extraordinary capacity to spur the imagination of

academics, businesspeople and journalists alike. From the saviour of crumbling western economies to the vanguard of anarchist politics, the new medium has been ascribed almost every conceivable role. Leaning towards hyperbole rather than sober analysis, these accounts often defy any realistic conception of how media are used and what a medium can accomplish (Manovich, 2001).

But obviously, the advent of the internet has not gone by without the introduction of any changes. Inexpensive written communication and easy information retrieval are just some of the most apparent examples. Maybe even more importantly, the production of qualitative content and its instant global distribution have become affordable to a considerably greater number of people.

While this suggests that the internet has greater participatory capabilities than many other media, recurrent attempts to control its content and steer its data flows also have been made. The dynamics arising from this tension and the question of what effect it might have on society have been the subject of intensive debate in recent years. While it is too early to anticipate any specific outcome of these debates, studies in the emerging academic field of new media studies<sup>1</sup> have succeeded in covering a wide range of phenomena emerging around the internet (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2002).

Reflecting on the theoretical trends of new media studies, Kim and Weaver (2002: 521) demand that 'traditional mass communication theories should be redefined to effectively explain new communication technology and social system interactions'. Therefore, empirical research has to be accompanied by a development of theoretical tools, evolving both from theory's relation to empirical material and a comparison of theories (Kim and Weaver, 2002).

Calls for new theories and methods have been answered by a number of readers and anthologies, which examine the new technological situation from a wide range of epistemological and theoretical angles. As a whole, new media studies are characterized by an exceptional openness towards theory and method and up until now it seemed impossible to discern any obvious canon guiding research decisions in the field. This 'experimental approach towards theory and epistemology' (Sterne, 1999: 264) allows for valuable interdisciplinary cross-fertilizations that hold the promise of a better understanding of evolving technological and social situations. However, it does not seem that the prevalence of this experimental approach in new media studies can be ascribed to any larger meta-theoretical decision or discussion. While there certainly is some overlap with the epistemological discussions of cultural studies and other academic traditions, much of the field's experimental character seems to be attributable to enthusiasm in the face of the experimental possibilities of the new technologies themselves.

Considering the quick progress of technological and financial consolidation in the new media sphere, these technologies' experimental possibilities may not persist very much longer. In a climate that is generally more hostile towards such characteristics, the need for an 'experimental approach' in academia also would appear less self-evident. The risk that new media studies' valuable openness and social relevance will be compromised in such a scenario, therefore, has to be countered by the development of a more explicit meta-theoretical corpus. Unfortunately, empirical studies in the field of new media rarely discuss the theoretical underpinnings of their research more explicitly (Kim and Weaver, 2002), allowing their choice of theory to appear like a matter of personal disposition rather than critical assessment. However, along with the maturing of the field, histories of the field (Silver, 2000) as well as topical, theoretical and methodological meta-analyses have been developed (Kim and Weaver, 2002; Silver, 2004; Stempel and Stewart, 2000), pointing towards a need for more conceptual comparisons and evaluative analyses of the underlying theoretical approaches employed in the field.

This study seeks to develop the move towards deepened meta-theoretical analysis. It is argued that, in order not to lose our grip amid the wealth of theoretical positions at play in the field, it is necessary to lift the discussion to a more abstract level and look at the underpinnings of theory rather than its applications. It is argued that, while wariness towards canon creation is justified, the renunciation of normative meta-theoretical criteria cannot be an option. On the contrary, the field's flexibility, openness and relevance can be sustained only if its meta-theoretical premises are made explicit in a thorough debate.

Taking the Frankfurt School scholarship as its main point of departure, this article argues that the issues of power, reason and closure should be made major areas of concern for such a debate. Three normative meta-theoretical criteria are suggested, drawing on Adorno and Horkheimer (1979[1944]), Birgitta Höijer (1990), Horkheimer (1972[1937]) and Albrecht Wellmer (1991[1985]). Subsequently, these criteria are used in a critical review of some common theoretical perspectives at use in the field. For these reviews, texts have been chosen which employ a certain theory in a very explicit way. The point of these choices is not to criticize particular authors or reject whole theoretical traditions, but rather to show how some of the applied figures of thought, if allowed to have a decisive impact on a future canon, could narrow the scope of new media studies in unproductive ways.

## POWER

Traditional theory, as described by Horkheimer (1972[1937]), hides its ideological nature within an aura of objectivism. It assumes that both the

individual scientist and the scientific process are autonomous from the surrounding society. Although ultimately it seeks the legitimacy of science in its usefulness for society, both its questions and epistemology are perceived to derive from within science. However, for critical theory the nature of its material cannot be taken for granted in any positivist fashion. As society is marked by struggle and contradictions, theory cannot avoid being influenced, if not determined, by these struggles:

The critical theory of society . . . has for its object men as producers of their own historical way of life in its totality. The real situations which are the starting-point of science are not regarded simply as data to be verified and to be predicted according to the laws of probability. Every datum depends not on nature alone but also on the power man has over it. Objects, the kind of perception, the questions asked, and the meaning of the answers all bear witness to human activity and the degree of man's power. (1972[1937]: 244)

Thus, the question of power is at the heart of critical theory. Theory cannot be separated from ideology and from power relations in society. Therefore it seems vital that theory, rather than resting in 'normality', should seek to identify and question the power relations which influence it and which, in turn, it is able to influence. Due to the importance of the question, this analysis should be given priority and should be attended to with utmost accuracy. Thus, the first meta-theoretical criterion is:

1. The theory should include a sophisticated concept of power that is as broad and subtle as possible and can be applied both analytically and self-reflexively.

## REASON

Another difference between traditional and critical theory, according to Horkheimer, is that critical theory aims not merely at a coordinated gathering of knowledge for knowledge's sake, but at 'the rational organization of human activity' (1972[1937]: 245), ultimately promoting 'man's emancipation from slavery' (p. 246).

However, Adorno and Horkheimer (1979[1944]) also discuss the problem of instrumental reason, promoting an excluding form of rationalization and functionalism. Berman (1983) and Bauman (1989) have traced some of the devastating consequences of this side of Enlightenment reason when incorporated into modernity. Postmodernism has intensified this critique, aiming to transcend the homogenizing effects of Enlightenment reason (Wellmer, 1991[1985]). Discussing the different aspects of the postmodern critique of reason, Wellmer summarizes:

The linguistic critique of rationalism and subjectivism does provide an opportunity for thinking in new ways about 'truth', 'justice' or 'self-determination'; but at the same time it will make us suspicious of those who

want to give an affirmative twist, in the manner of Nietzsche, to the psychological critique of the subject – by which I mean those propagandists of a new era which shall have cast off the burden of Platonic heritage, and in which rhetoric shall replace argument, the will to power shall replace the will to truth, the art of words shall replace theory, and the economy of desire shall replace morality. We have quite enough of all that to contend with, after all, in the world as it is now. (1991[1985]: 70, emphasis in original)

On the one hand, in Wellmer's account a thorough critique of reason appears as necessary and adequate, considering the history of instrumental reason. On the other hand, reason is portrayed as one of the few viable tools which make normative statements possible. If it is reason that enables the combination of theory and political practice and provides both with a common direction, it is uncertain what happens if this principle is abandoned. Without a common, abstract principle on which to base one's judgement, one truth could appear as valid as any other. Coherent politics or theory would hardly be feasible in such a scenario, as it would be impossible to predict the outcome of any action taken.

According to Wellmer, an absolutist critique of reason has little to offer other than affirmation, regression or cynicism – traits that are impossible to build politics upon and therefore lend themselves to being smoothly integrated into capitalism. Wellmer (1991[1985]) argues, therefore, that it is necessary to narrow the focus of the critique of reason onto the relevant parts and perverted uses of reason, rather than abandoning the notion altogether. But he also states that politics in this sense cannot take the forms once promised by rationalist Enlightenment. Thus the second meta-theoretical criterion is:

2. A theory should incorporate a sensible critique of reason, including a discussion of alternative ways to maintain political impetus.

## CLOSURE

Traditional positivism holds that good theory derives from empirical evidence. A theory should be able to explain, or describe in more detail, certain occurrences in the material that it analyses. Methodological guidelines should keep the researcher from excluding any evidence and make it possible for other researchers to test conclusions. The amassed knowledge can be drawn upon subsequently by new generations of researchers, resulting in a better understanding of the world and better ways to make use of the resources available.

While some of these notions might still be found in contemporary theory, today positivism as a whole concept of science is seen mostly as outdated. Its somewhat naive belief in a pure form of empiricism, which can be employed in building a good society, has not survived the more relativistic accounts of science developing in the wake of Ludwig Fleck

(1979) and Thomas Kuhn (1970). However, there is no reason why some of positivism's criteria for what can be considered 'good' theory should not be relevant also in a contemporary context. Höjjer (1990) argues that the three methodological criteria, reliability, validity and generalizability – usually ascribed to quantitative studies – should be considered also in qualitative, ethnographic research. According to Höjjer, the criterion of reliability provides at least some protection against overly subjective interpretations of data. This is especially important as

people as information seekers – and processors – are far more likely to see confirming instances of original beliefs or perceptions than to see disconfirming instances, even when disconfirming instances are more frequent. (Miles and Huberman, quoted in Höjjer, 1990: 16)

Validity concerns the way in which variables and units of analysis are defined, providing a way to assess 'how well you measure or investigate what you intend to investigate' (Højjer, 1990: 17). Thus, discussion on the validity of research can help to avoid imposing 'alien structures on the material' (Højjer, 1990: 17).

While Höjjer's discussion focuses primarily on methods in qualitative research, her points are equally valid in a meta-theoretical context. As Webster (2002) shows, much recent theorizing on the 'information society' can be criticized for lacking reliability and validity. Taking a switch towards greater 'informationalization' for granted, a lot of these theories disregard disconfirming evidence and build upon vague definitions of variables (Webster, 2002).

The transformation of Höjjer's principles into meta-theoretical criteria can help to criticize theories which introduce certain closures without delivering convincing arguments for so doing. It suggests that, ideally, the development of theory should move back and forth between theory and material, rather than just extending from one of these directions. Thus, the third meta-theoretical criterion is:

3. The theory should take into account as much empirical evidence as possible without limiting it from the outset by means of excluding definitions. Any closure must be argued for.

## DISCUSSION

In the following discussion, the three criteria developed above will be employed in the critical review of a range of theoretical perspectives. The discussion of the theoretical orientations of political economy and postmodernism, as well as their relationship to power, reason and closure, prepares the ground for a more in-depth discussion of Habermasian and Foucauldian approaches.

## Political economy

Writing from a political economy perspective, Winseck (2002) analyses the ways in which Canadian Internet Service Providers (ISPs) limit the use of their services in order to usher internet usage in a more capitalism-friendly direction:

At the very least, these restrictions strive to neuter the internet as a competitive threat as well as to narrow the role of users vis-à-vis the network. Confronted with a context of information abundance and the devolution of media power on to users' desktops, the communication industries are striving to pull these powers back into the network, under their control, where they think they belong. This dramatically changes the character of the internet as we know it and resurrects a model that looks much more like the 'old media'. (2002: 809)

By focusing on the material conditions in which technological and social aspects develop, political economy fulfils the important function of qualifying some of the bold claims made from other perspectives. Pointing out continuities found in class stratification and corporate control, the adoption of a political economy approach can serve to question notions of the levelling impact of the 'information revolution'. But when it is assumed to describe all relevant power relations, the political economy approach in new media studies turns problematic. Displaying a tendency towards economical determinism, studies based in this approach risk disregarding the fact that, in spite of the inroads made by commercial interests, the internet continues to be a comparatively vibrant medium. Also, Winseck's study completely disregards the possibility that the early days of the internet – promoting qualities such as openness, involvement and creativity – might have established patterns of usage and content production that will not be given up without resistance by its users. In his account, cultural imagery, social interaction and other phenomena never seem to be able to escape economic determination.

Apart from the tendency towards economic determinism, the approach can be criticized for its failure to address the question of reason. Definitions of power and resistance, drawn from traditional Marxism, are comparatively crude and locked in a mutually exclusive dichotomy – on one hand the duped subject of capitalism, on the other hand the authentic subject of reason. As Wellmer (1991[1985]) discusses, this conflation of reason and liberation is not self-evident, as 'instrumental reason' can lead to oppression of a different kind. The identification of the 'true' needs of the working class would then result in new functionalistic accounts, rather than aiming at the inclusion of the Other in all its varieties.

A materialist analysis with clearly identified opponents, along with adoption of the legitimizing principle of reason, provides the Marxist approach, with the advantage of being easily translatable into powerful

political practice. While its discussion of economic structures seems vital to any critical analysis of new media, it simultaneously risks adopting a limited focus that excludes both disconfirming evidence and prevents the analysis of more subtle negotiations of power relations.

Failing to address further the question of reason, the approach risks creating new limitations, analytically, conceptually and, maybe most importantly, politically. As well as excluding other oppressed groups from its view, this limited approach could fail to grasp important political opportunities emerging in the field of new media.

### **Postmodernism**

Postmodern thought intensifies discussions about the question of subjectification, thereby radicalizing the critique of reason (Wellmer, 1991[1985]). Therefore the virtues of new media, in terms of deconstruction and decentralization, are a natural focus for studies with postmodern affiliations.

Peter Lurie (2003) argues that the internet not only enables a deconstructive reading of texts, but that the nature of HTML renders such a reading inevitable. According to him, 'a person engages in the web in much the same way that a deconstructionist approaches a text . . . The web is a postmodernist tool that inevitably produces a postmodernist perspective' (Lurie, 2003). In the long run, if people are trained from the outset not to accept any (textual) authority as given, this holds the promise of an 'open, inquisitive and markedly liberal spirit' and 'a newly emergent majority on the Left . . . It's all in the code' (Lurie, 2003). Poster (1995) discusses virtual communities, which offer considerable possibilities for their users to play with identities and develop elaborate characters without any connection to real life. He focuses especially on gender and argues that the fact that one has to choose gender in a virtual community helps to question gender formations in real life: '[Internet communities] are places . . . of the inscription of new assemblages of self-constitution.'

The postmodern approach to new media, in the form represented here by Lurie and Poster, suffers primarily from two problems. First, in its urge to cast the internet as an essentially new phenomenon, it portrays the present as completely different from anything in the past. Rather than being analysed within the context of their historical development, phenomena such as role-playing or deconstructive reading appear to be enabled only recently by the advent of new media. When failing to recognize parallels between 'old' and 'new' media, the postmodern approach thus discourages more contextually-based and historically sound analyses.

Second, by ascribing technology with the ability to change cultural patterns, the postmodern approach flirts with technological determinism. Through the absolutist critique of reason, postmodernism takes important

steps away from liberal and positivist notions of the subject, thus questioning preconstituted positions of subjectivity and stressing the impact of language and technology on the subject. However, this view of a deconstructed subject, embedded in social relations and cultural patterns, is not always accompanied by an equally deconstructive analysis of technology. When issues such as ownership, access, bandwidth, interface design, etc. are neglected, the social genesis of technology is inadequately analysed, leading to a picture of technology as an autonomous force. In interaction with the deconstructed subject, this force then appears as a determining one, rather than an outcome of negotiations of power relations.

In some postmodern accounts, this inadequate description of technology does not seem to be problematic, because theory and technology are conflated. Lurie (2003), for example, relies on the ‘agnostic, linked, associative and contingent’ nature of the internet as proof for its postmodern qualities. However, this conflation of theory and technology is problematic, because it ‘undermines, by inevitable affirmation, the critical position of the reader–theorist’ (Van Pelt, 2002: 314, emphasis removed). Also, when applied to technologies with less appeal to postmodern thought, the concept of autonomous technology would hardly seem desirable.

The deconstructive reading and self-constitution of identity advocated by the postmodern approach are assumed to have a profound impact on the way in which people perceive and interact with reality. Ultimately, this is seen to result in the acknowledgement of the Other. However, without explicit reflection on continuities in social stratifications and the structural and material power relations inscribed into technological infrastructure, the postmodern approach results in a rather limited focus on the personal and experimental. Together with the absolutist critique of reason, this focus translates uneasily into political practice.

### **Habermas and rational discourse**

The concept of the public sphere has proven fruitful in the field of new media studies. As Habermas laments the decay of the public sphere caused by the growing professionalization of information provision and the commercialization of media (1989[1962]), it is interesting to discuss whether the new forms of communication introduced by the internet hold the promise of a re-enactment of the public sphere. A natural area of interest for this kind of analysis are discussion forums and chatrooms, as often they are open to all internet users and submissions are rarely edited as strongly as in older media. Providing an area for public deliberation, such fora can appear as heirs to the magazines and coffee houses which Habermas views as the nucleus of the historical public sphere (Habermas, 1989[1962]).

The discussion forums on the website Slashdot (<http://slashdot.org>), mainly focusing on computers and software issues, have been the subject of

two independent analyses from a Habermasian perspective. Ó Baoill (2000) summarizes his findings as follows:

The three characteristics of the classic public sphere – universal access, rational debate, and a disregard of rank – serve as benchmarks against which to judge actual public spaces. The analysis of Slashdot under these headings, while not always positive, must ultimately be viewed as confirming the power of the internet to provide a strong public sphere in the twenty-first century.

Analysing the same website, A. Michael Froomkin concludes, slightly less optimistically:

It would be foolhardy to predict that some hypothetical version five of Slashdot will someday include tools that encourage communities to self-generate morally valid community decisions. But it is not too soon to speculate that a multiplicity of Slashdot-like sites could become the nuclei of pluralistic ‘public spheres’ in which the participants self-organize, educate each other, and then bring that shared understanding to bear in more traditional social processes for decisionmaking – such as elections. (2003: 866)

Both authors thus contend that, even if the internet does not live up to Habermas’ criteria in every respect and despite the inroads made by the corporate sphere, compared to other media it provides possibilities for revitalizing the public sphere. They prove that a Habermasian approach can take into account a broad range of empirical evidence. By using ideal notions as a means to gauge restrictions on rational discourse, it is possible to identify encroachments from a variety of sources. In this way, the discussion of both material and discursive questions can be integrated, enabling a subtle analysis of the way in which rational discourse is circumscribed.

However, in the course of locating the public sphere within society, Habermas also introduces more dubious concepts, among them contrasting the public with a private sphere – the space of those matters not considered ‘of public concern’. Traditionally, as it has been issues such as reproductive work, the intimate sphere or the exchange of goods which have been ascribed to the private sphere, this division has been identified as a feature of patriarchal domination, as well as a common tenet of liberal ideology (Benhabib, 1992). Therefore, it is hard to see the benefits of its integration into a critical analysis. On the other hand, it can be argued that the division into private and public is a purely analytical concept. While reflecting on divisions that exist within a given society, the concept would not include normative guidelines as to how these divisions should be altered. However, the strong normative tendencies running through Habermas’ ideal notions make it difficult to determine which parts should be used normatively and which should be used analytically.

This weakness is also apparent in the underlying concept of power. Again, by focusing on encroachments on rational discourse, power relations can be analysed in both broad and subtle ways. But by endorsing the division of society into different realms, certain limits are set on this analysis of power relations. Consequently, important aspects of these relations are exempted from critical analysis. As Habermas' definitions of ideal notions seek utterly to delineate a space or a situation where the free unfolding of rational discourse is guaranteed, the focus is steered away from the areas of society that are not considered to be domains of reason in the first place. Additionally, if it is the resort of reason which has to be defended, this begs the question of exactly what this resort entails in terms of power relations (McCarthy, 1994). According to Habermas, it is possible to separate the instrumental reason that threatens the public sphere from the critical reason that reigns within it. But Habermas has been attacked from many quarters for endorsing an excluding view of rationality. It has been pointed out that neither women nor the working class had access to the spaces that Habermas counts among the domains of the emerging historical public sphere (Fraser, 1999). Again, normative tendencies running through the historical account create uncertainty about the nature of his concepts.

To be viable as a theoretical tool fostering oppositional politics, some clarifications and amendments have to be made to Habermas' original concepts. It has to be made clear that both the public and private spheres are conceptual constructions, the boundaries of which are not given historically, but have to be constantly renegotiated (Benhabib, 1992). A stronger focus on oppositional politics has to be adopted, addressing the question of how things become 'of common concern' and what strategies can be implemented to push things into the public sphere. Therefore, concepts of multiple or subaltern public spheres have been suggested, evading the potential homogenizing effects of the rationality advocated by Habermas (Felski, 2000; Fraser, 1999). Although Habermas contends that his understanding of critical rationality actually incorporates this multitude of different rationalities (Lipscomb, 2002), it remains unclear at which level this variation can be accepted and exactly where the kind of rationality that transcends historical singularities could be located.

Basing rationality solely in the context of a singular group or historical situation seems to be problematic in so far as coherence between these singular rationalities can be lost. They then appear incompatible and incomprehensible to each other, resulting in a relativistic account of isolated phenomena. In that respect, the public sphere can be seen as serving a unifying function, which enables a productive exchange between these entities. However, the question that remains unresolved is on what merits any of these regional rationalities should be lifted up to the meta-level of the public sphere and be given the task of judging the validity of the others.

Considering the history of instrumental reason, it could be argued even that the version based in the European Enlightenment has proven to be incapable of fulfilling this task in any satisfying manner.

Thus, the adoption of the original concept of the public sphere without any critical discussion of the role of reason in the framework of Habermas' theory risks advocating a model of democracy that excludes many practices and discourses from its vision. Fortunately, the extensive body of criticism aimed at the original public sphere concept also finds its way into more empirical studies, lowering the risk of an unreflecting adoption of Habermas' original principles.

### **Foucault and social apparatuses**

Analysing the internet from a Foucauldian perspective, Jordan (1999) identifies 'technopower' as a major strategy of power at the heart of the new medium. According to Jordan, the dynamic of power relations around the internet can be described as a struggle between individual empowerment and elite domination: 'Individuals exist in cyberspace by using the tools that depend on a technological infrastructure controlled by an elite, but that technological infrastructure exists to provide the tools that individuals use for empowerment' (1999: 211). Even if Jordan does not always take full advantage of the sophisticated concept of power that the Foucauldian approach has to offer,<sup>2</sup> the benefits of the approach are apparent: drawing on a very wide and open definition of power, newly evolving power relations can be traced and analysed more subtly and efficiently than by relying on preconceived explanatory patterns. Neither is the empirical material limited by a narrow predefined focus.

According to Schrage (1999: 65), this openness is due to the fact that the Foucauldian approach seeks to avoid the 'transferring of continuities that create meaning and order from methodological *a priori*'.<sup>3</sup> Preconceived definitions and classifications are avoided, letting the 'discursive space "remain" a discontinuous space' (1999: 65).<sup>4</sup> Methodologically, such an analysis must be seen as an attempt to 'examine the discontinuities of a specific discursive space as to their regularities – not as a way to deduce general rules of "the discursive" from that space'<sup>5</sup> (Schrage, 1999: 67). Thus 'discourse' is defined in the act of analysis (Schrage, 1999). Sensing charges of a reconciled empiricism, Schrage explains that the broadened empirical scope prescribed by Foucault can only aim at a broader or subtler picture, never at a more 'true' one (1999: 67). No longer can 'truth' form the basis for deciding which criteria to use in an analysis. The relevance of categories can be measured only by what they achieve, i.e. which new, productive perspectives they enable and what they highlight. This could be described in terms of productivity and efficiency, bearing in mind that these criteria always depend on the context of the analysis (Seier, 1999).

However, with the lack of concrete analytical categories provided by Foucault, some of the research inspired by him has instead drawn on his examples as a point of departure. Reviewing studies on consumer surveillance inspired by Foucault's writings on the panopticon, Greg Elmer (2003: 235) remarks that such research often reflects too literally upon Foucault's examples, resulting in a focus 'on the prison at the expense of panopticism, or the technology as opposed to the technique'. Instead, he argues for a 'diagrammatic approach', positioning Foucault's concepts on a much more abstract and general level than actual architectural or technological arrangements. It is possible then to both 'conceptualize the manner in which modes of data accumulation, storage, and processing are networked in an increasingly dispersed and automated infoscape' (2003: 241) and locate the subject within this framework without succumbing to it analytically to the disciplinary forces of discourse.

In order to appreciate fully the implications of this model not only for surveillance studies, but also for new media studies as a whole, it is useful to trace the development of the concept of the *dispositif* in the works of Foucault and Deleuze. Whereas Foucault's early writings centre on the concepts of discourse and archaeology, he turns to a more explicit discussion of the nature of power, beginning with the development of the concept of genealogy. Foucault's view on power thus changes from a discursive–repressive concept to a strategic–productive one. The former subscribes to a rather traditional view of power as limiting the freedom of the individual, or, in broader terms, as limiting or steering the unstructured development of discourses. Roughly speaking, through the analytical work of 'archaeology', it is possible to analyse the impact of power on discourse by tracing the rules that power has brought to bear on it (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982).

The notion of a more 'authentic' or unstructured discourse is rejected in the strategic–productive concept, because it focuses on power only in negative, repressive terms. Foucault (1978) contends that if power was only a negative and inhibiting force, it would not work as effectively and power relations would not be as stable as they are today. Instead, power is seen to permeate society in formations of changeable and interlinked networks. It is utterly intertwined with knowledge and the formation of the subject. It is, then, impossible to think of power as limited to certain institutions in society. As subjectivity is heavily intertwined with power and knowledge, there can be no talk about an autonomous individual. Also, traditional Marxist concepts of base, superstructure, dialectics and the ruling class have to be interpreted as *one* way of encoding struggles, war and confrontation. The networks of power 'consist of a range of multifaceted power relations, all of them unstable and drawn into conflicts, but only some of these are directly connected to the ruling class' (Hörnqvist, 1996: 44).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the strategic–productive concept implies that discourse cannot be seen as the

only manifestation of power. The earlier conceptual predominance of discourse over practice is reduced somewhat, making discourse a part of a set of discourses and other practices. This set of discourses and practices, which are interlinked and networked, forms an apparatus, which is powered (and thus influenced) by a common strategy. In this social apparatus – the *dispositif* – power, knowledge and subjectivity are linked in intricate ways.

Deleuze (1992: 159) offers a compelling account of this concept. He envisages the *dispositif* as consisting of lines, all of which are ‘broken and subject to changes in direction, bifurcating and forked, and subject to drifting’. The concept comprises four major types of lines. Curves of visibility and enunciation are the result of regimes that structure light in certain ways – regimes that make things visible, that create knowledge. Although power permeates the whole apparatus, it manifests most clearly along lines of force. They “‘rectify” the preceding curves, they draw tangents, fill in the space between one line and another, acting as go-betweens between seeing as saying and vice versa’ (Deleuze, 1992: 160). Finally, Deleuze talks about lines of subjectification:

A line of subjectification is a process, a production of subjectivity in a social apparatus [*dispositif*]: it has to be made, inasmuch as the apparatus allows it to come into being or makes it possible. It is a line of escape. It escapes preceding lines and escapes from itself. The Self is neither knowledge nor power. It is a process of individuation which bears on groups and on people, and is abstracted from the power relations which are established as constituting forms of knowledge [*savoirs*]: a sort of surplus value. It is not certain that all social apparatuses [*dispositifs*] comprise these. (1992: 161; emphasis added)

According to Deleuze (1992), the consequences of such a philosophy, of the *dispositif*, have to include the repudiation of universals and a shift of interest away from the eternal and towards the new, meaning the variable creativity which arises out of social apparatuses.

The employment of the concept of the *dispositif* in new media analysis seems especially appropriate, as it provides a powerful tool with which to uncover the subtle, interlinked networks of power, knowledge and subjectivity within and around the internet.<sup>7</sup> In such an overarching analysis, both discursive and material perspectives could be integrated and contrasted. Applying the conceptual constructs of lines of visibility, enunciation and force to empirical material, it could be discussed whether the interaction of these lines contributes to the formation of ‘lines of escape’ in the specific setting. This can be related to the question, put forth by the Habermasian approach, of the way in which topics are made public ‘in the sense of making accessible to debate, reflection, action and moral–political transformation on the other’ (Benhabib, 1992: 113). In comparison, the Foucauldian approach appears less constrained by the liberal legacy of the public/private division. Additionally, Foucault’s concept has a greater

impetus towards self-reflexive discussion of the analyst's position, because the research itself is a part of a specific constellation of lines of visibility, enunciation, force and subjectification.

While this meta-analytic level can provide valuable insight into the underlying assumptions of the research project, it might lead also to a more problematic questioning or relativizing of the findings themselves. The root of this problem can be found in Foucault's critique of reason. It has been argued that Foucault fails to deliver an alternative way to maintain a political impetus, because of the normative confusion and the excessive stress on deconstruction running through his work. Whereas Habermas uses reason universalistically as a normative principle, Foucault wants to introduce yet another meta-level, aiming at the critical contextualizing or deconstruction of reason. Fraser (1994: 192) discusses whether this also implies a rejection of reason. Although describing a strategic rejection of reason as 'attractive', she contends that in fact, Foucault advocates a more radical rejection, ultimately failing to establish 'what sort of change is desirable' (1994: 195).

Honi Fern Haber (1994) claims that Foucault's approach is too focused on the deconstruction of the autonomous subject. While an appropriate tool for deconstructing liberal notions of the male, autonomous individual, it delivers few options for the way in which the formation of subjectivity within and through community can be envisaged in the context of oppositional politics:

If any and all closures are terroristic, then the Other will never be given a chance to form itself as a political force. It will remain unrepresented and unrepresentable. And since, in fact, political systems (power regimes) which exclude or marginalize otherness do exist, then insofar as the law of difference can be used to keep the Other from articulating itself as a coherent, even if contingent identity, the law of difference serves the dominant and dominating order. It becomes a tool of colonization and keeps the Other defenseless. (1994: 130)

However, by describing subjectification as 'a process of individuation which bears on groups and on people', Deleuze is able to comprise conceptually the problem outlined by Haber within a Foucauldian framework. Subjectification, which in Foucault's later writings takes rather individual forms (Lipscomb, 2002; McCarthy, 1994), then can be conceived of as a collective process. For the analysis of community, this also opens up discussion of how far collective as well as individual processes contribute to the formation of 'lines of escape'.

Although not explicitly drawing on the concept of the *dispositif*, Fung (2002) illustrates the merits of a Foucauldian approach with a focus on subjectification. He concludes:

While it is not feasible to try and erase power or to oppose the knowledge/power relationship in which social actors produce and participate, the

emancipatory potential of the internet can be questioned by looking at what marginal groups actually do and how they articulate their own view, identity, subjectivity and their own emancipation project through practice online. (2002: 200)

The application of the concept of the *dispositif* in new media studies thus holds the promise of being able to combine a thorough mapping of power/knowledge relations, both those offline and those inscribed in technology (e.g. in the way infrastructure, protocols, interfaces and retrieval systems are constructed) with a discussion of the way in which these relations foster or circumscribe collective as well as individual processes of subjectification. Due to the abstract nature of the concept, it can be used to reframe existing research in a larger theoretical context, but it could also help to subtly explore new areas that other theories have experienced difficulties in grasping.

## CONCLUSIONS

### **Power: effects of power vs. primacy of power**

While power is a question that concerns research in both the Habermasian and the Foucauldian tradition, Foucault delivers the more explicit concept of power itself. The concept of the public sphere provides criteria by which to measure the effects of power on a delineated sphere that is free from power relations. By abandoning the notion of a sphere without power, Foucault's strategic-productive concept provides a comparatively broader scope. Given that new media phenomena can be perceived as both the outcome and the origin of very complex arrays of power and knowledge, the Foucauldian concept seems better equipped to map these relations without forcing them into predefined explanatory patterns. Also, the acknowledgement of the productive nature of power seems especially important in order to map any genuinely new emancipatory possibilities brought forward by new technologies, because it can conceive of such possibilities in broader and more diverse terms than of which the public sphere approach is capable.

### **Reason: discourse ethics vs. ethics of transgression**

As has been discussed, one major difference between Habermasian and Foucauldian approaches can be found in their different ways to reflect upon the legacy of the European Enlightenment. As Habermas regards actual historical developments as one specific incarnation of Enlightenment principles, his project is the formulation of normative principles which foster the emancipatory aspects of Enlightenment, without reproducing the excluding aspects of instrumental reason. Foucault, however, focuses primarily on the disciplinary effects of modern societies. Although he does not renounce Enlightenment principles altogether, his project is not one of

restructuring these principles but of mapping their development. The ethical gap left behind is filled to a certain extent by what has been called the ‘ethics of transgression’: ‘the possibility to go beyond the limits that have been imposed on us’ (Richters, 1994: 314).

It has been argued that the concept of the *dispositif* presents an especially promising way to analyse the interconnectedness of power and knowledge in terms of the limits that they impose upon the subject, as well as the possibilities of ‘transgression’, framed by Deleuze as ‘surplus value’ accumulated in social apparatuses. Thus both approaches present a subtle critique of reason in Wellmer’s sense. Neither can Habermasian accounts be called naive reproductions of homogenizing Enlightenment principles, nor does it seem that Foucault intends a complete abandonment of normative principles. However, it can be said that Foucault’s ‘ethics of transgression’ present a more open way to conceive of emancipatory social processes than Habermas’ discourse ethics.

While a tension certainly exists between openness towards the new and a coherent normative framework, it is not necessarily the case that the former can only exist at the expense of the latter. By adopting the concept of the *dispositif* in empirical analyses, it is possible to formulate normative positions that could be more adequately applicable to a specific situation than universal ideal notions. Again, if the internet really does hold possibilities of an evolution of genuinely new modes of emancipation, the *dispositif* approach could prove more apt to sense and gauge these possibilities.

## Operationalization

It seems that most empirical studies inspired by Habermas include at least some critique of Habermas’ relation to the Enlightenment tradition and the excluding tendencies of the original public sphere approach. However, these discussions are not always followed by an equally critical assessment of the criteria subsequently employed as variables in the empirical analysis.

Often enough, the critical vigour of the initial discussion is diminished when it comes to the difficult task of operationalizing the outcomes of these discussions. Dahlberg (2004) demands that the process of operationalization should be guided by rigorous critical assessment and should not simply quote one of the various available frameworks. Papacharissi (2002) provides an excellent example of how critical development of criteria from public sphere theory can be carried out. Her questions are derived from the problematic of the public sphere, but adapted to be able to map the areas that she regards as most pressing in the current technological situation: information access/inequalities, globalization/fragmentation and change/continuity. Dahlberg’s (2004) study proves that internet public sphere research has evolved sufficiently to draw methodological consequences from the experiences gained so far. Unfortunately, the concept of the *dispositif* has

not found its way into empirical research to the same extent. Elmer (2003) takes steps towards introducing the main qualities of the approach into new media studies, but his discussion is situated on a theoretical rather than a methodological level.

The concept of the *dispositif* has been adopted more widely in a German context, where a set of methodological discussions has evolved (Bublitz et al., 1999). These discussions could be drawn upon in the further development of operationalizations that are capable of maintaining the benefits of the theoretical concept, while gradually broadening its area of empirical implementation.

## Notes

- 1 Although 'new media studies' usually has a wider scope, the term 'new media' is used here to encompass only the internet, i.e. those exchanges of data enabled by the internet protocol that extend outside local area networks.
- 2 A very strict division into elites and grass roots runs through the text, clearly at odds with Jordan's (1999) stated goal to identify more intricate power relations.
- 3 'Dass der Transfer von sinngebenden und ordnungstiftenden Kontinuitäten aus methodischen Aprioris unterbunden wird' (author's translation).
- 4 'Der zu untersuchende diskursive Raum soll als diskontinuierlicher Raum – d.h. ohne methodische Kontinuirungsversuche – "stehengelassen" werden' (author's translation).
- 5 'Ein Versuch, die Diskontinuitäten des spezifischen diskursiven Raums auf ihre Regelmäßigkeit hin zu untersuchen, und kein Weg, aus diesem Raum allgemeine Regeln "des Diskursiven" abzuleiten' (author's translation).
- 6 'Består av en mängd mångfacetterade maktrelationer, varav alla är instabila och indragna i konflikter men bara en del är direkt kopplade till den härskande klassen' (author's translation).
- 7 The use of technological metaphors in Foucault's concept should not be confused with the conflation of technology and theory discussed earlier.

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