The Once & Future (?) Public Sphere

Geoff Nunberg
Infosys 218: 9/20/06
How the materiality of print shapes the spatial conception of discourse

Material & social aspects of the public sphere

What happens to the public sphere when the material substrate of discourse changes?
The Spatialization of Print Discourse

Spatialization of written texts

“As I have argued elsewhere..."
"Where does Marx say that history repeats itself?"

Spatialization of discourse: the public sphere/public space
The Spatialization of Print Discourse

Images of public sphere in print forms and institutions ("institutions littéraires");

Cf. the notion of the "trésor"

Libraries, anthologies, dictionaries, in a word "treasuries" [trésors], alongside of encyclopedic collections, delimit a vast territory on which are cast the signs required for knowledge, the expression of identities, and communication among the members of the group.

-Alain Rey, "Les trésors de la langue," 1986
The Properties of Public Space: Topology

1. A continuous, bounded space, with inside and outside.

Boundedness lends significance to inclusion/exclusion, presence and absence, "scene" and "obscene" (H. Lefebvre)

"…walls, enclosures, and façades serve to define both a scene (where something takes place) and an obscene area to which everything that cannot or may not happen on the scene is relegated…"

Boundedness of spatial conception reproduces the distinction between public and private

Boundedness permits the pretence of comprehensiveness/exhaustive enumeration of public discourse…
Formal Correlates of Topological Space: The Form of the Book

Hold the English language in your two hands...

WEBSTER'S THIRD NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY

...and you possess the proven key to knowledge, enjoyment, and success!
Models of Public Space: The Form of Collections, 1

Library of the Escorial, 1543

E-L. Boulée, plan for the Bibliothèque du Roi, 1785

Labrouste, Bibliothèque Ste. Geneviève, 1851
The Form of Collections, 2: The classical version

Smirke, British Museum Reading Room, 1851

Labrouste, Bibliothèque Nationale 1868

Pelz/Casey Reading Room, LOC, ca 1898

Asplund, Stockholm City Library, 1928
The Form of Collections, 3: Postmodern Interpretations

D. Perrault, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1994
The Metrical Space of Print

Discourse: Degrees of Membership

Commonality/objectivity ("a common place"/ un lieu commun).

That vast aggregate of words and phrases which constitutes the Vocabulary of English-speaking men presents... the aspect of one of those nebulous masses familiar to the astronomer, in which a clear and unmistakable nucleus shades off on all sides, through zones of decreasing brightness, to a dim marginal film that seems to end nowhere, but to lose itself imperceptibly in the surrounding darkness....

James Murray, "General Explanation" to the OED
The Properties of Public Space: Canonicity

Canonicity: All elements of all subdomains are ordered with regard to "centrality" of membership (i.e., discursive space is metrical, not just topological)

E.g., canonicity of words in a dictionary, newspaper stories, authors, etc.

What defines a "reference book"

**words**: civet > panther > cat
**authors**: Michael Crichton > John Updike > Herman Melville
**news events**: rescued cat > school budget vote > earthquake
Also: tourist attractions (travel guides), artists (national collections), etc.

Buf cf. world records: ??Most hot dogs eaten > largest waistline > longest kiss
The Properties of Public Space: Metrical

Canonicity permits essentialist abridgement.

Cf sense of "library" and "bibliothèque" to denote comprehensive publication series & catalogues.

News summary, small dictionary as image of large, etc.

"If the lexicon of a language is indeed something like that of a circle, then… if one moves away from the center in concentric circles, the result should be a faithful image of the total lexicon." Henri Béjoint, *Tradition and Innovation in English Dictionaries*, 1992

Men of good will have extracted the substance of a thousand volumes and passed it in its entirety into a single small duodecimo, a bit like skillful chemists who press out the essence of flowers to concentrate it in a phial while throwing the dregs away." Louis-Sebastian Mercier, *L'An 2440*, 1771
"Objectivity" of Public Space

Commonality/objectivity of public space ("a common place"/ un lieu commun).

It's been the dream and the project of many cultures to assemble for every language a collection of texts that identify, illustrate, and defend it, to give a common place [lieu commun] to this stream of preserved words where it can be found and consulted. Libraries, anthologies, dictionaries, in a word "trésors," alongside of encyclopedic collections, delimit a vast territory on which are projected the signs required for knowledge, for the expression of identities, for communication among the members of the group.

Bibliothèques, anthologies, dictionnaires, enfin «trésors», à coté des recueuils encyclopédiques, cernent un vaste territoire où se projettent les signes nécessaires au savoir, à l'expression des identités. à la communication entre les membres du groupe (Alix, P. Le Trésor de l'espace)
How the forms of print discourse support its spatialization

Topological model: corresponds to (more-or-less) dichotomous distinction between public and private -- cf "fit to print"
How the forms of print discourse support its spatialization

Metrical: Correlations in print discourse:

Diffusion ↔ Accessibility

Reputation ↔ Diffusion

Cf George Campbell, *Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 1776: “it is of importance to have some certain, steady, and well-known standard to recur to, a standard which every one hath access to canvass and examine. And this can be no other than authors of reputation….I choose to name them authors of reputation, rather than good authors, for two reasons: first, because it is more strictly conformable to the truth of the case. It is solely the esteem of the public, and not their intrinsic merit (though these two go generally together), which raises them to this distinction, and stamps a value on their language. Secondly, this character is more definitive than the other, and therefore more extensively intelligible. Between two or more authors, different readers will differ exceedingly, as to the preference in point of merit, who agree perfectly as to the respective places they hold in the favour of the public.
How the forms of print discourse support its spatialization

…and reputation correlates with "merit"

Cf Hume, Campbell: "reputation and merit go generally together."
(e.g. citation index)

The same HOMER, who pleased at ATHENS and ROME two thousand years ago, is still admired at PARIS and at LONDON. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language, have not been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may give a temporary vogue to a bad poet or orator; but his reputation will never be durable or general. When his compositions are examined by posterity or by foreigners, the enchantment is dissipated, and his faults appear in their true colours. On the contrary, a real genius, the longer his works endure, and the more wide they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration which he meets with. David Hume, "Of the Standard of Taste," 1777

I.e., "There are no unjustly remembered books…"
The Material Substrate of the Public Sphere

Modes of circulation & inscription support the conception of the "public sphere"

"public sphere" = Öffentlichkeit

Cf inevitability of spatial metaphors in conceptualizing discourse

“The public sphere [is] comprised of any and all locations, physical and virtual, where ideas and feelings relevant to politics are transmitted and exchanged openly.” (W. Lance Bennett and Robert M. Entman)
End of c. 17 (Britain): emergence of new social domain independent of state and private life: new role for "public opinion" to replace and complement authority of state. "Mediates between society and the state" (Habermas)

Association with new social contexts, new forms of writing
Defining "the public"

public, n.

Am. Her: The community or the people as a whole. 2. A group of people sharing a common interest: the reading public.

OED: The community as an aggregate, but not in its organized capacity
Defining "the public"

public, n. 1.
Am. Her: The community or the people as a whole. 2. A group of people sharing a common interest: the reading public.

OED: The community as an aggregate, but not in its organized capacity

Occurrences in major newspapers, 2005:

American people 2660
American public 1350 (1:2)
Iraqi people 940
Iraqi public 37 (1:25)

cf. ?The medieval British public.
Defining "the public"

public, n. 1.
Am. Her: The community or the people as a whole. 2. A group of people sharing a common interest: the reading public.

OED: The community as an aggregate, but not in its organized capacity

Occurrences in major newspapers, 2005:

- American people 2660
- American public 1350 (1:2)
- Iraqi people 940
- Iraqi public 37 (1:25)

cf. ?The medieval British public.

“The press created the public”: G. Tarde
"It is certainly right and prudent to consult the public opinion. ... If the public opinion did not happen to square with mine; if, after pointing out to them the danger, they did not see it in the same light with me, or if they conceived that another remedy was preferable to mine, I should consider it as my due to my king, due to my Country, due to my honour to retire ... but one thing is clear, that I ought to give the public the means of forming an opinion." Charles James Fox, 1792
Social Background: Who were the public?

"the Town":

"a class of comparatively educated and polished persons, large enough to form a public, and not so large as to degenerate into a mob, distinct from the old feudal nobility, and regarding the life of the nobles with a certain contempt as rustic and brutal, more refined again than that class of hangers-on to the Court, of merchants and shopkeepers stamped with the peculiarities of their business…" Leslie Stephen

But "rank and privilege" in theory set aside, and discourse becomes ostensibly impersonal:

"…when any work is addressed to the public, though I should have a friendship or emnity with the author, I must depart from this situation; and considering myself as a man in general, forget, if possible, my individual being and my peculiar circumstances." Hume, 1757
Economic Shifts

Writers (ostensibly) freed from direct dependence on patronage. Symbolized by Johnson's letter to Chesterfield:

Is not a Patron, my Lord, one who looks with unconcern on a man struggling for life in the water, and, when he has reached ground, encumbers him with help?

Cf J's def of patron: "One who countenances, supports or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with indolence, and is paid with flattery."
Emergence of "modern literary system"

Modern notions of intellectual property, publishing, authorship, etc.

Cf Oliver Goldsmith, 1761: "that fatal revolution whereby writing is converted to a mechanic trade; and booksellers, instead of the great, become the patrons and paymasters of men of genius."
Creating the public: The Book as a an “Inscription in Space”

The newspaper reader, observing exact replicas of his own paper being consumed by his subway, barbershop, or residential neighbors, is continually reassured that the imagined world is visibly rooted in everyday life…creating that remarkable confidence of community in anonymity which is the hallmark of modern nations. --Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

[Britain] has become a nation of readers. --Samuel Johnson, 1781
The Book as a Public Presence
Habermas: by 1830, transformation from "journalism of conviction" to "journalism of commerce." Emergence of mass media, corporate interests, increasing role of state in discourse, advertising and propaganda, etc.

Concept of liberal public sphere is now merely "normative."

But traditional conception is also supported, more-or-less, by material basis of discourse.
In a “purely digital” discourse, with no anchors to print world or institutions, there is (among other things)

No material distinction between “public” and “private”

No common experience of texts to guarantee intersubjective agreement/objectivity

No correlation between accessibility and reputation or authority/No material/geographical limit on circulation of texts

Cf "an international reputation"

Cf also consequences for linguistic diasporas, etc.
Linkage and the New Intelligence

In the digital world, "intelligence" replaces (or substantially complements) "information"

The importance of links -- for authenticity, authority, validity, community, etc.

The intelligence that came from afar ... possessed an authority which gave it validity, even when it was not subject to certification. Information, however, lays claim to prompt verifiability. The prime requirement is that it appear 'understandable in itself....' Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller”
Two Senses of "Virtual Community"

“Imagined communities” (B. Anderson) -- sense of community grows out of common experience of replicated representations diffused throughout region

Networked Communities -- sense of community through transitive individual connections to other members
Exploiting the Networks

Diminished occasion for common experience/sense of community
Two Spatial Models of Electronic Discourse -- Piazzas or Souks?
The Virtual Rialto
Aside: The Epigraphic and the Bibliographic:
Renaissance Epigraphy
The Renaissance Book

Epigraph from the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Venice, 1499

Piranesi frontispiece, 1764
The Book in Baroque Epigraphy

Bernini, Tomb of Urban VIII, 1628
Epigraphy in modern life
Epigraphy in modern life: Aesthetic...

Jenny Holzer

Here is an example

Joseph Kosuth
Cf use of *go to, visit, post, site, etc.*

Note that nothing in the mode of diffusion itself entails this particular model of circulation.

Cf perceptual difference between html and pdf documents.
How Spatial Metaphors Can Lead Us Astray in the Digital World

Imputations of topological space: Analogies to material institutions:

“Why do underage children have access to porno web sites on computers in the children's library section? Isn't this the same as having pornographic material available on the shelves for them to check out?”

"I grew up in a world where certain materials were kept in a special place."
Imputations of metrical space: notions of "commons" and "community"

Cf. James F. Moore (Berkman Center), on "the global consciousness of the second superpower":

The Internet and other interactive media continue to penetrate more and more deeply all world society... The collective power of texting, blogging, instant messaging, and email across millions of actors cannot be overestimated. Like a mind constituted of millions of inter-networked neurons, the social movement is capable of astonishingly rapid and sometimes subtle community consciousness and action... the emergent democracy of the second superpower is alive with touching and being touched by each other, as the community works to create wisdom and to take action.... Not every idea will take hold in the big mind of the second superpower—but the one that eventually catches fire is started by an individual.
When Google Supports the Idea of Internet Community

("Google takes advantage of the uniquely democratic nature of the Web")
... and When it Doesn't
Searching for "Publics" in an Indeterminate Space

"The press created the public." (Tarde)

Still true, in virtue of the interpenetration of materially anchored public institutions and digital discourse.
Searching for "Publics" in an Indeterminate Space

But "the public" may not be a useful notion for large parts of digital discourse:

Blogs: Public or "in public"?

May 02, 2003
"The press created the public." (Tarde)

Still true, in virtue of the interpenetration of materially anchored public institutions and digital discourse.

But "the public" may not be a useful notion for large parts of digital discourse:
Wow. So I had a crush on this girl, and she was really cute, you know the drill. So, I tell some of my friends, and as time goes by, one of them tells her. I didn't mind. I kinda wanted her to know anyway. So she thinks it's cute, that I like her and stuff, and she even said that I'm cute. I was like, this is going good! Then she goes all like, but he's a sophomore.... At first, I was like, that doesn't matter wierdo! Plus, I'm taller than her, so it wouldn't look awkward. Then today I find out that she's going out with this guy I don't know. He's all gangsterish and she's in band.
"It is certainly right and prudent to consult the public opinion. ... If the public opinion did not happen to square with mine; if, after pointing out to them the danger, they did not see it in the same light with me, or if they conceived that another remedy was preferable to mine, I should consider it as my due to my king, due to my Country, due to my honour to retire. Charles James Fox, 1792

How can blogs shape and manifest "public opinion"?
...bloggers will always be dismissed by their opponents as biased. And, while conservatives would like to treat the *Times* and the *Post* this way, they can't. They know that if a story--for example, Abu Ghraib or the CIA secret prisons--appears in one of those papers, it most likely has a strong basis in fact. Despite black marks like WMD reportage... old media still have enough prestige and authority to play referee.

Franklin Foer, *The New Republic*, 12.26.05
The heterogeneity of discourses that form public opinion:

Signs and symbols, language, are the means of communication by which a fraternally shared experience is ushered in and sustained. But conversation has a vital import lacking in the fixed and frozen words of written speech. … Ideas which are not communicated, shared, and reborn in expression are but soliloquy… Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participator. Publication is partial and the public which results is partially informed and formed until the meanings it purveys pass from mouth to mouth. That and only that gives reality to public opinion." John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, 1927