**Hegel, Habermas, and Community: The Public in the New Media Era**

**Charles C. Self, Ph.D.**

Gaylord College of Journalism and Mass Communication

The University of Oklahoma

Norman, Oklahoma

U.S.A.

[cself@ou.edu](mailto:cself@ou.edu)

405-325-1117

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New media technologies with their networking capabilities have raised age-old questions about the nature of the “public” implicit in Enlightenment and about the role of public relations industries in democracies. This article reviews conflicting representational and deliberative notions of public dominant in the 20th century, the implications of late 20th century alternatives, and what Hegel’s writings might suggest for a 21st century concept of public. The article offers a reconceptualizaiton of “public” as process—a constantly evolving conflict of the particular with the universal rather than as either a stable essence or as a consensus-building discourse.

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**Acknowledgement:** The author would like to acknowledge the Gaylord family and the Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation for their ongoing support of his research.

**Recent developments** of media technologies have raised age-old questions about the nature of the “public,” its role in community decision-making, and whether public relations can use mediated forms of communication to play a meaningful role in public dialog. One 20th century perspective on the public argued that public relations professionals could successfully use mediated forms of communication to inform the public and engineer public understanding of organizational enterprises and public support for policies and activities considered crucial for organizational operations. However, the leading public relations theorist James Grunig and his colleagues grounded their “situational theory of publics” (Grunig, 1997) in a distinctly different vision of “publics” based on concepts of the Chicago School of Philosophy, especially in the democratic notions of John Dewey and Herbert Blumer. “In the 1940s,” Grunig wrote, “sociologist Herbert Blumer and philosopher John Dewey defined publics in ways that still provide two of the clearest and most useful definitions in use today. Unfortunately, social scientists and public relations practitioners today often have not learned of those definitions or have forgotten them” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 143).

The dichotomy referred to by Grunig is based in the conflicting assumptions between the media effects perspectives popular during the 20th century and the American Pragmatist perspective which grew in popularity as the century unfolded. This conflict has haunted much of debate about the nature of the public in the 20th century in the United States. Furthermore, the debate has remained unresolved and has grown more urgent in face of the emergence of new media technologies that are changing media behaviors at the opening of the 21st century. The debate suggests a rereading of the Enlightenment through the work G. W. F. Hegel and Jurgen Habbermas. It suggests that such a rereading might re-conceive of “public” as a process rather than as an entity. Such a process concept might better fit the unfolding uses of network media and the concepts advanced by some writers at the opening of the 21st century.

**1. The Challenge of “Public” in the Enlightenment--Habermas**

The legacy of thinking about the “public” from the original Enlightenment philosophers suggests a bifurcated role for communication (See Rogers, 1994, for a discussion of the evolution of this way of thinking, especially pp. 137-202). On the one hand, that legacy emphasizes that information is power and that information is essential for a “public” to make “reasoned” judgments about state practices. This line of argument emphasized the need for information to be protected from interference by the state and from alliances with the moneyed interests of the “estates.” On the other hand, a second line of argument from the Enlightenment emphasized that truth can only emerge from unfettered rational dialog and even debate among equals (Habermas, 1991). This line of argument emphasized the need for dialog to be protected from interference by the state and its allies and from what Mill called the “tyranny of the majority” (Mill, 2003).

Juergen Habermas mounted a careful explication of the implications of this legacy for the notion of “public” in the middle of the 20th century in his classic work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.* Habermas asked whether the idea of the “public” as envisioned in the Enlightenment was ever viable. He noted that the “public,” to be viable, had to exhibit several essential characteristics: Members of the public had to be of roughly equal status, they had to be educated and informed, they had to debate and decide issues without interference or influence from either the state (government) or from the “estates” (powerful moneyed interests that negotiated directly with the state and exhibited their agreements to the “public” for its acquiescence). He suggested that serious questions exist about whether such criteria had ever been met (Habermas, 1991, pp. 27-38).

Habermas argued that these criteria certainly were no longer being met in 20th century democracy. He suggested that mass societies in the 20th century showed wide disparity in status among its citizens and serious questions about educational levels and access to information. He further suggested that disparities in wealth had created disparate access to the forms of communication that were assumed to shape debate.

Furthermore, crucial to the notion of public envisioned in the Enlightenment, he argued, was the idea that the “public” could debate about the “common good” or “humanity” and “common human beings” (p. 56). This required that the discussion be conducted independent of influence by state interests, independent of the interests of the estates (moneyed interests), and even without undue emphasis upon parochial private interests. Habermas suggested that that the growth of the persuasion industries, in particular, had recreated the kind of “representational” communication that was typical of pre-Enlightenment European societies. That type of communication sought, not informed debate within a public, but rather informed acclimation before the “public” for policies negotiated among the representatives of the “estates” and “state” and then exhibited in “public” in order to induce acquiescence. Habermas suggested that 20th century industries with their sophisticated public persuasion machinery had largely displaced genuine dialog among equals with a new version of the public machinery of information and acquiescence (Habermas, 1991, pp. 211-222). This critique of the public as a “mass” audience manipulated by mediated communication messages echoed concerns raised in Walter Lippmann’s book *The Phantom Public (1930)* and even acknowledged in John Dewey’s book *The Public and Its Problems (1984).* However, Lippmann and Dewey offered quite different proposals for dealing with these problems.

The argument raises questions about whether the form of “public relations” that emerged in the 20th century played an Enlightenment role of enabling “public” dialog independent of large vested interests or whether public relations came to be seen as a way to achieve acquiescence in public of policies favored by moneyed interests. The concept implied that the “informed” public merely had the option of embracing or rejecting the policies thus formulated for them and offered to them.

Grunig acknowledges such concerns. “Remember that size and cohesion affect how active a public becomes,” he wrote. “If publics become too large and diffused they seldom move from the aware state to the active states” (Grunig & HuntuHuntH, 1984, p. 147).

In his more recent work, Habermas has described the complexity of late 20th century battles for influence through mediated forms of communication. “A self-regulating media system must maintain its independence vis-à-vis its environments while linking political communication in the public sphere with both civil society and the political center; and, second, an inclusive civil society must empower citizens to participate in and respond to a public discourse which, in turn, must not degenerate into a colonizing mode of communication. The latter condition is troubling, to say the least,” he wrote (Habermas, 2006, p. 420). He suggests that while a truly deliberative public is possible through a mediated communication system, there is clear evidence that the professionalization of the institutional manipulation of communication messages in mass media still violates the requirements of a truly deliberative public.

**1.1. The 20th century dichotomy: Lippmann, Information and Consensus**

This dichotomy over a representational versus a deliberative role for a public through the media is reflected in the debate between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey. In the 1920s, Lippmann argued that the public was too distracted, too uninformed and too poorly educated to formulate policy. “(The accepted theory of popular government) rests upon the belief that there is a public which directs the course of events,” Lippmann wrote. “I hold that this public is a mere phantom. It is an abstraction…The public is not, as I see it, a fixed body of individuals. It is merely those persons who are interested in an affair and can affect it only by supporting or opposing the actors (politicians, bureaucrats, and experts)” (Lippmann, 1930, p. 77). He argued that the public was too easily misled by mass media that played to sensationalism and oversimplification of the issues to be involved in public policy. He argued that the “public” based its decisions on stereotypes, the “pictures in our heads” (Lippmann 1922, pp. 3-32). He held that “experts” of well-educated individuals who were paid to carefully and systematically examine the options best for society should develop public policy. The role of public communication was to “inform” the public and persuade the public to accept these policies formulated by their representatives in consultation with experts.

Lippmann’s views were reinforced by media effects theories in the early 20th century that suggested that the public could be shaped by media through systematically developed persuasion campaigns. These theories, sometimes called “magic bullet,” “hypodermic needle,” or “strong effects” theories saw the “public” as a heterogeneous “mass audience” of isolated individuals highly susceptible to the influence of information from media messages (Defluer & Ball-Rokeach, 1989). Sarah Igo has suggested that this view led to and was, in turn, shaped by the development of the polling industries that sought to find normative behavior in this mass audience. These industries became commercial and popular successes and helped shape the idea of the “averaged American” who held normative values that could be appealed to in formulating public policy and commercial decision-making (Igo, 2007).

This normative vision has been examined by the postmodern critique. Among the most important aspects of that critique for public relations practices and for the assumptions of effects theory was whether mediated communication could be “representational” at all. The “postmodern literature” (although that term was rejected by many of those writers usually included), from 1979 with the publication in French of *The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984, in English)through to the work of Jean Baudrillard (1994) and to the work of Jacques Derrida and the deconstructionists (Derrida, 1982 & 1976), raises fundamental questions about the notion of overarching stable narratives (norms) of any kind and whether assumptions that any kind of communication practice including public relations practice actually constructs general narratives or consensus. They challenge the viability of widely accepted concepts of public relations in a time of increased instability about the entire notion of mediated consensus.

The result has been growing skepticism that mediated approaches to consensus building has enhanced a sense of community and served either public policy or public relations practices very well. For example, Robert D. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* (1995 & 2000) argues that social capital and civil engagement actually declined during the mass mediated 20th century. (For a counter view that such civic engagement never existed, see Michael Schudson’s *The Good Citizen,* 1998*.)* Other recent works suggest that targeting strategies have undermined, rather than enhanced notions of a general (national) public (Igo, 2007). Furthermore, credibility research has repeatedly found a growing polarization across democracies and mistrust of all institutions from government to “big business” to “media” (Self, 2009. Also see, for example, the annual reports of the Pew Research Center, 2009).

These challenges to 20th century ideas of the media’s role in creating and sustaining a broad, general sense of public have become more pronounced as new forms of media technology have become more widespread.

For example, Brian McNair, in his book *Cultural Chaos: Journalism, News and Power in a Globalised World* (2006) suggests that in “today's media environment of turbulence and volatility, in which news travels faster and further than ever before....Events in one part of the world feed back instantly into the politics of another, and linear, machine models of top-down cultural control no longer explain very much.” And Manuel Castells’ trilogy: *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (2000, 2003, and 2005), suggests that political power, government, perceptions of time and space and identity itself are fundamentally changed by the volatility of flows of information surging instantly and constantly around the globe and through communities in every niche of the world. He suggests that they undermine our traditional understanding of civic engagement, social identity, and society-wide consensus.

**1.2. The 20th Century Dichotomy: Dewey, Debate and Decision**

Much of this work would seem to support the idea that the mass audience does not comprise a public—at least in the idealized sense that Habermas described in his work on the public sphere or in the sense that Lippmann called “the accepted theory of government.” However, another vision of the Enlightenment “public,” illustrated in John Stewart Mill’s *On Liberty* (2003),held that the original concept of a public is based, not on consensus, but on dialog, debate and conflict.

In his book, *On Liberty,* Mill argued that truth could be known only through debate and conversation. His carefully argued treatise is usually seen as an argument against censorship, which it certainly is. But just as certainly, it is an argument for dialog, debate and conflict in the pursuit of truth. “Even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth, unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds,” Mill writes (p. 118). Mill’s argument is that truth cannot be given to a public as information—it must be tested and contested through earnest debate. “Where there is a tacit convention that principles are not to be disputed; where the discussion of the greatest questions which can occupy humanity is considered to be closed, we cannot hope to find that generally high scale of mental activity,” he argues (p. 102). And, he adds, the discussion must be undertaken authentically. “This is the real morality of public discussion; and if often violated, I am happy to think that there are many controversialists who to a great extent observe it, and a still greater number who conscientiously strive towards it” (p. 120).

John Dewey took up a similar argument for dialog in his answer to Lippmann’s book, which he called “…perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned” (for a detailed examination of the Lippmann/Dewey debate, see Bybee, 1999). Dewey argued in *The Public and Its Problems* (1984) that if the public were properly included in an ongoing conversation about public policy, discussion would create the kind of policy solutions that would work well over the long term. He acknowledged the critique of a public too diverse and a society too complex to attend to the minutia of public policy making. In fact, some have argued that Lippmann and Dewey were essentially in agreement on the problem and that the “debate” between them has been exaggerated (Jansen, 2008). But while Dewey shared Lippmann’s concerns about public attention, he was unwilling to embrace Lippmann’s solution that the public should be kept out of policy making except for selecting the “actors” who could attend to the details. Dewey’s solution was grounded in a dialogic process or, perhaps, interaction as described by Georg Simmel (1955), and in the idea of social debate as described by Mill.

It is this authentic conversation—this genuine debate about policy—that drives Dewey’s notion of public, which is an alternative to the informational model of acclaim described by Lippmann and by many of the theories of socialization and agenda setting implicit in the 20th century information and effects models. “…Knowledge is communication as well as understanding,” Dewey (1984) writes. “…A thing is fully known only when it is published, shared, socially accessible. Record and communication are indispensable to knowledge. Knowledge cooped up in private consciousness is a myth….A fact of community life which is not spread abroad so as to be a common possession is a contradiction in terms. Dissemination is something other than scattering at large…Public opinion is judgment which is formed and entertained by those who constitute the public and is about public affairs…Unless there are methods for directing the energies which are at work and tracing them through an intricate network of interactions to their consequences, what passes as public opinion will be ‘opinion’ in its derogatory sense rather than truly public, no matter how widespread the opinion is” (pp. 345 – 346).

This idea of putting opinion to work through debate and measuring its consequences for a group or community is at the heart of Dewey’s view of public. It is also part of Habermas’ theory of communicative action. Habermas distinguishes between success-oriented strategic action and understanding-oriented communicative action (Huttunen, 2008; Habermas, 2006). Strategic action is aimed at control and treats people as natural objects toward which communication is purposively directed. Understanding-oriented communicative action is aimed at interaction to achieve mutual understanding and to harmonize action. It is this second kind of action that is at the heart of Dewey’s alternative view of public. The public should not be the object of manipulative information campaigns with strategic goals. “Opinion casually formed and formed under the direction of those who have something at stake in having a lie believed can be *public* opinion only in name (emphasis in original),” Dewey writes (p. 346). “Calling it by this name, acceptance of the name as a kind of warrant, magnifies its capacity to lead action astray.”

Recent strategies to “manage relationships” (Bruning & Ledingham, 1999) or engage in “dialogic communication” (Kent & Taylor, 2002) with communities are examples of attempts to engage particular publics rather than only an attempt to inform in order to achieve a kind of universal consensus even within a “targeted” audience. They also suggest the impact that Grunig’s “Situational Theory of Publics” has had on recent thinking about public relations practices and this alternative way of thinking about “publics.”

**1.3. The Situational Theory of Publics: Grunig**

James Grunig’s Situational Theory of Publics (Grunig, 1997, 1978, & 1966) is grounded explicitly in the notion of public advocated by John Dewey in *The Public and Its Problems* (1984). Grunig quotes another American Pragmatist, Herbert Blumer, to the effect that when pollsters do their work of measuring they actually measure “mass” opinion rather than “public” opinion (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 143). Dewey’s ideas evolved from the work of Charles Peirce and the Chicago School of American Pragmatism. Charles Peirce, in turn, was profoundly influenced by G.W.F. Hegel, particularly his book *Phenomenology of Spirit (1977).*

Dewey (1984) had argued that citizens in a democracy would put politics to “their work” by measuring the consequences of public decisions within their own situations, as William James has described it (James 1963, p. 33). Dewey argued that this would create evolving communities of citizens concerned about things that might affect them. These publics would argue about their concerns and about civic policy and about the conflicting consequences of policy for these communities. “Dewey argues that a person participates in ongoing activities solely on the basis of habit…until he faces an uncertain, indeterminate or problematic situation. Then the person thinks and chooses a course of action,” Grunig wrote (Grunig, 1966, p. 34).

“Ideas which are not communicated, shared and reborn in expression are but soliloquy, and soliloquy is but broken and imperfect thought,” Dewey had written (1984, pp. 217-219). Dewey’s thought suggests that more complex social dialog led to problem recognition. Or, as Grunig suggested, following Blumer, mass opinion and public opinion are not the same thing because the mass is not a public (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 143). He added, “Dewey’s definition of public contains three conditions he considered necessary for a public to exist….a public is a group of people who: 1) Face a similar problem. 2) Recognize that the problem exists. 3) Organize to do something about the problem” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, pp. 145). This led Grunig to his “three major independent variables,” problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement, and “when people will communicate in two ways—that is, it explains two dependent variables”: active information seeking behavior and passive information processing behavior (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 149). These are relationships based on dialog and active “meaning making,” what Carey has called “expressivism” or “signification” (Carey, 1982).

Grunig and his colleagues study the variables that constitute the understanding of a situation for engaged groups of people and that drive evolving configurations of public communities as they attempt to make decisions about policy. Grunig has argued that communities vary in the degree to which they recognize problems, the degree to which they recognize constraints on actions to deal with problems, and the degree to which they recognize the relevance of problems to their situation (or level of involvement). These perceptions of the “situation” for the communities change the information seeking and information processing activities of those people. These situations determine when people communicate and when communications with people in communities are most likely to be effective. The theory predicts that those highly involved will seek more information and process more information and learn more about a problem or issue than those with lower involvement (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The crucial prior question underlying the Situational Theory of Publics is *how the independent variables that shape the situation* (problem recognition, constraint recognition, and level of involvement) *are themselves formed*. Grunig suggests, with the American Pragmatists, that rational communication behaviors shape the community’s understanding of the situation (see his earlier discussion of rational behavior in Grunig, 1966, esp. pp 40 and 41) and thus whether they become a public.

Grunig points out that this notion of “public” was not universally embraced in the 20th century. Some public relations practices reflect more clearly the ideas represented in Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion.* Those practices were based in the idea that publics could be manipulated using information, persuasion, and propaganda—asymmetric models of public relations. Those models of control assumed that demographic and psychographic conditions drive the recognition of problems, constraints and degree of involvement.

This was not Dewey’s view or Grunig’s view. As new, networked media systems emerge in the early 21st century, such “management” and “control” is increasingly problematic.

**2. Another Vision of Public: Hegel**

The idea embraced by Dewey and Grunig can be found in original notions of the Enlightenment as Hegel and Mills described those notions. A similar process assumption of public also can be read in the diverse set of writers who published at the end of the 20th century. Dewey and Grunig challenged the essential assumptions implicit in Lippmann and the effects models of the 20th century: that the “public” was a stable entity. They suggested instead that “public” evolves and changes through “dialog” and within “situations.”

This suggests recognition of a process concept of public that is both old and new. The shift is crucial to understanding what is happening in political communication on the Internet at the opening of the 21st century. After all, Internet behavior has been shown to be driven by social networks that depend upon “collaborative social endorsements” (Flanagin & Metzger, 2008), “heuristics,” (Sundar 2008a) and “murky agency” (Sundar 2008b, & Sundar and Nass, 2001).

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit,* Hegel(1977) argued that the Enlightenment spelled an end to traditional notions of unity. He suggested that these notions were grounded in the contingencies of particular situations and that situations change across time and place. As the situations have changed, the idea of government, philosophical truth, and public “right” have changed. He suggested that the Enlightenment meant that conflicting notions of truth among individuals and groups could exist in conflict at the same time and that Enlightenment societies could sustain ongoing debate. His idea of the situation, or “contingency,” driving groups of people was based “shapes of consciousness” that formed how the situation was seen and, thus, how issues emerged.

In his seminal work on the state, *The Philosophy of Right* (2002), Hegel argued that “right” (or “actualized freedom”) emerged from the interplay (or dialectic) of “will” with “spirit.” “The basis of right is, overall, the domain of spirit,” Hegel wrote. “Its more precise location and starting point is the will, which is free. Freedom thus constitutes the substance and determination of right and the system of right is the realm of actualized freedom, the world that spirit brings out of itself as a second nature….The will is a particular way of thinking, thinking as translating itself into existence, as the drive to give itself existence” (Hegel, 2002, p. 18).

Alexandre Kojeve’s description of Hegel’s views, particularly the first three of his famous Paris lectures in 1937 (Kojeve, 1947, especially, chapter 2) capture the essence of Hegel’s ideas (See also, Fukuyama,1992).

Kojeve suggests that the heart of Hegel’s concern is the conflict between the universal and the particular—the same conflict can be seen between Hobbes (2003) and Mill and Lippmann and Dewey. It is the conflict over the “universals,” manifest as “information” or “consensus,” as implemented within the “particular,” manifest as action or debate and conversation among individuals and groups. Hegel situates this conflict within the core condition of human beings and their aspirations for, or will to, the universal transcendence of their will on the one hand and as essential particularity of an individual act within a contingent situation on the other hand. Hegel expresses this as the conflict between the “family” and the “state” in *Phenomenology of Spirit* (pp. 268-289) and in *The Philosophy of Right* (pp 132 – 146, especially p. 146). In *Philosophy of Right,* he also describes it as the conflict of determinacy or the “particularization of the I” by the will on the one hand (p. 21) and “the element of pure indeterminacy or of the pure reflection of the I into itself, within which is dissolved every restriction” by Spirit on the other hand (p. 20). “This is the unrestructured infinitude of absolute abstraction or universality, the pure thinking of itself” (p. 20). “The will is the unity of these two moments: it is particularity that is reflected into itself and thereby led back to universality” (p. 22). This process of the will acting determinately within a particular situation, and at the same time holding itself apart in order to will any possibility universally, lies at the heart of the unity of human freedom, right, and societal relationship.

Hegel argues that this tension between Spirit and Will, universal freedom and contingency drives the individual toward Absolute Knowledge and the universal social relationships found in the state. But this state is not a fixed, static entity; it is a dynamic process of social relationships driven by the interplay of human freedom.

“One of the two principles of civil society,” Hegel writes, “is the concrete person, who is its own particular end but is also a totality of wants and a mixture of willfulness and natural necessity. But the particular person is essentially related to other particular persons in such a way that each gains validity and finds satisfaction through the others, and at the same time simply through the form of universality—the other principle of civil society” (Hegel, 2002, p. 147). Hegel argues that the state is a universal manifestation of the particular demands of individuals and groups. The process of the individual asserting the particular in order to achieve universality and the constant escape again into the infinite possibility of the individual is what he argues constitutes the state.

Underpinning this pattern, Hegel describes four desires at the core of human consciousness: “1) The desire to sense Being (the world around us), 2) the desire to change Being (to shape the world), 3) the desire to have the “Other” yield freedom to the individual’s choice for change, and 4) the desire to have the Other recognize the individual’s freedom to change as universal (Kojeve, 1947, p. 43). These drives create the perception of the situation of the particular (the family group). 1) Through speech, human beings identify Being (the contingent particular) that makes up “the world.” 2) Through action (universal will made particular) human beings shape Being, which separates human consciousness from circumstances and empowers it. 3) Through dialog human beings encounter differences over change. 4) Through conflict human beings fight for recognition of their (universal) freedom to shape (contingent) change through the commons.

Hegel suggests that human beings fight one another, not simply for change, but, more importantly, for recognition of their freedom to change or “project” their particular values upon Being and upon each other within the universal of the state. He argues that it is this conflict--this act in relation to an idea (or the actualized concept freely willed within the contingent situation)--that has produced the history of mankind. He suggests that history is the record of this conflict over the “idea” or “project,” the particular free acts of individuals or groups that within the State, or the willed idea of the common good.

Hegel suggests that this conflict can only be finally resolved in the Enlightenment solution that conflicting ideas exist as the particular of freedom and struggle that empowers each group to actualize its own concepts—a freedom that manifests itself in conversation and conflict. “This is the deeper root of the modern states: that the whole is held together securely because the particular human individuals are therein satisfied, as particulars” (Hegel, 2002, p. 150). Within this solution, individuals will hold conflicting positions about how the universal and the particular are integrated within the state. Particular issues emerge, not simply from the physical reality of the situation. They emerge from the more fundamental conceptual reality of the free “act” or “project” of the individual or group concretized within the particular situation (Hegel, 1977, pp. 267-289). The conflict is perpetual.

The American Pragmatists, particularly John Dewey, embraced the idea that the public evolved within conceptual effort implemented within the contingency of the situation. Hegel suggests that the freedom to act and project for individuals and groups create the issues, values, and concerns that constitute the situation. “Man from the start seeks…Recognition,” Kojeve explains. “He is not content with attributing a value to himself. He wants this particular value, *his own,* to be recognized by *all* men, *universally….*Man can be truly “satisfied”…only (when) the strictly particular, personal, individual value of each is recognized as such...by *all,* by Universality incarnated in the State as such….” (Kojeve, 1947, p. 58). Kojeve explains that the demands of the group within the particular situation and their manifestation as the State, the universal, common good, inevitably clash. According to Kojeve, Hegel says that man is thus “always and necessarily *criminal,* either toward the State or toward the (group)” (Kojeve, 1947, pp. 61-62). Hegel offers a compelling description of the “tragic” nature of this conflict between the duty of the particular to the “family” (group) and to the universal to the “State” (consensus) (Hegel, 1977, pp. 266-289).

It is the driving force of this constantly evolving conflict between duty to the particular (group) value and the universal (State) value that creates the dilemma of the “situation.”

This view of civil society and the state as the struggle of the particular and the universal also holds the promise for an understanding of the process of public appropriate for the social network media of the early 21st century, with its unending flows of assertion and counter assertion across the network.

**3. An Emerging View of the Public: Late 20th Century Writers**

In his book *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (2007)*,* Richard Rorty suggests that Hegel helped us understand that human beings create a vocabulary or language and with that language a situation that has meaning for them. He suggests that the vocabulary for each group shapes its view of the world. “Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not, he writes” (Rorty, 2007, p. 5). “What is true…is just that *languages* are made rather than found, and that truth is a property of linguistic entities, or sentences…The phenomenon Hegel describes is that of more people offering more radical redescriptions of more things than ever before” (Rorty, 2007, p. 7).

These redescriptions offer conflicting and contingent worldviews that perpetually struggle for universal recognition that Habermas and Dewey alike believed could be reconciled through dialog and conversation.

Grunig discusses the impact of worldview (assumptions and languages) on the practice of public relations(Grunig & White, 1992). He advocates an approach that “incorporates ethics into the process of public relations rather than on a view that debates the ethics of its outcomes.” It should be based on “dialog” with groups (or publics), he says. “The outcome then must be ethical if all parties participate in making decisions and accept the choice of the consequences,” he adds (p. 57). In other words, he hopes for reconciliation that many late 20th century writers find impossible.

But many late 20th and early 21st century writers have held no such hope of reconciliation of the unceasing conflict through dialog.

Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984) describes the late 20th century skepticism that the conflict of any particular to establish the universal can be resolved through dialog or discourse. His “report on knowledge” suggests that even the rules for the legitimation of knowledge themselves have been undermined in irresolvable ways. He suggests that the “language game” requires that conflict over knowledge include conflict over the rules of the legitimation of knowledge itself. The result, he argues, is an end to consensus—the “grand narrative” of legitimation—and perpetual conflict among “local” narratives with local justifications for legitimation. This core idea—that consensus over rules to establish the universal—is impossible became a central theme in the critique of late 20th century notions of “the public.” Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Bruno Latour, and dozens of other late 20th century writers have explored how narratives of consensus have been destabilized by local narratives grounded in the situation of the particular and by the contingency of local situations.

“A *self* does not amount to much,” Lyotard writes, “but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at ‘nodal points’ of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be. Or better: one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 15).

Latour suggests that these local nodes of contingency aspire to transcendence. “Instead of the subtle play of the moderns among three entities each of which was at once transcendent and immanent, we get a single proliferation of transcendences,” he writes (Latour, 1993, pp. 128-129.). Then he adds: “When we abandon the modern world, we do not fall upon someone or something, we do not land on an essence, but on a process, on a movement, a passage—literally a pass, in the sense of this term as used in ball games. We start from a continuous and hazardous existence—continuous because it is hazardous—and not from an essence; we start from a presenting, and not from permanence.”

The deconstructionists describe a process of “reading.” As Derrida puts it in his famous essay on différance: “Already we have had to delineate *that différance is not,* does not exist, is not a present-being (*on)* in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything *that* it *is not,* that is, *everything;* and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent” (emphasis in original) (Derrida, 1982, p. 6). Instead, the reading, he suggests, is a constant process of reading again and anew within a new contingent situation what had been previously read and asserted as universal.

**4. Another Approach**

The broad critique by late 20th century writers of the 20th century emphasis upon “the grand narrative” (the universal) seems to call for a reconceptualization of the notion of the “public.” It calls for an amended understanding of the role of media in communities and of the approaches of public relations professionals in dealing with a “public.”

The phenomenal growth of social networking, blogging, online chat, and virtual communities demands a careful examination of conversations about “a public.”

If the 20th century was about informing the entity called the mass public and setting the agenda for that mass public through mass media or if it was about dialog and conversation among entities called “publics” in order to achieve some kind of consensus, then the 21st century seems to be about empowering processes—virtual communities, guerilla communities, and local communities--that operate through media that give voice and enable processes of dialog and debate—the constant reassertion of the particular as universal. These processes assert their freedom to act—to make concrete the freely willed project. They act in order to assert possibility. They assert as particular universal longing rather than accepting or acquiescing to the universal of some Other. They exercise vocabularies to “read” the situation. They operate through “nodes” of networks that Latour calls “hybrids.” They act within what Castells calls an “informational flow.”

In *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel meticulously laid out a map of the journey of the mind in its quest to find Absolute Knowledge (universality) in the contingent material world. He traced its struggles to reconcile the perception of inert being with interactions with the Other. He suggested that every individual and each community begins this journey anew, but that individuals and groups populate the landscape forever at different points in the journey. He suggests that conflict among these individuals and groups to assert universality of their particular situations constitute much of the tension of human life. He suggested that, above all, groups demand recognition for their freedom to assert their values and aspirations as universal. It is a struggle for the freedom of the spirit to make its project concrete. This struggle is not an “essence,” even though, for Hegel, the struggle was toward the universal “Absolute Knowledge” that was the (process of the) State. Human beings act—eternally. The struggle asserts the aspiration of the universality of choice among the aspirations of the universality of choice by the Other. The public dialog of the Enlightenment can be seen as not essence but as an eternal dialog of the aspiration of the particular for universality within the aspirations of the Other. Hegel’s recognition of the struggle of the particular aspiring to universality in face of the Other recognizes the eternal battle of the “local” with “consensus.”

This landscape of “the spirit” described by Hegel offers the alternative view of “public,” not as an essence but as an act or process. The “public” “flows” across networks of dialog in an unending battle for universality. “Public” is the unending process of struggle, not the fortuitous grouping of demographics, psychographics, or even issues. It is a view grounded in evolving networks that share vocabularies that create the perception of issues. These networks compel recognition of their power to make choices. They demand dialog, debate and conversation. The flow, or conflict, of the local aspiration with the universal is the act of public.

Hegel’s picture of the Enlightenment as field for dialog and struggle, dialectic of action, demands an authentic conversation among equals to that conversation. Such an approach offers a new understanding of the forces that drive human thought and human choice. It offers the structure for a new way of thinking about the nature of communication and “act of public” in the era of interactive media, fragmentation, and social networking.

**5. Conclusion**

The age old questions about “public” are answered anew by revisiting Hegelian notions of process that are as new as the late 20th century critique of meta-narratives. The emergence of new communication technologies—social networks of interactive media with murky sourcing—reveal “public” to be a process, a “flow,” rather than an essence or group. In order to participate in that process, the 21st century communicator will be required to join the conversation of particulars asserted and reasserted as constantly evolving visions of universals.

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About the Author

Charles C. Self is Gaylord Chair of Journalism and Mass Communication and Professor at The University of Oklahoma and Director of the Institute for Research and Training. He has been President of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the Council of Communication Associations, the Association of Schools of Journalism and Mass Communication, and the Southwest Education Council for Journalism and Mass Communication. Research interests include Communication Theory and Philosophy, International Communication, Communication and Democracy, and Media Technology and Society. He was founding dean of the Gaylord College at OU, Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and head of journalism at Texas A&M University, and chair of Journalism at the University of Alabama. He has taught journalism at the University of Iowa and the University of Missouri. He was founding editor of *The Journal of Communication Inquiry* and has authored dozens of articles and book reviews.