Electronic media in relation to the theories of action of Arendt and Habermas

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Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1957), and Jürgen Habermas in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1967) are major twentieth century political philosophers whose works have been voluminously elaborated and commented upon in the twenty-first century. Both distinguish different kinds of action, contrasting, in different ways, instrumental or means-end action or work with communication. These distinctions shed light on several issues about modern society and culture. However, the rise of the new, electronic media raises questions about the total validity or usefulness of the dichotomies that Arendt and Habermas develop. Both Habermas and Arendt start with a critique of Marx, claiming that Marx's with his notion of labor does not do justice to communication. The communication with which they deal is primarily oral, face to face communication. Even written communication does not play more than a small role in their theory. Both wrote their major works before the rise of the internet. Arendt died before the widespread, popular internet and social media arose, while Habermas makes only limited remarks about the new social media.

ARENDT'S AND HABERMAS' CRITICISM OF MARX

Both Arendt and Habermas begin developing their respective accounts of human action from criticisms of Marx's notion of labor. In different ways, they claim that Marx's account of labor is inadequate. Habermas claims Marx's labor excludes communication and is purely instrumental. Arendt claims Marx has two notions, one positive and one

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negative, that he includes in his concept of labor. Habermas claims one needs to supplement, while Arendt claims one needs to distinguish.

Both, however, make somewhat of a straw man of Marx. Contrary to Habermas Marx does include communication as part of cooperative labor, and discusses language, albeit briefly, in *The German Ideology*. Also, contrary to Arendt Marx does distinguish between two kinds of labor, alienated under capitalism, and unalienated under communism. On the one hand, labor is the Heraclitean "living, form-giving fire" as Marx calls it, the energy and driving force of the economy consisting of human labor, expressive of human potential, and on the other hand it is the deadening burden. The practical treatment of labor as negative and onerous appears in the passage in *The German Ideology* that claims the goal of communism is the "abolition of labor" (Marx and Engels, 1859,) and in the statement in volume three of *Capital* that "the realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane conditions ends." (1967, 820) These cannot contrast more strongly with the numerous passages praising free, creative labor as the fulfillment of humans.

ARENDT

Hannah Arendt, distinguishes work, labor, and action. She frames this initially and largely in terms of ancient Greek society, but then claims that in the twentieth century the role of these kinds of activities shifts for the worse.

Nevertheless, developing Arendt's distinction between labor and work, she describes the worker, as opposed to the laborer, as a craftsperson, such as a potter, a weaver, or a carpenter, can see their finished product and recognize it as their own. Unlike the slave or the female householder, "whose work is never done," Arendt's worker does discrete processes of work which have beginnings and ends, which have means that culminate in ends.

Arendt uses the term work for activity that does not produce a tangible, material product. In ancient Greece work was the activity of slaves and women in the household. Food preparation, house cleaning, bathing, massaging, and childcare are examples of

activities that do not produce a material object and must be repeated after intervals. (Childcare seems, at least after the child's babyhood, to be much less repetitive than Arendt's inclusion deems it. Childcare does produce a product – the older child. Elsewhere Arendt celebrates the arrival of a new infant in the world as a true *nova*. However, work in cleaning, bathing, massaging truly does not produce a tangible object as does carpentry, and must be repeated.

The third category of action for Arendt is described by Arendt primarily with respect to politics, in Athens this involves speechmaking and public discussion in assemblies. Action, like work, produces no tangible product. Here Arendt is thinking of ancient political speeches or discussions that are not recorded. Spoken language disappears on the air as soon as spoken. (This neglects memory and the repeating handing down of the speech by word of mouth. Action for Arendt produces, creates new policies and social arrangements. It is not a repetitive and unoriginal activity like labor, and is more truly, fully creative than work. This, in many ways, corresponds to Marx's *praxis*, creative revolutionary activity, in the Early or *1844 Manuscripts* (1964).

In the modern world fabrication and making of objects shifts from work to labor. The assembly line leads to repetitive activity. Also, the worker often does not see the product of her activity. The assembly line worker, as in an automobile factory, adds or adjusts a single part over and over, and may never see the final product, here the automobile.

In Arendt's pessimistic view, politics in her sense has almost entirely disappeared. What we call politics, or politicking, arm twisting, maneuvering, and manipulating, are not part of Arendt's idealized politics. Obviously, even in ancient Greece, political horse trading, bribery, and so forth obviously existed. But Arendt's idealized politics involves free, creative, democratic conversation. In this respect it resembles Habermas' ideal speech situation. For Arendt through speech and collective, communicative action genuinely new things are brought into the world. For instance it initiates a *Novo Ordo Secularum*, as the founding of the United States was called. Arendt claims the truly political conversation in the modern world is present only in local town meetings, or, at the nationally significant level, in the short-lived workers' councils or assemblies, as in the

original Soviets at the beginning of the Russian revolution, or workers' councils in the post-WWI European revolution, that arise and a generally suppressed and crushed as the new national government consolidates.

Some humanist Marxists, for instance the Yugoslavian member of the former Praxis group, Gajo Petrovic. wish to sharply distinguish between Engel's, characterized as treating humans as laboring animals, and Marx treating humans as beings of praxis. The tendency of so-called Marxist humanists is to blame whatever they disapprove of in Marxism on Engels, in order to keep Marx free of whatever they dislike, attributing the true Marx to the 1844 writings. This neglects that Marx collaborated with Engels on many works and that Engels account of labor as accounting for the transition from ape to man, parallels Marx's claim that humans are distinguished from animals by their making themselves through making their environment (presumably by labor). Ironically the structuralist Marxists following Althusser make the same sharp dichotomy between early and late Marx, but put the positive valence on the later rather than the early Marx. Both neglect the continuity between early and late in the rough draft of *Capital*, the *Grundrisse*. Arendt and Habermas draw the dichotomy but in different ways from either the humanists or the structuralists.

HABERMAS

Habermas, similarly to Arendt, makes a distinction between types of action. In his earlier work in the nineteen sixties *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968) he discusses them in terms of three knowledge guiding or knowledge constituting interests. He calls these 'interests of reason' following Fichte. These are the instrumental, the communicative, and, in this early, more radical treatment, the emancipatory. Habermas' instrumental action, taken from the sociologist Max Weber, is means/end action. It is purposive, but does not involve communication, meaning or understanding. The only values it involves are instrumental values and the only 'oughts' it contains are hypothetical imperatives; if you want this result, you do this.

Habermas rejects the primacy of work and technology, which he ascribes to Marx, accepting the technological determinist interpretation of Marx present in

"orthodox" Soviet Marxism as well as in many textbook summaries of Marx. He claims that Marxism lacks the role of speech and meaning. This is not wholly true, as Marx briefly discusses language in *The German Ideology* and assumes communication between laborers in the work process. Nevertheless language does not play a major role in Marx's accounts. Habermas ends up holding a strong dualism or dichotomy of technological labor and communication of meanings.

In contrast to instrumental action, communicative action, in its original form, is described in *Knowledge and Human Interests* in terms of Hans-Georg Gadamer's hermeneutics, the interpretation of meanings.

The third interest is in freedom, what Habermas calls the emancipatory interest. Freud and Marx and their critical views of self and society are used in delineating the third interest. Habermas original (1970) account of systematically distorted communication is in terms of Freud's psychoanalysis and Marx's notion of ideology and Habermas treated emancipation in terms of Marx's ideas of liberation. However, the emancipatory interest was dropped after a decade as Habermas became much less Marxist.

Later, in his *Theory of Communicative* Action (1970), instead of hermeneutics, which he did not altogether give up, Habermas used notions of symbolic communication based on the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1965 [1913]) and on the American sociologist philosopher George Herbert Mead (1934). Durkheim gives a functionalist account of the role of symbols in society, in terms of collective representations as sources social identification and unity. George Herbert Mead was the source of the theory of symbolic interactionism. Habermas also early developed his conception of systematically undistorted communication. This is ideally to be unaffected by what Freud described unconscious biases and what Marx described as ideology. This ideal communication strongly resembles, although on different philosophical bases, Arendt's political speech. Habermas had much earlier, in his first book-length published work, described the rise of the public sphere in early modern Europe, including coffee houses and newspapers. This gave a model for democratic discourse.

THE STATUS OF INFORMATION

Although the word "information" was used from the nineteenth century, the center of modern information theory is Claude Shannon's paper "A Mathematical Theory of Communication." (1949) Shannon gave an equation for information that is formally equivalent to Boltzmann's formula for entropy in thermodynamics. Shannon himself claimed that his concept of information has nothing to do with meaning. Warren Weaver (1949) who wrote an introduction to the book version of Shannon's paper did suggest adding another level by which one could talk of meaning in relation to information.

Rudolf Carnap and Yehoshua Bar Hillel (1953) presented a semantic theory of information. It surprises me that more use has not been made of this sixty-five year old paper. It uses probability and induction to characterize semantic information. The probability of a tautology or logically true definition is one, while the probability of a contradiction is zero, in line with standard probability theory.

There has been much controversy over the status of information in relation to meaning and natural language. Despite Shannon's disclaimer or injunction various uses of information in language and the social sciences have been made. Shannon dismissed most of the uses in the aftermath of his theory. However, many people quite competent to understand Shannon's mathematics did apply mathematical information theory to natural language meaning. People who popularized and applied information theory included Colin Cherry and John R. Pierce. The numerous people, eminent in a number of fields, attending the dozen Macy Conferences, were mostly favorable to the application of information theory to the social sciences (Heims).

One thinker (not an analytical philosopher but a follower of Martin Heidegger) who has dealt with information theory, Alfred Borgmann (1995), distinguishes between 1) Information About Reality (the most familiar use of information as descriptive of the world) 2) Information For Reality, or instructive information; information about action, and 3) Information As Reality, the claim that information is a real, objective entity, not a matter of human judgment or conception.

One of controversies concerning the applicability of information is with regard to biology. Some, such as biologist Godfrey Smith and philosopher Peter Godfrey Smith believe information is a scientifically valuable concept for biology. George C. Williams, who wrote one of the earliest and most influential general books defending gene selection has later claimed that in fact what he call 'codical selection,' selection of abstract codes rather than physical organisms or genes is central to evolution. (1992) Others, such as the former mathematical biophysicist and now science studies person, Evelyn Fox Keller (1995) and philosopher of biology Sahotra Sarkar, (1986, 1995) claim that information talk in molecular biology, such as genetic information, plays merely a rhetorical and metaphorical role and does not contribute to the content of the science. (Shannon's own unpublished and, because of its formulation in tensor notation, unknown in genetics, then and now, doctoral dissertation was on mathematical genetics was prior to and did not involve information theory). Early molecular biology was rife with information terminology and talk. More recently, since the human genome project's flood of information and development of powerful and rapid computers, bioinformatics has become a professional field. However, here the use of information talk is with respect to the data bases in computers, a more indisputably literal use does not take genetic information as literally as early molecular biology. Originally bioinformatics was coined as a field in biophysics. Later it came to gain its present usage.

Some has claimed that information in DNA functions as instructive information rather than descriptive information. That is, the information consists of instructions for the production of proteins, not the description of their amino acid sequence. The notion of DNA as blueprint or instruction is hardly new, but this way of phasing the nature of genetic information does distinguish this understanding from genetic information as information about.

Another controversy concerning the status of information concerns information as reality. Some physicists and computer scientists have treated information as the genuine stuff of the universe. Fredkin, a computer scientist, attempts to construct a theory of physics made solely from computer bit – the universe is a computer. In one talk Fredkin recalled MIT physicist Philip Morrison disparagingly said of this that Fredkin works in a computer lab, so thinks the universe is a computer, and if he worked in a

cheese shop, he would think the universe is made of cheese. (Wright, 1988, 59) More seriously, leading pure physicist highly respected for his work on general relativity theory and much else, John Wheeler, propounded the slogan: "It from bit," that is, bits of information are the fundamental entities, and subatomic particles are secondary manifestations of them.

INFORMATION ECONOMY

The concept of the "knowledge society" does not necessarily mean the same as the information society. Knowledge in the ordinary sense is treated as a force of production and/or capital, but may not be treated as information as such, let alone information in the technical sense. Marx, long before theories of the knowledge economy did speak of science as a force of production, but, like his other prescient suggestion, automation in the *Grundrisse*, (1971, 136, 140) does not elaborate its consequences in detail as he did concerning physical production in heavy industry. In discussion of postindustrial society information is said to replace monetary capital. In Daniel Bell's classic sociological treatment of postindustrial society. *The Coming of Postindustrial Society* as in Zbigniew Brzezinski's *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era* information and information processing is made central. However, both works appeared prior to the emergence of the public internet, the smartphone, or social media. Further, they, like most of the original post-industrial society theorists, particularly Brzezinski, were quite ignorant of computers and the electronic media, despite touting them as the source of the coming (utopian?) society. Thus, major information related institutions or social phenomena do not appear. On the other hand many postmodern works that discuss phenomena related to information are on the phenomenological level, discussing e-mail, streamed music and video, webpages, and Facebook as information media in illuminating ways, but do not deal with information in the technical sense. One area in which information as an objective entity is taken seriously is in economics and sociology, where talk of the "information economy" has become prevalent. Practical evaluation of information as a commodity and information as related to banking, for instance the role of electronics in increasing the velocity of money and subsequent economics consequences for society, takes information in some ways more seriously as an object than much of the writing concerning information in discussion of virtual reality. Despite

this, there is as yet no overall theory of the information economy equivalent to those of Adam Smith, Karl Marx, or John Maynard Keynes for the industrial economy as Peter Drucker wrote (1993, 184), and whose claim still holds true despite partial and specific economic treatments. Friedrich Hayek has centered his theories around the central role of information in the capitalist economy, but this was developed for the free market, industrial economy. Hayek's otherwise useful focus on information (1980) fails to distinguish between the so-called post-industrial information economy and the traditional industrial economy for which Hayek's theories were developed.

Fritz Machlup, a student of Hayek, developed surveys of the "knowledge society" or "information economy" in the United States. His work has been very influential in sociology and science studies, but it has had surprisingly little influence on technical economics, seen by some as more a semantic or terminological account rather than an economic theory. The treatment of knowledge as a commodity makes information an objective entity but has not been tied so far to the treatment of information in the Shannon-Weaver sense as objective, in the manner of Fredkin, Wheeler, or biologists such as John Maynard Smith. Machlup does mention the Shannon theory of information twice in his book. (Machlup, 31) but does not really develop it in tandem with the elaboration of his economic accounts. Later, he dismissed the use of Shannon information as a "weasel word" and merely "metaphorical," (Machlup and Mansfield, 657) thus shifting to deflationary view of used of information in science seen in biology in the criticisms by Fox Keller and Sarkar and abandoning an objective account of the flow of Shannon information.

In the 1950s various economists more committed to technical mainstream mathematical theory than the Austrians such as Machlup, including notably Kenneth Arrow, discussed the role of information in the economy. They were influenced by WWII computer developments and the concepts of Shannon, as well as mathematically able to understand and utilize Shannon's formulae, but at the same time, they like the sociologists of the information society tended to refer to Shannon information, but in practice to use a more usual sense of knowledge and its embodiment in goods. (Mirowski, 2017, 104) Nevertheless, this treatment of the information economy made better use of the concept of objective information. On the other hand, if the focus was on information's role in decision-making, the more subjective conception of information was implicitly used.

MODE AND AGES OF INFORMATION

In attempting to deal with the new modes of communication various writers have presented historical sketches of the sequence of different information media and their social impact. Perhaps the most famous and earliest is Marshall McLuhan, who his convoluted, sometimes almost unreadable prose, presents a sequence from orality to literacy to TV-world. The primitive and tribal world of orality is presented as a Rousseau-like paradise of face to face, unalienated communication, while the age of print is seen as the source of alienation, abstraction, and impersonality. The age McLuhan saw emerging in his day, of television, his portrays as a recapturing of the primitive authenticity and directness of the archaic world. McLuhan's scheme Resembles that of the Bible and of Marx: an original paradise, followed by the alienated state, followed in turn by a return to paradise. Orality parallels primitive communism and Eden, print parallels the fall and capitalism, and TV-land parallels communism and paradise. Mark Poster replaces the mode of production of physical things with the mode of information, as do many technocratic writers with their scheme in which agricultural society is succeeded by industrial society, succeeded by the information and post-industrial society.

DEALING WITH ELECTRONIC MEDIA

Electronic media raise problems for both Arendt and Habermas. The question arises where electronic media communication, such as Facebook or e-mail resides. With Arendt's trichotomy of labor, work, and action, the political communication on the internet, as in Facebook and twitter calls for action, would seem to fit with Arendt's action. On the other hand, routine business communication would seem to be labor most of the time. Work in Arendt's Greek-based schema involves production or construction of a tangible product. Writing of documents or production of web pages is construction. Are virtual reality constructions, such as sim-city constructions of the sort that Arendt would count as work? Perhaps the continuous correction and cleaning of Wikipedia entries can be considered labor, but the writing or addition of extra intellectual and factual content can be counted as work, if writing in general is.

ARENDT AND SPEECH ACTS

Arendt plays down written words and emphasizes spoken ones in their ephemeral and evanescent character, their disappearing in air once spoken. The British ordinary language philosopher J. L. Austin, who introduced the terminology of 'speech acts,' similarly focused almost solely on spoken utterances and not on written ones. Austin discussed speech acts stating facts (constantive utterances), illocutionary acts, speech acts perlocutionary acts, and most originally and famously, speech acts that create a social relationship, performative acts. Examples are 'I promise,', the handshake on a contract, for the chair of a meeting, 'I call this meeting to order, 'This meeting is adjourned, 'I thee wed,' in a marriage, or a priest baptizing a baby. These latter fit well with Arendt's conception of action, in which political speech institutes new social arrangements. However, both Arendt and Austin neglect written actions. Communication on the internet can involve spoken communication, as with Skype, but the huge volume of e-mail communications is written. Other non-verbal internet communications, such as 'liking,' tagging, poking, or 'waving' on Facebook are non-spoken and even non-linguistic though liking is permanent, like a written record, but poking and waving are temporary, like a spoken act. This neglect certainly appears in pre-internet forms of written communication, such as documents and correspondence sent via post office ('snail mail' today).

Arendt denigrates mere 'communication' as opposed to her 'speech.' She says this communication can be accomplished by sign language in an attempt to discredit communication as opposed to speech. She does not recognize that sign language is a genuine language and a of action, like spoken language. (179) She apparently thinks that sign language cannot be common to the larger community and that it is purely expressive, both of which are false. Also, for Arendt anonymous speech is not speech. This seems an odd exclusion in that many politically important eighteenth century communications were anonymous because of fear of persecution by the nobility and church, though these were in writing. Even if, though unlikely, Arendt would accept internet communications as political speech, she would have rejected anonymous posts or avatar posts under pseudonyms, though some have genuine political relevance. Arendt also downgrades mathematical symbols as a means of communication. (179). Apparently digitally based communication is excluded by her. Perhaps one can say that the surface language used

in e-mail and Facebook is non-digital. However, the mode of transfer is definitely digital, not the air vibrations of Arendt ideal speech.

HABERMAS AND THE INTERNET

There is vast secondary literature about Habermas and the Internet in media studies and elsewhere, but almost all of this literature uses Habermas' early work on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) as its starting point. It deals with the possibility of a public sphere in contemporary society, whether mass media make Habermas' ideal public sphere impossible, whether Habermas' ideal public realm is a realistic goal, and other issues. It does not deal in detail with his speech act theory or distinction between instrumental and communicative action. Despite the relevance of this work of Habermas to contemporary political problems, the book was written even before Habermas' intitial work on instrumental and communicative action.

Habermas does not say anything about the relationship of his ideal speech to digital conveyance, though, following J. L. Austin (1962) via John Searle (1969) Habermas' speech acts are purely oral.

Amboise, in an insightful article, notes that Austin (1962) or Searle (1969) speech act theory to social media needs to be changed and supplemented. The so-called felicity conditions of communication acts on electronic media need to include aspects of the technology that is enabling them.

For while the felicity conditions of an Austin, oral, speech act involve such things as sincerity of speaker, awareness of capacity of hear to do the act in requested or commanded, awareness by speaker than the hearer will utterance, appropriate intention on the speaker's part, additional felicity conditions are involved in the social media communication act. Amboise does not elaborate on this, but an initial attempt to list some internet felicity conditions might be: 1) The technology must be working appropriately. 2) The communication must be appropriate to the kind of social site on which it is made. (For instance discussions far off the topic of the list will be terminated by the list administrator—requests for personal advice on a physics discussion forum.)

3) There must be awareness of the ability of the receiver to be able to interpret nuances of the pragmatics of the message. For instance it is widely said that irony and sarcasm do not communicate well on e-mail, and the recipient often takes the sarcastic message as literal description. 4) Another felicity condition would be awareness of the capacity or lack of capacity of the medium used to convey certain types of information. For instance the limited communication of subtle emotions by emoticons, or the limits of the short length of twitter messages.

Despite his generally negative attitude toward the mass media, more recently Habermas has written a few words about the internet:

> "…computer-mediated communication in the web can claim unequivocal democratic merits only for a special context: It can undermine the censorship of authoritarian regimes…" However, Habermas has a negative opinion of the role of the internet vis a vis politics in the First world. "In the context of liberal regimes, the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world tend instead to lead to the fragmentation…" of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics." (Habermas, 2006, p. 423)

Habermas contrasts this with the traditional print newspapers, which he considers the 'quality press.'

Habermas' opinion about chat rooms is similar to that social epistemologist Steve Fuller, who calls the blogosphere a "monadological hell." (Fuller, Fuller writes about his involvement in the Intelligent Design versus evolution controversy, 'I was hobbled by the peculiar epistemic predicament of facing mostly pseudonymous assailants" and "..their blog served as an intellectual echo chamber—a monadological hell..." However, Habermas and Fuller are wrong to totally exclude chatrooms and blogs from the realm of genuine political discourse and dialogue. For instance, some blogs include spaces for comments, and thus are not totally "monadological."

CONCLUSION

In order to develop communicative action in a way appropriate to the new electronic media we must include, not only speech in the traditional sense treated by Arendt and Habermas, but written and gestural speech, whether sign language or 'pokes' and 'waves' on Facebook. We should take into account information treated as meaningful, but also information understood to be based on an underlying digital structure. The notion of collective action must include not only the face to face public rallies or demonstrations but also assemblages of opinion via social media. "Work" in Arendt's sense should include not only physical construction in carpentry and pottery, but web authoring and construction of simulation games and virtual realities. Arendt's labor, work, and action, or Habermas' instrumental and communicative action are useful for making contrasts and distinctions, but should be thought of provisionally useful analytical tools as hermetically sealed realms.

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