

## Democratizing Technology Through Communicative Action

By Kirsten Anne Moore

In advanced capitalist societies, technology plays a large role in every person's life. It seems unjust, then, that the very people that are most affected by technology have the least control over how it is developed and used in their lives. It is the corporations, the media, and the industries, not the general public that control technology. In order to democratize technology, the public must once again become involved in open debate, and be able to trust in this type of action to bring about democratic results. Jurgen Habermas is one philosopher whose theory of communicative action pertains directly to democratizing technology. In his earlier work, Habermas stressed the importance of student protests and the specific responsibilities of the university that must be fulfilled. I propose that if Habermas's ideas about student involvement in the political process, emphasized in his earlier work, are combined with his later theory of communicative action, a solution could be formed that would begin to democratize technology.

I will explain Habermas' theory on communicative action, how he explains the importance of student protest, and the purpose and roles of the university. Communicative action is not merely conversation or friendly talk; it is discourse, debate, or argument, all of which must work towards a consensus.<sup>1</sup> Finn Bowning describes this type of action as "a means of linking the aims of individual participants in a cooperative way so that they pursue their individual goals under the condition that they can harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common situation definitions".<sup>2</sup> Through such debate, different points of view can be brought together into a common definition, and a consensus reached. Through communicative action people are able to establish patterns of belief, consent, and legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> Thus, once the public affects technology, it will be formed through legitimate means based on democratic debate, not power and money. Communicative action consists of two forms: negotiating a definition, so mutual interpretation will lead to a lifeworld, or actual discourse and argument leading to validity claims being contested. It is this second form that leads to action because it calls for reflection and a legitimation of validity claims based on democratic debate. The main appeal of communicative action is that a course of action is chosen through democratic consensus, not power or money. Communicative action can work to help democratize technology because claims about how

technology should be used must be supported based on legitimations that arise from the realm of the lifeworld or the public, not the realm of work and the corporate world.

The lifeworld consists of the realm of raising families, hobbies, and social gatherings, “culturally transmitted and linguistically organized stock of interpretative patterns”.<sup>5</sup> The lifeworld provides a background of context from which communication, and thus communicative action, can draw from in order to reach a consensus.<sup>6</sup> The realm Habermas refers to as instrumental action takes place within a rational system, such as the economy, the state, or any organizational apparatus.<sup>7</sup> For Habermas, the main problem with the lack of public control over technology arises because of the intrusion of such instrumental action into the lifeworld. Communicative action resides in the lifeworld because it is there that socialization and discourse develop. When instrumental action intrudes into the lifeworld, it replaces such discourse with methods of manipulation and subjugation of the public rather than encouraging their participation. Habermas sees the lifeworld as a crucial part of communicative action because it is within the lifeworld that communication develops and claims become valid based on communication, not manipulation. Thus, action can become coordinated through communication and not manipulated by forms of power.

Habermas designates a key difference between the way action is oriented in communicative and instrumental action. The distinction resides between action oriented toward mutual understanding and action oriented toward success.<sup>8</sup> Communicative action coordinates action through consent as a result of discourse. Instrumental, or strategic action is coordinated through influence by manipulation, as a result of instrumental rationalization.<sup>9</sup> Open, democratic debate involves action oriented toward understanding because it must be able to combine many views and concerns to form a consensus. Technology can then become democratically controlled by the public, instead of controlled by capitalists whose actions are oriented toward attaining their own private success rather than working toward the greater benefit for all.

Communicative action and instrumental action are also found to have different rationalities. Communicative rationality consists of evaluating language and statements put forth on the basis of the validity of their truth claims, their rightness claims, or their sincerity claims. In other words, to be “communicatively rational is to be able to justify (in terms of truth, rightness, and truthfulness) one’s validity claims pertaining to the objective world, social world,

and subjective world”.<sup>10</sup> Strategic action or instrumental rationality uses intimidation and manipulation, rather than democratic consensus, as means for validation.<sup>11</sup> The power of communicative rationality is that through communication, people will make claims that must be valid, not because of an accepted norm based on power, money, or status, but on an accepted definition that resides within the lifeworld. When the public is allowed to make decisions about technology based on communicative rationality, industries and corporations will no longer be able to manipulate the public based on instrumental rationalization rather decisions will be made based on consensus stemming from the lifeworld.

An acceptance of information based on instrumental rationality is often seen through the media. What people see on television largely impacts their view of society, but what is shown on television is controlled by self-serving corporations. When Time Inc. merged with Warner in 1989 the result was a closed loop of communication. The Time Warner Corporation controls such a large share of the market from magazines to films to cable channels that the public cannot escape receiving only the views of the corporation. This becomes a threat to “pluralism, democratic discourse, and the First Amendment”.<sup>12</sup> The public currently accepts whatever technology is given to them through the corporations. They accept it as the best possible form of technology they can get because that is the rational that the corporations use to influence the public. No longer do the public question technology; no longer do the public demand that technology be truly suited toward public needs instead of the interests of the capitalist; no longer is technology held up under the light of communicative rationality. Instead, technology is enshrouded in the excuses and explanations of the corporate world. The public should not accept technology given to them simply because the corporations hand it out. Technology must be analyzed through communicative rationality and developed by democratic debate in order to be controlled by the general public and not capitalists.

Through Habermas’ vision of how communicative action should theoretically operate in society, one is able to see the undemocratic way, in which technology is currently used. Technology, controlled by the corporations through strategic action, does not allow the lifeworld to fulfill its functions of “cultural transmission, social integration, and socialization”.<sup>13</sup> Take for example the myth that the major television networks have led the public to believe about the amount of choice they have in the programs they watch. There may be three or four stations to

“choose” from, so that one can decide which views and ideologies will be upheld, but each station merely shows variations of the same program. Herbert Schiller gives an example of the “choices” viewers have: “There are several talk shows on late-night TV; there may be half a dozen private-eye, western, or law-and-order TV serials to ‘choose from’ in prime time; there are three network news commentators with different personalities who offer essentially identical information”.<sup>14</sup> Instead of the media and mass communications being used to increase democratic discourse, it has limited such discourse through the control of self-serving corporations who use the guise of more choices as a way of being democratically organized. The type of rationalization that follows from instrumental action denies the benefits of linguistic constructions (discourse and arguments based on communicative rationality) within the lifeworld. Corporations currently replace linguistic communication, creating a lack of discourse among the public, and systems and relations of production become distanced from the values of the lifeworld. This distancing enables these systems to no longer be legitimated-based on communicative rationality.<sup>15</sup> In other words, when purposive rational intrudes into the systemic domain instead of value rational, legitimating through strategic action is allowed rather than “consciously arriving at agreement concerning the values, norms, and goals of action”.<sup>16</sup> The most costly side effect of these intrusions is that the public feels that they have no influence, so there is no attempt at debate to try to change anything, or any other communicative action. The manipulation and domination of debate by industries due to instrumental and strategic action causes citizens to “feel that it is impossible to resolve political problems with the help of ‘sincere’ democratic debate”.<sup>17</sup> It is possible for the public to create changes within technology, but only by democratizing the technological process. This process itself must begin with communicative action, and the public must once again realize that it is through democratic debate that they can have an effect.

If society is so manipulated and dominated by the views and ideals of industries and corporations, then how will society return to communicative action and values derived from the lifeworld? The public is not motivated to attempt change because they live in a system so dominated by the capitalist they do not think they will have an affect. The public is also pacified by material things into leaving society as it is.<sup>18</sup> A change must occur in the very way that citizens view the culture in America. In order to find a way to begin this process of changing the

public's view of democratic debate and its practical operation in society, we turn to examine Habermas's earlier views on student protest and how communicative action might be assimilated into higher education.

Habermas identifies students as having "great political significance" and the ability to "exercise permanent political pressure," but only under certain conditions not usually found in highly industrialized countries.<sup>19</sup> The most viable place to allow students such influence is the university. Habermas identifies three main responsibilities that a university must fulfill: A student should receive some kind of professional knowledge that aids toward attaining a profession; he or she should develop a sense of the cultural traditions of the society; and finally it is at the university that the political consciousness of the student is formed.<sup>20</sup> Habermas sees the university as an "ideally suited place for the discussion of political issues"<sup>21</sup> when it is operating democratically by fulfilling the above responsibilities.

Not only did Habermas see the university as an ideal place for political change, but the age of college students made them susceptible to a revolution, "[there is] a certain parallel between processes of personal development and revolutions of social structure (that is, between dissociation from the traditionalist home and the dissolution of traditionalist social formations)".<sup>22</sup> A current example of the willingness of students to work towards political change is the anti-sweat shop movement that began on college campuses in 1997. After much protest, Duke students were able to persuade the university not to sell clothing with a Duke label manufactured by sweatshop labor. The movement at Duke quickly spread to other campuses across the country. This was an organized movement with sit-ins and the formation of the United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS) organization. Students were able to create some of the changes they wanted through their widespread mobilization. One example of these changes resulted in universities requiring the knowledge of every factory location of the clothing company they used.<sup>23</sup> The atmosphere that Habermas saw at the university would be an ideal place to begin bringing communicative action back into the public realm.

Before we can combine Habermas's theory on the political significance of the university and his theory on communicative action, the current organization of the university must be corrected to become more democratic. Currently, the structure of the university itself often reflects the same hierarchy found in society. Paul Lakeland lists the current problems with

universities now as the culture of the college being fragmented, the lack of grassroots organization within the “government” of the college, and the fact that narrow interest majors are encouraged. He thinks a decrease in hierarchical authority and decision-making and an increase in dialogue consensus and grass-root government, an increase in the importance of a more general and broad education, and smaller classes with an emphasis on the quality of reasoning and argument in discussions would be beneficial changes to the universities.<sup>24</sup> Students must no longer be educated through the “passive reception of knowledge and skills merely to reproduce society,” but they must be taught to have a critical, reflective outlook and to pay attention to the state of the society around them.<sup>25</sup> It is the students who graduate from these universities who will become a part of industries and corporations, either as employees or as CEO’s. Citizens who are socialized within the university, where they were able to experience changes created through communicative action, will be less inclined to allow themselves to be manipulated and they will believe in the power of democratic debate to alter the course of society.

Eventually, the values of these students out in the workforce would have to intermesh with other citizens in order for the theory of communicative action to become a useful reality. The unification of students and citizens in a common cause is seen in the May events of 1968, when students and workers united.<sup>26</sup> It may take many years for a greater infiltration of these liberally educated students into society and for the values of the lifeworld and communicative action to become widespread. This sweeping political change can occur, however, by first using communicative action on the collegiate level.

Habermas has posed a theory that attempts to democratize technology by emphasizing the importance of open communication and public involvement through communicative action. By using Habermas’s ideas on the university as a source for forming the political conscious of students, and combining this with his emphasis on the importance of communicative action, we can form an important starting place for democratizing technology. Technology and the education at higher learning institutions will have to be democratically organized for students to gain this new perspective on technology. Once students realize the effect they can have through democratic discourse, they will expect to have the same influence over technology in society. The cultural view of these students will be radically different than the current view of the public. As they begin to move out of the university into the public realm, their views of how political

change occurs through communicative action will begin to spread throughout society. Technology can be democratized through communicative action, and it will be the students who will carry forth this form of democratic control over technology.

#### Notes

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