

Shane Finan

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Rebuilding the Public Sphere: Community and Communication in Trinity College in the 21st Century

Introduction

“Like education, the Internet has the ability to provide information, skills, and networks that enable political and economic participation.” (Mossberger et. al 9)

This paper will explore the role of a university in relation to theories on the public sphere. It will analyse Trinity College specifically, as a place of education in Dublin City centre, and will determine how the role of the university is changing with the advent of digital media and ubiquitous computing through this analysis. Crucially, it will determine whether the idea of the public sphere is being re-imagined as a result of the implementation of digital media networks in institutions of higher education such as Trinity College.

Section 1 will explore the concept of place, and the idea of the public sphere will be clarified to determine how public places are identified and used by groups and individuals. Place will be defined through theories that show how location and identity can determine people’s understanding of the roles and functions of a particular space (Certeau, Tuan). The public sphere relates to how people use places as communicative areas for social engagement, often reinterpreting the roles of buildings by using them in ways that they were not necessarily designed for (Castells, Habermas). By determining the decline in the public sphere and the specific revision of debates on the public sphere as a result of digital public debate (Varnelis), the paper will determine whether public and private places hold the same relevance in the current climate that they have done in the past.

Section 2 will determine Trinity College’s role as a private space, looking specifically at the role of the university within these new theories of digital public debate. It will explore the varied roles of the university, looking at the history of Trinity College and how it has been used as a space for discourse and debate, i.e. as an area where the public sphere has been prevalent. It will observe the private and public roles of the university, and will determine whether the

private spaces of Trinity College are being altered by ubiquitous digital media. This will be analysed further by determining how separate buildings and areas within the grounds of the college encourage different engagement from people, and in particular the role of new media will be analysed as it is altering how these places function.

The overall goal of this research is to uncover how developments in digital media networks may be reinventing the way that places are interacted with and identified by people, and how this may change the future of how people engage with and understand place. This will be determined through questioning past understanding of public and private places and incorporating new theories of digital public place into the current university model through an analysis of Trinity College.

Section 1 - Place and the Public Sphere

In order to first determine how places can be used for public discourse and debate, the next subsection will consider the idea of place and will explain what is meant by the public sphere. By determining how place is regarded and used by varied public groups, more recent developments will be explored in the following sections that show Trinity College's role as a private place that hosts public debate, highlighted by the most recent developments in digitally-enabled public debate.

1.1 Place and the Public Sphere

For the context of this essay, place can be understood as a phenomenon that relates to our sense of understanding of a location and its identity (Augé, Certeau, Tuan). Yi Fu Tuan described space and place as two related phenomena, where place was something that people understand through sensory experience, while space is a broader field that determines our overall physical environment (101-117). Places have defined roles or functions that are identified by the people that use them. Places can gain an identity through familiarity of experience with their role or function (Tuan 18), or through how we pass through them and create memories of paths or events (Certeau 97-98).

People create identities for a place based on how they understand the roles or functions of that place from an individual perspective. Tuan spoke about place as a phenomenon where human identifiers, cultural signifiers or memories are present (9-18). He notes that an "object or

place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total” (9). Michel de Certeau similarly spoke of experience when writing on cities and urban place being understood by people through the experience of walking through a city and becoming familiar with its rhythms and systems (91–97). The experience of passing through a place is, to de Certeau, the experience of learning and identifying with one’s surroundings. These interchangeable definitions of place will be revisited in the second section in order to analyse people’s understanding of Trinity College as a place.

The public role of a place can determine how people interact with one another in situ, and can thus determine how people view or understand a specific place (Tuan 136–148). At times the role of a place can alter due to the way that people use it, and this has been the case in the past when analysing the public sphere.

The public sphere is a phenomenon that has been present in western society from as early as the middle ages (Habermas 9–10). It is concerned with public discourse and debate, often relating to civil or state policy. It was often seen as a democratic bridge between the public and decision-makers, where the public could gather together and debate important issues, and these debates would filter up to decision makers in positions of power (Castells 78–79). Habermas saw the public sphere as an important functional aspect of a civil society due to its influence on how policy is constructed.

Intersections between place and social status is crucial when analysing the deconstruction of boundaries due to digital media, and this will be explored further in the second section of this paper. However, analyses on the failures of the public sphere in the past has led to theories being presented on the decline of the public sphere in the late 20th Century.

1.2 The Decline of the Public Sphere

Habermas saw signs of architectural prestige as a separating factor between public and private places (9–12). The role of major architectural structures often acted as boundaries that worked outside of the public sphere. The separation of private and public life was echoed by a separation of status which has been highlighted as a failure in the “publicness” of the public sphere in the past. The male-gendered, wealthy social status of those who were involved in the early public sphere is an example of this failure, as the broader public were not seen to have been involved in the public sphere in its original form (Ward 75).

Various theorists documented the decline of the public sphere in the 20th Century (Castells 78–93, Habermas, Sennett 259–268). This decline was precipitated by changes in social behaviour, privatisation of property and the spread of free market capitalism (Sennett 130–149). Richard Sennett suggested that closer relationships between small groups of individuals became a dominant social model in the 20th Century, and saw this as a counter–balance to public behaviour (259–260). As people became closer, Sennett argues, they become more closed off and less publicly engaged. This pattern has become more noticeable in late–20th Century urban development, as cities have dramatically increased in population and infrastructure.

The public sphere can be considered as a structure without determined planning or development, where public decisions are influenced through public debate, and the decline of the public sphere due to inequality, social behaviour or international politics have seen a reversal in recent times. In the 21st Century, digital media networks began to allow for discourse in the digital sphere that created a broader networked communication model that was not possible in previous incarnations of the public sphere (Varnelis & Friedberg 15–25). Digital public spheres have emerged in the form of online forums, social networks and other digital platforms that allow for a broader audience in public debate.

The public sphere that Habermas described, exemplified by the bourgeoisie in France, was “composed of narrow segments of the European population, mainly educated, propertied men, and they conducted a discourse not only exclusive to others but prejudicial to the interests of those excluded” (Calhoun 3). The networked public sphere is potentially opening public debate up to all members of society with digital media capabilities, which is a far broader audience than was once purported by the public sphere.

1.3 The Networked Public Sphere

Cyberspace and ubiquitous digital spaces have had an impact on how place is perceived by offering alternative places for communication that have no physical equivalent (Meyrowitz, Weiser 98–99). The mass–communication capabilities of digital media have given way to the idea of “placelessness”, where the role of place was usurped by the lack of place within digital networks (Meyrowitz).

Kazys Varnelis put forward the concept of a networked public sphere to categorise this digitally–enabled public arena (145–163). Varnelis suggested that digital communications were

creating new spaces for public discourse that operated in a similar way to the public sphere. Habermas had emphasised the bourgeois coffee shop of the 19th Century as a prime example of a place where the public sphere had operated through regular meetings of artists and philosophers (14–26). Varnelis and Friedberg drew a comparison between people in these coffee shops and the digitally-enabled crowds in Starbucks in the 21st Century. As the authors conclude,

We gather at the communal watering hole as we always did; only now we don't reach out to those around us. Instead, we communicate with far-flung souls using means that would be indistinguishable from magic for all but our most recent ancestors. (16)

The provision of networked publics has led to political and social discourse being operated and offered in a fashion that facilitates broader audience engagement. If private space had historically been walled off by symbols and signs of status in architecture and design, as Habermas had argued, the same private spaces can now play host to public discourse due to the ubiquitous nature of networked publics. If a private space has internet access or mobile access it can potentially be used as a place for networked public discourse regardless of the perceived role of that physical place.

The changing role of place through the overlap of boundaries within digital media spheres is creating a shift in how place is perceived. Historically the role of place has had a profound influence on how public debate could be carried out; in recent times, with networked public spheres this influence of place holds far less relevance. However, as with the original public sphere, the networked public sphere still suffers from access from all areas, and although larger audiences can interact with one another in the networked public sphere there are still potential limitations with regards the ownership of private networks.

1.4 Private Networks and Public Discourse

Darin Barney suggested that the networked society is “always on”, stating that “the placement of its members in territorial space is less important than their existence in the ‘space of flows’ where crucial economic and other activity occurs” (29). Barney saw a separation between the traditional idea of a state (using Max Weber’s definition of a community that holds legitimate force over a given territory and people) and the statelessness of networked society (110–111). This argument concludes that state control over networks is spurious when compared to the public control that members of a state may have. However, private ownership of networks

can restrict the effectiveness of the public sphere.

A clear example of how control over location can affect networked publics took place shortly after the beginning of the “Twitter Revolutions” in Egypt, where the government effectively shut down the internet in order to halt the growth of the public revolution (Mims). The use of networked publics had effectively begun this revolution, with social networking on the internet cited as a major driver behind the mobilisation of the Egyptian revolution (Eltahawy & Wiest 6–7). As the Egyptian government own the largest internet service provider in the country, they were capable of shutting down internet connections across the nation with almost immediate effect (Mims). The state-based control of a network conforms to an overall control of a place (the country of Egypt) and control over the network within this place.

The ownership of networks can also dictate how social class or gender operate within the networked public sphere. The global access to internet technologies still shows large inequalities among nations (Chinn & Fairlie 40–41). Although the networked public provides a voice to people in areas where internet access is fully available, disparities in internet availability internationally continue to limit the capacity for political or cultural discourse across a broad range of race or ethnicity (Mossberger, et. al 139–165, Castells 80). This disparity leads to a convergence of opinion that could be primarily euro-centric due to greater access for people in these regions. In Habermas’ bourgeois public sphere, women and the poor were unable to participate in debates (Landes). In networked public spheres the poor are still limited, although the issue is now international as opposed to local. Thus the operation of networked public spheres is still limited to place and to the mobility and access of people in a place.

1.5 Conclusions - Place and the Public Sphere

The role of place with regard to how it relates to social groups is an important factor in determining our political and social environment. Phenomena such as the public sphere help to rationalise and identify key roles that specific places can hold. However, even the public sphere can be said to create its own isolated social group, often due to the place in which it is operated. Whether through the discriminatory separations of class or gender in bourgeois coffee shops or through the misleadingly global status of networked media, the public sphere continues to operate as a place that harbours discourse and debate among a select public.

To draw the key points from the idea of the public sphere, Habermas’ observations on

ownership and the public role of discourse and debate are not without merit. The public sphere was established in places where debate could be carried out outside of political, state or governmental circles, and the networked public sphere is following in this tradition. Although ownership and class are still issues, the networked public sphere does open up debate in areas that are broader than those illustrated by the public sphere.

The use of networked public spheres allows a larger audience to comment in a broader way on matters of public interest. However, within spaces that have a level of control over how networked spheres can operate, this can create boundaries around how the networked public sphere can be used as a space of discourse.

In summary, the networked public sphere is offering new opportunities for debate that move through boundaries of public and private places, and these opportunities provide a larger audience for public debate than was possible in the past. Significantly, the roles of places in the past, as areas with boundaries and ownership, are less relevant in the networked public sphere. Although networks can be owned, debate can still be carried out by broad audiences over large distances in a way that was impossible before ubiquitous digital media. The next section will analyse Trinity College as a university which has roles both as a place (a public institution with certain private boundaries), and as a networked place (an institution with a visible online presence where the broader public can engage in meaningful debate).

Section 2 - Trinity College: Private and Public

2.1 Universities and the Public

Don Mitchell drew attention to the role of ownership as it applies to public participation in the People's Park in Berkeley in the early 1990s (108–115). He raised questions about ownership of the park and the freedom of public discourse after student protests in 1991 failed to halt urban development in the park (108–109). The park was privately owned by the University of California, but had held the role of a public space for generations and the protests were organised to attempt to retain the space as an open public place. One of the most contentious issues about the park that led to this development being planned, and one of the key factors in

sparkling the protests that objected to the development, was the use of the park by homeless people as a space of residence (Mitchell 111–113).

This draws an interesting parallel with Trinity College's early history. In the early 1600s, College Green had been set aside as a space for a bridewell; something akin to a temporary home for vagrant travelers (Gilbert 7–8). These plans were scrapped after contentious debate, and the land was instead sold to Dublin City Council on the condition that it be used as an educational centre. Thus Trinity College was formed to create a centre of education, and created a break away from monastic or noble-trained education in Ireland that had existed until then (McDowell & Webb 1–4). This role as a public institution was designed to create less of a distance between education and the public, however the specific role of Trinity College changed throughout the following centuries, as the university gained a status as part of an international university system and became disassociated from the broader public.

The ownership and role of universities may serve as an example of places that hold to Habermas' theories on public and private space in public discourse. The status associated with the expansive college in Dublin City centre creates a separation between the public places outside of Trinity and the more private places within the walls of the college campus. Like the medieval castle park, the university is not seen as a place for public discourse due to the overriding characteristic of its function and ownership, and although universities have been cited as a possible site of the public sphere (Rheingold 105–106), the following section will argue that the architectural boundaries of the university campus can disrupt this public autonomy.

2.2 Functionality in Architectural Space

In the 18th Century developments in the understanding of architecture helped to create a relationship between the public and architectural space (Lavin 188–194). Sylvia Lavin argues that architectural developments in this period had a profound effect on how the public interacted, and was crucial in the development of the public sphere (192). Habermas had highlighted the importance of coffee shops not for their proposed function (providing and retailing coffee) but for how they came to be used (as places of public debate), and this is essentially a re-imagining of a public architectural place.

The primary function in the role of a space has an association to the architectural concept of *caractère*, which holds that the design of architectural spaces can be dictated “by

which no other sensations may be created in the beholder's mind but those that are required by the theme [of the building]" (Boulée 1968, qtd. in Grignon & Maxim 1995 73). The *caractère* of a university is in theory to provide a place for educational discourse. It can thus be argued that the predetermined *caractère* of the university campus creates an environment where discourse is generally carried out by the people who use it, not by the public in general. Essentially, the role of Trinity College is currently to service staff and students, and not the general public, and there is a separation between the public in general and the public that have been allowed to use the university as a place of discourse as university fees and specific modules have been put forward. This will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

2.3 Public Places in Trinity College

Trinity College, due to its geographical location in central Dublin and its public access, provides access through part of the city as well as containing a selection of public buildings. Although the primary role of the university remains the education of its students, the location of the college has provided for the expansion of public and private amenities throughout the campus grounds. Sports pitches, open spaces, culture (the museum building, The Science Gallery) and arts (the Douglas Hyde Gallery) are all key components of the overall system of the university's public space. In order to analyse the role of Trinity College as a place of public discourse, it is practical to break Trinity into separate functions, observing the roles of individual buildings as opposed to observing the role of the university as a whole.

2.3.1 The Campus and Passing Through

The overall university campus is a unique and important aspect in the public role of Trinity College. The campus is located in Dublin city centre, and is often used as a thoroughfare for local citizens. As previously mentioned, passing through is an important method for reading and understanding the identity of a place through visually mapping and experience (Certeau 91–92). Tourists and locals gain a spatial understanding of the campus that they move through via a subconscious mapping of the area (Sennett 133–136).

Thus one of the ways through which the public engage with Trinity College is as a public thoroughfare. The campus provides a path through part of the city. Although the walled campus and private security create an element of private place to the campus, the overall place is used

by a greater public.

To return to the relevance of ubiquitous digital media, by using portable media within the separated space of the campus a broad public that does not have an association with the university can engage in open public debate while passing through its walled interior. The “always on” nature of mobile internet devices in particular leads to a reinterpretation of place when present in a location such as Trinity’s campus. The pervasive nature of ubiquitous computing leads to the possibility for communication from place to place without a necessity for being on-site (Kluitenberg 9–10). For example, academic debate and discourse can be carried out between Trinity scholars and individuals from outside of the college without a necessity for anyone to be present in the place, which in many ways creates an obsolescence of place for the university. This is carried out through forums and social media, often operated by the university itself.

With networked publics, engagement in discourse and debate can take place on-site or off site, which creates engagement between a broader audience within places (Varnelis & Friedberg). These engagements alter a person’s public relationship with their location, and it may be argued that location is in many ways secondary when people engage with each other through networked publics. The next two sections will look at the particular roles of individual buildings in Trinity College as part of a growing networked public sphere.

2.3.2 Libraries and the Public Sphere

Libraries can play a role as a public sphere, although the system for discourse is somewhat different from the one experienced in coffee shops or parks. Through encouraging critique and rational discourse through engagement with information, libraries offer a public sphere that is associated with creation and dissemination of knowledge (Buschman). Discourse can take place using methods other than verbal debate. In the university environment this exchange is particularly prevalent, as the academic system is built upon by each successive academic year’s outpouring of students. Trinity’s separate libraries pertain to different subjects and areas of focus, however information is accessible from one to another.

From its early beginnings, the Trinity College Library was designed to serve a single function through the continued education of the students of the college. The construction of Trinity College’s library coincided with the dawn of the printing revolution, and thus fell at an

important historical epoch when the size of libraries was increasing dramatically throughout Europe (Boran 41). The early 21st Century has seen the digitisation of many library resources at another historical epoch. With access to electronic resources the nature of research libraries has shifted in the past 20 years (Pradt Lougee). This digitisation gives greater autonomy to students and library members to access various texts both inside and outside the library, and although the libraries' singular role in Trinity is not altered, the use of the place is changing due to these developments.

Research libraries serve as a good example of how specific functional buildings have been altered through the development of networked media. With large online databases such as MIT and JStor available to students who are members of the Trinity College libraries, the necessity to be present on-site is less than it has been in the past. The ubiquitous access of research material alters the way that debate and discourse can be carried out across research disciplines in the different libraries of Trinity college, and although this access is still limited to the select public who are members of the library, the range of audience for critical debate and the range of materials available have increased dramatically as a result of the cross-pollination of subject matter available for academic discourse. This embraces the nature of libraries as part of the public sphere, and cements the notion of Trinity College's libraries as becoming part of the networked public sphere.

2.3.3 Culture and the Public

The knowledge economy is a third major factor influencing the role of the networked public sphere in Trinity College. This is associated with the role of knowledge as an economic property and the way that culture can contribute to the social standing of a place (David & Foray 2003).

The role of cultural, historical or artistic centres has been associated with public engagement in the past (Ward 71-75). However, the public engagement has arguably been significantly socialised, as highlighted by Frazer Ward (75-78). Brian O'Doherty recounted the role of the spectator in galleries historically as being male and of a "dignified pedigree" (39-41).

The advent of networked publics may, however, be changing the more insular public role of cultural spaces. The development of the knowledge economy has created an interest in the development of spaces of cultural significance in urban areas in order to strengthen the public

reputation of private places (Sassen 64–70). These cultural moves are part of a socio-economic drive to advance the reputation of a place by enhancing its cultural output. To achieve this, places often focus on the economic benefit of knowledge and culture whereby “the larger the number of people exchanging knowledge, the greater the chances of making the overall stock of knowledge grow” (Jiménez 231). This theory is particularly important when considering developments at Trinity such as the Science Gallery, which, through a combination of research and exhibitions provides a place that contributes to a knowledge economy as part of the overall role of the university.

The Science Gallery utilises ubiquitous computing as part of its ongoing exhibition programme and as a driver for how this programme is developed. Various exhibitions, such as the Hack The City exhibition in 2012, have encouraged public debate through not only the space of the museum itself, but outside the walls of the university campus and into the city as a whole. Exhibits such as *The Mobile Commons* (Fairwaves, CTVR & Redfern) allowed users to send SMS messages within the gallery space during a two-day intervention at the exhibition, while *The Advertiser* (Oliver, Stewart & Castro), part of the same exhibition, allowed artists to manipulate advertising billboards throughout the city when users viewed them through the screens of mobile devices.

These installations that breach the traditional role of the museum or gallery alter the role of specific museum or gallery buildings as they become less pivotal to the central curatorial theme of an exhibition. Further to this, the ability of a broad public audience to criticise and debate particular exhibitions or aspects of exhibitions through social media and online debate can have an influence on how exhibitions are selected and put together in a way that the public sphere could manage policy changes historically. The knowledge economy is guided by a drive to increase and retain an audience, and the ability for an audience to add critical debate to how a cultural institution is run operates as a public sphere that guides policy decisions. Social networks often provide this platform for debate and engagement, and their instantaneity and publicness ensure that public criticisms are often acted upon.

This altered cultural dialogue is a recent development that creates room for new public debate through cultural institutions, and through initiatives such as the Science Gallery, Trinity College is placing the development of networked debate at the forefront of its cultural prerogative.

Conclusions

Eric Kluitenberg has written that “Because the space of electronic communication is rooted in local networks, it is also linked with local history” (10). Although networked publics create new modes of engagement and discourse, they arguable still have a relationship to place due to this weight of history and context of identity.

The introduction of network systems to Trinity College has allowed for an extension of public discourse that is no longer self-contained within the space of Trinity College, but is instead attached to the international networked community. This alteration not only dictates new terms to how Trinity College as a public institution functions, but also draws attention to the changing roles of individual institutions and departments within Trinity College.

By implementing network technologies as part of the overall structure of the campus and grounds of Trinity, the possibilities for public engagement increase not only throughout the local areas in Dublin, but internationally. The use of ubiquitous computing models in private places can have an effect on how the place is perceived, but the retention of a sense of place due to the walled interior of the college campus allows the greater public to continue to engage with the space as they have done in the past. Thus networked publics are broadening the horizons for discourse by offering new audiences for engagement, debate and collaboration, and as a result they are changing the role of particular architectural places. The public sphere may have never related to overall publics, but the networked public sphere is having an influence on private areas such as Trinity College by allowing for larger public engagement and debate in how the place is used due to a larger audience base and more responsibility given to public opinion in general.

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