

# Human Agency and the Revitalization of the Public Sphere

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## Human Agency and the Revitalization of the Public Sphere

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*This article introduces a theory of human agency that helps identify and integrate factors that may be important for explaining why the advent of the Internet has not revitalized the public sphere. The theory suggests three types of interrelated explanations. One type of explanation focuses on the “economy of attention”—limits to human information processing and resulting tradeoffs. A second type of explanation, psychosocial structure, includes the development of routines of Internet use that confine that use to conventional activity. It also includes the decline of traditional political organization, which reduces participation incentives. Ultimately, however, attention and structure serve only as deterrents, not as bars to revitalization. Political disinterest serves as the final bar. This disinterest can best be understood as due to developmental factors that serve as a crucial impediment to a flourishing e-public sphere.*

**Keywords** agency theory, attention, cognitive development, public sphere, social structure

Many information technology researchers have been drawn to the descriptions of vibrant public spheres offered by Habermas (1989), Rheingold (2000), and others. If such rich interpersonal worlds once existed or exist in special places today, then perhaps they could be replicated on a mass scale—provided the public had broad access to convenient fora of discussion and to helpful information. Thus, the Internet, the most pervasive public space in human history, became home to many hopes. As other articles in this volume suggest, the Internet has thus far proved to be a rickety home. New technical capabilities or changed political and social circumstances might yet revitalize the public sphere. Nevertheless, this seems unlikely today.

The failure to anticipate how the Internet actually affected the public sphere, however, is an opportunity. Incorrect anticipations imply incorrect or incomplete understandings. Improving those understandings offers the opportunity not only to better comprehend the social effects of technology but perhaps also to take steps to reinvigorate the public sphere.

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In searching for an explanation of the stasis of the public sphere in the face of the Internet, it is necessary to strive for a theoretical framework different than those commonly available. The political science, psychology, and communication literatures offer many explanations for political engagement, but the most widely known explanations do not specifically address self-motivated participation. Because the Internet is a medium of choice, self-motivation plays a critical role in people's willingness to participate in the Internet public sphere. Also, standard explanations are typically fragmentary rather than trying to account for the system of effects resulting in real engagement. Understanding what might revitalize the public sphere will require understanding relevant factors not one at a time but as a dynamic system of interrelated effects.

This article makes an initial foray into a theoretical framework that may offer some insights on the revitalization of the public sphere. The theory seeks to be a theory of human agency that helps to clarify the nature of self-motivation in a framework that embraces a systemic viewpoint. Because the focus here is the public sphere, agency theory will be briefly described, and then some key implications for the Internet and the public sphere will be examined. Three implications seem key: the economy of attention, psychosocial structure, and limited cognitive and self development. A central argument is that developmental explanations are ultimately necessary to understand how the e-public sphere might be vitalized.

### Agency Theory

Agency theory is indebted to Mead's (1962) philosophical psychology, Carver and Scheier's (1981, 1999) self-regulation theory, Vallacher and Wegner's (2000) action identification theory, Koestner's (Koestner et al., 1996) and Ryan's (Ryan & Connell, 1989) work on self-determination and internalization, and Rosenberg's (2002) developmental psychology. Agency theory seeks to describe the peculiar kind of rational agent crucial to understanding self-motivated political engagement—one responsive to considerations of identity, ethics, and values.

Agency is the capacity to choose and execute actions consistent with a coherent and reflexively determined identity. With respect to political engagement, agency can be thwarted in several ways. For example, people may not have the skills needed to execute participatory actions (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995), their motivation to act may not be adequately incorporated into their identity (Koestner et al., 1996), or their identity may not be sufficiently unified or of the right type to motivate engagement (Yates & Youniss, 1998). These capacities constitute the "political agency" of a person.

Agency theory proceeds in part from a dual processing model of the brain. The brain is a massively parallel processing device. Most mental processes are parallel, unconscious, and "self-organizing" (Carver & Scheier, 1999). For instance, when people learn a complex dance, they do not consciously learn which muscle groups to fire and when—something that could not be mastered by the slow, serial processes of consciousness. Rather, they practice until they have built a nonverbal, unconscious, and self-organized mental structure that can execute the necessary responses. Self-organizing processes do not, however, possess high-level unity of purpose or the capacity for reasoned correction. A massively parallel processing device requires a serial guiding force, and that force is conscious attention and verbal mental structures. Learning to dance involves both. Conscious attention directs the dancer to practice dancing, and it is also involved in building consciously accessible verbal structures that seek to model the dancing. These verbal structures are accessible to conscious, symbolic manipulation, which allows dancers to reason about and

thereby consciously correct specific problems in their dance execution. The correction does not take the form of directly altering the self-organized structure, which is not accessible, but of consciously intervening at a specific point in action execution, thereby slowly reprogramming the self-organized structure. **1**

Because it is serial and therefore slow, consciousness must perform a cognitive miser, while unconscious processing can be used more unsparingly, though at greater risk of error in some applications. Cognitive psychology research suggests that people are often cognitive misers unwilling and unable to process much information. More recent research adds that people are dual processors (Chaiken & Trope, 1999) capable of both superficial, less conscious processing and more thorough conscious processing. **5**  
 Thorough reasoning is too time consuming to be practical for most everyday tasks. The number of issues people can entertain in this rational way is very limited. Conscious attention can, however, create both verbal and unconscious mental structures that can help a person cope with a complex world. **10**

A crucial aspect of agency theory is explaining how people maintain a coherent self, because selves with insufficient continuity and unity are poor agents. Mental structures help perform the feat of creating the continuity and unity of a person despite varying activities and contexts. Continuity and unity are only possible to the extent that the mental structures involve the consistent pursuit of a set of consciously held “objectives.” More abstract and internally consistent objectives will better accommodate fluctuations in behavior and the environment. Environments, activities, and psychosocial structures that challenge continuity and unity can promote elaboration of more abstract and consistent objectives and related structures. They can also affect development by suggesting solutions to continuity and unity challenges. People possess an intrinsic drive to address any lack of self-unity they perceive, but they may not perceive a real lack of unity if it is not exposed in their everyday interactions. **15**  
**20**

Unification of the self, one type of development, proceeds in part through a “conversation” between the I—identity-constituting mental structures that are unconscious and self-organizing—and the Me—identity-constituting verbal structures that are consciously created (see Figure 1). Because the I involves fast parallel processing, people depend on it to handle most details of action. The Me, which involves conscious, slow, serial processing, allows reasoned self-correction and high-level unity of purpose. People can discover the I as it is revealed in action and build a verbal model that can be used to understand and shape the I. This verbal model in part constitutes the Me. **25**  
**30**

Development involves improvements in how well synchronized the I and the Me are with each other and within themselves. Synchronization can occur by homeostatic self-regulation of action (behavior, thoughts, and emotions). Focusing attention on how well action meets the expectations and standards of the Me, people can correct their actions, thereby slowly reprogramming the I. Alternatively, synchronization can proceed by reconceptualizing the self-understandings of the Me to more adequately capture observed actions and thereby the operation of the I. **35**  
**40**

A fundamental mental structure relevant to agency is “perspectives”—verbal and nonverbal structures that model the reactions of various points of view to input. The I and the Me are constituted by a collection of perspectives, including the ideal self, public self, private self, and various collective identities (group memberships such as ethnic identity, gender, work group membership, a societal perspective, the self as citizen). Specific perspectives can be activated by a variety of cues—such as the presence of an audience, self-awareness, the priming of group roles, or a societal perspective—with powerful effects on thought and behavior (Carver & Scheier, 1981; Ross & Ward, **45**  
**49**

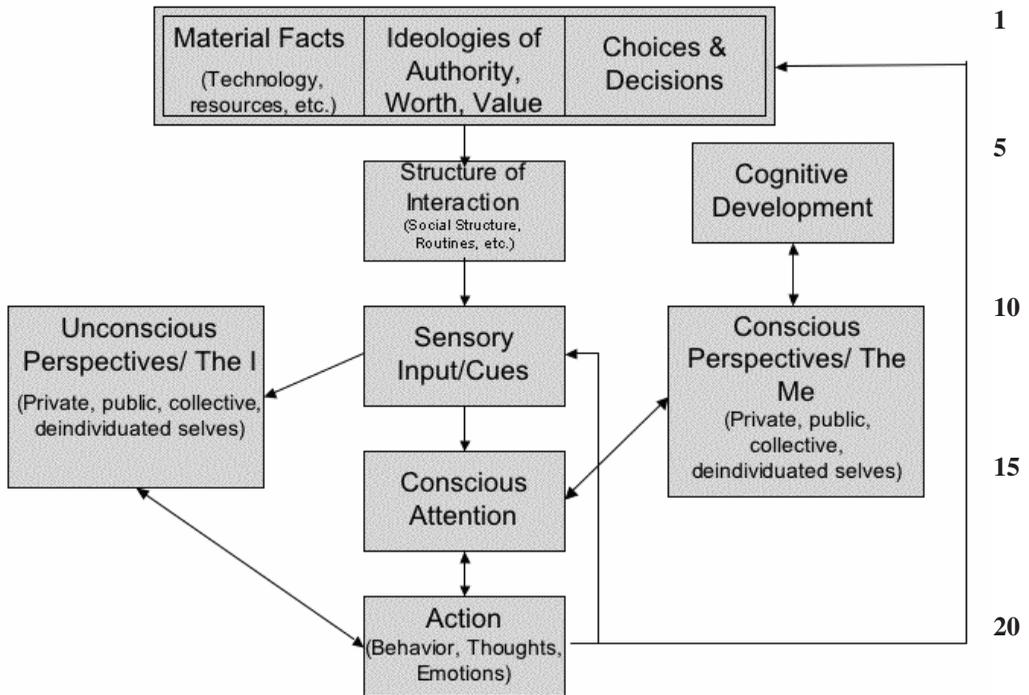


Figure 1. Agency theory.

1996; Tetlock, 1992). An activated perspective can influence which normative standards of behavior are invoked. Perspectives need not, however, be a loose collection of identities, each activated one at a time. Some perspectives, particularly that of the core, unified self, may seek integration across a variety of roles and identities.

More could be said about agency theory, but the task at hand is to apply this theory to better understanding the stasis of the public sphere in light of the Internet. For this purpose, I focus on three key explanations suggested by agency theory: the economy of attention, psychosocial structure, and cognitive development. These form the basis of an integrated approach to understanding how the public sphere might be revitalized, one that takes into account system properties and self-motivation. I clarify relevant aspects of agency theory as these explanations are considered.

### The Economy of Attention

In agency theory, attention is a precious commodity. The Internet and its interaction possibilities are so vast that they can easily overwhelm people's attention resources. Any Internet public sphere, therefore, faces a severe "economy of attention"—the economy of competing draws on the attention resources of individuals. For instance, it is inevitable that the voices of only a very few people can be heard by the many. If people had to read the daily musings of just 100 other persons, they would have time for little else. Features of the Internet affect the economy of attention. As the number of unfit discussants on the Internet rises—people who do not know enough or enter discussions to emote or attack—the actively engaged will find Internet discussions less valuable.

An earlier paper (Muhlberger, 2002) suggested that the educated participate in Internet political discussion less than would be expected because they have difficulty finding quality conversations. Finally, as the amount of information, particularly faulty information, proliferates on the Internet, the attention costs of identifying useful and trustworthy information grow, as does the expertise needed to evaluate it. As these costs rise, the Internet fails for many people as a cornucopia of information and opinions that might stimulate the public sphere. 1 5

None of this implies that a vibrant Internet public sphere is impossible. People are, after all, able to direct their conscious attention to that which matters to them—a basic premise of dual processing theories. And they can with time develop expert cognitive structures that help them handle vast amounts of information. Nevertheless, the economy of attention no doubt serves as a substantial hurdle to those who do not actively and expertly seek engagement in the public sphere, which, given the political ignorance and apathy of the American public (Kinder, 2002; Neuman, 1986), is most people. A complete explanation of the stasis of the public sphere would, however, seek to model the economics of political information and discussion on the Internet. 10 15

### Psychosocial Structure

With their limited processing ability, people can cope only by developing sophisticated organization or “structure”—standing patterns of activity or propensities. In agency theory, attention can build the cognitive structures needed to expertly and rapidly handle new information. The theory also suggests that people can build interaction structures, including social structures and patterns of interaction with the nonsocial environment, for the purpose of addressing their needs. Because building structures is time consuming, all types of structures serve as a crucial form of “capital” for addressing the agent’s needs. 20 25

Routines and habits are key types of structure that greatly simplify interactions with the world. Giddens’s social theory of structuration depends heavily on the shaping force of routine. When I go online to read the news in the morning, I do not run a Google search for news sources and evaluate which probably has the best news of the day. Instead, I thoughtlessly start entering the URL for the *New York Times*—sometimes even when I want something else entirely. People’s days are substantially defined by such standing patterns of action, which reduces cognitive load. Note, as well, that a newspaper itself is a collection of structures. 30

Habits appear to be taking hold on the Internet as well, making the Web less of a novel exploratory activity and more of a routine instrumental activity. Jupiter Media Metrix, a research firm, reported in 2001 that while about 60% of Americans the year before had visited more than 20 Web sites in a typical month, about 50% reported doing so in 2003 (Harmon, 2001). They also found that 72% of visitors to news sites in July 2001 went to the *New York Times*, MSNBC, and CNN. Supporting this picture, the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Fox & Rainie, 2001) found that 17% of people surveyed reported using the Internet less, while 29% reported using it more. About half of those who reported that they used it less said their reason was that it was no longer interesting or useful, while the most cited reason for using it more was for school or work. 35 40 45

Habits and routines are structured not merely psychologically, but socially as well. Everyday interactions, often structured by institutions, promote the formation of habits. The easy availability of superficial, entertaining, and often biased news on widespread TV channels and newspapers promotes the building of routines of superficial news con- 49

sumption. Such news encourages the perception of politics as a passive spectator sport. 1  
 The colonization of the lifeworld (the world of intimacy and community) by strategic  
 considerations (Habermas, 1984) occurs in part because of the power of system struc-  
 tures (structures of the economic and other strategic realms) to penetrate the lifeworld  
 via their organizing effects on thought, habits, and routines. Relatedly, theorists and 5  
 researchers have also suggested that structural features of the most common activity—  
 work—can serve as bars to democratic transformation. Pateman (1970) held that the  
 undemocratic nature of the workplace undermines the democratic potential of the pub-  
 lic. Less sweepingly, Brady et al. (1995) found that skills learned or not learned at  
 work are important for political participation. 10

Skocpol (2003) found that civic organizations, an important type of sociopolitical  
 structure, have changed over time in ways that weaken civic engagement in America.  
 She observed a substantial decline over much of the past half century in organizations  
 that involved people from across socioeconomic strata, such as veterans' groups and 15  
 fraternal organizations. People joined such organizations for a variety of reasons and,  
 once inside, were encouraged toward civic engagement. Simultaneously, there has been  
 a considerable weakening of organizations that traditionally stimulated engagement among  
 lower socioeconomic groups: unions, ethnic and religious organizations, and political  
 parties. Since the 1960s, there has been an explosion of single-issue public interest groups,  
 which typically seek solicitations with mass mailings. These interest groups usually do 20  
 not involve interactions between members. Such groups predominantly organize those  
 who are upper middle class. Skocpol believes the government is partly responsible for  
 these changes.

For e-democracy, some of the most important psychosocial structures are those re-  
 lated to the digital divide. A Habermasian public sphere, with its stipulation of equal 25  
 access, is hardly possible in a world where many have no access to the Internet or have  
 little skill in using it. Norris (2001) found evidence that the Internet advantages those  
 who are already advantaged in offline political engagement. Social structural factors,  
 such as socioeconomic status, grant societally dominant groups both more access to the  
 Internet and greater cognitive capacity for using it. 30

The importance of psychosocial structures can be more appreciated by briefly con-  
 trasting the real world with one structured to promote deliberative democracy (Barber,  
 1984). In such a world, education would be equitably distributed and involve intensive  
 civics training. TV channels would inject lengthy and balanced programs on political 35  
 issues during prime time. Government would create a substantial and independent public  
 information service. Government would give all citizens home access to the Internet and  
 training to effectively use it. All organizations and channels of communication would  
 intensively remind people to participate. Physical and virtual community centers would  
 be built to serve as public spaces in which people could meet and deliberate. Deliberation 40  
 would be designed to have real effects on policy, and people would receive long-  
 term feedback. Workplaces would promote decision making by all workers; work weeks  
 would be reduced to allow civic engagement, and people would have free child care and  
 a guaranteed minimum income.

## **Why Developmental Explanations Are Needed** 45

The economy of attention and psychosocial structures serve as a deterrent to a bustling  
 public sphere, but not as a bar. Disregarding people who are too economically stressed  
 or uneducated to be engaged, there should still be tens of millions of Americans able to 49

populate a renewed public sphere. Though daily routines and habits might distract people and fail to suggest civic engagement as a possibility, these should not be an appreciable hurdle for people who are motivated to actively participate. Though “infotainment” may distract some from serious news, Norris (2000) found that news media exposure is positively associated with political knowledge, trust, and participation. She also found that the diversity and audience of high-brow media have only grown with time. 1 5

Dynamic system considerations, such as the absence of a critical mass of fit discussants or the undermining effects of unfit discussants and poor information, may impede progress toward an Internet public sphere. But, again, a question remains as to whether these actually serve as bars. If millions of people saw civic engagement as crucial, they could create moderated communities such as Slashdot or The Well—which have had success dealing with unfit discussants and communal validation of information. Also, the rise in working hours in America may impede progress toward a public sphere. But if people transferred half their TV hours to political engagement, politics would be transformed. 10 15

Skocpol’s account of the changing nature of political organizations might help explain weaker civic engagement, but it may not help solve the problem of reinvigorating the public sphere. The declining political significance of traditional organizations and the rise of professionally steered public interest organizations are manifestations of what Dalton and Wattenberg (1993) called the “individualization of politics.” They partially attributed the substantial withering of religious and social class effects on voting to the advent of the mass media, which allow candidates to communicate directly with voters. Individualization is only apt to grow. 20

More broadly, social theorists suggest that modern social systems encourage people to be more reflexive (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Giddens, 1991), that is, to question truisms and rely on their own judgments. A reflexive population should be less interested in organizations defined by tradition or traditional group cleavages and more interested in issue-oriented politics (Beck, 1994). The public, or parts of it, may be more reflexive than it once was. Many today would be unwilling to endure the rituals, conformity, and social controls of traditional organizations. The modernization of society may make it impossible to return to traditional structures. 25 30

Researchers of the public sphere need to consider the possibility that the public sphere has not grown dramatically because most people simply are not interested in political and social affairs. Disinterest may be the ultimate bar, not just a deterrent. In *Stealth Democracy*, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) presented evidence that people dislike politics, do not care about policy, and do not want to be consulted regarding policy. They found that most people believe there is substantial public consensus on most issues and that political disagreement is largely the result of special interests trying to impose their will. The public wants stealth democracy—politicians should enact the imagined consensus without recourse to debate or public consultation. This picture of the American public is consistent with the considerable research revealing an uninformed and apathetic public (Converse, 1964; Gilens, 2000; Kinder, 2002; Neuman, 1986). 35 40

The stealth democracy thesis can decidedly be qualified, though ultimately it seems the public has no consistent, strong political interest. In their work with deliberative polls, Luskin and Fishkin (Fishkin, 1997; Luskin, Fishkin, & Plane, 1999) have found that as many as 35% of the population will actually show for deliberations. Also, participants are generally very enthusiastic about their experience. Participants were, admittedly, paid about \$100 per day. In a representative sample of 1,200 Pittsburgh residents (Muhlberger & Shane, 2001), 36% of respondents were willing to be contacted by phone 45 49

regarding their participating in a deliberative Web site or meeting—without pay. Respondents also reported favoring improved quantity and quality of their political discussion. People feel they should do more as citizens. But these results may be due to a survey context that hinted at the desirability of citizenship, invoking a citizenship perspective. Susceptibility to contextual cues would imply that the public is more uncertain than enthusiastic about citizenship. 1  
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Even if the public could be mobilized by the right participation opportunities and structural changes, this is not necessarily a good thing. Increased participation could be harmful unless participants actively seek information and deliberate thoughtfully. Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) findings are cause for alarm about the consequences of a more participatory public. They found that most Americans naively assume there is broad consensus on policy issues. These authors expressed concern that the public must come to realize that disagreement is not evidence of evil intentions. What they describe fits nicely the notion of "naive realism" found in the developmental psychology literature. Ross and Ward (1996) explained that naive realism is the view that personal beliefs are self-evidently true, and all good and reasonable people subscribe to them. People assume that those who disagree are either bad or mad. Naive realists are unlikely to engage in rational and tractable dispute resolution. 10  
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A final consideration on behalf of pursuing developmental understandings of the possibilities for the public sphere is the need for rational agents to inhabit this sphere. Deliberation in the public sphere would not yield a reasoned consensus if people are the kinds of agents described by certain social psychological theories and research (Mendelberg, 2002). Developmental theory offers a response. As discussed below, Rosenberg's (2002) work suggests that a number of social psychological mechanisms apply only to an intermediate level of cognitive development characteristic of most Americans. More developed people should react more rationally. 20  
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How can proponents of the public sphere address the evident political disinterest and deliberative unfitness of the public? Disinterest and unfitness must be understood as neither inevitable nor unchangeable. Yet, they have hardly changed over the many decades political scientists have studied them. One theoretical perspective offers the hope that disinterest and unfitness are not inevitable: the developmental standpoint. A developmental explanation maintains that political interest and action require cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills that take time and special circumstances to develop. 30

## **The Developmental Standpoint**

A complete explanation of the stasis of the public sphere requires an understanding of the public's general lack of self-motivated interest in politics. In agency theory, interest can be either intrinsic—what people are biologically inclined to like—or internalized—a developmental process in which a motive is carefully built into the I and the Me through effortful attention. Political interest is likely to be substantially a matter of internalization. Political interest also depends on another form of development—cognitive development. A self-motivated interest in politics necessarily depends on being able to take a broad societal perspective, a complex ethical standpoint from which the welfare of people in the wider society matters to the individual. In addition, a societal perspective makes political interest possible by incorporating more sophisticated understandings of social forces and social systems. The societal perspective constitutes the pinnacle of cognitive development in several theories (Habermas, 1990; Kohlberg, 1984; Mead, 1962). 35  
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Developmental explanations of political disinterest and apathy might be broadly 49

categorized into two groups: “thin” and “thick.” Thick explanations are built on the strong assumptions of Piaget (Chapman, 1988). In these approaches, it is assumed that development proceeds through qualitatively distinct types of reasoning that always occur in the same sequence during development. Thin approaches stipulate only quantitative changes in thought through a gradual process of development. Below I examine an objection to developmental explanations and then discuss thin and thick explanations of political disinterest.

### *Development, Education, and Reflexivity: A Counterargument*

Education enhances cognitive development; thus, if education rises substantially, political engagement should rise, other factors constant. Yet, U.S. education levels have grown substantially, while engagement has not. How can this be explained? One explanation is that political engagement may be responsive to forms of development not directly affected by education, such as the development of a citizenship identity.

Political interest must also be understood within the context of psychosocial structure. People may be interested in politics both because they have a self-motivated concern for the social and ethical implications of political affairs and because they view political engagement as a means of expressing solidarity with their group. Whether or not a person at a low level of development is likely to be greatly interested in politics will depend on the social structural context. As shown by Skocpol (2003), traditional civic organizations once reached many Americans. In such a world, people whose ethical development stresses the moral claims of groups would naturally find politics pertinent. As traditional organizations disappeared, citizens whose reasoning is group oriented had less reason to participate politically. Today’s issue-oriented political groups demand a high level of cognitive sophistication, including ethical concern for the broader society.

The public sphere has failed to flourish because people’s level of development has not been sufficient to more than counterbalance the decline of traditional organizations. The conformity and group-biased reasoning found in many traditional organizations would not be compatible with a rational public sphere. Society, however, seems to have outstripped traditional organization without building a level of development necessary for most people to spontaneously pursue deliberative engagement.

### *Thin Developmental Explanation*

The often mentioned “virtuous circle” or “spiral” explanation of civic engagement is a thin developmental explanation. Neuman (1986) discussed a spiral theory that he compared to the theories of developmentalists such as Piaget and Kohlberg. According to this spiral theory, political sophistication is viewed as responsive in the long term to education, which hones cognitive skills, and a politically stimulating environment. Neuman identified a number of “spiral” processes—mutual positive influences between variables. Interest in politics leads to greater political knowledge, which stimulates more interest. Neuman also postulated mutual positive influence between differentiation and integration, that is, between the number of ideas or facts a person has about politics and how adequately he or she can relate these ideas and facts through abstract ideas. Differentiation and integration, whether called by those terms or not, are central to the literature on political reasoning and sophistication (Converse, 1964; Lane, 1959). Less well known is that these notions are related to information processing approaches to cognitive development (Schroder, Driver, & Streufert, 1967).

Neuman's spiral theory might best be placed in a developmental dynamic system framework, because some limitations are needed to explain why positive reciprocal influences do not spiral into self-sustained and intense political involvement. A solution is to introduce another factor: self-sustenance. If political interest and reflexivity reach a level at which a person begins to spontaneously seek out political information and activity, then that person has a self-sustaining engagement with politics. Below the level of self-sustenance, a person's engagement will depend on inducements and contact with political stimuli. Self-sustenance may be the key ingredient that would make a revitalized public sphere possible. Because of its low costs of information and communication, the Internet may help lower the point of self-sustenance, though few may be near that point.

Differentiation and integration may also play a role in the digital divide in skills for using the Internet for political purposes. While 90% of Hargittai's (2002) respondents could find a variety of other types of information on the Internet, only 61% were able to find simple political information. Those who were able to find the information took 83% longer than for nonpolitical information. This political digital divide may be due to lower levels of differentiation and integration with respect to political concepts.

Another crucial factor in self-sustenance of political engagement is political internalization. Internalization occurs when an agent tries to reprogram the I so it is more consistent with the normative demands of self-concepts (the Me). If these demands are not fully integrated into the I and the Me, they will conflict with other components of the I and the Me, and they will be experienced as internally coercive. Incomplete integration has a wide variety of implications such as weak, conflicted, and unreflexive pursuit of political interests (Koestner et al., 1996; Muhlberger, 2003). This research shows that incomplete internalization reduces active political information seeking, creates dependence on others for political decisions, increases susceptibility to persuasion, reduces differentiation of attitudes, increases the likelihood of accepting various rationales for political apathy, decreases the quantity and quality of everyday political discussion, and decreases the chance of voting. Political internalization may be crucial for a vibrant public sphere.

Another thin developmental explanation is moral reasoning sophistication, as measured by the Defining Issues Test (DIT). I interpret the DIT as measuring ability to apply ethical considerations to wider social units, for example the nation as opposed to just friends and family. Those with high DIT scores prove several times more likely than those with low scores to appear at a subsequent interest group meeting, provided they feel a moral responsibility to act (Muhlberger, 2000). Non-ethical considerations, such as expectations of self-reward, more strongly affect behavior in those with low scores. The DIT (Rest, 1979; Rest & Barnett, 1986), an objective paper and pencil test, measures moral reasoning on a quantitative scale. Those with higher DIT scores should be more easily mobilized by the Internet political groups that deal in abstract ethical goods.

### *Thick Developmental Explanation*

Thick developmental explanations have fallen out of favor. Nevertheless, a substantial literature, reviewed in several publications (Blasi, 1980; Kohlberg, 1984; Rest, 1979, 1983; Rest & Barnett, 1986), finds compelling evidence that adults differ in their social reasoning abilities and that these abilities develop over time and influence behavior (Blasi, 1980; Kohlberg & Candee, 1984; Thoma, Rest, & Barnett, 1986), including political

behavior (Candee & Kohlberg, 1987). Moral reasoning, one type of thick developmental explanation, was subject to the criticism that it is gender biased (Gilligan, 1982) and to the general perception that it is not value neutral. The gender-bias critique was thoroughly addressed by empirical responses (Rest, 1979; Walker, 1984). The absence of value neutrality can be addressed by reference to a key objective of developmental theory. This objective is to discover the structure of reasoning, not the content of the reasoning, such as values or beliefs. Kohlberg's theory may not have succeeded in avoiding content. Value neutrality might be addressed by improvements in the theory, a project currently being pursued by one research group (Rosenberg, 2002). Thick developmental theories may have ceased to captivate social scientists for more peripheral reasons, including that such research is very time consuming and requires substantial training.

I will sketch aspects of Rosenberg's theory and discuss how it might be used to understand political disinterest and the unfitness of deliberators. Rosenberg stipulates three types of reasoning: sequential, linear, and systematic. I will focus on linear thinking, which best describes most Americans. Systematic thinking will be defined in relation to linear reasoning. (Incidentally, it is at least conceivable that this theory might be reformulated as a thin theory.)

Linear reasoning involves the ability to abstract actions from events and place them in relation to each other, but the types of relations are severely limited. In analyzing a given event, linear reasoning identifies one anchoring action and interprets all other aspects of the event as flowing to or from the anchoring action. Linear thinkers cannot conceptualize multiple immediate causes of a given action or feedback relationships, as can systematic thinkers. Understanding is limited to simple linear chains of relationships.

Categorization in linear reasoning involves creating category labels to describe groups of actions. For instance, actions can be grouped by their effects—thus, actions that make others happy are “being nice,” and the person who engages in these actions has the trait of “being nice.” Alternatively, various concrete actions can be grouped into roles such as “mother” or “student.” The self is conceptualized as a collection of such traits and roles. I would add here that the failure to understand the self as a complex system pursuing certain abstract goals (principles) in a manner responsive to context prevents linear thinkers from understanding how people could be nice in some situations and not in others. As Rosenberg observes, linear thinkers are totalizing—they conceptualize people as all good or bad. Similarly, they cannot understand how the self might navigate between roles, say by principles that legislate when a given role has priority. This means that the linear thinker can understand a person only from the perspective of one totalizing role at any given time. This makes linear reasoning sensitive to contextual manipulation—contextual cues may determine which role or traits a person adopts or attributes to another person. Linear thinkers' conceptions of groups are similarly affected. They can understand groups as command hierarchies but not as complex dynamics. Consequently, they reify groups as obeying a single will.

Valuation can be based on a transfer of value among associated elements, such as in a linear chain. For example, actions by a person (or group) who is classified as “good” are assumed also to be good; people associated with a good person are assumed to be good. I would add that the inability of linear thinkers to understand the self as a complex system helps explain why the notion of good transfers between actions and associations. A uniformly good person cannot be understood to act badly or associate with bad people. Linear valuation is especially influenced by social convention. Linear thinkers do not understand social or self systems, and therefore cannot critically analyze

how a given action fits into the purposes or functions of these systems. For example, a systematic thinker can criticize a given law as harmful to the purposes of the social system, such as its purpose of advancing the interests of individuals. Linear thinkers cannot conceptualize a standpoint from which to consistently critique aspects of a social system. To the extent that linear thinkers see overall virtue in the social or political system, they tend to declare all aspects good. Also, the conventional roles and traits linear thinkers observe are reified as “natural” and necessary. Again, the linear thinker lacks a perspective from which to see roles and traits as historically bounded social products serving system functions.

Rosenberg’s theory can help clarify political disinterest and deliberative unfitness. Earlier, I suggested that naive realism may explain much political disinterest and could entail certain types of deliberative unfitness. Naive realism can be seen as a product of linear reasoning. It is nonreflexive—it is unable to take itself as its own object. Reflexive reasoning requires thinking about a system of relationships, including an objective world, the observer, other observers, generalizable laws and principles lying behind observed events, and the multitude of factors that can influence observation or inference. Only in systematic reasoning do thinkers fully appreciate these factors and therefore the uncertain nature of their own beliefs. Linear reasoning assumes a strong causal chain from observables to belief. Conclusions should consequently be seen as unproblematically correct and natural—that is, naive realism.

Rosenberg’s theory also suggests that only nonsystematic reasoners should be susceptible to certain social psychological effects that could make people deliberatively unfit. For example, research on social identity reveals that activation of identities results in devaluing of out-groups, exaggerating differences between groups, stereotyping, and prejudice. Rosenberg believes that social identity effects are confined to the linear form of reasoning. Linear thinking totalizes groups as all bad or all good with a single will, leading to such effects as stereotyping. Add to this linear thinkers’ need to see themselves positively, and the result will be devaluing of other groups.

Systematic thinkers should be affected quite differently by the Internet than nonsystematic thinkers. The hypothesized imperviousness of systematic thinkers to social identity effects implies that they will be less susceptible to online group polarization. An absence of both (standard) social identity effects and naive realism should make systematic thinkers less likely to “flame” others and more capable of thoughtful online discussion. With their capacity for complex reasoning, they should also be able to better utilize the Web as an information tool and, given their imperviousness to context effects, more likely to use it to consistently pursue their long-term goals. The success of an e-public sphere may depend heavily on whether sufficiently many systematic reasoners are available to populate it.

## Conclusion

To better understand how the public sphere might be revitalized, research needs to strike out in new directions. This article has offered a theoretical framework, agency theory, which helps identify facets of social processes vital for understanding how the e-public sphere might be vitalized. The key explanations considered here—the economy of attention, psychosocial structures, and development—represent some important targets for research, and agency theory suggests interrelations between these explanations.

The discussion of attention, structures, and development implies a picture of the dynamics responsible for the vitality of the e-public sphere. That dynamic begins with

the limited capacity of people to process the amounts of information involved in political engagement. People can rationally and thoroughly process a small amount, but depend on more automated processing for most daily tasks. Attention, then, serves to determine which matters will receive thorough processing and which matters are so important as to be worth developing expert processing structures. **1**  
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Attention operates differently for different people. Self-motivated people will attend to and act on political matters in the absence of political cues, others will attend when they encounter cues, and others will never attend. A number of research-relevant questions are raised, including what makes some people need cues, which cues are important for which people, and what determines which people are exposed to political cues. The e-public sphere may have a weakness in that it is not in a medium that readily imposes political cues. **10**

Psychosocial structures, which funnel attention, help explain why people get exposed to political cues. Research could examine how social structures and individuals' routines can influence attention and the self by structuring interactions. Structured interactions prime or build certain identities as well as enhance or inhibit cognitive development. When the structure of interaction exposes people to sufficient political stimuli over an extended period, it encourages them to develop, via self- and cognitive development, psychological structures that can yield self-motivated participation. **15**

The political cues needed by some people will often operate by priming identities or roles. Research shows that people can be made to act very differently depending on whether environmental cues trigger their public self, private self, or various collective selves (Breckler & Greenwald, 1986; Carver & Scheier, 1981)—perhaps because the cues trigger incompletely internalized normative demands. Mirrors, audiences, accountability, and so forth can dramatically alter behavior and reasoning. Because most people have poorly internalized norms of citizenship, the political effects of such cues are apt to be substantial, accounting for the crucial importance of mobilization for stimulating political participation (Rosenstone & Hansen, 1993). The e-public sphere may be weak in part because it has had few mobilization efforts. More generally, much research remains to be done to learn which cues trigger politically relevant selves and which selves matter for intensive political engagement and how (Huddy, 2001). Aspects of the Internet may give it special properties with respect to triggering identities (Lea & Spears, 1991). **20**  
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Ultimately, self-development and cognitive development explain why some require political cues to participate and others are self-motivated. The conversation of the I and the Me can result in self-development that can internalize political motivation, resulting in self-motivation. Internalization deserves considerable research scrutiny. Some may not have sufficient cognitive development to permit them to achieve full internalization through the conversation of the I and the Me. For example, Rosenberg's linear reasoners can only contemplate one role or identity at a time because they cannot conceptualize system principles allowing for role integration. This should make their citizenship role more dependent on context-driven role priming—resulting in non-self-sustaining participation and sensitivity to contextual cues. Linear reasoners' black and white valuations can also result in strong rejection of out-group roles and identities. Linear reasoners may use the e-public sphere differently than systematic reasoners, perhaps being more likely to seek out like-minded others. But forums that invoke their citizenship identity might dramatically improve their behavior. **35**  
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Ultimately, the self and cognitive development constitute the agency of people. People are agents to the extent they have an integrated, consistent, and reflexively chosen self. They are also agents to the extent they are systematic reasoners, the only form of rea- **49**

soning that permits adequate reflexivity with respect to the self and its goals. Systematic reasoners with integrated selves should prove highly self-motivated in the absence of cues, including social pressures. Such persons are also more likely to be highly political, thanks to an inclusive moral sensibility. Such a political agent would be an ideal member of the e-public sphere. Researchers need to learn why so few political agents exist in the mass public and whether e-deliberation could help create such political agents.

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