

Public Portfolio #1

As I perused the Internet looking for something remotely Habermasian, I finally came across a website entitled *createdebate.com*. I used Habermas' ideal public sphere because his model exudes characteristics that I believe make a good public sphere. Though *createdebate.com* is not completely exemplary of a true Habermasian public sphere, its objective as a space for all types of people to converse about "common concerns" comes close to a Habermasian public sphere.

The first aspect that caught my eye is the site's mission statement:

"Our goal is to build this site into the best social debate platform on the

Internet...Ultimately, we envision CreateDebate becoming an incredibly useful tool that will help groups of people to sort through issues, viewpoints and opinions so that better decisions can be made" (About CreateDebate 1)

Not only does the site have a great mission statement that is inclusive of the mandatory components of a Habermasian public sphere, the majority of the people that belong to the site sustain the site's objective. Many sites like *4forum.com* and others alike have objectives akin to *Createdebate.com*, but what matters in the end is what the dialogue entails and who is participating. *Createdebate.com* welcomes people of all ages, creeds, genders, etc. to engage in debates that span from abortion to gay marriage. Members can choose to join a debate or create a new one at any point in time. I was unable to find out how long the site has been in existence, but it has built of a large following. The site is an excellent domain for good debate because there is much diversity amongst its members.

Generally, I am opposed to using labels like "Democrat" and "Republican" because they generally polarize society. They do not promote togetherness. Instead, labels promote extremism,

which is never good for critical and rational debate. But on *createdebate.com*, labels work. In each member's profile, he or she's party affiliation, gender, religion, marital status, etc is stated. I like this because it gives members more of a background of the people they are debating. Though this site does not promote exclusivity, members can easily scope out people they want the debate.

Another feature that gives way to *createdebate.com* being a good public sphere is its accessibility. Debates are categorized by their topic (Technology, Business, Politics, etc.) and/or by their recent activity. Organizing debates by their recent activity may not be a characteristic Habermas would find essential for a good public sphere, but in the 21st century, this organization makes perfect sense. The need for instantaneity and our growing attention deficits are forces of our society that are unstoppable. People are more inclined to post to a hotly debated because they know someone will hastily respond to what they had to say. Issues that are not as active as others do not get pushed aside on *createdebate.com* – they stay open for anyone who wants to participate. They can be found with ease by their search bar at the top of the site. In addition to the sites accessibility, *createdebate.com* can be shared on major social networking sites so more people have to potential of stumbling across the different debates.

When I crafted a new debate topic, I first stated the general debate around abortion: Pro-life views v. Pro-choice views. I initiated the debate in the most unbiased manner imaginable. Instead of stating my stance as a supporter of the Pro-choice view right off the bat, I took a step back and debriefed the current debate and some common rationales of both sides of the argument. Going into a debate is the hardest part of the whole thing – it can set the tone, mood, structure and the amount of participation for the remainder of the debate. I chose to keep it clean and open-ended for prospect debaters by using the argumentative tactic of definition. I have

found that rationality and critical debate thrive the most when they have the ability to work from definitions. I used definitions by “example.” “Arguments of this sort focus on who or what may be included in a list that defines a category” (Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz 226).

In my second statement, I finally thought it right to state my stance on the issue. But really, I did not see it purposeful to go into the reasons why I am Pro-Choice. Everyone can go back and forth on why they believe it should be legal or illegal, but I had a hard time imagining that we could ever reach some deliberation on the matter. Instead of putting in my worthless opinion, I found power in exposing the history of how many Americans formulate their opinions based on inaccurate statements made by regarded political figures like Supreme Court members. To establish credibility, I posted an external link to a website where I received my facts.

A second principle that made my writing critical and rational was my thoughtfulness. I managed to incorporate thoughtful claims in my writing after I established credibility and reverence from the use of logos. This principle of credibility is best exuded in my second statement. After I politely acknowledged user, ThePyg, I shifted the broad topic of the abortion to a narrower one. With my knowledge of the predictable fate of the abortion issue in today’s government, I made plausible claims that abortion will remain legal in the US (i.e., Obama’s lack of interest in banning abortion, rising abortions, growing secularism).

After I stated my claims about the fate of abortion in America, I got down to the realistic question of how we can decrease the amount of abortions each year. By my third statement, I began to build a platform on safe-sex education over abstinence education. I relied solely on my own common sense as to why I think safe-sex education is better than abstinence education. Later in my fourth statement, I talked about the reliability of the condom to back up my

argument. I made a connection to the dropping number of Christians in America, but I do not know if it made an impact on the argument I was trying to make.

The last principle I used was the most contrasting to my other logos laden ones. I chose to include personal observation and its contingency to my view that safe-sex education is the better route to go in decreasing abortion rates. Because I had access to the age of the site's members, I noticed that I was one of the youngest of the people involved in the debate. With that in mind, I used a tool that no one else could use in their arguments. Because of my close connection to the younger generation (the generation that commits most abortions), I had the reason to say why safe-sex education works better.

Most of the discourse that I read from the members on the message board could be read as rhetorical statements, but they almost always relate to the post they are responding to. Most did not take the time to ask questions to other members, but they usually stimulated discussion. They were generally thoughtful and clearly stated, but they lacked conviction when giving their arguments.

I was the person that controlled the topics because I asked all of the questions. It seemed like a good portion of the members had worthy opinions and good ideas to decreasing the amount of abortions, but they just needed a little more solidity. For example, when user, JakeJ, talked about how pregnant women can give their child up for adoption at birth instead of aborting it. It is a wonderful idea, but what are the implications of putting a child up for adoption? Will the government pay for women to deliver the child? He could of raised good points to back up this alternative to abortion, but failed to do so. This definitely was not a debate with an objective of deliberation in mind. It seemed to be just a collection of organized statements that pertained to the issues that fall under the umbrella of abortion.

Mostly seen in JakeJ's posts, his inability to legitimize his strong statements like, "...most kids already know how to be safe..." with rational reasoning made his claims extremely weak. He does attempt to use ethos when he says that a person with faith in safe-sex education working is bound to change their mind when such a person has children. He does ask a hypothetical question to the debate's members regarding how one may feel about passing out condoms to their own children. This is effective to me because I truly do not know how I would feel about giving out free condoms to my children to go out and have promiscuous sex.

Overall, the discussion's productivity was questionable. If I hadn't facilitated the discussion, the discussion would have been a mere exchange of viewpoints. To me, that is not a productive discussion. In order for a discussion to be productive, all parties must be involved in answering the questions being asked and all parties must ask questions as well. I asked the majority of the questions. The others did not. Most of the time, the participants gave dead end responses and I rarely found that the members expanded on their ideas. I would not say a productive discussion needs to reach a consensus, but the process of deliberation must be evident. The members in the debate did in fact have ideas and participated in the critiquing of other's ideas, which is a part of the definition of a productive discussion.

As Habermas would eloquently put it, a public sphere is that of a body of "private persons" assembled to discuss matters of "public concern" or "common interest." A valid public sphere should also be inclusive of all class, creed, race and gender. As Habermas said, in order for something to be categorized as a public sphere, it needs to "neutralize extant status distinctions." Based on my experience with participating on-line, I can say that the discussion met such criterion. Anybody was free to join the discussion despite one's background and a

common concern was discussed. The debate was also accessible, which is a requirement for a Habermasian public sphere.

However, the discourse that transpired contrasted discourse that would be in Habermas' public sphere. The people did not necessarily critically approach the subject of abortion and the steps society should take in decreasing the abortion rate. In a Habermasian public sphere, participants would only partake in discussion if he was well read on the subject and offer valuable words that could be discussed, contested and/or argued. Ostensibly so, members on createdebate.com would rather speak freely than listen to old school scholars like Habermas.