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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? With, against, and beyond Habermas

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Abstract
The main purpose of this paper is to assess the validity of the contention that, over the past few decades, the public sphere has undergone a new structural transformation. To this end, the analysis focuses on Habermas's recent inquiry into the causes and consequences of an allegedly 'new' or 'further' [*erneuten*] structural transformation of the political public sphere. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part considers the central arguments in support of the 'new structural transformation of the public sphere' thesis, shedding light on its historical, political, economic, technological, and sociological aspects. The second part offers some reflections on the most important limitations and shortcomings of Habermas's account, especially with regard to key social developments in the early twenty-first century. The paper concludes by positing that, although the constitution of the contemporary public sphere is marked by major—and, in several respects, unprecedented—structural transformations, their significance should not be overstated, not least due to the enduring role of critical capacity in highly differentiated societies.

Keywords Critical capacity · Habermas (Jürgen) · New structural transformation · Political public sphere · Public sphere · Structural transformation

Part I: A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?

The Relationship between Democratic Processes and Deliberative Politics

A key issue at stake in Habermas's recent inquiry into 'a further structural transformation of the political public sphere'[1] is the relationship between democratic processes and deliberative politics. Once the former are institutionalized within the framework of liberal society, characterized by high degrees of complexity and heterogeneity as well as pluralism and individualism, it becomes increasingly difficult to make a convincing case for the viability of the latter. Societies of this kind tend to lack a widely 'shared religion or world view'[2] and, hence, a common reference point, around which *all* of its members can coalesce.

Given the absence of a (culturally, religiously, or ideologically defined) sense of unity, the feasibility of such a society, understood as a collective project, depends on its capacity to meet two conditions: (a) that all those directly or indirectly *affected* by both short-term and long-term decisions be *included* in the *deliberative process*; (b) that all decisions, democratically reached by co-operative and mutually respectful citizens, be *dependent* on 'the more or less pronounced *discursive character* of the preceding *deliberations*'[3].

Having acknowledged 'this *requirement of free deliberation*'[4], it is hard to overlook the pivotal role played by the *political* public sphere, notably in terms of its capacity to render the emergence of large-scale democracies possible.[5] It is no accident that, historically speaking, liberal democracy and the bourgeois public sphere came into existence in the

[1] See Habermas (2022b). See also Habermas (2021) and Habermas (2022a).

[2] Habermas (2022b), p. 150.

[3] Ibid., p. 150 (italics in original).

[4] Ibid., p. 150 (italics in original).

[5] See ibid., p. 150. See also Seeliger and Sevignani (2022).

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same period—initially in Great Britain and subsequently in other Western countries, particularly those in North America and continental Europe. It would be misleading, however, to conflate a political order with its public sphere. Even in liberal democracies, the contribution of the public sphere to processes of opinion- and will-formation is '*limited* because, as a general rule, no collectively binding individual decisions are taken there'[6]. The political communication occurring in the public sphere makes an '*essential but limited contribution*'[7] to the deliberative practices and structures by which liberal democracies are sustained.

And yet, it would be erroneous to disregard the considerable impact of the mass media on the variety of opinions held by a heterogeneously constituted body of citizens. In fact, the mass media may have an 'enlightening quality'[8] in terms of shaping views and attitudes among citizens. In the traditional media, activities of reporting and commenting usually undergo a rigorous selection process, guided by editorial filtering policies, ensuring that all issues are covered in a balanced, reliable, and accurate manner. Its task is to allow for a 'more or less *informed pluralism of opinion*'[9], thereby enhancing the chances that citizens' assumptions and convictions, as well as their electoral decisions, will be '*rationally motivated*'[10] and *discursively tested*.

Whatever its rational and discursive underpinnings, the public sphere is not tantamount to a seminar room, removed from the structural constraints of multilayered realities. In democratic societies, engagement in political discourse is inconceivable without every citizen's orientation towards mutual understanding, out of which may emerge a culture of consensus-building. Paradoxically, however, the 'fundamentally *agonal character*'[11] of political disputes confirms, rather than undermines, the notion that citizens, both as individuals and as members of social groups, undergo *learning processes* when arguing with each other. 'To argue is to contradict.'[12]

Citizens '*learn from each other*'[13] by exposing themselves to conflicting positions. Their *individual* learning processes are, at the same time, *collective* learning processes: their participation in deliberative politics permits them 'to *improve* [their] beliefs through political disputes and get *closer* to correct solutions to problems'[14]. Far from being reducible to an exercise in arguing for the sake of arguing, the exchange of validity claims between citizens is pointless unless it enables them to have a tangible impact on the world and to acquire the mutually beneficial capacity to find (short-term, medium-term, and long-term) solutions to the most pressing problems they face—not only as individuals but also as members of communities, societies, and the same species.

When making judgements about the deliberative processes shaping the public sphere in general and public opinion in particular, what matters is 'the discursive quality of the contributions'[15], rather than the implicit or explicit goal of consensus-building, which, in the long run, is hard to achieve. A vibrant public sphere thrives on cultivating 'an open-ended conflict of opinions that gives rise to *competing* public opinions'[16], assessed and tested against each other in a constructive fashion. Without this 'dynamic of *enduring* dissent'[17], the public sphere would lack one of its most distinctive functions—namely, its capacity to serve as the constitutive realm of opinion- and will-formation. Dissent, conflict, competition, friction, and antagonism are essential ingredients of, rather than obstacles to, deliberative practices and structures in democratic societies. It is because of, rather than despite, the 'fundamentally *agonal character*'[18] of debates and controversies taking place in the public sphere that citizens feel (and know) that they have a stake in the game.

In a pluralistically constituted public sphere, 'the anarchic power of saying "no"'[19] is no less important than the bonding (and binding) power of saying 'yes'. In a curious way, the public sphere—both as a factual and as an imaginary construct—illustrates the co-constitutive relationship between experience and reason at the core of the *reality* of the lifeworld (and, by extension, between empiricism/consequentialism and rationalism/proceduralism at the heart of a philosophically sound *conception* of the lifeworld). 'The citizens must be able to *perceive* their conflict of opinions as both consequential and a dispute over the better reasons.'[20] In other words, actors are more likely to take an interest in, to engage with, and to contribute to the daily construction of the public sphere if they sense that their viewpoints and actions matter. In order for this to be the case, they need to experience their civic participation as relevant—rationally and consequentially, conceptually and empirically, theoretically and practically, discursively and

[6] Habermas (2022b), p. 151 (italics in original).

[7] Ibid., p. 150 (italics in original).

[8] Ibid., p. 151.

[9] Ibid., p. 151 (italics in original).

[10] Ibid., p. 151 (italics in original).

[11] Ibid., p. 152 (italics in original).

[12] Ibid., p. 152.

[13] Ibid., p. 152 (italics in original).

[14] Ibid., p. 152 (italics in original).

[15] Ibid., p. 152.

[16] Ibid., p. 152 (italics in original).

[17] Ibid., p. 152 (italics in original).

[18] Ibid., p. 152 (italics in original).

[19] Ibid., p. 152.

[20] Ibid., p. 152 (italics in original) (quotation modified). On this point, see also Habermas (2020) and Lafont (2020).

substantially, in a problem-identifying and problem-solving fashion.

Through both the '*rationalizing power* of public debates'[21] and the '*problem-solving power of a democracy* on the flow of deliberative politics'[22], the public sphere acquires a particular civilizational value, which consists in providing its members with a reasonable degree of certainty that their viewpoints and actions *matter*, both in the context of their own lives and in the grand scheme of things. One need not be a pragmatist à la Rorty[23] to acknowledge that validity claims (that is, truth claims, rightness claims, truthfulness claims, and intelligibility claims) remain insignificant unless those who raise and/or those who assess them can *relate* to them in such a way that they *resonate*[24] with them. When this is the case, the exchange of validity claims is perceived as potentially making a difference to those raising and/or assessing them and, by implication, to the material and symbolic construction of their lifeworlds.

The socio-ontological significance of civic engagement notwithstanding, the tension between *public interests* and *private interests*[25] pervades all forms of life: 'individualist' or 'collectivist', 'complex' or 'simple', 'loose' or 'tight', 'vertical' or 'horizontal', 'freedom-based' or 'control-based', 'person-centred' or 'community-centred', 'relatively heterogeneous' or 'relatively homogeneous', 'technologically advanced' or 'technologically backward', and 'large-scale' or 'small-scale'.[26] In late-modern societies, the '*tension* between the functionally required level of *civic* commitment and the *private* commitments and interests that citizens both want to and need to fulfil'[27] is particularly pronounced. Crucially, this tension is expressed both *within* the private sphere and *within* the public sphere.

The ever-more far-reaching digitalization of public communication has significantly contributed to 'blurring *the perception* of this boundary between the private and public spheres of life'[28]. Both experientially and conceptually, it has become increasingly difficult for most citizens to separate these two spheres in a clear and unambiguous manner. To be sure, 'the social-structural prerequisites for this distinction'[29] continue to exist and manifest themselves in various (notably social, political, cultural, economic, and legal) dimensions. Yet, when assessed from 'the perspective of the semi-private, semi-public communication spaces in which users of social media are active today'[30], it is hard to ignore what may at least be *perceived* as the *blurring* of traditional boundaries. More worryingly, from Habermas's point of view, this trend has severely undermined 'the inclusive character of the public sphere'[31]. In his estimation, this development represents a 'disturbing phenomenon'[32] on the objective side of late-modern societies in general and 'on the subjective side of the users of the media'[33] in particular, indicating that more stringent levels of political regulation of technologically advanced (that is, digital) means of communication are required.

The Relationship between Capitalism and Democracy

Another central concern in Habermas's reflections on a further structural transformation of the political public sphere is the relationship between capitalism and democracy. Essential to this matter is the question of the probable or, rather, 'improbable conditions that must be fulfilled if a crisis-prone capitalist democracy is to remain stable'[34]. When examining the impairment, if not decline, of deliberative practices and structures oriented towards opinion- and will-formation, we need to analyse both 'the complex causes of the crisis tendencies of capitalist democracies'[35] and 'the digitalization of public communication'[36] (and, more broadly, of social processes across different realms of interaction).

With the global scope of these two challenges in mind, Habermas identifies three conditions for the possibility of active citizenship.

The first condition for the possibility of active citizenship is the presence of 'a largely *liberal political culture*'[37] permeating the behavioural, ideological, and institutional

[21] Habermas (2022b), pp. 152–153 (italics in original) (spelling modified).

[22] Ibid., p. 153 (italics in original).

[23] See Rorty (1982), Rorty (1991), Rorty (1998), and Rorty (2009 [1979]). Cf. Habermas (2000b).

[24] See Rosa (2019 [2016]) and Rosa (2022). See also Susen (2020b).

[25] On this point, see, for instance: Bailey (2000); Butt and Langdridge (2003); Condren (2009); Crouch (2016); Cutler (1997); Geuss (2001); Habermas (1962); Habermas (1989 [1962]); Marston (1995); Powell and Clemens (1998); Salmerón Castro (2002); Steinberger (1999); Susen (2011); Weintraub and Kumar (1997).

[26] See Triandis (1996), esp. pp. 408–409. (According to Triandis's typology, the following main 'cultural syndromes' can be identified: tightness, cultural complexity, active-passive, honour, collectivism, individualism, and vertical and horizontal relationships.) On this point, see also, for example: Susen (2007), pp. 63–64, 214, and 290; Susen (2010c), pp. 67–68 and 77–78; Susen (2012a), p. 309; Susen (2015a), p. 140; Susen (2016a), p. 72; Susen (2016b), pp. 132–133; Susen (2022a), p. 65.

[27] Habermas (2022b), p. 153 (italics added).

[28] Ibid., p. 153 (italics in original).

[29] Ibid., p. 153.

[30] Ibid., p. 153.

[31] Ibid., p. 153.

[32] Ibid., p. 153.

[33] Ibid., p. 153.

[34] Ibid., p. 146.

[35] Ibid., p. 153.

[36] Ibid., p. 153 (spelling modified).

[37] Ibid., p. 154 (italics in original).

modes of functioning prevalent in a given society. The key challenge with which we are faced in this context is captured in the following question: What are the conditions under which most, if not all, citizens can feel that they are fully fledged members of a (politically and ideologically) *pluralistic* and (culturally and ethnically) *diverse* society, thereby generating a sense of unity within a demographic and territorial framework of interactional complexity?[38] Such a liberal political culture can flourish only if it sets itself apart from the relevant majority culture, in a way that permits *all* citizens to recognize themselves as vital contributors to the construction of society.

The second condition for the possibility of active citizenship is a considerable and stable 'level of *social equality*'[39]. Most, if not all, members of the electorate should be able to participate in democratic procedures, in such a way that they can experience processes of opinion- and will-formation in a resonant and empowering, rather than alienating and disempowering, fashion. 'The close correlation between social status and voter turnout has been widely documented'[40]: the more stable and resourceful the sociological variables associated with the former, the more dynamic and extensive the activities associated with the latter. By contrast, a vicious circle is set in motion when large parts of the population express their 'resignation over the lack of perceptible improvements in living conditions'[41], leading, in the best-case scenario, to abstentionism (especially among socially deprived groups) or, in the worst-case scenario, to the rise of populist, if not authoritarian and totalitarian, movements (across society).

The third condition for the possibility of active citizenship is the '*balancing of the conflicting functional imperatives by the welfare state*'[42], notably in terms of 'the precarious relationship between the *democratic state* and a *capitalist economy*'[43]. Unless it is carefully regulated, this relationship tends to exacerbate structural inequalities between social groups. In this sense, democracy is a constant balancing act, made more difficult by the systemic forces dominant in a capitalist economy. It is no coincidence that, in his groundbreaking study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*[44], Habermas defends the perspective of political economy. This approach casts light on the intimate link between the political system, society, and the economy.[45]

During the Cold War, marked by the 'systemic competition' [*Systemkonkurrenz*] between capitalism and socialism, the former greatly outperformed the latter in almost every aspect of advanced technologies.[46] Far from functioning as a free-market system, however, 'self-perpetuating capitalist modernization generates a need for state regulation to curb the centrifugal forces of social disintegration'[47]. Without the steering capacity of the state, it would have been remarkably difficult, if not impossible, to prevent capitalism from collapsing, given its inherent contradictions, which manifest themselves in its cyclical and structural crises. The disintegration of state socialism, epitomized in the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, marks the beginning of an era in which capitalism is commonly portrayed as the triumphant economic system—and liberalism is widely regarded as the victorious political ideology—across the world. And yet, even following the implementation of neoliberal agendas in large parts of 'the West' in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, most governments continue to be confronted with two conflicting demands:

- On the one hand, their task is to guarantee the presence of social, political, and legal conditions that allow for the *valorization of capital*, thereby generating lucrative tax revenues.
- On the other hand, their task is to meet basic normative demands, founded on principles of *social and political justice*, by 'securing the legal and material preconditions of the private and public autonomy of every citizen'[48], thereby gaining approval and benefitting from viable degrees of democratic legitimacy.

Liberal-capitalist democracies require high degrees of steering capacity to be able to respond, and to (re)adjust, to crisis scenarios resulting from the tension between these two imperatives.

Aware of the difficulties arising from any attempt at identifying 'the framework conditions for the functioning of national public spheres'[49], Habermas emphasizes the numerous challenges faced by actors engaging—or seeking to engage—in deliberative processes oriented towards democratic modes of opinion- and will-formation in late-modern societies: neoliberalism; individualism; authoritarianism; populism; abstentionism; political apathy [*Politikverdrossenheit*]; privatist trends towards depoliticization; sensationalism; global migration flows; high levels of social inequality; major forms of crisis (social, political, environmental,

[38] Cf. Forst (2013 [2003]). Cf. also Susen (2010a).

[39] Habermas (2022b), p. 154 (italics in original).

[40] Ibid., p. 155.

[41] Ibid., p. 155.

[42] Ibid., p. 155 (italics added).

[43] Ibid., p. 155 (italics in original).

[44] Habermas (1989 [1962]). See also Habermas (1962).

[45] On this point, see also Habermas (2022a) and Staab and Thiel (2022).

[46] On this point, see Susen (2020c), pp. 753–754.

[47] Habermas (2022b), p. 155 (spelling modified).

[48] Ibid., p. 155.

[49] Ibid., p. 156.

military, etc.); unprecedented dynamics of social acceleration; and rising degrees of existential insecurity, anxiety, and depression.[50]

According to Habermas, what is needed in light of these challenges is *more, rather than less, European integration*.[51] This pro-European (and, arguably, pan-European) vision is predicated on the assumption that only 'a more pronounced *opening* of the national public spheres *to each other*'[52] will make it possible to face up to 'the big problems' in a mature, effective, and internationally co-ordinated manner. Striving for deeper intracontinental integration, the member states of the European Union will—paradoxically—be able to regain the *competences* they appear to have lost at the *national* level 'by creating new political capacities for action at the *transnational* level'[53]. Habermas is sufficiently realistic, however, to recognize that 'international asymmetries of power'[54] continue to exist and, in fact, may have been further consolidated in recent decades.[55] The question that arises, then, is whether the digitalization of the public sphere has been a positive or a negative trend (or, on balance, a contradictory process marked by both positive and negative aspects).

The Relationship between the Public Sphere and the Digital Media

Processes of digitalization have fundamentally transformed the media and, by implication, contemporary public spheres—in terms of both their structures and their practices. The technological advances associated with the digitalization of communication have significantly contributed not only to the blurring of traditional boundaries but also to the fragmentation of the public sphere. In this respect, a noticeable trend is *the 'platformization' of the public sphere*[56]: the platform-based constitution of the new media manifests itself in the emergence of communicative realms capable of bypassing traditional editorial and professionalized gatekeeping practices and structures, by permitting readers, listeners, and viewers to take on the role of authors. In brief, 'platformization' and 'authorization' are two co-constitute processes transforming the media and the public sphere.[57]

One of the most important functions of a healthy media system is to generate a discursive realm of '*competing public opinions* that satisfy the standards of deliberative politics'[58]. In order for public opinions to have any currency, political actors, lobbyists, and representatives of PR agencies need to be '*sufficiently responsive* to *discover* the problems in need of regulation'[59]. Otherwise, they will not be able to address, let alone to resolve, them. Democratic arrangements that are embedded in technologically advanced and large-scale societies depend on the incessant interaction between two spheres: on the one hand, actors build civil society[60] through '*face-to-face encounters in everyday life* and in *public events*'[61], which constitute '*the two local regions of the public sphere*'[62], without which communicatively sustained and deliberatively oriented bottom-up dynamics would be inconceivable; on the other hand, actors rely on 'the *public communication* steered by *mass media*'[63], which is instrumental in compressing and structuring the multiplicity of opinions, agendas, and interests competing with each other in society.

A key challenge, therefore, consists in examining the extent to which digitalization has transformed, and continues to transform, the media system, including its capacity to steer processes of mass communication. Even in media systems that are technically, organizationally, and structurally highly complex (and, hence, appear to have brought about a new era of communication), traditional modes of professionalization, gatekeeping, filtering, fact-checking, and editing remain in place. These elements, which belong to the '*infrastructure*'[64] of modern public spheres, set the parameters for communication, above all with regard to its *scope* and its deliberative *quality*, both of which have been profoundly influenced by digitalization processes.[65] Irrespective of the question of whether the impact of digitalization has been largely positive or negative (or mixed), 'the signs of political regression are there for everyone to see'[66], posing important questions about the normative constitution of the public sphere, especially in relation to socially entrenched mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion.

Three successive revolutions in communications technology have led to far-reaching societal transformations of

[50] See ibid., p. 156.

[51] Cf. Habermas (1999), Habermas (2001 [1998]), Habermas (2003), Habermas (2012 [2011]), and Habermas and Assheuer (2016).

[52] Habermas (2022b), p. 156 (italics in original).

[53] Ibid., p. 156 (italics added). On this point, see also Habermas (2012 [2011]).

[54] Habermas (2022b), p. 156.

[55] Cf. Zürn (2021).

[56] Cf. Beyes (2022) and Törnberg (2023).

[57] See Habermas (2022b), pp. 146 and 157–160.

[58] Ibid., p. 157 (italics in original).

[59] Ibid., p. 157 (italics in original).

[60] See Cohen and Arato (1992). See also Susen (2021).

[61] Habermas (2022b), p. 157 (italics in original).

[62] Ibid., p. 157 (italics in original).

[63] Ibid., p. 157 (italics in original).

[64] Ibid., p. 157 (italics in original).

[65] See ibid., p. 157.

[66] Ibid., p. 157.

historic significance: *writing*, *printing*, and *digitalization*. Even if one concedes that it is far from straightforward to operationalize the deliberative quality of procedurally regulated opinion- and will-formation at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels of society[67], it is hard to overstate the revolutionary character of the new (that is, digital and social) media over the past decades—not only in terms of their rapid expansion but also in terms of their game-changing role, expressed in their power to transform the nature of communication.

In each of the aforementioned revolutions in communications technology, there is a process of *detachment* at work: first, from speaking to writing (detached from the spoken word); second, from writing to printing (detached from handwritten parchment); and, third, from printing to both digitization and digitalization (detached from printed paper). In the 'information age'[68], the global 'network society'[69] is marked by a curious time–space compression[70], meaning that—in principle—anyone, anywhere in the world, can communicate with anyone, anywhere else in the world.[71]

The symbolic revolution—that is, the emergence of a symbolically (and, at a later stage, linguistically) mediated relationship to the world and, along with it, the efflorescence of artistic, musical, and ritualized expression—can be regarded as a major evolutionary leap in the history of our species. In each of the successive revolutions in communications technology—writing, printing, and digitalization—the power of this 'symbolic explosion' has been taken to a new level, culminating in the establishment of the World Wide Web (WWW). One of the most noteworthy features of these groundbreaking developments is the fact that they have enabled us, as members of the same species, to overcome 'the original limitation of linguistic communication to face-to-face oral conversations and exchanges within hearing range'[72].

It is hard to overstate the extent to which these transformations in communications technology represent a complex affair. First, they have opened up numerous valuable (social, political, economic, epistemic, scientific, moral, and civilizational) advances. Second, they have generated modes of interaction that, owing to their systemic constitution, transcend the intersubjectively mobilized resources derived from the lifeworld and mobilized in face-to-face encounters. Third, they have led to processes of digitalization, which have had a substantial impact upon the constitution of the public sphere: 'the centrifugal expansion of simultaneously accelerated communication to an arbitrary number of participants across arbitrary distances generates an ambivalent explosive force'[73], capable of going beyond national boundaries and thereby contributing to the rise of a global, albeit profoundly fragmented, public sphere.

Through worldwide digitalization, opportunities for communication across local, national, regional, and continental boundaries are both expanding and accelerating. Consequently, an increasing amount of facts and events is being reported, interpreted, and commented on—not only in the traditional media (such as the press, radio, and television) but also in the new (notably digital and social) media—giving the impression that the world has shrunk on our screens.

Processes of 'platformization' illustrate what is 'novel' about the new media and, by implication, about the public sphere in the first half of the twenty-first century. In this platform-based environment, the interventionist function of journalistic editing, mediation, and programme management is largely absent. Moreover, all (potential or actual) users are *empowered*, in the sense that they are given the opportunity to take on the role of 'independent and equally entitled authors'[74]. The digital companies that make this possible by providing the technological infrastructure for these platforms are fundamentally different from traditional news services and publishers in that they are *not* accountable for the material made available via their digital channels. More specifically, they are *not* responsible for producing, managing, editing, filtering, or selecting this material, thereby rendering both the form and the content of what is being publicly communicated virtually unpredictable and uncontrollable. Insofar as they act 'in the global network as intermediaries "without responsibility"'[75], allowing for the accelerated creation of unexpected connections and contacts, they convert public communication into a discursive realm marked by a significant number of (potentially serious) unintended consequences.

Broadly speaking, the traditional media and the new media can be distinguished in terms of the following dichotomies: asymmetrical *vs.* symmetrical, vertical *vs.* horizontal, regulated *vs.* unregulated, edited *vs.* unedited,

[67] On this point, see Steiner et al. (2004). See also Steiner (2012). In addition, see Cooke (2000) and Susen (2018b).

[68] See Castells (1996), Castells (1997), and Castells (1998). See also Webster (2005).

[69] See Castells (1996). See also Hassan and Purser (2007).

[70] On this point, see, for example: Giddens (1990); Giddens (1991); Giddens (1995 [1981]); Giddens (2002 [1999]); Harvey (1989); Kyung-Sup (2010); Massey (1993); May and Thrift (2001); Robertson (1995); Urry (1985); Warf (2008).

[71] See Habermas (2022b), p. 158.

[72] Ibid., p. 158.

[73] Ibid., p. 158.

[74] Ibid., p. 159.

[75] Ibid., p. 159.

filtered *vs.* unfiltered, top-down *vs.* bottom-up, one-way *vs.* reciprocal, planned *vs.* spontaneous, state-controlled *vs.* grassroots, centralized *vs.* decentralized, professionalized *vs.* non-professionalized, expert-driven *vs.* layperson-based—to mention only a few. In the traditional media, there is a dividing line between two clearly demarcated roles: on the one hand, the 'giving' role of producers, editors, and authors, who are responsible for their outputs and publications; on the other hand, the 'receiving' role of the anonymous audience of readers, listeners, and viewers, who consume (and, ideally, reflect upon) these outputs and publications.[76] By contrast, in the digital landscape dominated by the new media, one finds innumerable communicative connections between a large amount of users, who encounter each other, at least in principle, on an equal footing as autonomous, creative, proactive, and contributing participants.

The emancipatory potential inherent in the socially relevant resources of the new media notwithstanding, the emergence of a multiplicity of echo chambers poses a significant normative challenge. The dream of limitless, horizontal, inclusive, and universally empowering global communication—based on rational discourse, perspective-taking, and the fruitful exchange of diverging arguments and points of view—tends to be overshadowed by the reality of tribalist fragmentation, impulse-driven trivialization, and intra-group consolidation.

Thus, the new media environment is marked by deep *ambivalence*, with far-reaching repercussions for the constitution of the public sphere: on the one hand, the new media appear to give us the chance to put into practice 'the *egalitarian-universalistic* claim of the bourgeois public sphere to include all citizens equally'[77]; on the other hand, the new media have generated more and more *echo chambers*, exacerbating their influence behind 'the libertarian grimace of world-dominating digital corporations'[78]. What is required, then, is a long and thorough collective learning process:

> Just as printing made everyone a potential reader, today digitalization is making everyone into a potential author. But how long did it take until everyone was able to read?[79]

How long will it take until everyone is able to be an informed, thoughtful, and responsible author? Just as the role of the reader has to be learnt, mastering the role of the author requires training. This type of role acquisition is not something that happens overnight.

[76] See ibid., p. 159.

[77] Ibid., p. 159 (italics added).

[78] Ibid., p. 160.

[79] Ibid., p. 160 (spelling modified).

The Relationship between the Traditional Media and the New Media

The growing influence of the new media has been researched and documented in numerous studies.[80] When examining the role of the traditional media in the early twenty-first century, we are confronted with a mixed picture. Whereas television and radio, far from having disappeared, have managed to defend their position in the digital media landscape, the consumption of printed newspapers and magazines has been dramatically curtailed and reached remarkably low levels.[81] It is ironic, of course, that the Internet has been able to absorb large parts of the traditional media by making newspapers, television, and radio available online, thereby giving consumers the possibility to access an unprecedented volume of sources from different political, ideological, cultural, national, and linguistic perspectives.

This trend, however, is not entirely positive and empowering. To the extent that more and more citizens gain access to information about, interpretations of, and commentaries on facts and happenings on their smart phones, their attention span is compromised. Consequently, they are less likely to be willing to read, let alone to analyse, dense texts and to grapple with complex ideas in a sustained and critical manner. Nowhere is the impact of this decline of reading culture, along with the expanding power of the audio-visual media, felt more acutely than in twenty-first-century educational institutions, especially schools and universities.

There is another worrying trend worth mentioning: 'the increasing infiltration of the public sphere by fake news'[82], epitomized in the emergence of a 'post-truth democracy'[83], in which standards of validity are ever more elastic, if not arbitrary. In this precarious historical setting, both the cognitive foundations of truth and the normative foundations of democracy appear to have been undermined—not only by different (epistemic, cultural, and moral) forms of relativism but also by a turn towards populism (and, in some cases, authoritarianism), leaving little, if any, room for the construction of well-functioning, inclusive, and deliberative political systems.

The weakened position of the print media, accelerated by the global spread of audio-visual technologies, is reflected not only in deteriorating levels of aspiration of the offerings but also in an arguably even more disturbing

[80] See, for instance: Bastos (2021); Bennett and Pfetsch (2018); Boltanski and Esquerre (2022); Flew (2014 [2002]); Gane and Beer (2008); Jordheim and Ytreberg (2021); Käll (2019); Kaun (2017); Lister et al.(2009 [2003]); Lou and Yuan (2019); Rosa (2022); Sevignani (2022); Staab and Thiel (2022); Susen (2023b); Williams (2020).

[81] See Habermas (2022b), pp. 146 and 160–162.

[82] Ibid., p. 162.

[83] Ibid., p. 162.

trend: 'the citizens' receptiveness and intellectual processing of politically relevant news and problems are on the decline'[84]. This direction of travel is illustrated in the trivialization of news coverage, often presented in 'colourful' formats and leading to the rise of an 'infotainment'[85] culture. The prevalent tendency 'to use digital platforms to retreat into shielded echo chambers of the like-minded'[86] without testing one's views, arguments, and opinions in a genuinely pluralistic arena of a broad diversity of voices is intensified by the power of algorithms to influence people's perception of, and to define the boundaries of their engagement with, reality.

Well-established and high-quality newspapers and magazines continue to serve as the leading sources of information and interpretation upon which other media—that is, both the traditional media (notably television and radio) and the new media (notably digital platforms)—draw. Their enduring influence permits large parts of the media to take substantiated and authoritative positions on key issues of the past, present, and foreseeable future. On the supply side, the contemporary public sphere is marked by a diversity of both traditional and new media, implying that, at least in principle, there is a multitude of 'opinions, arguments, and perspectives on life'[87], giving citizens the opportunity to test their beliefs, assumptions, and convictions against those put forward by others. This process makes it more likely that, guided by the cognitive resources of critical capacity[88], they call into question their own preconceptions and prejudices.

In short, we are confronted with a curious paradox: on the one hand, digital platforms contribute to the construction of '*islands of communication*'[89], which are equivalent to 'autopoietic systems'[90], through which users 'generate intersubjectively confirmed worlds of their own'[91]; on the other hand, digital platforms appear to attribute 'the *epistemic status of competing public spheres*'[92] to the internal logic by which interconnected realms of communication are governed. Fragmentation and competition are two constitutive components at the heart of the platformization of the public sphere.

The Relationship between Commercial Exploitation and Internet Communication

The rise of the new media involves significant challenges, not least because of the degree to which unregulated forms of communication taking place on the Internet can be commercially exploited.[93] On the one hand, this process poses a serious *threat to the economic viability of the traditional media*, especially newspaper publishers and the profession of journalism. On the other hand, 'semi-public, fragmented, and self-enclosed communication seems to be spreading among exclusive users of social media that is distorting their *perception of the political public sphere* as such'[94]. This novel historical constellation has profound implications for processes of opinion- and will-formation in societies whose public spheres are increasingly dominated by the new media, including digital platforms.

Whether one considers Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, or Twitter (now X), all of these algorithm-steered platforms exert a substantial degree of influence on their users and beyond, reinforced by their capacity to make enormous profits from gathering, commodifying, and selling data, not to mention the revenues obtained from advertising.[95] Value creation in the digital age is embedded in a new economic system, commonly referred to as 'surveillance capitalism'[96]. In this system, information is converted into a digital commodity, which is not only commercially exploitable but also sociologically powerful: algorithms can be used to manipulate—if not, to colonize—people's attitudinal and behavioural modes of functioning, 'nudging' them in a certain direction by re-biasing their largely unconscious preferences and inclinations.[97] Far from being a merely systemic matter, this 'algorithm-controlled path'[98] has significantly contributed to the digitalized 'commodification of lifeworld contexts'[99] and, therefore, to the colonization of people's everyday relationship to the world by technological devices and economic imperatives.

When seeking to examine the constitution of contemporary public spheres, a key challenge consists in accounting for 'the pressure to adapt that the exploitation logic of the new media exerts on the old media'[100]. Texts and programmes published in the traditional media tend to be

[84] Ibid., p. 162.

[85] See Susen (2015a), p. 227. See also, for instance: Brants (1998); Davis et al. (2020); Thussu (2007).

[86] Habermas (2022b), p. 162.

[87] Ibid., p. 162 (punctuation modified).

[88] On this point, see, for instance: Boltanski (2011 [2009]); Boltanski and Thévenot (1999); Boltanski and Thévenot (2006 [1991]); Susen (2012b); Susen and Turner (2014). Cf. Susen (2010b).

[89] Habermas (2022b), p. 162 (italics added).

[90] See, for instance: Fischer-Lescano (2012); Habermas (1987 [1985]); Luhmann (1995 [1984]); Luhmann (2002); Mingers (2002).

[91] Habermas (2022b), p. 162.

[92] Ibid., p. 162 (italics in original).

[93] See ibid., pp. 163–168.

[94] Ibid., p. 146 (italics in original) (punctuation modified).

[95] See ibid., p. 163.

[96] See Zuboff (2019). Cf. Fuchs (2021).

[97] On this point, see Gane (2021). See also Susen (2023b), esp. section VIII.

[98] Habermas (2022b), p. 163.

[99] Ibid., p. 163.

[100] Ibid., p. 163.

subject to more or less stringent cognitive, normative, and aesthetic standards, which need to be met in order for these outlets to serve a democratizing function. In 'digital societies'[101], citizens are exposed to 24/7 modes of news production and circulation, implying that the conditions for evidence-based and discursively constituted opinion- and will-formation are far more dynamic than in previous historical periods.

Processes of newsmaking [*processus de mise en actualité*][102] are inconceivable without the constantly redefined relationship between facts and occurrences, on the one hand, and selections and interpretations, on the other. As part of this dynamic, 'the media constantly confirm, correct, and supplement the blurred everyday image of *a world that is presumed to be objective*'[103]. And yet, while '*all contemporaries*'[104] may agree that there is a world 'out there', they tend to disagree on how facts and occurrences in this world should, or should not, be selected and interpreted.

In any case, the 'platformization of the public sphere'[105] has significantly weakened the position of the traditional media, including the role of journalists and their professional standards. This shift, far from being merely symbolic, has tangible consequences—not least because 'the decline in demand for printed newspapers and magazines'[106] has exposed the fragile economic foundations of the press in an increasingly digitalized media environment: less circulation means less advertising and, hence, less revenue.

Owing to the narrow systemic logic prevalent in the 'attention economy'[107], citizens are effectively reduced to consumers. Moreover, given its weakened position and need to reinvent itself in a media environment that seems hostile to traditional ways of doing things, the press finds itself in the tricky position of having to adapt 'to the commercial services of platforms that are vying for the attention of *consumers*'[108], instead of focusing on its hitherto most important task, which consists in fostering 'the discursive formation of public opinions and political will by the *citizens*'[109]. Granted, the trend towards 'infotainment'[110] is hardly new, as reflected in the colourful history of tabloids and the mass press, whose commercial success depends on the trivialization, personalization, and derationalization of political issues. The normalization of the systemic imperatives underlying the 'attention economy'[111], however, extends, at least partly, into the sphere of conventional newspapers, not to mention the degree to which the new media benefit from and contribute to this development.

Since many digital platforms tend to compel their users to produce relatively concise, if not 'catchy', messages, their mode of communication is likely to 'influence the *perception of the political public sphere as such*'[112]—a process that, of course, may involve forms of misperception. There is, however, another dimension that is potentially problematic in this respect: digital platforms provide their users with incentives for indulging in 'narcissistic self-presentation and the "staging of singularity"'[113]. In this regard, one may draw a distinction between *individualization* and *singularization*: the former refers to the sense of *distinctiveness* and *uniqueness* that individuals acquire by attributing particular meanings to their lives, not only in terms of their personality traits but also in relation to specific milestones[114]; the latter designates 'the *visibility* and *gain in distinction*'[115] that individuals can attain by posting and boasting about themselves on the Internet, publicly celebrating their strengths and accomplishments. The 'promise of singularization' lurks behind the online activities of influencers whose success depends on their ability to tout for their followers' approval.

Modern societies are marked by several noteworthy tensions, such as the following: private *vs.* public, individual *vs.* collective, customer *vs.* citizen, self-interest *vs.* common good—to mention only a few. This means that, when making decisions (political, cultural, economic, or otherwise), actors are confronted with various tensions, notably the one between their *self-interest* (at the individual level) and their interest in serving the *common good* (at the collective level). Crucially, these tensions are 'played out in the space of a political public sphere'[116], in which, in principle, every citizen is a member of a potential audience. Insofar as 'public streams of communication flow through editorial sluices'[117], they are—by definition—separate from private (including business-driven) channels.

[101] See, for instance: Fuchs (2022a); Housley et al. (2022); Lindgren (2021 [2017]); Perriam and Carter (2021); Schwarz (2021).

[102] See Boltanski and Esquerre (2022). See also Susen (2023b).

[103] Habermas (2022b), p. 163 (italics in original) (punctuation modified).

[104] Ibid., p. 163 (italics in original).

[105] See Jarren and Fischer (2021).

[106] Habermas (2022b), p. 163.

[107] Ibid., p. 164. On the 'attention economy', see, for example: Celis Bueno (2017); Davenport and Beck (2001); Nelson-Field (2020).

[108] Habermas (2022b), p. 164 (italics in original).

[109] Ibid., p. 164 (italics in original).

[110] See Susen (2015a), p. 227. See also, for instance: Brants (1998); Davis et al. (2020); Thussu (2007).

[111] Habermas (2022b), p. 164.

[112] Ibid., p. 164 (italics in original).

[113] Ibid., p. 164. On this point, see also Reckwitz (2020 [2017]) and Reckwitz (2022). In addition, see, for instance: Baert (2022); Carleheden et al. (2022); Gümüsay (2018); Harrington (2021); Staab and Thiel (2022); Susen (2023a).

[114] See Baert et al. (2022a, b). See also, for instance, Susen (2022a).

[115] Habermas (2022b), p. 164 (italics added).

[116] Ibid., p. 165.

[117] Ibid., p. 165.

One may find many examples to illustrate the various differences between public and private 'spaces'. The spatial metaphor on which this distinction is based, however, should be treated with caution, since 'the decisive factor is the perception of the *threshold* (itself politically contested) between private matters and public issues that are discussed in the political public sphere'[118]. Different individual and collective actors (including social movements, capable of creating counterpublics) will have different perceptions of the boundaries between public and private realms. Ironically, the debates and controversies about demarcation criteria are themselves an essential part of the construction of the public sphere (and its separation from the private sphere). Engagement in these disputes focuses people's minds by blurring the boundaries between individual and collective consciousness: public spheres whose constitution is relatively solidified have the capacity 'to direct the attention of *all* citizens to the *same* topics in order to both stimulate and enable each of them to make their *own* judgements'[119] about key issues and about decision-making processes.

A significant consequence of the widespread use of social media across the world is 'a change in the *perception of the public sphere* that has blurred the distinction between "public" and "private"'[120] in a way that makes it hard to separate these two realms from each other. Thus, it becomes far less obvious how to attribute progressive meanings—such as 'inclusivity', 'accessibility', 'visibility', 'transparency', 'openness', and 'collectiveness'[121]—to the public sphere. It is no accident that, in communication studies, it has become common to argue that traditional perceptions of politics in general and the political public sphere in particular have been severely undermined,[122] suggesting that the generalization of interests, pursued by *all* citizens and articulated in a *shared* space of communication, has become more and more challenging. In brief, we are confronted with *the privatization of the public sphere*—that is, with *the colonization of the public sphere by private interests*.

In a largely *digitalized* 'plebiscitary "public sphere"'[123], communicative processes appear to have been 'stripped down to "like" and "dislike" clicks'[124]. In this virtual environment, which is marked not only by 'a peculiar anonymous intimacy'[125] but also by relatively undifferentiated and unnuanced modes of communication, the boundaries between 'public' and 'private' are increasingly blurred. It appears, then, that we have been witnessing the rise of a 'semi-public sphere' (or 'unstructured public sphere')[126], in which *users* have been elevated to *authors* and in which communicative energy revolves around readers' comments and the 'likes' of their followers (and 'dislikes' of their detractors). One of the main dangers is the formation of echo chambers and bubbles, in which actors are not required to 'test' their views, values, and assumptions by engaging with a diversity of voices and perspectives.

In the context of modernity, the public sphere is a vibrant, inclusive, and heterogeneous realm of divergent viewpoints and opinions. In the context of late modernity, the public sphere is marked by the ubiquity of digital echo chambers, fostering the exclusion of dissonant (and, by implication, the inclusion of consonant) voices. The result is the rise of 'a *semi-public sphere*'[127] (or, indeed, of 'a *semi-privatized sphere*'[128]), in which the 'testing' of validity claims remains limited to an exchange of propositions and convictions between like-minded people.

It is ironic, to say the least, that 'fake news' may be spread by those who, at the same time, purport to combat the 'lying press'[129] and to challenge the dogmas of 'the mainstream', 'the establishment', or 'the experts'. In the 'post-truth' era, the political economy of knowledge appears to be little more than a 'power game'.[130] The revival of populist and authoritarian regimes across the world is exacerbated by the echo chambers of social and digital media, indicating that a profound sense of existential uncertainty, if not insecurity, is experienced by more and more people across the world.[131] Numerous recent developments appear to confirm the significance of this trend, notably in 'the West': the election of Donald J. Trump as the forty-fifth President of the United States of America in 2016; the Brexit referendum in 2016; the election of Viktor Orbán as Prime Minister of Hungary in 1998 and 2010; and, last but not least, the demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions and vaccinations after the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020—among many other events.

Put in Habermasian terms, a political public sphere in which validity claims are not fully and openly criticizable fails to do justice to its name. When communicatively constituted contents—such as knowledge, insights, views, and opinions—can 'no longer be exchanged in the currency of

[118] Ibid., p. 165 (italics in original).

[119] Ibid., p. 165 (italics in original).

[120] Ibid., p. 165 (italics in original).

[121] See Susen (2011), esp. pp. 38–42.

[122] See, for example, Bennett and Pfetsch (2018).

[123] Habermas (2022b), p. 166.

[124] Ibid., p. 166.

[125] Ibid., p. 166.

[126] See ibid., p. 166.

[127] Ibid., p. 166 (italics in original). See also ibid., pp. 167 and 169*n*20.

[128] See ibid., p. 169*n*20. See also Staab and Thiel (2022), esp. p. 130.

[129] See, for instance, Hohlfeld et al. (2020). See also Jaster and Lanius (2020).

[130] See Fuller (2017b).

[131] Boltanski and Esquerre (2022), pp. 17, 264, and 268–270. See also Susen (2023b), esp. sections IV, V, VII, and VIII.

criticizable validity claims'[132], there is a serious danger that the spread of fake news takes on unprecedented proportions and, which is an even greater problem, that '*fake news* can no longer even be identified as such'[133]. Such a scenario may involve not only the (at least partial and temporary) *disintegration* of the political public sphere but also the 'widespread *deformation of the perception of the political public sphere*'[134].

'*[D]isrupted public spheres*'[135] are largely disconnected from journalistically institutionalized realms, prevalent in their traditional counterparts. Irrespective of one's assessment of the developments associated with these spheres, it would be erroneous to assume that their normative constitution can be separated from key concerns in democratic theory[136]—not least because communicative processes taking place in 'independent semi-public spheres'[137] are by no means depoliticized, let alone apolitical.[138] Democratic systems are profoundly dysfunctional if the communicative infrastructure of their respective public spheres lacks the capacity to inform citizens about central issues on which they have to make individual and collective decisions. Their regular exposure to, critical engagement with, and evidence-based testing of *competing* and *qualitatively filtered* narratives, views, and opinions are vital to the formation of vibrant, inclusive, and heterogeneous public spheres.

To be clear, 'crisis-prone capitalist democracies'[139] face numerous challenges. The digitalization of the public sphere is an important, but by no means the only, development undermining their traditional parameters. The gradual marketization of almost all spheres of society, reinforced by the predominance of neoliberal agendas[140] across a large number of countries across the world, is a curious twin-trend in a fast-changing global environment. The relationship between two major developments is crucial in this regard: on the one hand, the commercial use and promotion of digital networks, epitomized in the nearly limitless influence of Silicon Valley across local, national, and regional boundaries; on the other hand, the global hegemony of neoliberal regimes of governance, pushing through radical programmes of marketization, monetarization, commodification, privatization, denationalization, decentralization, deregulation, and 'flexbilization'.[141]

The 'globally expanded zone of free flows of communication'[142], which has emerged in recent decades through the World Wide Web (WWW), may be perceived—and, arguably, has presented itself—as 'the mirror image of an ideal market'[143]. Ironically, this 'market did not even need to be deregulated'[144]. Accelerating the digitalization of the micro-, meso-, and macro-realms of society, it has succeeded in shaping large parts of human existence in the most pervasive and transformative fashion imaginable. A curious paradox of this tendency consists in the fact that 'the algorithmic control of communication flows'[145]—far from being reducible to a product of deregulatory mechanisms, let alone to a matter of chance—is symptomatic of an *increase in regulatory control*. This type of control, however, is *not* associated with Keynesian models of state interventionism; rather, it is embedded in a new form of digital domination, commonly discussed in terms of 'surveillance capitalism'.[146] In brief, *market power and digital power are deeply intertwined*, as illustrated in the global and quasi-monopolistic influence of Internet corporations.[147]

The most effective competition laws will struggle to transform digital platforms in such a way that they function in accordance with the same stringent level of regulation and filtering of information as the traditional media, which have both a moral duty and a legal obligation to rectify any reports that turn out to be erroneous. By contrast, digital platforms operating in the new media environment 'do not want to assume liability for the dissemination of truth-sensitive, and hence deception-prone, communicative contents'[148]. Instead of reducing information to a digital commodity, modern public spheres need to do their bit in terms of providing social conditions under which processes of opinion- and will-formation can take place in accordance with rigorous procedural standards. If we

[132] Habermas (2022b), p. 167 (spelling modified).

[133] Ibid., p. 167 (italics in original). See also Hohlfeld (2020).

[134] Habermas (2022b), p. 167 (italics in original).

[135] Ibid., p. 167 (italics in original). See also, for example, Bennett and Pfetsch (2018).

[136] See Berg, Rakowski, and Thiel (2020).

[137] Habermas (2022b), p. 167.

[138] Cf. Boltanski and Esquerre (2022), p. 13. Cf. also Susen (2023b), esp. section II ('The Ontology of Contemporary Reality: Political or Politicizable?').

[139] Habermas (2022b), p. 167.

[140] See, for instance: Browne and Susen (2014); Chomsky (1999); Coles and Susen (2018); Davies (2014); DeMartino (2000); Gane (2012); Gane (2014); Harvey (1989), esp. pp. 292–296; Harvey (2005); Piketty (2013); Ritzer (2013 [1993]); Roy et al. (2007); Saad-Filho and Johnston (2004); Smith et al. (2008); Soederberg et al. (2005); Susen (2010a), pp. 260–262, 267, and 274; Susen (2012a), pp. 294, 303, and 307–308; Susen (2015a), pp. 124, 134, 185, 194, 195, 201, 257, and 273; Susen (2017), pp. 156, 169–170, and 178; Susen (2018a), pp. 8, 24–29, and 61–62; Touraine (2001 [1999]).

[141] See previous note.

[142] Habermas (2022b), p. 167.

[143] Ibid., p. 167.

[144] Ibid., p. 167.

[145] Ibid., p. 167.

[146] See Zuboff (2019).

[147] See Susen (2023b), esp. reflections on 'digital economies' (in section IX).

[148] Habermas (2022b), p. 167.

take this challenge seriously, we will be able to (re)build a public sphere in which deliberative processes—rather than being downgraded to a 'click culture' of 'likes' and 'dislikes'—are regarded and treated as 'a constitutional imperative'[149] and, thus, as a vital component of modern democracies.

Part II: Critical Reflections—With, against, and beyond Habermas

Constitutional Patriotism?

In the spirit of 'constitutional patriotism' [*Verfassungspatriotismus*][150], Habermas defends the view that '[i]t is not the philosophers, but *the large majority of the citizens* who *must be intuitively convinced of the constitutional principles*'[151] on which modern democracies are based. From a Habermasian perspective, such an approach is crucial to the construction of vibrant political public spheres, facilitating the emergence of communicatively mediated processes of opinion- and will-formation, performed by those directly or indirectly affected by the decisions made within the procedural boundaries of their polity. On this account, democratic engagement can be regarded as the most effective medicine against the rise of populist, authoritarian, and totalitarian movements.

Even if one broadly sympathizes with this interpretation, however, one needs to recognize that it is predicated on a questionable assumption: namely, that citizens 'must be intuitively convinced of the constitutional principles'[152]—not only to participate in deliberative procedures but also to be immune to the destruction of social, political, and legal arrangements that render democratic processes possible. Even in the most deliberative, innovative, and inclusive democracies that humanity has produced over the past millennia, it is hard to see how a sizeable proportion of citizens may have been intuitively, let alone rationally, convinced of constitutional principles. The large majority of actors have more concrete (that is, more practical and less abstract) things to worry about than the values, codes, and conventions derived from and protected by their state's constitution.

The Mass Media: Formative or Manipulative (or Both)?

Habermas insists on the '*enlightening quality* of the contribution of the mass media to this *formation* of opinion'[153]. Such a one-sided depiction, however, fails to account for the *distorting quality* of the contribution of the mass media to the *manipulation* of opinion. In fact, *both* the traditional media (notably the press, radio, and television) *and* the new (notably digital and social) media contribute to *both* the formation *and* the manipulation of views and attitudes as well as behaviours and practices. In technologically advanced societies, large parts of the population are directly or indirectly affected by the production, interpretation, and circulation of information emanating from both traditional and digital media outlets.

One need not be a Chomskyan to realize that at the heart of the political economy of the mass media lies its capacity to ensure that dominant social groups can instrumentalize the power of 'manufacturing consent'[154], with the aim of legitimizing and strengthening the status quo. The question that arises, therefore, is to what degree the political economy of the new media—its cultural, attitudinal, and ideological diversity notwithstanding—is *also* geared towards justifying and stabilizing, rather than questioning and subverting, the social order in place. Be that as it may, both traditional and new media are marked by a high level of *ambivalence*: on the one hand, *both* can play an educational, enlightening, and empowering role in terms of fostering the development of informed opinions; on the other hand, *both* can play a retrograde, misleading, and disempowering role in terms of contributing to the spread (and normalization) of views and attitudes based on 'misinformation', 'disinformation', and/or 'mal-information'.[155] Considering this ambivalence, the quasi-ubiquity of 'infotainment'[156] culture—regardless of whether it is interpreted as a civilizational achievement or a social pathology (or, paradoxically, a combination of progressive and regressive trends)—is reinforced by both traditional and new media.

Towards Pragmatic Fallibilism?

Habermas's theory of the public sphere is based on the *socio-teleological* assumption that 'political discourse

[149] Ibid., p. 168.

[150] Cf. Habermas (2019b), pp. 795–797. On the concept of 'constitutional patriotism' [*Verfassungspatriotismus*], see, for instance: Baumeister (2007); Calhoun (2002); Fossum (2001); Fraser (2009); Gosewinkel et al. (2021); Hedrick (2010); Huw Rees (2019); Ingram (1996); Lacroix (2002); Müller (2007); Müller (2008); Nanz (2006); Shabani (2006); Sternberger (1990).

[151] Habermas (2022b), p. 148 (italics added).

[152] Ibid., p. 148.

[153] Ibid., p. 151 (italics added).

[154] See Herman and Chomsky (2008 [1988]).

[155] See Susen (2023b), esp. section VI ('Interpretation: Between Suspicion and Recollection'). See also, for instance: Altay et al. (2023); Bergmann (2018); Druckman (2022); Miró-Llinares and Aguerri (2023); Rhodes-Purdy et al. (2023); Rubin (2023); Shu et al. (2020); Vinhas and Bastos (2022).

[156] See Susen (2015a), p. 227. See also, for instance: Brants (1998); Davis et al. (2020); Thussu (2007).

is also *oriented* to the *goal* of reaching an agreement'[157]. Habermas notes that this presupposition is often misunderstood and/or misrepresented, especially when it is portrayed as a form of communicative idealism, according to which social practices in general and democratic processes in particular are tantamount to rationally guided interactions taking place in 'a convivial university seminar'[158]. In opposition to such a socio-romanticist vision, which conceives of human lifeworlds as uncontaminated spheres of pristine intersubjectivity arising from universally altruistic and categorically agreeable members of humanity, Habermas is sufficiently *realistic* to recognize the 'fundamentally *agonal character*'[159] of political disputes, including those unfolding in the public sphere. Just as '[t]o argue is to contradict'[160], to co-exist is to rely on compromise. Both as individuals and as members of social groups, citizens undergo learning processes when arguing—and, in a more fundamental sense, co-existing—with each other.

In this respect, Habermas makes a persuasive case for what may be described as *pragmatic fallibilism*.[161] Socially interdependent subjects are capable of engaging in communicative action and rational discourse. To be exact, they are not only oriented towards reaching mutual understanding [*gegenseitiges Verstehen*]—by immersing themselves in processes of communication [*Verständigung*], aiming to make themselves understood [*sich verständlich machen*], and seeking intelligibility [*Verständlichkeit*]—but also oriented towards reaching different types of agreement [*Einverständnis*] about the objective, normative, and subjective dimensions of their existence, when raising—and, crucially, arguing over—truth claims, rightness claims, and truthfulness claims. Thus, they navigate the world by drawing on, mobilizing, testing, and—if necessary—*revising* their practical and theoretical, intuitive and reflective, and implicit and explicit forms of knowledge. Without this critical capacity, the construction of symbolically mediated, culturally codified, and epistemically motivated modes of existence would be inconceivable.

Through their pragmatic fallibilism, ordinary actors are *required* to rely on taken-for-granted knowledge *even if* its validity cannot be conclusively proven or justified, let alone be regarded as certain or infallible. And yet, owing to the taken-for-grantedness of their knowledge, sustained by the structure of prejudgements and prejudices [*Vorurteilsstruktur*] stemming from their language, they can function as *realists*. As such, they are capable not only of coping with the numerous challenges thrown at them by their environment (and, indeed, by their own bodies) but also of undergoing individual and collective learning processes. Different forms of progress (social, political, cultural, moral, economic, epistemic, scientific, and technological—in short, civilizational[162]) would not be possible without this pragmatic fallibilism, which is built into the human condition. Just as Habermas is enough of a (sociological) realist to concede this, every ordinary actor has to be enough of a (social) realist to navigate the world in a viable manner. Pragmatic fallibilism is a manifestation of the human capacity to evolve by getting things wrong and, if possible, by learning from one's mistakes.

Self-legislation or Representation?

Habermas posits that one of the main functions of a democratic constitution is to expound 'the plain will of the citizens to *obey only the laws they have given themselves*'[163]. This process is embedded in, and protected by, the legal and political framework of the state of law [*Rechtsstaat*]. One of the many problems with this approach, however, is that it appears to overlook the obvious, yet significant, fact that, under the umbrella of a democratic constitution serving as a foundation for a state of law, citizens are *also* expected to obey the laws they have *not* given themselves.

Within representative political systems, laws are designed (and, potentially, modified) by elected politicians, rather than by citizens themselves. In addition, citizens may feel represented by some, but not by other, politicians—especially if they did not vote for them and/or oppose their views and agendas. Finally, even when decisions are made on the basis of referenda, large parts of the population will be expected to obey the laws they have *not* given themselves, if the popular vote did not go their way. The Brexit referendum[164] is only one striking example: Remainers were (and still are) required to obey the laws brought about by the Leave vote.

In short, representative democracies, unlike their direct and deliberative counterparts, demand from their citizens that they obey the laws they have *not* given themselves. Pluralistic public spheres reflect the fact that representative democracies are based on *compromise*, including their citizens' agreement to disagree and to respect the laws whose implicit or explicit rationale they may find politically and/or morally unpersuasive, if not indefensible.

157 Habermas (2022b), p. 151 (italics in original).

158 Ibid., p. 151.

159 Ibid., p. 152 (italics in original).

160 Ibid., p. 152.

161 Cf. Brown (2018), Cooke (2006), and Frederick (2020).

162 Cf. Habermas (2019a) and Habermas (2019b).

163 Habermas (2022b), p. 152 (italics in original).

164 See, for example: Bhambra (2017); Calhoun (2016); Calhoun (2017); Crouch (2017); Delanty (2017); Fuller (2017a); Habermas and Assheuer (2016); Inglis (2021); Outhwaite (2017a); Outhwaite (2017b); Reid (2016); Susen (2017).

Towards a Typology of Interests?

Throughout his analysis, Habermas draws attention to the tension between *public interests* and *private interests*. To be sure, Habermas has been grappling with the concept of 'interest', notably in relation to the constitution of 'human interests', for several decades.[165] If, however, one goes down a posthumanist and/or postanthropocentric path[166], one may argue that 'human interests', as 'universal' as they may seem, are actually 'particular' in nature, given that they *exclude* all non-human entities. This raises the more important question of the *scope* of the interests one has in mind. In fact, this reflection may require us to develop a more differentiated typology of interests, along the following lines: *individual interests*, *communitarian interests*, *societal interests*, *global interests*, *human interests*, *non-human interests*, *planetary and environmental interests*, and *vitalist-universalist interests*.[167]

The world—or even, in a broader sense, the universe (or multiverse)—is a place of multiple *competing* interests. The aforementioned interests, for instance, cannot always be reconciled with each other, precisely because the *realization* of one interest may involve the *violation* and/or the *suppression* of another interest. We may pursue interests as individuals, as members of a group, as members of a society, as members of a global community, as members of humanity, as inhabitants of the planet and the environment, and/or as living beings. Different actors may pursue these (and other) interests in different ways and in different orders of priority. Just as we may experience *intra*-existential conflicts of interest (when our own range of interests is marked by tensions, frictions, and contradictions), we may experience *inter*-existential conflicts of interest (when our own interests clash with those of others). Non-human agents may have, and/or pursue, interests that compete or clash with those we have, and/or pursue, regardless of whether we do so as individual or collective actors.

Questioning the underlying *anthropocentrism* of Habermas's account, one may legitimately ask whether the three knowledge-constitutive interests he identifies may also be pursued by non-human agents. More specifically, it may be the case that—although, admittedly, at varying levels of complexity—other living creatures (including bacteria and viruses) and other non-living agents (such as computers and action systems based on artificial intelligence) may also pursue a *technical* cognitive interest in control, a *practical* cognitive interest in communication, and perhaps even an *emancipatory* cognitive interest in autonomy. In short, it is imperative to provide a *differentiated and non-anthropocentric typology of interests*.

The Ambivalent Constitution of the Media?

In his account, Habermas portrays the new media in a largely negative light. In this context, he stresses the extent to which 'platformization' and 'authorization' are two co-constitute processes that have transformed the media and the public sphere in a detrimental way, hindering the possibility of nuanced, well-informed, and evidence-based debate and controversy.[168] Regular exposure to, critical engagement with, and evidence-based testing of *competing* and *qualitatively filtered* narratives, views, and opinions are vital to the formation of vibrant, inclusive, and heterogeneous public spheres. Without communicatively sustained and discursively refined processes of opinion- and will-formation, political systems lack the capacity to build democratic institutions through everyday practices of deliberation.

Habermas is right to be wary of the far-reaching influence of echo chambers, which—owing to their self-enclosed, self-referential, and self-righteous nature—pose a significant normative challenge to modern societies in general and the social sciences in particular. Such a diagnostic view, however, should not prevent us from acknowledging the deeply *ambivalent constitution*[169] of the media, both traditional and new. In fact, *for many actors, the new media are not less but more inclusive, empowering, horizontal, discursive, and dynamic than their traditional counterparts*. Obvious examples are social groups whose members (due to their class, 'race', ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, [dis]ability, etc.) experience both agential and structural forms of discrimination, exploitation, and/or marginalization on a daily basis. For many of them, access to, engagement with, and participation in social and digital media may be regarded as a godsend, permitting them to establish meaningful connections with other members of their respective communities and, thus, to build a sense of belonging and identity through networks of solidarity and reciprocity. Both traditional and new media are marked by a combination of positive and negative aspects, both from the third-person perspective of those who study them and from the first-person perspective of those who produce and/or make use of them.

165 See Habermas (1968) and Habermas (1987 [1968]).

166 See, for example: Braidotti (2013); Braidotti (2019a); Braidotti (2019b); Braidotti and Fuller (2019). Cf. Susen (2022b).

167 For a tentative outline of a typology of interests, see, for example, Susen (2016b), pp. 130–131, and Susen (2020c), pp. 755–756. See also, for instance: Habermas (1987 [1968]); Habermas (2000a); Müller-Doohm (2000); Peillon (1990); Swedberg (2005a); Swedberg (2005b).

168 See Habermas (2022b), pp. 146 and 157–160.

169 On the concept of 'ambivalence' in sociological thought, see, for example: Arribas-Ayllon and Bartlett (2014); Bauman (1991); Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips (2011); Merton and Barber (2013 [1963]); Susen (2010c).

The Vicious Circle of Poverty and Abstentionism?

Habermas posits that a vicious circle is set in motion when large parts of the population express their 'resignation over the lack of perceptible improvements in living conditions'[170], leading, in the best-case scenario, to *abstentionism*, especially among socially deprived groups, or, in the worst-case scenario, to the rise of *populist*, if not *authoritarian* or even *totalitarian* (or *proto-totalitarian*), movements. While this is a widely researched issue in the contemporary social sciences, we must avoid lapsing into the correlation–causation fallacy—that is, we cannot deduce a *cause-and-effect relationship* between two developments from an observed *association or correlation* between them. The dictum 'correlation does not imply causation' has almost become a truism; it needs to be defended, however, to prevent us from being seduced by simplistic explanations of multilayered, multifaceted, and multifactorial states of affairs and events. The fact that there is a *link* between a perceived lack of improvement in living conditions, on the one hand, and abstentionism (and/or populism, authoritarianism, and totalitarianism), on the other, does not prove that the former *causes* the latter.

Existential Challenges to Contemporary Public Spheres?

Habermas is right to emphasize that contemporary public spheres are confronted with a large variety of challenges. These raise serious questions about the viability and, more specifically, 'the framework conditions for the functioning of national public spheres'[171]. Among the most significant challenges faced by actors engaging—or seeking to engage—in deliberative processes oriented towards democratic modes of opinion- and will-formation in late-modern societies are the following: neoliberalism; individualism; authoritarianism; populism; abstentionism; political apathy [*Politikverdrossenheit*]; privatist trends towards depoliticization; sensationalism; global migration flows; high levels of social inequality; major forms of crisis (social, political, environmental, military, etc.); unprecedented dynamics of social acceleration; rising degrees of existential insecurity, anxiety, and depression.[172]

In light of these developments, Habermas's analysis would benefit from providing a *systematic account of the different types of challenges* faced by actors participating in the construction of public spheres in the twenty-first century (and beyond): social, economic, political, ideological, cultural, moral, organizational, technological, environmental, demographic, medical, pandemic, scientific, epistemic, philosophical, and so on.

Beyond Eurocentrism and Idealism?

Habermas makes a powerful case for a pro-European (and, indeed, pan-European) vision of the public sphere. For a variety of reasons, different commentators will agree or disagree with Habermas's perspective, which builds on his previous work on 'the postnational constellation'[173]. His plea for a 'greater integration of *core Europe* at least'[174], however, is, at best, *Eurocentric* (given its continental focus on 'Europe') or, at worst, *Franco-German-centric* (given its intracontinental focus on 'core Europe').[175] In addition, his Europeanist outlook is predicated on the assumption that only 'a more pronounced *opening* of the national public spheres *to each other*'[176] will make it possible to face up to 'the big problems' in a mature, effective, and internationally co-ordinated fashion.

Sympathetic critics may welcome the counterintuitive spirit permeating this argument: through deeper intracontinental integration, the member states of the European Union will—paradoxically—be able to regain the *competences* they appear to have lost at the *national* level 'by creating new political capacities for action at the *transnational* level'[177].

[170] Ibid., p. 155.

[171] Ibid., p. 156.

[172] See ibid., p. 156. It is striking that, in this context, *social acceleration* is increasingly regarded as a major source of concern, not least because it appears to have contributed to growing levels of *social alienation*. On this issue, see, for instance: Reed (2014); Rosa (2010); Rosa (2015 [2005]); Rosa et al. (2017); Rosa and Scheuerman (2009); Torres (2016); Vostal (2014); Wajcman (2015); Wajcman and Dodd (2016).

[173] See Habermas (2001 [1998]).

[174] Habermas (2022b), p. 156 (italics added).

[175] It is worth pointing out that it is far from obvious how the idea of a 'European public sphere' (which, arguably, is divided into different national and subnational public spheres) should be defined. For instance, should it be confined to EU countries (including those that, at present, are not part of the Schengen area—that is, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Ireland, and Romania)? Should it include countries that are in the Schengen area but are not EU member states (such as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, and Switzerland)? Should it include countries that are in the Customs Union but are not in the EU (such as Andorra, San Marino, and Turkey)? Should the UK (post-Brexit) be included? Should Poland and Hungary, despite the recent 'Eurosceptic' developments in these countries, be included? And what about Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus? Irrespective of one's definition of the 'European public sphere', it is hard to ignore the significance of Europe's transatlantic partnership with the United States of America and Canada (as illustrated not only in World War I and World War II but also in the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Russo-Ukrainian War). One's view of the role of this transatlantic partnership notwithstanding, Europe in general and the European public sphere in particular would have developed very differently without it. For a critical account of the impact of the Cold War on Western (notably Anglo-American and European) public spheres, see, for instance, Menand (2021).

[176] Ibid., p. 156 (italics in original).

[177] Ibid., p. 156 (italics added). On this point, see also Habermas (2012 [2011]).

Unsympathetic critics, however, may reject the premise of 'a more pronounced *opening* of the national public spheres *to each other*'[178] and contend that such a scenario is highly unrealistic.

Granted, different national public spheres are deeply interconnected—not only by the constant confluence of (local, national, regional, and global) *events and happenings* but also by the constant confluence of their (local, national, regional, and global) *interpretations*. Yet, the frameworks of reference in which these public spheres exist and in which their actors operate remain spatiotemporally confined, in the sense that they are shaped by, and in turn shape, the specific variables (such as language, culture, history, law, and politics) underlying the construction of both materially and symbolically constituted practices and structures revolving around the *nation-state*. To put it bluntly, even in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, public spheres are defined by the parameters and reference points of the nation-states in which they are embedded. This is *not* to deny the significance, let alone the existence, of a *global (and/or transnational) public sphere*.[179] Rather, this is to acknowledge that, in practice, *national public spheres* remain the central arena in which debates and controversies—and, by implication, processes of opinion- and will-formation—take place.

Arguably, the traditional media (such as the press, radio, and television) are—in terms of production, circulation, and consumption—more confined to these national arenas than the new (notably digital and social) media, including online platforms. And yet, for both the old (that is, traditional or legacy) media and the new (that is, digital and social) media, *national* public spheres continue to represent not only a key reference point but also a crucial (that is, both real and imagined) framework in which to operate.

The End of Deliberation?

Habermas rightly states that '[t]he influence of digital media on a further structural transformation of the political public sphere can be seen, for example since the turn of the millennium, from the extent and nature of *media use*'[180]. It is baffling, however, that he adds to this observation the remark that '[w]hether this change in scope also affects the *deliberative quality* of public debate is an open question'[181]. The reason this follow-up comment is perplexing is that the whole point of Habermas's *critical* analysis is to cast light on the extent to which precisely 'the *deliberative quality* of public debate'[182] has been profoundly undermined by the rise of the new media—'platformization' and 'authorization', along with the formation of digital echo chambers, being among the most obvious manifestations of this trend. Even if we insist on the *ambivalent* constitution (that is, on the confluence of positive and negative aspects) of both the old and the new media, the key question that poses itself is as follows: to what extent is it possible to restructure the public sphere in such a way that its inclusive, empowering, horizontal, discursive, and dynamic dimensions carry more weight than its exclusionary, disempowering, vertical, manipulative, and stifling ones? Critical social scientists need to address this question—theoretically, methodologically, and empirically—head-on.

From New Means of Communication to New Modes of Socialization?

Habermas notes that 'the expansion and acceleration of opportunities for communication'[183] go hand in hand with 'the increase in the range of the publicly thematized events'[184]. He fails to acknowledge, however, that the latter has been brought about by the former. This insight obliges us to reflect on the relationship between *facts and events*, on the one hand, and *representations, interpretations, and explanations* of these facts and events, on the other. Moreover, it requires us to grapple with the relationship between two sets of processes that are constitutive of modern public spheres:

- On the one hand, processes of newsmaking [*processus de mise en actualité*], in the sense of framing and presenting selected contemporary occurrences as newsworthy, thereby permitting a large number of people to obtain knowledge about facts and events that, for the most part, they have *not* directly experienced.
- On the other hand, processes of politicization [*processus de politisation*], which, through the problematization of facts and events, manifest themselves in a multiplicity of interpretations conveyed in commentaries, discussions, and controversies.[185]

When examining the transition from old to new media, the question arises to what extent the relationship between

[178] Habermas (2022b), p. 156 (italics in original).

[179] On this point, see, for instance: Couldry (2014); Czingon et al. (2020); Della Porta (2022); Fozdar and Woodward (2021); Fraser (2007a); Fraser (2007b); Fraser (2014 [2007]); Fraser (2014); Hutchings (2014); Kögler (2005); Kurasawa (2014); Nash (2014a); Nash (2014b); Nash (2014c); Owen (2014); Seeliger and Sevignani (2022); Volkmer (2014).

[180] Habermas (2022b), p. 157 (italics in original).

[181] Ibid., p. 157 (italics in original).

[182] Ibid., p. 157 (italics in original).

[183] Ibid., p. 158.

[184] Ibid., p. 158 (spelling modified).

[185] See Boltanski and Esquerre (2022). See also Susen (2023b).

processus de mise en actualité and *processus de politisation* has been fundamentally reconfigured. In this respect, Luc Boltanski and Arnaud Esquerre's recent proposal to distinguish between three key periods[186], each of which is associated with a new dominant means of communication and indicative of a specific historical 'moment', is insightful:

a. The crowd moment [*moment foule*]: 1870–1914
b. The mass moment [*moment masses*]: 1930–1970
c. The network moment [*moment réseau*]: 1990–present

These three 'moments' share several key features: First, each of them is shaped by a new agent [*actant*] that—'through its violent, blind, and harmful action'[187]—'threatens society and destroys its political regulations'[188]. Second, each of them is characterized by 'a logic of gregarious association'[189], which brings people closer together and, in a quasi-collectivist fashion, strips each person of their sense of singularity and uniqueness. Third, in each of them, individual choices and the exercise of a person's autonomy are severely curtailed by the *horizontal* logic of imitation and/or the *vertical* logic of intimidation or manipulation. Typically, this kind of dynamic benefits individuals who succeed in taking on the role of a leader and/or influencer, equipped with the power to impose their wishes and desires upon their (quasi-hypnotized) followers. In brief, all three 'moments' have a pronounced *destructive*, *normative*, and *imitative/manipulative* potential, which manifests itself not only in the radical transformation but also in the gradual synchronization [*Gleichschaltung*] of society.[190]

Each of these 'moments' is associated with a dominant means of large-scale communication: first, the *crowd moment* (1870–1914) with the *popular press*, particularly *tabloids and newspapers*; second, the *mass moment* (1930–1970) with *radio and television*; and, third, the *network moment* (1990–present) with the *Internet* and the rise of the *new (notably digital and social) media*. Critical theory needs to account for the degree to which technological transformations in the means of communication have triggered, and will continue to trigger, profound changes in prevalent modes of socialization, including both bottom-up and top-down dynamics of politicization. Different social scientists may formulate different hypotheses about both the causes and the consequences of the ensuing structural transformation of the public sphere. In any case, the growing influence of AI (artificial intelligence) is likely to be one of the main ingredients of the next major historical transition.[191]

Beyond Accountability?

Habermas posits that the new media differentiate themselves from the old media in that their leading companies are *not* accountable for the material made available via their digital channels. Furthermore, he claims that they are *not* responsible for producing, managing, editing, filtering, or selecting this material. If this is true, then both the form and the content of what is being publicly communicated are being rendered virtually unpredictable and uncontrollable.

On this view, powerful digital companies act 'in the global network as intermediaries "without responsibility"'[192], allowing for the accelerated creation of unexpected connections and contacts. Effectively, they convert public communication into a discursive realm marked by a significant number of (potentially serious) unintended consequences, which are largely beyond the citizens' control.

Habermas is right to assert that these digital companies 'profoundly alter the character of public communication itself'[193], as illustrated in the 'platformization' and 'authorization' of the media. He fails to acknowledge, however, that there are at least *some* editorial filters in the new media. Granted, these may not be of the same standard as those prevalent in the old media. Yet, it is erroneous to suggest that the key players among the social media platforms—such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter (now X)—lack *any* filtering mechanisms. Not only can they *ban* certain users from their platforms and, if considered appropriate, *reinstate* them (Donald J. Trump being one of the most famous examples); but, in addition, they can *filter* and *regulate* the information available on their digital channels. Whether this process involves editorial interventions, performed by conscious and purposive (human) agents, or automated filtering and regulating technologies, executed by computational and algorithmic (non-human) agents, it demonstrates that digital platforms are more than software-based online infrastructures that facilitate interactions and transactions between users. Insofar as the communicative flows provided by the new media are subject to at least *some* degree of editorial and regulatory processing, they should not be caricatured as wild streams of mere mis-, dis-, and mal-information, proliferating in a totally unrestricted and deregulated digital jungle.

[186] See Boltanski and Esquerre (2022), pp. 17–20 (my translation).
[187] Ibid., p. 18 (my translation).
[188] Ibid., p. 18 (my translation).
[189] Ibid., p. 18 (my translation).
[190] See Susen (2023b), esp. section IV ('Crowds, Masses, and Networks').
[191] See, for instance: Bloomfield (1987); Boden (1987 [1977]); Boden (1990); Boden (2018); Braidotti (2013); Braidotti (2019a); Braidotti (2019b); Braidotti and Fuller (2019); Habermas (2003 [2001]); Larson (2021); Lennox (2020); Susen (2022b), esp. pp. 65–66.
[192] Habermas (2022b), p. 159.
[193] Ibid., p. 159.

Beyond the Public/Private Dichotomy?

As elucidated by Habermas and by various other scholars[194], the public/private distinction is far from clear-cut. Indeed, Habermas is right to suggest that, in several respects, the boundaries between 'public' and 'private' are increasingly blurred.

- At the level of *cognition*, this is reflected in the extent to which collective consciousness and individual consciousness are intertwined: public spheres whose constitution is relatively solidified have the capacity 'to direct the attention of *all* citizens to the *same* topics in order to both stimulate and enable each of them to make their *own* judgements'[195] about key issues and about decision-making processes. When this happens, the public sphere spills over into the private sphere, and vice versa.
- At the level of *media usage*, 'a change in the *perception of the public sphere* […] has blurred the distinction between "public" and "private"'[196], in such a way that it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate these two realms from each other. Consequently, it has become far less obvious how to attribute progressive meanings—such as 'inclusivity', 'accessibility', 'visibility', 'transparency', 'openness', and 'collectiveness'[197]—to the public sphere.
- At the level of *communication and discourse*, we have been witnessing the rise of a 'semi-public sphere' (or 'unstructured public sphere')[198], marked by the formation of digital echo chambers, in which actors are not required to 'test' their views, values, and assumptions by engaging with a diversity of voices and perspectives.
- At the level of *interest structure*, large parts of the media (that is, of both the old and—even more so—the new media) are being marketized and commodified. This process is reinforced by the predominance of neoliberal agendas. Hence, we are faced with *the privatization of the public sphere*—that is, with *the colonization of the public sphere by private interests*. In this context, it appears that the generalization of interests, pursued by *all* citizens and articulated in a *shared* space of communication, has become more and more challenging.

One may, of course, find numerous other examples to illustrate that the boundaries between 'public' and 'private' are far more porous, permeable, and unstable than ideal-typical models may indicate. One of the main problems with Habermas's account, however, is that it *overstates* the novelty of this blurriness and *understates* the degree to which the intersecting of public and private realms is built into *all* societies, irrespective of their spatiotemporally variable features and historical specificities.

Both *the tension between public interests and private interests*[199] and *the intertwinement of the public sphere and the private sphere* pervade, in one way or another, *all* forms of life: 'individualist' or 'collectivist', 'complex' or 'simple', 'loose' or 'tight', 'vertical' or 'horizontal', 'freedom-based' or 'control-based', 'person-centred' or 'community-centred', 'relatively heterogeneous' or 'relatively homogeneous', 'technologically advanced' or 'technologically backward', and 'large-scale' or 'small-scale'.[200]

If this hypothesis is true, then we are required to move from a *sociological* to an *anthropological* mode of inquiry: the relationship between 'public' and 'private' affairs, including the degree to which these two realms may *intersect* and the boundaries between them may be *blurred*, is vital to *all* societies. Even in societies characterized by a relatively rigid separation between 'public' and 'private', these two spheres will inevitably overlap. And even in societies marked by a relatively high degree of intersection between 'public' and 'private', these two spheres will never be entirely fused with, or collapsed into, each other.

Resonance through Consonance and Dissonance?

Habermas's analysis obliges us to reflect on the *relationship between consonant and dissonant voices* in the public sphere. His account, however, is far from unproblematic.

194 Cf. Habermas (1989 [1962]). For useful discussions of the public/private distinction (including the blurring of the boundaries between 'the public' and 'the private'), see, for instance: Armstrong and Squires (2002); Boyd (1997); Calhoun (1992); Fraser (2007a); Geuss (2001); Kögler (2005); Landes (1998); Long (1998); Nash (2014a); Offer (2022); Prokhovnik (1998); Rabotnikof (1998); Rose (1987); Steinberger (1999); Susen (2011); Susen (2015a), pp. 75, 193, 224–229, 276, 293*n*3, and 330*n*440; Susen (2020a), pp. 32, 41, 138, 203, and 250; Volkmer (2014); Weintraub and Kumar (1997). For recent reflections on the 'new structural transformation of the public sphere', see Habermas (2022a). See also, for example: Beyes (2022); Brinkmann et al. (2022); Della Porta (2022); Habermas (2022b); Rosa (2022); Seeliger and Sevignani (2022); Seeliger and Villa Braslavsky (2022); Sevignani (2022); Staab and Thiel (2022); van Dyk (2022).

195 Habermas (2022b), p. 165 (italics in original).

196 Ibid., p. 165 (italics in original).

197 See Susen (2011), esp. pp. 38–42.

198 See Habermas (2022b), p. 166.

199 On this point, see, for instance: Bailey (2000); Butt and Langdridge (2003); Condren (2009); Crouch (2016); Cutler (1997); Geuss (2001); Habermas (1962); Habermas (1989 [1962]); Marston (1995); Powell and Clemens (1998); Salmerón Castro (2002); Steinberger (1999); Susen (2011); Weintraub and Kumar (1997).

200 See Triandis (1996), esp. pp. 408–409. On this point, see also, for example: Susen (2007), pp. 63–64, 214, and 290; Susen (2010c), pp. 67–68 and 77–78; Susen (2012a), p. 309; Susen (2015a), p. 140; Susen (2016a), p. 72; Susen (2016b), pp. 132–133; Susen (2022a), p. 65.

a.

It tends to *overstate* the degree to which the *old media* generate open and discursive spaces of communicative reason, in which *dissonant voices* can encounter, challenge, and contradict each other and (genuinely) 'test' the (presumed) defensibility of their respective validity claims. At the same time, it tends to *overstate* the degree to which the *new media* produce self-enclosed and self-referential digital platforms equivalent to echo chambers, in which *consonant voices* reinforce, reaffirm, and endorse each other and (mistakenly) 'corroborate' the (alleged) accuracy of their respective validity claims.

By the same token, it tends to *overstate* the degree to which the *old media* are organized in such a way that, within their sphere of influence, the uninterrupted consolidation, let alone arbitrary imposition, of a chorus of *consonant voices* is highly unlikely. Consequently, it tends to *overstate* the degree to which the *new media* are configured in such a way that, within their digital bubbles, the fruitful interplay, exchange, and competition between *dissonant voices* are almost impossible.

b.

It tends to *understate* the degree to which at least some parts of the *old media* are structured around the mutual reinforcement of *consonant voices* (for instance, in the form of specific political, cultural, or ideological agendas, pursued by producers and/or consumers of particular newspapers, radio stations or programmes, and/or TV channels and programmes). Accordingly, it tends to *understate* the degree to which at least some parts of the *new media* provide arenas for the constructive dialogue, open clash, and both reason-guided and evidence-based contest between *dissonant voices* (for instance, in the form of live debates, in-depth podcasts, and open-access talks [TED Talks, Talks at Google, etc.] and conference series).

By the same token, it tends to *understate* the degree to which the *old media* may contribute to 'manufacturing consent'[201], to legitimizing and reinforcing the status quo, and—at least in some cases—to spreading 'misinformation', 'disinformation', and/or 'mal-information', similar to their new media counterparts. Consequently, it tends to *understate* the degree to which the *new media* may contribute to questioning, subverting, and defying the received wisdom, thereby opening up new avenues for exploring both the 'big questions' (notably in relation to ontology, epistemology, logic, morality, and aesthetics) and the 'small questions', arising from people's everyday engagement with the world.

In short, when examining the *relationship between consonant and dissonant voices* in the public sphere, we need to provide a differentiated analysis, rather than clichéd caricature, of the positive and negative aspects of the old and new media. Both consonance and dissonance are invaluable sources of intersubjective resonance across different means (and modes) of communication.[202]

From Digital Capitalism to Digital Socialism?

Habermas offers a powerful critique of what may be called 'surveillance capitalism'[203] or 'digital capitalism'[204] (or, more provocatively, 'technofeudalism'[205]). As argued above, however, his diagnosis suffers from a tendency to *overstate* the *negative* features and to *understate* the *positive* features of the multiple ways in which the new media have become an integral component of twenty-first-century capitalism. In some cases, this is reflected in outright misrepresentations of issues that are more complex and multifaceted than Habermas appears to suggest.

His one-sided depiction of the worldwide demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions and vaccinations after the start of the pandemic in 2020 is a case in point.[206] The claim that these were 'staged in a libertarian spirit but [were] in fact driven by authoritarian motives'[207] is, at best, questionable or, at worst, misleading. One's view of these demonstrations notwithstanding, COVID-19 restrictions and vaccinations can be, and have been, *opposed* (and—ironically—can be, and have been, *endorsed*) on numerous grounds: authoritarian *vs.* libertarian, conservative *vs.* progressive, right-wing *vs.* left-wing, individualist *vs.* collectivist, pseudo-scientific *vs.* scientific, utilitarian *vs.* deontological, pragmatic *vs.* principled, impulsive *vs.* reflective, irrational *vs.* rational, mystical *vs.* logical, faith-based *vs.* evidence-based, religious *vs.* secular, instrumental-rational *vs.* value-rational, populist *vs.* procedural, short-term *vs.* long-term, top-down *vs.* bottom-up—and so on.

To be clear, the point is not to defend or to condemn, let alone to trivialize, people's attitudes and behaviours towards demonstrations against COVID-19 restrictions and vaccinations. Rather, the point is to recognize that the motivational driving forces behind people's convictions and actions are variegated and, thus, irreducible to a simple right-*vs.*-wrong scheme.

[201] See Herman and Chomsky (2008 [1988]).

[202] See Rosa (2019 [2016]) and Rosa (2022). See also Susen (2020b).

[203] See Zuboff (2019). Cf. Fuchs (2021).

[204] See, for instance: Betancourt (2016); Chandler and Fuchs (2019); Fuchs (2019); Fuchs (2020a); Fuchs (2020b); Fuchs (2022b); Huberman (2022); Sharon (2018); Staab and Thiel (2022); Törnberg (2023); Wajcman (2015); Wajcman and Dodd (2016).

[205] See Varoufakis (2023).

[206] See Habermas (2022b), p. 166.

[207] Ibid., p. 166.

The previous issue raises the more general question of whether 'digital capitalism' can, and/or should, be replaced with another socioeconomic system, such as 'digital socialism' or 'platform socialism'.[208] As famously stated by Marx, '[w]hat the bourgeoisie […] produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers'[209], paving the way for the construction of a socialist society. As posited by some contemporary Marxists, digital capitalism is in the process of destroying itself, paving the way for the consolidation of technofeudalism.[210]

Irrespective of one's assessment of the view that 'digital capitalism' represents a global paradise for the free flow of borderless communication, embedded in a highly deregulated economy that epitomizes the worldwide triumph of the (neo)liberal order, it is hard to avoid the question of what an *alternative* mode of social organization would, and/or should, look like. If, for instance, one seeks to make a case for 'digital socialism' or 'platform socialism', then one has to acknowledge that, over the past centuries, the socialist movement has been profoundly divided by two key issues: the question of its *goals and objectives* and the question of its *means and strategies*. The former issue—regarding the ideological question '*What* do we want?'—illustrates that different socialist currents embrace divergent conceptions of socialism. The latter issue—concerning the strategic question '*How* do we get there?'—is reflected in the rivalry between revolutionary and reformist routes to socialism.[211]

One of the primary problems with such an alternative path for a 'digital society'[212], however, is that it is far from clear whether it would deliver in terms of its emancipatory potential. Radically different (and, arguably, postcapitalist) models of both small-scale and large-scale organization will be judged in terms of their capacity to bring about various (interconnected and interdependent) forms of *progress*: social, political, cultural, moral, economic, epistemic, scientific, and technological—to mention only a few. It is not obvious where the evolutionary leap from the Neanderthal to Silicon Valley (and beyond) will take us—regardless of whether the next chapter in human history will be defined by postcapitalism, (post)postmodernism, posthumanism, post-anthropocentrism, and/or something else.

The construction of a universally empowering public sphere—inspired by progressive principles such as 'inclusivity', 'accessibility', 'visibility', 'transparency', 'openness', and 'collectiveness'[213]—is both part of the problem and part of the solution. As part of the problem, it contributes to the reproduction of power relations based on the asymmetrical distribution of socially relevant resources. As part of the solution, it provides us with a multitude of communicative tools and discursive realms in which systems of domination, exploitation, and exclusion (along with the social pathologies generated by them) can be exposed, examined, evaluated, and challenged—namely, in such a way that the critical engagement with the conditions of possibility for the construction of an emancipatory society becomes an everyday reality.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper has been to assess the validity of the contention that, over the past few decades, the public sphere has undergone a new structural transformation. To this end, the analysis has focused on Habermas's recent inquiry into the causes and consequences of an allegedly 'new' or 'further' [*erneuten*] structural transformation of the political public sphere.

The first part has considered the central arguments in support of the 'new structural transformation of the public sphere' thesis, shedding light on its historical, political, economic, technological, and sociological aspects. As demonstrated above, several dimensions are vital in this respect: (1) the relationship between democratic processes and deliberative politics, (2) the relationship between capitalism and democracy, (3) the relationship between the public sphere and the digital media, (4) the relationship between the traditional media and the new media, and (5) the relationship between commercial exploitation and Internet communication.

The second part has offered some reflections on the most important limitations and shortcomings of Habermas's account, especially with regard to key social developments in the early twenty-first century. As argued in this part, various elements of Habermas's approach need to be examined in a critical light: (1) constitutional patriotism, (2) public opinion and the mass media, (3) the power of pragmatic fallibilism, (4) self-legislation and representation, (5) the role of competing interests, (6) the ambivalent constitution of the media, (7) the link between socioeconomic status and political engagement, (8) the viability of the public sphere in the face of global challenges, (9) the problems arising from Eurocentric and unrealistic conceptions of the public sphere, (10) the deliberative quality of public debate, (11) the nexus between means of communication and modes of socialization, (12) the problem of accountability, (13) the public/private dichotomy, (14) experiences of intersubjective resonance through the co-presence of consonant and dissonant voices in both the old and the new media, and (15) the prospects for a transition from digital capitalism to digital socialism.

[208] See Muldoon (2022).

[209] Marx and Engels (2000/1977 [1848]), p. 255.

[210] See Varoufakis (2023).

[211] See Susen (2015b), p. 1030.

[212] See, for instance: Fuchs (2022a); Housley et al. (2022); Lindgren (2021 [2017]); Perriam and Carter (2021); Schwarz (2021).

[213] See Susen (2011), esp. pp. 38–42.

Although the constitution of the contemporary public sphere is marked by major—and, in several respects, unprecedented—structural transformations, their significance should not be overstated. One can only hope that people's critical capacity, rather than the systemic logic built into seemingly uncontrollable technologies, will determine the course of history.

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