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The public sphere, as articulated in particular by German political theorist, philosopher and sociologist Jurgen Habermas (1962/1989), is a space for rational and universalist politics that is distinct from both the state and the economy. It is a scene of activity in which people are addressed as citizens, as rational political beings, and not merely as consumers. In other words, the public sphere provides a space in which public communication may be conducted. Public communication comprises “those processes of information and cultural exchange between media institutions, products and publics which are socially shared, widely available and communal in character” (Ferguson 1986:ix).

The concept of the public sphere constitutes a central analytical tool for making sense of the relationship between the media and democracy, particularly in terms of civic engagement. In his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, originally written in German in 1962, Habermas explained that in the late eighteenth century a new political class, the bourgeoisie, came to the fore, especially in Britain; this political class formed a public body which, in sharp contrast with the old authorities, notably the state and the church, provided the conditions for the development and dissemination of reason-based, public opinion. The creation of a network of institutions by the bourgeoisie within civil society, especially the launch of a number of newspapers, provided the means through which private thoughts could become public. The printed press, libraries, coffeehouses and universities became places for public debate and criticism of government policy. The new public sphere was in principle open to all and was protected from the power of both the church and the state.

However, in his historical analysis of the evolution of the public sphere, Habermas argued that the space for rational and universalist politics created by the capitalist market was damaged by both the extension of the state and the growth of monopoly capitalism. The formation of large private institutions – in particular, advertising agencies and public relations firms – and the deals they made with each other and with the state while excluding the public, led to the replacement of rational public discourse by power politics. As Habermas argues, these large organizations “strive for political compromise with the state and with each other, excluding the public sphere whenever possible” (1974:54). He thus concluded that “the idea of the public sphere, preserved in the social welfare state mass democracy, an idea which calls for a rationalization of power through the medium of public discussion among private individuals, threatens to disintegrate with the structural transformation of the public sphere itself” (ibid.: 55). The role of the media has been central

to the replacement of what Habermas terms the “ideal speech situation” (Habermas 1990:86) by conditions of distorted communication. The ideal speech situation that enables rational public opinion takes place under conditions where all citizens have access to information and there is freedom of expression and publication of opinions about matters of general interest, which implies freedom from economic and political control (Habermas 1962/1989:27, 1989:136). In Habermas’s view, whereas the development of the independent press at the beginning of the nineteenth century had opened up the possibility of rational public debate and public decision-making on political and judicial matters, it later came to function increasingly as a tool for managing and manipulating public opinion. Indeed, Habermas and his many followers since have argued that the public sphere has now principally become a platform for advertising and public relations (Webster 2006; Schlesinger 2009). Around the world, control of the news media is used to reinforce the power of autocratic regimes and to deter criticism of the government by independent journalists. This may be achieved through official government censorship, state ownership of the main radio and television channels, legal restrictions on freedom of expression and publication (such as stringent libel laws and restrictive official secrets acts), limited competition through oligopolies in commercial ownership, and the use of outright violence and intimidation against journalists and broadcasters (Sussman 2001). Referring to the internet and social networks era, Papacharissi (2010) argues that new, online and personalized technologies enabled citizens to expand the scope of their social activity, thereby rearranging the boundaries between public and private spaces. As discussed below, her work provides a fresh angle with which to examine the circulation of information among the public in the digital age and calls for a blurring and redefinition of the boundaries between the public and private space.

Assessment and critique

Despite these developments, Habermas’s theory merits consideration because he carefully conceptualized the nature of the public sphere, viewing it as an achievement of the new bourgeois (or capitalist) class in Europe, and an outcome of this class’s successful struggle against feudalism and church or state oppression. At the same time, however, Habermas’s thesis has been questioned on historical grounds. Many argued that he idealized the early period of history to which he referred, and particularly questioned the notion that the eighteenth century press was politically independent (Mortensen 1977; Hohendahl 1979; Curran 1991a, 1991b). Koss (1981, 1984), in his analysis of the British political press, contended that political control by proprietary interests was in fact exercised over a large part of the press from as early as the eighteenth century. Koss’s analysis showed that the early British press was not independent to the extent that Habermas described, and therefore, one could argue, did not contribute to freedom of expression to the degree suggested by Habermas.

Habermas has also been criticized for his argument that the public sphere enabled rational debate. Curran (1991a:35) suggests that “the newspapers celebrated by Habermas were engines of propaganda for the bourgeoisie rather than the embodiment of disinterested rationality”. Dutton (2007:13) has similarly found the concept of the public sphere productive, but “too closely tied to a romantic view of the past”. In today’s global multicultural society, criticisms of Habermas’s ideal public sphere could additionally include

its universalizing angle and apparent neglect of difference, its emphasis on the national rather than global space, and its normative understanding of a unified national sphere signified and constituted by the media. According to Fraser (2007), there is little consensus on what constitutes a common good, nor can any values truly be described as universal: rather, cultural values are increasingly shaped by exchanges between various local, national and transnational actors, including the state, corporations, civil society actors, citizens and consumers, mainstream and marginalized groups.

Although the historical account in Habermas's theory may be questionable, he nevertheless pioneered a novel line of inquiry in pointing out that the public sphere – a conceptual rather than physical space – and democracy – expressed through engagement in rational discussion – are closely connected. Habermas's thinking thus provides a valuable set of theoretical resources with which to advance important issues relating to democratic society in the contemporary era. His work also offers a starting point for understanding the media's role in public communication, highlighting its influential position in shaping people's understanding of social and political issues, practices and identities. Garnham (1986), for example, although critical of Habermas's historical assumptions, has adopted his central thesis and, by connecting the notion of the public sphere to that of public service, has used it to construct arguments in favour of public service broadcasting.

According to Habermas's ideals, the media should facilitate the process of rational argumentation by providing a context for public discourse which is essential for the formation of free and reason-based public opinion. The media should help encourage debates over political ideas, contribute to the circulation of information among the public, and thus help maintain the strength and vitality of democracy. The free circulation of information among the public is important both for expressing the common interest and for enabling citizens to take part in debates relating to that common interest. However, the arguments made in favour of a vibrant and open public sphere are not just political arguments. Habermas's theory focuses exclusively on the implications for politics, but there are countless ways in which we might consider the importance of the public sphere for society. There are arguments about cultural heritage, environmental preservation, public health and universal education, to mention but a few. Over the course of time, these desirable objectives have been interpreted and characterized as public goods, that is, goods or services whose consumption by an individual does not reduce the overall availability of the good or service for the rest of the citizenry. One version of the public interest argument, for example, has found its fulfilment in the provision of universal education in most Western European countries since the nineteenth century (Smith 1989). Offering universal education is now considered a public good, that is, good not only for the individual concerned, but for the whole society. Another version of the public interest argument has valued the right to authentic cultural expression and the right to participate in defining the historical development of a given culture (White 1994). Provision for the arts, in particular, has often rested in the hands of the state, both because cultural heritage was regarded as a service that needs to be preserved for future generations and because the state could help ensure that all social classes are able to gain access. Additionally, public service media can contribute to the public interest and enhanced civic engagement in at least three broad areas: information – particularly factuality and accuracy of news and public representations; cultural representation, in the sense of creating a pluralistic social and cultural community;

and universality, assuming public service media are available to all at the point of reception at low cost (Iosifidis 2014). The notion of public interest has thus been broadened to include important public services at zero or low cost for the interests concerned.

The structural transformation of the public sphere

The idea of the public sphere has been the focus of renewed interest as a result of the advent of the internet and other networked digital technologies which can provide new communication spaces in which public debate can be conducted. The online forums and social spaces of the web differ substantially from the platforms for public debate constructed by traditional broadcast media in a number of ways. First, they attract many more people than traditional media (Iosifidis and Wheeler 2016). In 2019, 45 per cent of the world's population (or 3.5 billion people) were social media users (We Are Social 2019). These numbers are out of reach for traditional media such as radio and television stations. But it is not only numbers or scale that matter, for social networks allow much greater interactivity as well as the possibility of many-to-many communication on a global scale, rather than one-to-many as is the case with broadcast media. Moreover, networked media is not constrained by national borders to the same extent as traditional media. The emergence of the internet and social media has thus led to the globalization of the public sphere and public opinion. The space for public discourse has expanded and the formation of public opinion increasingly takes place in a transnational context that crosses national boundaries. Whereas the traditional media in the form of the newspaper press and public television has been an integral part of the creation of a national public sphere, there is now a widespread assumption that new spheres of communication networks can provide the basis for shared concerns, common tastes, and political and cultural debates at a global level.

Most significantly, however, some scholars have sought to explore how the internet and online digital media shapes, and in turn how it is shaped by contemporary forms of democracy, and how the new media ecology alters the process of civic engagement. In her book *A Private Sphere*, Papacharissi (2010) discusses the way in which new technologies are embedded in individuals' routines and how the new media ecology alters the process of civic engagement. She suggests (ibid.:165) that "democracy is more than a political system of government since it combines personal trajectories of success and failure in everyday life through a shared system of decision-making". People discuss politics alongside other things, and these practices help them connect politics to essential parts of their daily lives. In this sense, democracy is viewed as resolving the individual's relationship to the public and the private. At the same time, Papacharissi suggests that online technologies reshape contemporary democracy by blurring and redefining the borders of public and private. Online technologies afford people both public and private spaces, rather than merely a public sphere. Indeed, Papacharissi suggests, the spaces presented by online technologies are hybrid spaces, simultaneously public and private: thus, "[n]ew technologies create a new civic vernacular for individuals, allowing an actualization of civic identity in tropes distinct from the deliberate model of the public sphere" (2010:130). Papacharissi contends that this new civic everyday language operates in the private sphere. She adds that in post-modern democracy, civic identity can materialize outside the deliberative model of the public sphere. As the border between the public and private space has been blurred, she

concludes that “the private sphere describes and explains the mechanisms for civic connection in contemporary democracies” (ibid.:167).

According to Dutton (2007), while the rise of traditional news media enabled the development of the Fourth Estate (for example, the investigative journalism conducted by the *Washington Post*, *Time* and *The New York Times* to publicize the Watergate scandal in the US in the 1970s), the growing use of the internet and related digital technologies can also be seen to have promoted a new source of accountability in government, politics and other sectors. Dutton explains how this emerging ‘Fifth Estate’ is being established and why this could challenge the influence of other more established bases of institutional authority and help support the vitality of liberal democratic societies. Indeed, as the new media disrupt the industrial model of information, citizens now have the power to oversee the actions of their elective representatives, thereby enabling a more direct form of democracy to emerge (Iosifidis and Wheeler 2018). In the same vein, Dahlgren (2005:160) argues that the internet may expand the public sphere by “allowing engaged citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics”.

A democratic social system can be defined as a system in which the supreme power is vested in the people. The origins of democracy can be traced back around 2,500 years to Athens, Greece, where important political decisions were made in person by (male, property-owning) citizens voting in public assemblies. Today, most democracies around the world are categorized as representative systems because the people usually choose from a selection of candidates the individual or party that they wish to represent them in parliament. The internet seems to challenge such hierarchical structures as it provides a powerful means for direct citizen involvement in public life and politics. It appears to offer the possibility of new forms of post-electoral democracy.

In particular, the availability of information via social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and the rise of user-generated content such as personal blogs have enhanced citizens’ ability to communicate and self-organize. The emerging citizen movements around the world thus serve as a check and balance on the prerogatives of government. Millions of citizens have taken to the streets of Sao Paulo, Tel Aviv, Manila, Madrid and Bangkok demanding good governance and an end to corruption. Demonstrators temporarily swept away autocratic governments in many Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, although most of them were later replaced by even more repressive regimes. Citizens in Southern Europe have called for an end of austerity measures that lead to economic exploitation and hopeless poverty. Indians have demanded protection from rape. In China tens of millions of bloggers have become a virtual citizens lobby pushing for environmental change, blocking huge new dams and petrochemical plants. Hoffman (2013) acknowledges that there are certainly risks that these newly empowered citizens could become pawns for populist demagogues, but it could also be argued that this is far more likely to happen when the media are controlled by a few than when there are multiple and independent sources of information.

In today’s network society, power is multidimensional and is organized around digital, interactive and self-expanding networks whose participants have very diverse interests and values. In direct contrast to power relations that are embedded in the institutions of society, especially those of the state, social movements exercise counterpower by constructing

themselves initially through a process of autonomous communication, free from the control of those holding institutional power. As Castells (2012:9) contends, “because mass media are largely controlled by governments and media corporations, in the network society communicative autonomy is primarily constructed in the internet networks and in the platforms of wireless communication”. These social networks carve out a new public space for deliberation, distinct from the constitutionally designated space which is occupied by the dominant political and economic elites. But it remains debatable whether these new media truly enhance democracy and contribute to political participation.

Indeed, many attempts to extol the democratizing and empowering potential of the internet and social media have been dubbed naïve and idealistic (Nieminen 2009:40). Not surprisingly, the attempt to ground Habermas’s ideal speech situation in the web has been met with scepticism. Coleman (1999) suggests that much online discussion is characterized as bad-tempered, perhaps as a result of the decline in public debate in physical spaces such as open meetings and street corners, where people first learned to argue effectively. Wilhelm (1999) also refers to the dangers of poor dialogue and a skewed distribution of contributors in cyberspace. Moreover, as Boeder (2005) argues, it is often the case that major decisions and actions concerning transnational matters continue to occur without intense public engagement.

Recommended reading

Dahlgren, P. (2005) ‘The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication: Dispersion and deliberation’, *Political Communication* 22(2): 147-162.

Deals with key issues and difficulties facing democracy, such as the destabilization of political communication systems in the internet era, from the perspective of the public sphere.

Habermas, J. (1962/1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*, translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Originally published in German under the title *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, this is a landmark contribution to modern understanding of democracy and the role of the media in creating a rational space for public dialogue, distinct from both political and vested economic interests.

Habermas, J. (1974) ‘The Public Sphere: An encyclopaedia article’, translated by Sara Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 3: 49-55.

This later work by Habermas acknowledges that the ideal of the public sphere, a space for rational political debate among an informed citizenry, has been damaged by the expanded role of the state and the appearance of large private institutions, such as advertising agencies and public relations firms.

Papacharissi, Z. (2010) *A Private Sphere: Democracy in a digital age*, Cambridge: Polity Press.

Explains the way in which new online, personalized media technologies have expanded the scope of citizens' social activity, thereby altering the process of civic engagement and creating a private space for discussion.