

DIGITAL MEDIA AND DYNAMICS OF CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPHERE: TOWARDS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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Abstract. The article examines the dynamics and change of the contemporary public sphere caused by the emergence of digital media and their transformative impact on social life and communicative professions. For this purpose the stages in Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere are traced, and, the main concepts in his two main works, dedicated to the classical public sphere (1962) and the one formed under the influence of digital media (2022), are analysed. The authors examine importance of this transformation on the democratic process, the platformization of the media and its influence in modern society, as well as the problems of technology in the field of social networks. The article undertakes an attempt to build a theoretical framework for explaining the development of the contemporary public sphere in the conditions of accelerated change in communication technologies.

Keywords: communication; digital media; public sphere; platformization; communicative influence; communication theory; deliberative politics

1. Introduction

The concept of “public sphere” is an idea formulated by the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas in his book “The Structural Transformation of Public sphere, first published in German in 1962¹. In the German original, J. Habermas used the concepts “öffentlich” (public, open to the public) and “Öffentlichkeit” (Publicity, Public), which are translated into English with the concepts of “public” or “public sphere”. According to the German author, publicity or public sphere (not in sense of *the public* i.e. of some individuals that are gathered together) itself is formed as some scope or realm of social life of the people in which publicity as a category (in sense of something that is appropriate to be exposed to general view) differs from or stands against the private as a category. “By the end of the 18th century, a ‘small but critically debating public sphere’ had formed in Germany. The reading public, which goes beyond the “republic of scholars,” consists primarily of citizens, city dwellers, and members of the middle class; not only did they invariably

absorb a small number of exemplary works [Standartwerke] intensively, but they also focused on newly published ones. Along with this – as if from the centre of the private sphere – arises a relatively dense network of public communication [öffentlicher Kommunikation]” (Habermas 1995, p. 35).

The concept of the public sphere is directly related to the idea of autonomy of citizens and of a given political community and their ability to influence through public opinion the bodies of political power through a free exchange of opinions and with the decisive role of the media². Public sphere and the notion of “publicly” originated as a concept in ancient Greece, in the language of the polis, and took shape in discourses and joint activity or praxis, as described by the German scholar (Habermas 1995, p. 56). In the historical development of society, this concept received its development, and as Habermas writes, even today “publicity continues to be an organizing principle of our political order” (Habermas 1995, p. 57). Habermas's concept of the public sphere in his first book from 1962 describes “a shift from publicity in the abstract sense...to the modern sense of the term in journalism, advertising and politics” (Outhwaite 1994, p. 8). A number of researchers accept this concept of the German philosopher as a scientific reaction to "rise of technocratic consciousness with its negative effects on public sphere" (Held 1980, p. 254) and especially to “define practical problems as technical issues” (Ibid.). Other author correctly notes that “Habermas's account of the public sphere in the 1990s has to be understood ... to the requirements of social integration” (O'Mahony 2013, p. 25). The concept of public sphere today needs to be rethought and clarified due to the ever-improving technologies of communication, among which the appearance of digital media and platforms (platform character) for creating and sharing content is in the first place. And recently, with the emergence of AI models based on large language models (LLM). According to scientists, the more text a chat bot can simultaneously perceive (in GPT-4, it is 32,000 characters), the more contexts it can place them in and therefore offer more full of matter and meaningful answers. Habermas himself further developed and updated his ideas about the public sphere in *A Theory of Communicative Action*, first published in two volumes in 1981³. There Habermas reflects on how the technological media, owned as private property (medium of money), "carry the danger of weakening it's [of the public sphere] communicative foundations" (O'Mahony 2013, p. 23). In September 2022, the German philosopher published a book called *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*⁴, in which he reflected on the changes imposed on the public sphere by the emergence of digital platforms and networks, through which public communication takes place. According to data from the National Statistical Institute of the Republic of Bulgaria, 87.3% of households in our country have access to the Internet (2022), and 96.1% of business enterprises also have such access⁵. The situation is similar in other countries in Europe and beyond. These data speak of the situation in which that digital “platformization” in the field of public communication is becoming a social fact that changes the way society

forms an opinion, as well as about the culture of communication itself. This also affects communication professions such as journalism, public relations, marketing communications, etc. Finally, Habermas's theory of the public sphere is related to the idea of deliberative democracy as an effective political system based on consensus and common negotiation (communication) of issues and problems important to society and the state. Therefore, it is also defined as normative, i.e. one that sets general rules for the maintenance of a shared democratic order, distinct from those in the private and intimate sphere. "The sphere of the market we call private, and the sphere of the family as the core [als Kern] of the private, we call intimate" (Habermas 1995, p. 120). These spheres are the site of different social or individual activity and perhaps of a different kind of communication. In the field of publicity normativity manifests itself in the political, in the construction of a new type of normative culture of the modern world and in general in the affirmation of normative foundations of democracy as a political project (O'Mahony 2013, pp. 3 – 4), in which process the media system plays an important role.

2. Discussion. Trends in theory of public sphere in online communication

Jürgen Habermas's theory of public sphere is perceived ambiguously by researchers of society, communications and the media. Especially in the field of English-language theorists, the ideas of the German philosopher and sociologist often face open criticism. This process is mostly related to the emergence of digital media, which change not only the form of publicity, but also affect specific professional topics in the field of journalism or the open sharing of information, its sources and, of course, its credibility and truthfulness. The ubiquity of social networks and the practically unhindered dissemination of information in them, especially those affecting important problems in the field of politics, history, social situation, social criteria of good and evil, permissible and impermissible, etc. change not only the communication but also the political and cultural landscape of a given society. According to University of Glasgow researcher, prof. Brian McNair, "the early public sphere was national in scope and reach, and the speed of information flow was low" (McNair 2016, p. 47). Even at the time of broadcasting journalism "the news about one country could be received as real time news in another country or would be disseminated to many countries simultaneously as in the case of 24-hour news channels such as CNN and BBC (from 1980 onwards)" (McNair 2020, p. 49). This process has a significant impact on politicians and the political sphere, because digital media enhance their organizational capacity. According to Shirky, "as with the printing press, the Internet spreads not just media consumption but media production as well" (Shirky 2011, p. 34). And as prof. McNair noted also the Internet introduces a participatory communicative space in which themes, issues or debates will emerge organically and to an extent, independently of mainstream news agenda in a particular territory (McNair 2016, p. 68).

According to Habermas' theses, "in the process of the emergence of civil public sphere [bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit], public power [in the sense of public authority] is concentrated in national and territorial state entities" (Habermas 1995, p. 225). The main position of Habermas and his followers lies in the concept of public realm or public sphere. It is key to effective democracy and is based on the communication process for mutual understanding and "speech situations", i.e. of the use of language as a social means to reach a common agreement or as O'Mahony puts it "essential epistemic and normative dimensions of politics can only be realized communicatively" (O'Mahony 2013, p. 133). This is the idea about deliberative democracy. Authors such as Chantal Mouffe have criticized these claims, observing that Habermas ultimately cannot definitively separate the public from the private (a mistake she believes John Rawls also makes) (Mouffe 2013, p. 92). There is a need to review the theoretical foundations of the theory of the public sphere in general, especially in the conditions of digital transformation in communication and society.

Modern digital platforms create a communication field that transcends national borders and thus increases the reach of the modern public sphere. This process started at an earlier historical stage, and the media once again played a major role in it. "The advent of a 'mass society' in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was characterized by universal media readership, together with universal suffrage and universal literacy" (O'Mahony 2013, p. 181). This observation is accurate, modern digital media with their ever-increasing technological capabilities reinforce this universal media readership, but it has both positive and negative sides for public communication and its influence. There is a misleading opinion that any complex technology, for example that of search engines, is "good" and therefore cannot lead to negative results. In this way, the unwanted result is reached, which can be defined as less critical thinking (Takis 2020, p. 247) and a completely not well argued desire for almost blind trust in the algorithms of digital platforms. This also applies to AI, albeit with much greater power. In an article in *The Economist*⁶, entitled *The Age of Pseudo cognition* and dedicated to the development of AI, the author makes an interesting comparison on the social effect associated with the inventions of the browser, the printing press and the practice of psychoanalysis. "One changed computers and the economy, one changed how people gain access and related to knowledge and one changed how people understood themselves". Browsers became platforms – "their role as a platform became fundamental". However, AI goes much further and again it is a matter of communication.

Habermas himself also offers an updated interpretation of the idea of the public sphere and publicity, caused by the emergence of new digital communication technologies in his book published in September 2022 and mentioned before. "In addition to its obvious advantages, the new technology also has highly ambivalent and potentially destructive effects on political publicity (Öffentlichkeit) in a national context. This is due to the way in which users of new media benefit from the provision of unlimited connection possibilities, i.e. "platforms" for possible communications with an arbitrary addressee"

(Habermas 2022, pp. 43–44). The “platformization” of public communication is what changes its structure, and also requires a change in the media and in the professions of all those involved in it. “For the media structure of public sphere, this platform character is actually what is new in the new media” (Habermas 2022, p. 44).

Digital media and platforms are clearly entering society more and more as a medium and a method not only to share information, but also to influence public opinion. According to data from the website Internetworldstats.com for the year 2022 the penetration of Internet in Bulgaria is 70% (for example in North Macedonia is 81%) with 4,805,716 users from 6,865,308 population⁷. Platformization requires a change in the professional activity of all those involved in public communication. Regarding journalism, the change from “broadcast to networked conversation” is being outlined, there is even talk of “people formerly known as the audience” (Fincham 2015, p. 174). Digital media makes the dissemination of information and especially news reports about various events almost limitless, and this raises questions about the credibility of that information itself. And also from the point of view of communication knowledge by the concept “misleading content” can be described everything related to the new digital communication technologies, “satire; clickbait; inaccurate captions, visuals or statistics; genuine content shared out of context; manipulated quotes and imagery; and outright fabricated stories” (Wardle 2020, p. 72). All these processes also affect Chantal Mouffe's objection to Habermas' initial thesis, which is that sometimes is difficult to distinguish between public and private, especially when the possibilities of digital technologies and platforms are used to collect and share information. From an ethical point of view, any information shared or expressed in a non-public situation – a conversation (face-to-face or through a technical means), an emotion, an intimate moment, political or religious beliefs, social or personal evaluations, personal or social confessions, etc. - distributed with the help or rather with the power of digital media without the express consent of the person or people who expressed it is something that does not meet the requirements of moral norms. Digital media and their possibilities for the ubiquitous dissemination of information seem to really blur the public-private distinction that Habermas accepts and which, according to him (with the emphasis on the public sphere), is the basis of social integration. He himself observes this in his book on the *new transformation* of public sphere from 2022 – that the Internet creates virtual spaces in which users can become authors. This makes conditions for the emergence of huge flows of information and data, which are not always reliable or at all probable, but often create confusion and disintegration in society. The already quoted author Claire Wardle even introduces a new term *malinformation* which is information based on reality that is shared to do harm to a person, organization and country. This term can refer to instances where “private information is made public...or genuine imagery is re-shared in the wrong context” (Wardle 2020, p. 72). It is clear that such actions, sometimes carried out by private individuals, but sometimes also by professional media and journalists or communication specialists in general, do not in any way contribute

to social integration, just on the contrary. But very often in the conditions of striving for the most recent publication (or making information open), especially in digital platforms, the media do not have the time or opportunity to verify the information, and striving to keep up with the times they provide sometimes frankly false information. “News industries are vulnerable precisely because of their competitive nature. If one news organization reports, it puts pressure on others to do the same – a particularly dangerous fact, as not all newsrooms undertake their own verification checks, seeing another newsroom's reporting as enough of an insurance policy” (Wardle 2020, p. 84). We see a decline in traditional media outlets that operate under journalistic norms of impartiality, accuracy, accountability, and so on, according to Cristina Lafont, a Professor of Philosophy in Illinois.

3. Discussion. Public sphere, digital media and politics

One of the consequences of the emergence of digital technologies on the public sphere is its expansion globally, or as some authors define it as a “globalized public sphere” (McNair 2016). As noted above, a key role in the transformation of the public realm, according to Habermas in his first book on the public sphere, is played by the media, which, German philosopher thinks, is a “new category of influence”. “As a result, a new category of influence appears – the power of the mass media, whose manipulations result in the principle of openness [Publizität] being deprived of innocence. The public sphere, at the same time pre-structured and occupied by the media, is transformed into an arena where topics, articles and reports serve to struggle not only for influence, but also to manage communication flows that can influence people's behaviour, a management whose strategic intentions are as hidden as possible” (Habermas 1995, p. 28). The advent of digital media deepens this influence. The problem of communication influence through hidden intentions is one that confronts us with reflections on democracy and its sustainability as a political system based on openness, freedom of speech, respect for the rights of all, inclusive of minorities and the possibility of free choice from competing political programs announced publicly. Free and independent media are part of the democratic political culture, which is also a sign of the maturity of a society, based on values such as tolerance, enlightenment, respect for diversity, and for the others and the possibility of discussion on all important political, moral or social topics. Habermas calls this social and political situation “deliberative politics” [die deliberative Politik] or deliberative democracy, i.e. such a political system based on “communicative premises” and on procedures that present an opportunity for open bargaining. “Deliberative politics should be conceived as a syndrome that depends on a network of fairly regulated bargaining processes and of various forms of argumentation, including pragmatic, ethical and moral discourses, each of which relies on different communicative presuppositions and procedures” (Habermas 1994, p. 6). The participation of the media in this process is undeniable, and Habermas himself in his 2022 book pays special attention to this process. Digital

media or platforms make access to information instantaneous and its distribution global. A letter reporting the Lisbon earthquake on November 1, 1775, dispatched by Sir Benjamin Knee on November 10, 1775 became a news story in the London Gazette on November 29 (McNair 2016, p. 49). New technologies fundamentally change the structure of communication, including the sense of time as part of culture. Nowadays, platformization, in addition to speed of distribution, also includes a personal (biased) point of view for the one who offers, creates or shares information in online media, based on digital platforms. “The description of the platforms as ‘media offers (Medienangebote) for connecting communicative content in any range’ is with a view to anything but the neutral presentation of algorithm-driven platforms, if they exist in the form of Facebook, YouTube, Instagram or Twitter”. (Habermas 2022, pp. 53 – 54). These observations reflect a general trend of a decline in confidence not only in journalism as an important and prestigious profession, but also in journalists themselves as people alien to public problems and their calling to report and publicly comment on events important to the nation. “A symptom of this is the dual strategy of spreading fake news and simultaneously fighting the “fake press” [Lügenpresse], which in turn causes uncertainty in public sphere [Öffentlichkeit] and in the mainstream media themselves” (Habermas 2022, p. 34). As is often the case in reader’s comments or other content in digital media prevails an almost hostile attitude to different policy, social group or even public figures. These sentiments are very strongly manifested through online platforms, in which the possibility of visualizing the message and thus reaching the largest possible audience plays an important role. This also leads to crises in communication professions, information attacks (so-called trolls) against journalists or the media. Moreover, this situation seems to lead, if not to violation, then at least to disrupting the structure of the media and their proper functions in a democratic society. Habermas is emphatic, “Maintaining a media structure that allows for an inclusive nature of publicity and a deliberative nature of public opinion for decision-making is not a political decision but a constitutional imperative” (Habermas 2022, p. 112) and this idea of his is brought out as cover logo of his book. However, this task exceeds the capabilities of journalists, advertisers, PR specialists and generally everyone involved in public communication.

4. Conclusions

The topic of the new changes in the public sphere, caused by the online platforms and social media and the shift they produce in professions such as journalism, public relations specialists, book publishing, etc., have to be investigated in depth. The technology that provides a continuous flow of information mainly through such gadgets as a PC, a laptop or even a smartphone, the online platforms to which they give access, change the structure of classic journalistic genres, sometimes deviating from professional and professionally-ethical journalistic standards and from the quality of the news reporting or analytical journalism content. The conclusion we can make is that digital media and their platform character are the main drivers of the new structural transformation

of the public sphere. Also digital media change the infrastructure of journalism and other communicative professions – the information spreads very quickly and globally through various online sites sometimes for the account of lack of editors, fact checkers or occasionally by aforethought told untruth. The new public sphere is more accessible for most of the people because of its platformization but it does not mean always a democratic tendency or better communicative content.

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NOTES

1. Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1962
2. By “public sphere” Habermas refers to a “realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (Held 1980, p. 260)
3. Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns, Suhrkamp, 1981
4. Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik. Suhrkamp, 2022
5. <https://www.nsi.bg/bg/content/2722/%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%84%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%86%D0%B8%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%89%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B2%D0%BE>, last visited 25.05.2023
6. The Economist, April 22 nd, 2023, 15-18
7. <https://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm#europe>, last visited 25.05.2023

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