

The Contemporary Public Sphere-Habermas' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Undoubtedly, the contribution of public opinion and involvement is a critical aspect in shaping and influencing the political, social, and democratic courses within a nation. The concept of the public sphere acknowledges the presence and studies the initiation of integral discourses conducted by the public. Indeed, the German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, instigated and established the understanding of such a concept. He critically highlights that the presence and participatory nature of the public sphere is crucial for a democracy. His theory, espoused in his 1985 *Theory of Communicative Action*, is predicated upon the principle that how we communicate, affects the content of that communication in the reasonable discourse of a mature democracy (Lock and Strong, 2010, p. 78). Nevertheless, it is evident that the development of technology and the internet has led to immense changes in the manner in which the public is able to become involved in such activities. Unquestionably, newspapers, writing letters, television and public meetings are no longer the only public sphere sources of the communication of information and the rise of social media and the virtual world provides many new sorts of opportunities for the exchange of views (Masip et al, 2019). Jürgen Habermas' theory was established over a decade before the advent of social media, which raises critical questions as to the placement of the public sphere in the context of the realm of social media. The public sphere has been fundamentally developed by digital communication and the emergence of the immediacy of opinion making via social media platforms, introducing a less personally interactive but much broader participatory base, increasingly sophisticated and more contentious (Mahlouly, 2013). This paper will examine the nature of communication in the contemporary public sphere and verify whether the rise of social media and the virtual world extends the public sphere or diminishes the level of rational conversation through exploring the public sphere; and monitor his structure, function and places of work, according to Habermas' theoretical vision. Moreover, to explain its components in the political and social field in the lifeworld. Also, to what extent of the contemporary sphere's applicability to Habermas' communicative theory. While Habermas' vision of the public sphere and communication was emphasized, it has been argued the perspective of Hannah Arendt and her "public realm". In addition, many contemporary thinkers, particularly Fraser, argued about the concept of the contemporary public sphere in the postmodern.

INTRODUCTION

The first effort to categorize, form public opinion, and legitimize state and government in post-war Western societies is Habermas' concept of the public sphere where it is possible to see the public sphere as a world of social life where public opinion can be formed (Habermas, 1991, p. 398). Habermas was neither the first nor the only one who worked on this concept, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant had previously provided a definition of the public sphere in his

book "What is the Enlightenment" in 1784, and yet Habermas's contribution regarding the public sphere is one of the first contributions to this concept in the twentieth century. The importance of these contributions is evident in rethinking concepts accompanying the public sphere, such as legitimacy, consultative democracy, and the formation of a free public opinion. Habermas created a space distinguished by being open to everyone according to a communicative reason focused on the public interest, while there were previous studies in the public sphere. In this paper, there will be details on this point.

In "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere", (Habermas, 1991) recounts his interpretation of the development of the "civil society" from its foundation in the market place of ancient Greek culture to the emergence of early finance and trade capitalism where a new social order was forming in the exchange of ideas through travel and trade (Habermas, 1991, p. 3-14). The public arena, the market, was viewed as a place where theories and opinions on governance attained a freedom of expression which imbued the conclusions of discourse with a degree of permanence, differentiated from the transitory nature of the private realm of the home, where decisions were made on the basis of necessity (Habermas, 1991, p. 14). The public and private realm separation became more pronounced as civil society gained political advancement in the depersonalisation of the state, as the household concerns emerged into the public sphere (Habermas, 1991, p. 17).

However, as time evolved, 'public' was no longer a designation of state ownership on behalf of the people but the epithet belonged to private citizens, particularly the 17th Century 'bourgeois intellectuals' who frequented the coffee shops of Europe to chat, reflect and examine the problems of the day. The sphere became political. From the perspective of defining the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed", (Habermas, 1974, p.201) places his theory of the socialising of citizens through community discourse into the political arena.

However, in the development of democracy from the era of monarchical state, the new middle classes of the 18th century began to express their private views in public discourse on the performance and priorities of their government. Simply, the public sphere "grew out of a specific phase of bourgeois society and [entered] into the order of the bourgeois constitutional state only as a result of a particular constellation of interests" (Habermas, 1964, p. 50).

The public sphere was conceived as a gathering of those pursuing particular interests, experts with valued knowledge and perspectives on areas of government, entrepreneurs and intellectuals (Habermas, 2006).

Educated, intelligent and informed consensus would provide a mediation pathway "between society and state, in which the public organises itself as the bearer of public opinion" (Habermas, 1964, p. 50). It is owing to this notion of informed contribution, direction and the ability of involvement of people in such political matters which emphasizes the importance of the public sphere towards influencing political steps in a democratic nation. Essentially, sociological integration in the public sphere developed political discourse as a mediating influence in the relationship between the citizen and state; founded on the rationality of argued outcomes as an amalgam of shared opinion (Susen, 2011).

RATIONALITY AND CONSENSUS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

(Rutherford, 2000) describes the public sphere as an assembly of persons engaged in a dialogue which generates opinions and perspectives which affirm or challenge decisions of state government, guiding and influencing liberal democracy by developing public consensus. In defining philosophical 'rationality' Habermas divides the concept in two: (i) the moral, emancipative nature of communicative reasoning which aims to promote consensus and (ii) the more manipulative method of strategic thinking, whose focus is a desired goal (Schaefer, et al, 2013). These are also distinguished as communicative versus instrumental reason. His somewhat idealistic thinking on the purpose of the public sphere is that the communicative discourse therein is not primarily the accomplishment of the participant's own aims but to seek harmony with the plans and perspectives of other contributors (Habermas, 1984). Indeed, an aspect of the perception of attaining a consensus is concomitant with the involvement of rational and selective representors.

Although Habermas acknowledges that strategic action is a social act, it is an act that distinguishes it from communicative action when outcomes and interests are achieved in the first, while understanding is desired in the second. The real communication is inherent in language for Habermas, meaning that deliberative action is based on the incorporation of linguistic actions into the philosophy of action. According to the core principle of his pragmatic theory of meaning, "we understand a speech act when we know the kinds of reasons that a speaker could provide in order to convince a hearer that he is entitled in the given circumstances to claim validity for his utterance—in short, when we know what makes it acceptable" (Habermas, 1998b, p. 232). It can be said that (the linguistic turn) and the shift from the subject's philosophy to communicative (intersubjective) philosophy formed the foundation from which Habermas tried to build (the rationality of communicative action).

Nevertheless, generally, it is not socially rational to undertake the strategic path of persuasion toward one's self-interest. Herein lies the basis of consensus in the public sphere, where the interests of all supersede those of the individual, an arguable contrast with the private realm of thinking where an element of control forms a significant feature of discussion. Life in the public sphere is more attractive where participants "behave neither like business or professional people transacting private affairs, nor like members of a constitutional order subject to the legal constraints of a state bureaucracy" but otherwise free to express their views (Habermas, 1974, p. 49). The consensus principle, the agreement reached after rational discourse in which all participants believe in the truth of their contribution serves the interests of deliberative democracy and improves the quality of governance (Lafont, 2006). Nevertheless, when considering the nature and vast uses of social media, it remains questionable as to whether the virtual world of social media has the effect of promoting this aim (or indeed if it was ever so to the extent that Habermas suggests).

THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN ACCORDANCE WITH HABERMAS' CONCEPT

As explicated above, the involvement of the populace in the public sphere was integral in deliberating upon key societal and political issues. Intrinsically, such discourses largely involved intellectuals who could produce educational contributions and findings to attain a consensus to the deliberation at hand. (Dahlberg, 2001) describes this as informal citizenship deliberation which enables rational public opinion to be formed that can critically guide

political systems as central to strong democracy. Indeed, it appears to expand the scope of influences on government but historically this was only insofar as those of means and property interests in society, the bourgeoisie, were considered worthy of listening to. This worthiness was undoubtedly accredited to their background, experience and competence in being able to fairly contribute.

Thus, on the face of it, Habermas' perspective excludes the lower classes, the proletariat, those who are seen as inarticulate and incapable of objective thought (Negt and Kluge, 1993, p. 57). Consideration has to be given to this differentiation through investigation of what is meant by rationality in public sphere discourse and the reaching of a consensus, which is also pertinent to the question of the validity of the role of social media in that realm. This historically represents the class qualification for participating in public consensus forming; represented by the bourgeois class. While philosophically Habermas's work can be taken to justify that in that he favours rationality and giving reasons, and some groups are more seen as able to speak rationally than others. Habermas emphasises the public sphere in terms of members, or arguably more accurate, participants, and their intellectual skills and capacity to listen and understand diversity, but there is a differentiation in how favourable conditions of communication (Habermas, 1992).

The "economically dependent masses" will only be listened to when they gain "the equivalent of the social independence of private property owners" (Habermas 1992, p. 434). It should be noted that the rational public sphere and opinion theory of Habermas has come under much criticism from opponents who have presented new arguments. The main critique is linked to the fact that an elite and most certainly utopian idea that has never existed is the notion of the public sphere. In the meanwhile, another critique emerges from the feminist movement, which notes that Habermas establishes a public domain that does not cover all facets of culture, such as: women or members are the lowest class of society (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11). Unquestionably, this contentious area has a superseding undertone in relation to the necessity of qualification in participants of the public sphere. Previously, as per Habermas' ideology, such a prerequisite need was apparent in being fulfilled, however, social media substantially disregards such an aspect, where many of the digital dialogues lack communication rationality, since they are mostly instrumental communicative communication, self-beneficial or strategic social communication.

TECHNOLOGY, SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE VIRTUAL SPHERE- COMMUNICATIVE ADVANCEMENT

Inevitably, in due course, the media in the form of newspapers played an integral part in the "democratisation of Europe by creating an environment suitable for discussion and agreements between the citizens involved politically" (Cela, 2015, p. 195). Although Habermas emphasises "physical presence" in his early works, from meetings in coffee shops to public gatherings in civic halls, he subsequently includes in the public sphere the "virtual presence of scattered readers, listeners or viewers linked by public media" (Habermas, 1996, p. 361). This not only broaden the scope of the notion of public sphere but demonstrates a willingness and acknowledgment of the communicative advancement that has surfaced .

Because podcasting provides the tools needed to participate in politics directly or to have direct representation in reconciliating politics, the podcast ecosystem offers a distinguished liveliness

and exuberance as well as diversified points of view. This is crucial in order for individuals to have their democratic will and freedom. Moreover, this form of politics resulted out of podcasting can guarantee major remedial action to what Habermas suggested regarding the perfect public sphere (Habermas, 1989a). When podcasting provides such a mediatic and liberal space for those who lack the potential to express their ideas and opinions, such a group will enjoy a cultural power and the sense of belonging to their home country (Forde et al. cited in Van Vuuren, 2006).

In addition, the process of podcasting, despite the impossibility to have an ideal salon as suggested by Habermas, provides a great opportunity for those intermingling groups of the public and all spheres in order to get an effective discourse in a way that goes in parallel with what (Fraser, 1990) and many other scholars view. Podcasting, as the traditional theory of public sphere views, provides a chance to maintain the absent abilities of mass media. (Blumler, 1992) argues that traditional public broadcasting is merely a false space of the public sphere. In other words, it is an area where media depicts and frames the ways of behaving in a civil discourse. "It has been described as a service of the 'microdynamics of democracy'" (Dahlgren, 2006, p. 282). This can be done through involving the public with crucial matters and through providing them with some evocative information to inflame their wish in informative conversation. As a result, a rational deliberation is created in an indirect manner through podcasting. This, in turn, will evoke the image of the common concept of Habermas concerning the public sphere (Calhoun, 1992).

The rise of social media platforms, in which previously private information is registered in profile building in order to communicate ideas in the public arena on any socio-political subject upon which they wish to express an opinion ostensibly expands the public sphere beyond territory and national issues (Cela, 2015). Although not a part of this examination, the role of social media goes far beyond the communication of ideas and is a marketing tool for commercial interests, brand promotion, increasing website traffic and generating leads through consumer engagement. However, this study explicitly focuses on the publishing of ideas and opinions, an invitation to discuss and debate, without the logistical or territorial restrictions of traditional media which had previously been the major source of news (Fuchs, 2014, p. 185).

Social media aids the dissemination of information governments may be reticent about making available to the public arena, and fosters interest groups and communities which seek to promote socio-political interests that would not otherwise have a voice in traditional media, never mind the corridors of power. Although, vastly distinct from the origin of the notion of public sphere as alluded by Habermas, it is evident that the underlying rationale, purpose and importance is still viable if not extended through such communicative advancements. Further, now any participant in the democratic exercise of free speech can make their hitherto private views known to the public, without effective challenge and unlimited by education, intellect or indeed stake in society, subject only to the rules of the private corporate platforms on which they are posted (Brannon, 2019). Notably, this may be considered the exercise of direct democracy in a variable virtual world, or alternatively, a direct contradiction to the values of Habermas' public sphere through valued participants.

SOCIAL MEDIA

(Manning, 2014) describes social media as part of the development from centralised broadcast media, such as newspapers and television, through which the citizen would receive his news, guidance on his views and thereby formulate his socio-political opinion, into the interactive age. (Dahlgren, 2005) considers the modern public sphere as composed of (i) institutional structures, including mass media, the economy and control, promoting (ii) representation, which involves free speech, access to power and inclusivity, and (iii) interaction, the expression of a plurality of views, “the classic idea that democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other”.

Unquestionably, the internet has provided new ways of communication, unrestricted by the physical, logistical obstacles of access to information, exchanging information and organising social and political groups to pursue shared interests without the limitations of locality or community (Cela, 2015). Arguably, the elimination of direct physical presence in relation to a social media public sphere, rejuvenates and strengthens Habermas’ ideologies for the modern day. Governments and those vying to govern have access to a community, national and global audience to promote debated and views, permitting interactive commentary and contribution (Pereira et al 2012, p. 492). It may also be used by interest groups to focus on public, social issues which participants believe receives insufficient coverage in traditional media and political process, for example petitions against the deportation of non-national individuals, advancing causes of refugee welfare and highlighting injustice (Gonzales, 2016).

However, it arguably reduces the rationality and quality of discourse by the lack of physical interaction between participants and immediacy of reaction which reduces time for reflection. This is perhaps to be expected in a postmodern society which reflects a decline in hierarchical institutions and rigid social norms, where individual choice reigns through an entitlement to mass participation (Inglehart, 1997). Inglehart wrote about this social development before social media entered as an essential feature of modern life and it reflects that Habermas would, it is suggested, describe as a growth of democratic involvement of the broader society. It enables a communication link between the citizen and the centres of power (Dahlgren, 2005). This suggests that Habermas views the involvement of the public in such matters to be supreme in comparison to the arguably reduced efficacy in practice.

THE PUBLIC SPHERE IN CONJUNCTION WITH SOCIAL MEDIA ADVANCEMENTS

In the context of Habermas’ conception of the public sphere, the primary focus remains on two factors. As explicated before, firstly, that the focus of the discourse ought to be of social or political relevance. Secondly, that those involved are capable in being able to steer movement towards requisite changes through their proficiency. Indeed, any discourse via social media does not filter or segregate participants in prior irrespective of their position, knowledge or education as in the past. (Bruns, 2015) argues that such orthodox mindset is now outdated, even defunct, and requires transformation or more likely replacement by a new structure for discourse predicated on the virtual sphere. Arguably, the required revision is somewhat tackled by social media advancement in the public sphere realm. Indeed, the virtual sphere allows any contentious discriminatory barriers present in Habermas’ model to be eradicated by enabling unparalleled access to participants.

As such, arguably, social media is not just a development of Habermas' public sphere but a new realm where "the spread of political and public debate across multiple actors, platforms, and publics remains an ongoing process" (Bruns, 2015, p. 18). It may in any case be time for the Habermas idealised coffee shop philosophy to be adjusted (Webster 2013, p. 25). These perspectives, which undermine decades of a prevailing philosophy of deliberative participatory democracy, will be examined further. In addition, undoubtedly, the ultimate or sole purpose of utilizing social media is not in correlation to Habermas' notion of the public sphere involving political discourse, movement and change. Social media has a myriad of uses. However, this does not undermine its value for political protest and mobilisation, as exemplified by the pro-democracy upheaval in Hong Kong in 2014, where social media played an integral role in organisation (Agur, 2019). This can hardly be said to promote the rational discourse of Habermas' public sphere but is indicative of the use of the faculty of intercommunication to force change. Subsequently, this demonstrates, that where need be, social media is undoubtedly capable of promoting the rationale behind Habermas' ideologies.

SOCIAL MEDIA IN CONFLICT WITH HABERMAS' PUBLIC SPHERE

Digital technology has, it is suggested revitalised a public sphere which was declining in activity and influence, "subject to dramatic change, one might even argue that it is on the verge of extinction" (Boeder, 2005). (Kruse and Flinchum, 2018) however suggest the virtual world do not provide the comfort and freedom of Habermas' sphere and many find it gives too many opportunities for harassment and surveillance, restricts political discourse to similar thinkers, and ultimately, social media should be used for pleasurable interactions. As such, even though the internet is pervasive and influential, expands opportunities for representation and interaction, it remains relatively underutilised for political discourse, generating its income through consumer product targeting whilst enabling family and friend chats (Dahlgren, 2005). Apart from this, unquestionably, Habermas' political sphere is composed of "mediated political communication ... carried on by an elite" (Habermas, 2006, p. 416). However, this renewed public sphere allows all to confer irrespective of their background, intellect, and questionable competency in providing satisfactory contribution to reach concessions as in the past which can damage the discourse. Admittedly, even though, it may extend the public sphere, the ease of immediate opinion making, reflecting prejudices or bias without effective challenge, diminishes the level of rational conversation and changes intellectual dialogues in the philosophical political and religious fields and thus the quality of democracy (Masip et al, 2019). Furthermore, although on the face of it, social media has democratised conversation by making access to opinions available to everyone this does not mean it promotes the development of rational discourse essential to the sociological and political advancement of society. Access to information, inclusivity, involving social status disregard, opportunities for universal participation and interaction are all facets of both the traditional and new public sphere (Khan, 2014). In considering the pre-internet effect of mass media which bought political participation to a wider audience, Habermas found that the public sphere had become a potentially violent battle ground for opposing purveyors of propaganda and self-interest rather than a place of mediation (Habermas, 1991). This is arguably exacerbated by social media, which can thus, by turn, be considered to undermine rather than enhance the public sphere of discourse and reason.

Undoubtedly, consensus is a profoundly difficult goal in a post-modern capitalist society of entrenched perspectives and the absorption of the private sphere into a virtual world of

ineffectively challenged opinions made without the necessity of justification of rational thought (Bayer et al, 2019). Furthermore, its utility as a propaganda dissemination method by politicians, self-interested groups, even computerized 'bots' undermines the cogency and consensus values of public sphere social cohesion (Skolkay, 2019). Notably, a wider target audience through social media with the support of a virtual community is supplemented by interaction with politicians and rulers through their own sites in a manner which breaks down the logistical barriers of the Habermas public sphere. It can be said that this realm is so distinct from the previous position than it is difficult to equate in terms of efficacy.

MAJOR ISSUES AND POINTS PERTINENT TO THE STUDY

The separation of the virtual sphere from the physical and the difference in the expression and methods of opinion reflects on the veracity of Habermas' imperatives of rationality and consensus in socio-political discourse. The nature of discussion, and indeed the way in which participants formulate their views, is indicative of the structure and character of the comparative spheres which emphasises the difference. It is an argument for the proposition that the virtual is not an extension of the physical, and so the 'rules and outcomes must differ. Social media has broadened political and social interaction across all age groups, the marginalised and otherwise excluded, including teenagers. It offers participation in debate but not in democratic influencing, save for a few popular bloggers. Democratising of the participation of the people is not an aim of the commercial platforms, as it is the aspect of promotions which generates profitable attention and income

OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY

In common with many of the academics considered in this study, Salikov points out that social media has instituted a fundamental transformation of the public sphere and its public-private boundaries with its facilitation and networking content of highly political content communicated without borders. There exists no longer the unified public sphere envisioned by Habermas but a mosaic of different public spheres. This arguably makes the point that social media is not an extension of Habermas' conception but a new and separate forum for communicative exchange, operating on an entirely different set of rules for participants.

The nature of contributors to political debate on social media has fundamentally changed, the public sphere no longer confined to intellectuals but now open to "non-professional political actors who can use social media as a communicative platform to convey their political views to a wide audience", effectively, anyone, including the proletariat (Salikov, 2018). It is of note that the new inclusion of marginalised groups in a fragmented virtual sphere is considered by Salikov as a risk to the inclusion of their perspectives in a public, political arena rather than a promotion of democratic participation. He considers that such groups are vulnerable to the fake news purveyed on the internet and have an inability to reach a consensus, further isolating themselves (Salikov, 2018). The sites may offer egalitarian participation, but equal attention is not. In turning to Arendt's theory, Salikov describes her perspective of the "public realm" as a place created by the people to be noticed, recognised, artificially separating them from their private lives where they can freely indulge in politics in a "special human world". It cannot be merged with the private, but they complement each other. The competitive nature of this realm marks a significant difference from Habermas' sphere and Salikov provides a comparison of similarities and distinction of the two theories which aids understanding of both philosophies.

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