

Rationalising The Digital Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the suitability of Jürgen Habermas' concepts about the rationality of communicative actions in relation to the Internet and social media. The paper investigates the contemporary digital realm, analysing whether it functions as an expansion of the public sphere classic conceptualised by Habermas, with the aim of improving the level of rational communication. To accomplish this, the paper analyses the characteristics of the digital era, exploring Habermas's stance on social media and contemporary media. The paper analyses Habermas's concepts about the rationality of communication and supports the arguments with relevant literature to investigate the impact of current communication tools, including the Internet and its applications, on enhancing the quality of rational discourse. In order to accomplish this, it is important to thoroughly examine the key subjects pertaining to Habermas's philosophy of communication and assess its relevance to the modern virtual public sphere.

INTRODUCTION

The new interdisciplinary method of thinking developed by the Frankfurt School, 'the critical theory', aims to apply philosophical ideas to diagnose social problems. The purpose of philosophy here is to deal with and overcome the obstacles to actual communication, benefiting from available multilingualism and the ability to interpret. Moreover, this philosophy is interested in the lifeworld through bridging the gap among the conflicting parties and reducing dispute and violence. The concept of public sphere has had a great position and a considerable interest in Western political and philosophical thought. The public space is one of the concepts which is inherent in communicative rationality, and it is the one with which Habermas was occupying himself throughout his writings.

As Habermas states, the concept "Public" comes from Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Therefore, he stresses the spatial dimension of public sphere. The term denotes where goods are produced and exchanged (Habermas, 1989). It also indicates the conceptual dimension that forms a communicative structure which is embedded in the Lifeworld through its base which is made up of the civil society (Hinton, 1998).

Habermas analysed the public sphere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the period of the rise of public sphere at the hands of the bourgeois class at the time. He also monitored the workplaces of the public sphere, such as literary salons, newspapers and magazines which accompanied the emergence of the bourgeoisie with the economic development at the level of production and the development of the industrial capitalist market. Then Habermas presented a linguistic answer, which is the linguistic turn and the move from the philosophy of self to the philosophy of communication. This has provided a viable solution to fix the relationship

between the lifeworld and the system. This has formed the basis of what Habermas wanted to build, i.e., the rationality of the communicative action.

One of the most important tasks of the public sphere mentioned by Habermas in the eighteenth century is the use of the public sphere to have rational and critical discussions. Then it developed until it became the frame of the structure of the civil society and a deliberative mediator between the lifeworld and the system.

This paper seeks to uncover whether this contemporary sphere is an extension of the classical one in terms of the rationality of communication, the nature of its participants and its restrictions, or that this contemporary sphere is just of a different structure that has no relation whatsoever with Habermas's sphere. To achieve this, we need to study the most prominent topics related to Habermas's philosophy of communication and how applicable they are to the contemporary virtual public sphere. Therefore, the paper is going to investigate the features of the digital age, focusing on how it has affected the relationship between individuals and their communication. The result will include the integration that modern and digital means have had, in addition to the conflicts to which they may lead concerning societal relationships. Habermas's attitude towards social media and modern means will also be investigated, especially to see how the internet has played an important role to liberate citizens and public opinion as well as to restrict autocratic powers and authoritarian regimes. Finally, the research sheds light on both the historical and philosophical extension of the contemporary sphere, including recent studies of prominent scholars and researchers such as (Douglas, 2014), (Bennet, 2012), Howard Rheingold, and others.

THE DIGITAL AGE

In recent years, the pace of global transformations has accelerated very much in a way that humanity has never witnessed before, so anyone interested and observing the world can simply notice two issues. The first one is the tremendous developments in the methods and ways of communication among people, where the digital communication ones have become a widespread universal phenomenon crossing, in its multiple applications, all the traditional red lines used to separate people. The second one is the strong presence of wars, clashes and violence in the complete absence of understanding, reconciliation and sharing the interest of the common welfare.

This era is called the digital age in order to indicate a new phase in which the applications established in the digital information coding system have occupied large areas of people's use of computers and electronic devices. These devices have also brought with them many economic, social and political changes, as if we entered a new era that has started in the beginning of the new millennium. Therefore, the concept of 'the digital age' is used to describe the moment when everyone is connected with the others and is able to communicate, relying on technology to get access to the information via the Internet. It is worth noting here that the digital age has started in the second millennium when electronic computers connected to the internet have spread at homes, companies and stores. Moreover, schools and academic institutions have also had their own digital information structure.

The physical means of communication have gradually evolved as they went through several phases from mechanical to electrical and then electronic ones, where the latter depends on the

internet and its applications. Accordingly, it has been finally called the means of digital communication, as communication has reached its peak in the digital age. Many new digital communicative applications have spread on a wide range due to the characteristics they have such as the rapidity and instantaneousness of ideas and information. Being a network and a cross-border technology, social media allows communication in ways that traditional media unfortunately cannot. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration when we say that the concept of 'the digital age' is able to describe the moment in which everyone becomes connected with the others regardless of their place.

PHILOSOPHY AND THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE AGE

Focusing on the role that philosophy plays in the light of the major global transformations is a need. Hence come the next questions: Did philosophy and its topics have a role in the occurrence of these transformations or even in determining their directions and paths? Did these transformations, on the other hand, have any noticeable effect on the course of philosophy, its issues and interests? Most people tend to what confirms that philosophy was really influenced by this transformation without having an obvious role in directing the course of what is happening. However, the theorists of philosophy have spoken of letting applied ethics be as an important topic in the future of philosophy. This is the work that Habermas was engaged in through his communicative theories emphasizing the ethics and conditions of communication. Habermas believes in what is called (the fusion of horizons), which means his stress on the need of philosophy to play its complete role in solving all the hanging issues related to understanding and also its necessity to further expand people's perspectives of what bring them closer. In addition to that, his emphasis on the roles of the "listener" and the "speaker" must be taken into consideration since both of them are very significant in everyday dialogue among people, in elaborating a common horizon among them, and in breaking the incorrect stereotype picture (Borradori, 2013: 37).

Here, three main goals of philosophy appear. The first one lies in the ability not only by dealing with all the obstacles of actual communication, but also overcoming them. The second is to get benefit from its capability of multilingualism and interpretation, and finally, its interest in the lifeworld by bridging the gap between the conflicting parties on the one hand and reducing the circle of discord and violence on the other.

Since the use of the means of communication via the internet and its social applications is increasing rapidly day after another, so this down to earth fact requires a quick development of theories related to communication which reflects the importance of studying these variables and their effect on the establishment of humane communication which is the work that Habermas has done in his writings, including *The Structural Change of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) and *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* (1992). These works are the main sources for establishing the public sphere in Habermas.

HABERMAS'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND MODERN MEDIA

While searching Habermas's old writings and even the recent ones, specialists could not find any clear indication, which shows his interest in how big the changes that affected the public sphere with the rise of the means of communication and the digital media. This discovery caused a lot of frustration for many specialists and for those interested in his communicative

theories. There is a specialist who is also interested in Habermas's writings and ideas and who comes to post in his blog that he was very frustrated because of Habermas neglect to talk about the Internet as a communication sphere. This man is called Alex Burns, a specialist in digital communication technology Habermas. In a conference related to (International Communication Association) that Burns attended and Habermas was a key speaker in it, he participated in a study entitled (Political Communication in the Society of Media: Does Democracy still have a Knowledge Dimension?) (Habermas, 2006: 411-426).

There was no mention whatever in his speech of modern communication technology. Burns has reached a conclusion that Habermas either does not want or he is unable to modulate the public sphere that he himself established at the beginning of the 1960s, to be a model for political communication in modern societies that have moved from the age of mass communication to the age of digital network. Moreover, Habermas may not be fully aware of the essence of the Internet where he did not make it a model for the public sphere, and he only spoke about it briefly on the sides of the previously mentioned lectures (Geiger, 2009: 5).

After reading Habermas's published lectures, I can assure you that he has never been interested in the Internet in general, but his brief mentioning about it on the sides of his lectures, despite being short, is very significant, which made Burns' attitude towards Habermas inaccurate. Habermas believes that the role of the Internet differs according to the different political and democratic contexts in which it is located, as it may not have a democratic advantage unless it is found in a certain context. The Internet is capable of undermining the role of authoritarian regimes in the control they impose on their people and the public opinion (Habermas, 2006: 423).

By applying this view on what Habermas said about the relationship of the *Lifeworld* with the *System* in the second part of his book *The Theory of Communication Action* (Habermas, 2015: 137-139), it can be said that the Internet may lead an influential role in the *system* (which represents money and power) (ibid: 270), especially in the countries ruled by authoritarian regimes, more than its influence in the *lifeworld* (which represents the environment in which symbolic and cultural production is re-produced to society) (ibid: 137). The important question is that: is it possible to have a digital lifeworld that differs from the traditional lifeworld described by Habermas?

It seems that Habermas's attitude does not see the Internet as a public domain, despite his continuous assertion that it provides many chances to participate in the discussion of public interest issues such as politics. That was his answer when asked about his attitude towards the Internet in an interview with the Financial Times magazine (Stuart Jeffries, "A Rare Interview with Jurgen Habermas," Financial Times, 30/04/2010). Therefore, he implicitly recognizes that the Internet has provided some conditions for the public domain. On this basis, it can be said that Habermas stopped following the technical developments of the public sphere specialized in media and communication, at the level of the mass media, such as television and radio, and was unable to continue to follow up to reach what digital technology brought. This could be for reasons: his age or the lack of understanding the essence of the Internet and its digital communicative applications.

Furthermore, Howard Rheingold, a researcher specialized in the social and political implications of digital media and virtual societies, has published on his blog an article entitled: Habermas asks a surprising question about the Internet and the public sphere (Rheingold: 2007). In this article, he presents analysis of Habermas's attitude towards the Internet and his relationship with the public sphere. After having met him personally in a public seminar, he asked him about his opinion in the situation of the public sphere now, after the digital media replaced the mass media, as many people were able to use the Internet as a means of political expression. According to Ringgold Habermas, however, did not provide a satisfactory explanation which led Ringgold to reach the conclusion that Habermas simply does not understand the Internet! Stuart Geiger relied on Ringgold's Blog and his views on Habermas in answering his research question: "Does Habermas understand the Internet?" (Geiger, 2009). Whatever the case is and regardless of the reality of Habermas's attitude towards the Internet and the new social media, it is necessary to distinguish between Habermas's philosophy of public sphere and the rationality of communication on the one hand, and between the class from which Habermas made a model for his (bourgeois) philosophy, where it is possible to transfer Habermas's philosophy of the contemporary digital sphere, or building on its basis and make use of it, which is the thing that this paper is trying to uncover and identify.

THE DIGITAL AGE AND COMMUNICATION

In the digital age, the debate about the public sphere has increased as it has become more complex and diverse, as the validity of postmodern critique of Habermas's concept of the public sphere cannot be denied, yet Habermas's legacy provides important theoretical resources for understanding the public sphere and its relationship to democracy. The public sphere today is subject to a radical change as the discourse of communication via the Internet has replaced the speech of cafes and salons, the discussion of public issues, and the formation of public opinion on the web. Accordingly, does this shift in discourse enhance the quality of rational communication or does it only offer a shallow alternative?

In his notion concerning the public sphere, Habermas differentiates between two aspects. The first one is historical, in which an efficacious feature and qualification intended to establish a public agreement can be found. The other aspect is philosophical, as Habermas's writings can be seen as works justifying and promoting rational thinking and good reasoning, and some groups are found more rational than others in terms of reasoning and speaking about issues. Therefore, the answer to this inquiry is going to be from historical and philosophical points of view.

THE HISTORICAL EXTENSION/DIMENSION OF THE CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPHERE

Generally, and traditionally speaking regarding the public sphere, salons, clubs, and cafés have always been the places where people liked to meet each other to talk and discuss general issues of common interest to everyone. However, modern social media applications such as Facebook, X (Twitter) and others have provided virtual places in the form of pages, public groups, or even personal pages of intellectuals who left these pages accessible to the public. Now the question that comes to mind is the following: Do modern means of communication, such as the Internet and its communicative applications, contribute in raising the quality of rational dialogue and in reviving the public debate, or does it merely offer a weak alternative to this communicative discourse?

Theorists have had different arguments in terms of various fields concerning how to apply the concept of public sphere and the possibility to have realistic democracy, especially on social networking sites. Thus, it is arguable whether social media gives a more dominating power to authoritative parties, so that they become stronger or, conversely, it gives support and aid to oppose dominating powers, in addition to the possibility of forming a public opinion which is based on rationality and is not subject to any political authority.

Douglas Kellner (2014) argues that Habermas's investigation of public sphere presents essential theoretical information and references to comprehend this concept as well as its relation to democracy. However, recent developments in terms of technology and the new capitalistic world order necessitate conducting a wider study and analysis of public sphere and Habermas's work on it. We can also find that Andrew Murray has devoted the twentieth chapter of his book *The Law of Information Technology* (Murray, 2013) to talk about the virtual public sphere, in which he directly displays his idea of the possibility of considering this area as an alternative and an extension of the public domain and in the way that Habermas presented it. However, he immediately got to know that there were many obstacles which stand in the way preventing him from achieving it as desired by Habermas.

In addition, James Bohman debates in his study entitled *Expanding Dialogue: The Internet, the Public Sphere and Prospects for Transnational Democracy* (Bohman, 2004: 131-155) that in the light of the new changes, it is a must to rethink of both the concepts of democracy and the public sphere outside the frames of their ancient historical forms. Accordingly, there is a need to observe them in a new look that could be up to the level of universality. Thereupon, *Deliberative Transnational Democracy* can be considered as *Realistic Utopia* according to Rawls's term, as it broadens the political possibilities of deliberative democracy (ibid, 152).

In his turn, Lincoln Dahlberg suggested that the expansion of the public sphere via the internet would be faced with a number of restrictions and challenges. One reason is that besides the creation of deliberative spheres, people who have been interacting and intermingling in one cultural group must be urged and encouraged to take part in this sphere. However, with the emergence and development of social media, the similarities among cultural groups have attracted the individuals to participate although Dahlberg thought that such similar features might be regarded as hindrance to the process of interaction and communication on social sites on the internet, taking into account that the modern community tends towards individualism and materialism (Dahlberg, 2001: 615-633).

According to Douglas Kellner, the internet can play a two-faced tool. On one hand, it creates new public spheres to play a political role in spreading and stimulating democracy in the world. However, it may increase, on the other hand, the political power and domination through enabling politicians to manipulate and control minds. As a result, Kellner gives fair warning to the potential of having an increasing political domination as well as mind and media control though the exploitation of social media. However, there are many other researchers and theoreticians who mention the importance of social media in order to have the ability to distribute power equally among its owners, so that the latter can re-examine social discussions in the right time. This, in turn, will create and promote new forms and sorts of public opinion which are more flexible and thriving. Moreover, these new types of public opinions are less vulnerable to the authorities of dominating powers (Broersma and Graham, 2016: 89-103).

In this respect, (Ratto and Bolar, 2014) argue that the use of social media has contributed to enable people to respond and oppose, having new ways to apply enjoy their democracy. In other words, with the internet and new social media, citizens have the potential to be proactive rather than being reactive in terms of intervening and responding to the information received. This will support them to have their rights and democracy to face manipulation and disinformation.

Going against Habermas's writing on this topic, many post-modernists express their doubts about having the liberating possibility to have this frame of public agreement via rationality and discussion. Among these individuals, Nancy Fenton argues that the internet guarantees new political frames which are represented by new experiences that are modelled by pace and sphere. She, however, sheds light on the bias of these technological tools, as they work with the existence and intervention of absolute powers and authoritative manipulators (Fenton, 2016: 149-176). Meanwhile, dominating powers that keep doing their best to stop the work of public opinion and its formation have always tried to make these public opinions sound wrong with the use of media, which, according to Clay Shirky, urges democratic authorities to "welcome and encourage free and open access to social media as a tool to spread democratic ideals worldwide" (Shirky, 2011: 28-41).

(Rheingold, 1994) shows that the business of information and communication technology has economic and material aims, just like any other trading activity. However, the main aim of telecommunications is to enable people to have tools and means that make them influential over other people through affecting their thoughts and opinions. Whether a person is among those who are influencing or those who are being influenced depends on their political power and media control. Hjarvard has also shown the impact of globalisation on the public sphere and public opinion, attributed to the change and flexible use of social media in our modern world. This, in turn, has increased the control of political powers through operating on massive impact that social media has on a global scope. "The aggregation of public opinion during this process takes place both nationally and transnationally, and the media representation of this transnational public opinion acquires its own momentum" (Hjarvard, 2000).

Other scholars have worked on investigating the effective aspects of modern social media, in comparison with traditional media, to show its effect on the political process and power. As a result, these studies show the possibility to apply the theory of the public sphere on the deliberative democracy and the formation of public opinion, particularly on social networking sites.

The work of Jan Fernback and Brad Thompson has investigated the democratic power of groups in the virtual world and suggested that this potential which virtual communities have enables citizens in realistic societies to build up their democracy and power. "It seems most likely that the virtual public sphere brought about by [computer-mediated communication] will serve a cathartic role, allowing the public to feel involved rather than to advance actual participation" (Fernback and Thompson, 1995). Furthermore, (Golding, 1990: 85) alerts the public to what he calls "a technological determinism" which he regards as a complete answer to the problem of "political communications in the promises of new technologies." In addition, (McQuail, 1983: 105) notices the attributes of great and common media contents, depicting them as being

“variously, repetitive, infantile, thematically limited, undisturbing, ideologically tendentious, empty, nasty, anti-intellectual and subordinating content to form and techniques.”

In his turn, Vincent Miller argues that communication via modern social media does not necessarily lead to the promotion of a societal change. One reason is that this communication is pointless and has meaningless ends, so the relationships have no remedy or harmony. In other words, this idle communication does not promote any public sphere in the end (Miller, 2015).

Again, (Rheingold, 1994) expresses his optimism concerning the creation of a new chance in this respect, regarding that a decisive judgement about this issue is still too early. He also proposes the necessity to activate the participation to use social media on the purpose of having a core democracy, on the pretext that electronic means and social media offer a good channel to have effective communication and successful publication of information (Fernback and Thompson, 1995; Foucault, 1979). For example, we may consider Foucault's vision of the “panoptic society”, which suggests that the spread of social media and other technology will make it impossible to have independence in most aspects of life, including economy, culture politics and social relationships (Friedland, 1996).

On the other side of the coin, there are other scholars, such as Lance Bennett, Jason Gainous and Kevin Wagner, and Lauren Langman, who, unlike those who see that social media results in only idle citizens, view the internet and social media as being effective tools in terms of forms of democracy. In other words, they view social media as a weapon that enables citizens to intervene in the democratic and political process instead of keeping silent and motionless while receiving the news (Bennet, 2012). Consequently, this new model of communication can result in societal division and personal politics, which in turn will lead to the emergence of shared activities.

(Bennet, 2012), for example, investigates the newly established personal politics which, according to him, “has captured contemporary discursive spaces like social media, triggering debates and proving to be a successful means of protest.” (Gainous and Wagner, 2014) study the impact of social media in democracy and politics, taking into consideration how it has been beyond the traditional media. As a result, there have been new forms of communication in politics. (Langman, 2005) also adopts a modern theory which sees that public spheres and spaces can be made virtually with the basis of the latest technology and networks, which can provide convenient means and environment to have the potential to own a political power and to achieve social equity.

Among all these talks and critiques about social media, one can argue in a critical point of view this matter in relation to societal structure. In fact, the discussions raised either meet or stand against Habermas's concepts and view of public spheres at cafés and salons. In such a context, the people engaged in this process are well-educated and have good reasoning as well as critical thinking concerning social matters and politics. In addition, such people are against powerful authorities and capitalist groups whose concerns are merely economic and materialistic. Besides, it can be argued that in contrast with the conditions that prevailed in cafés and salons, including the ideal discussions that took place during the eighteenth century there, social media gives a good opportunity for citizens to express their opinions against the governments and

their oppressive procedures. In fact, this still applies to a restricted number of groups and individuals.

Concerning the public participation on social networking sites, in particular, and on the internet, in general, Thornton identifies a shift that changes the identity of the user, turning them from a “citizen” into a “consumer.” Accordingly, advertising has become a discursive tool that is common to be used. In this context, “‘Public’ slides into ‘publicity’ as the notion of ‘character’ is steadily replaced by ‘image’” (Fernback and Thornton, 1996). However, Thornton believes that the internet gives the chance to revive and activate the concept of the public sphere. “If Internet use expands into middle-income groups, lower-income groups and women, it may yet present a real opportunity for greater participation, democratic communication and a true revitalisation of the public sphere” (ibid).

As a result, many people have not yet experienced social networking. However, matters point to an increased use of social networks, which in turn expands the number of people who may participate in public and national discussions on political, cultural and social concerns. Such deliberations and discussions provide an opportunity to form public opinion away from the direct domination of the authorities. Social media is mostly linked to normal socializing. In any case, according to Karine Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, it is also a special sphere that allows political discourse and cultural customs to expand rapidly, and that in turn leads to a quick adoption of views between the world and various publics and users (Nahon and Hemsley, 2013).

Social media enables users to evade accustomed political bodies by giving them forum to take part in several small talks. Kitchen and others call that social media provides various types of geography and digital activities as the style of communication between the reader and writer changes and the actual discussions can occur in conjunction with the raising of matters. Accordingly, these public spheres can defy dominant structures in ways that academic essays can seldom follow (Kitchin et al, 2013: 56-72).

Because of the global interconnected formation of social media, it gives an open domain for combining different public spheres in addition to multifaceted contexts that provide thoughtful views a voice and an opportunity. Moreover, the cross-border nature of social media gives way for the idea of a multi-dimensional audience. According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere was on the national level. It represented the thoughtful views of citizens of every nation considering matters of common interest. Furthermore, social media provides the formation of different public spheres, regardless, and sometimes despite of, national limits helping with the perspective of wider human interests. This cross-border publics can be a strength to transfer the authority from national political leadership to groups that depend on interests along with sympathizers. E-forums can gather people in various manners. Before the emergence of social media, Lincoln Dahlberg noted that the Internet could produce a public platform for reasonable, crucial and interactive speech.

There is no wonder that political awareness, at the present moment, is increasing via social media since ideas and information are received by users in a personal and lively way, away from rumours or written messages. Accordingly, these ideas that are publicized through social media means can be considered a virtual domain of the Habermas’s public sphere. They have a

reflexive effect on personal discussions as if they were happening in a steady place. The moulding of public opinion from a Habermas's point of view is based mainly on examining different sets of skills, sounds and world thoughts with slightly dropping of the enlightened attitudes. In light of the previous, it seems that social media is distinguished by having this main component for shaping public opinion, since it is considered a broad place for exchanging ideas. Although it may not be exactly the same, the discourse of Habermas Café has developed towards the intermediary communication within electronic networks: its future together with the digital media where it provides a lot of possibilities as digital networks can verify and change social structures. The public sphere is alive and with a good structure to the degree that groups and individuals can actually achieve the change by means of the communicative action; moreover, the digital communication technology may enable these individuals to do so. Nevertheless, social media, as this paper sees in one way or another, is following the same path of Habermas' public sphere, but in a more modern and realistic structure that forms the conditions of the possible deliberative democracy. This structure that made up the political decision-making let the people shape their own thoughts and opinions via a series of rational discussions and applications of competing arguments. This will be crystal clear to us, as the researcher here believes, when talking about the philosophical aspect of electronic communicative media discourse lately.

Since Habermas first discussed and wrote about the bourgeois public sphere, technology has deeply affected and changed the civil society relations in a significant way. Social media has the ability and the power to form places that are suitable to create unusual public opinions or even commercial interests within the framework of Habermas public sphere but with a little more fluency among its issues, audiences, and affiliations. This newly conceptualized public sphere has formed many chances for counter-hegemonic cultural and political practices because of the strength they have to give meaning and to create a quick public opinion across political boundaries (Caroll and Robert, 2006: 83-104).

The dimensions and interests of the public sphere have always been vulnerable to big and deep shifts. Since the appearance of the new network structures, not only mass media, but also society as a whole have been subject to change. On the other hand, the technological infrastructure of communicative networks is constantly affecting the social structure of society; in addition, its evolvement is very much related to the development of social structures in a process of interchange and mutual dependence (van Dijk, 1999: 142). However, this study of the social and cultural ramifications of social media is still in its beginnings. The authors assert that new hybrid forms of activism that are not to differentiate between direct or indirect experiences can lead to many confusing social and political practices and review traditional understandings of what is "political", thereby making new shapes of civic engagement.

Last but not least, a big challenge is ahead of the digital public sphere related to its ability to confront the external restrictions imposed by governments and regimes on public discussions. Despite the fact that modern means of communication have created a new public sphere that gathers the various classes of society, including the intellectuals and elites, still its (i.e. the contemporary public sphere) speech is approaching to a great extent the speeches of the cafes and salons in the terms of Habermas. Perhaps the next section can show the philosophical side of the compatibility between both sides (the classical and the contemporary).

In short, we have already seen how modern information means have transformed the world in this digital age, particularly in terms of communication. As a result, everybody is connected via the internet and social media. Moreover, the realm of philosophy has been influenced by this digital transformation in a positive way in the lifeworld, bridging the gap between the conflicting parties on the one hand and reducing the circle of discord and violence on the other hand. The positive account of the virtual public sphere can also be noticed in Habermas's attitude and writings, as he shows the improved communication as a result of the digital media. According to him, the internet can also play a positive role in communication and in public domains when it is used properly in a certain context (Habermas, 2006: 423). Furthermore, the modern digital public sphere has had two dimensions: historical and philosophical. Historically speaking, digital means have replaced traditional ways of communication and public opinion. In spite of all challenges it has had, the internet, for example, has made the public intermingle and interact better and on a wider scale (Dahlberg, 2001: 615-633). The virtual public sphere has also enabled people to have more freedom to enjoy democracy and to oppose oppressive powers and autocratic regimes (Ratto and Bolar, 2014). Finally, the next section will show the philosophical dimension of our modern public sphere, investigating how it has promoted rational thinking and good reasoning.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL EXTENSION/DIMENSION OF THE CONTEMPORARY SPHERE

In this section, two concepts within society are going to be shed light on: the first is lifeworld ("world of everyday inter-subjective relations"), and the other one is system ("state and market"), after making an example of change towards inter-subjectivity ("communicative action") and finally to see the range to which this shift can draw and depict the discourse of electronic media.

It must be noted that the notion "Public Sphere" is not physical, but conceptual. In other words, the public sphere is not a physical building, such as a café, a salon, an institution, or even a journal (Hinton, 1998). Rather, it is a conceptual notion that forms a communicative structure which is embedded in the Lifeworld through its base which is made up of the civil society. This section sheds light on the theoretical part of Habermas's communication, its role in the creation of deliberative rationality, and the possibility of its representation in our contemporary lifeworld with the use of digital social media. Accordingly, the question to be posed here is: how can the theoretical part of the public sphere help in formulating and finding achievable choices for a digital future with a favourable transformation?

To answer the previous question, the theoretical part of the Communicative Action theory must be identified and presented, showing its relationship with the contemporary lifeworld, in addition to the role of the public sphere in the creation of a democratic civil society, based on deliberation and understanding. In his theory of the communicative action, (Habermas, 1984) has talked again about the public sphere, dealing with a dual concept related to society and its components, namely *lifeworld*, 'world of everyday intersubjective relations', constituting a realm of the communicative action, and *system*, state and market, constituting a realm of the instrumental action.

Actual and real communication, according to Habermas, is based on the study of language. This does not mean only in terms of phonetics, syntax and semantics, but also in terms of the pragmatics and deliberation of acts and discourse. In other words, it is to move from the

linguistic competence to the linguistic performance, taking into consideration that deliberation involves the integration of the linguistic behaviour within Action Theory. (Habermas, 2012) sees that lifeworld and system are not in harmony. The main reason, according to him, is attributed to the trial of what he calls 'the colonisation of lifeworld with the means of system' (Voirol, 2008; Silva, 2001). As a result, "the public sphere now has the role of protecting and guaranteeing the autonomy of the lifeworld" (Lubenow, 2012: 200). On this basis, the public sphere plays a role as a mediation between lifeworld and system, so that the conflict between lifeworld and system is settled, and the public sphere is no longer seen as 'liquidated' (Habermas, 2012).

Habermas presents a linguistic answer, which is the linguistic turn and the move from the philosophy of self to the philosophy of communication. This has provided a viable solution to fix the relationship between the lifeworld and the system. This has formed the basis of what Habermas wanted to build, i.e., the rationality of the communicative action. Thomas McCarthy thinks that one can find that Habermas's turn towards the linguistic and communicative theory constitutes a shift in interest rather than a fundamental change in thought, especially when we look at Habermas's early writings. In his book *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1968), Habermas considered language as a universal mediation in which the social life of human beings is involved (McCarthy, 1973: 136).

Habermas's preoccupation with the theory of communication can be seen as a shift in his theoretical interest, which has far-reaching consequences for formulating the basic ideas of Critical Theory (ibid). This new perspective can be noticed when dealing with the books of some linguists and language philosophers, including Searle, Austin, Chomsky and Habermas himself, whose works clearly change their orientation and interest towards the philosophy of language. Accordingly, it can be confirmed that the transformation which Habermas has stated means the shift from the philosophy of consciousness to the philosophy of communication, with the language being a mediation for this transformation. He also has asserted that the problem of consciousness has been replaced with language, while the transcendental criticism of language has replaced the criticism of consciousness (ibid). Moreover, pragmatism also played a role in Habermas's linguistic turn, which contributed to the formation of the later theoretical achievements. According to him, the pragmatic approach helped him to develop his theory of the Communicative Action and rationality. It was also the basis to put a critical theory for the society, in addition to its role in paving the way to have a theoretical frame of morality, code and democracy (Habermas, 2014: 1).

Since he has adopted and turned to this linguistic approach, Habermas has criticised all of the other philosophical approaches, especially those which follow the philosophy of self or consciousness. The main criticism that he offers is that these approaches may fail in defining some philosophical terminologies, but it is not possible to discuss this issue in detail in this paper. In general, the communicative action is based on the exchange of information within a specific societal context and the crystallization of the rules that permit coexistence, which means to construct lifeworld where the universe cannot be discovered without a deliberative language shaping the total of social relations. However, the questions that arise in this context are: What is meant by Lifeworld? Is the virtual world today an extension of Habermas's lifeworld, so that we can form a virtual public universe based on rational deliberation and understanding?

To answer the previous questions, one must consult the writings of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, who is the first person to use this concept of *Lifeworld* in order to show the difference between natural situations and others. As for Habermas, he gave all informal and uncommon fields in social life, such as family, home, cultural life, and political life that is outside the organized parties, media, and voluntary institutions, the name of lifeworld. These unorganized fields provide the community with an inventory of common senses and mutual understanding as well as a social realm to have daily meetings with the others. This realm is the basis and the background of the communicative action (Habermas, 1984: 119). Furthermore, the ingredients of lifeworld are open for reproduction, radical change and revision, according to what Habermas sees. It is the task of the communicative action and discussion to apply and implement the current reforms to lifeworld (Habermas, 1984: 138-139).

This theorizing establishes a knowledge base to explore the extent of linguistic deliberation in the contemporary sphere. Accordingly, the following two questions may be posed: Does the digital environment provide public spheres that substitute the traditional public realm established by Habermas? Can a digital form of rational communication and ideal speech situation be achieved? The answer to these two questions requires a test that identifies two basic concepts: the public sphere and the ideal speech situation. We have previously defined the public space as it is concerned with discussing public issues. On the other hand, the ideal speech situation is concerned with the discussion of applied morals for specific issues.

PRAXIS

Social media sites, in general, and Facebook and X (Twitter), in particular, have provided virtual spaces in the form of pages or public groups for discussion and dialogue concerning public issues that are considered as important for everyone. One of the studies investigates to what extent Facebook operates as a public realm. (McLaughlin, 2016) concludes that Facebook could be regarded as the public realm, adding that it has a good reputation which makes it worthy being so. In this context, (Stumpel, 2009), in his study "*Habermasian Implications of the Twittersphere*", studies the X (Twitter) sphere, concluding the following four points of similarity:

- X allows its users to share critical points of view.
- X is a place that can evolve through a rational agreement or consensus of the public.
- X is a public place that is outside the control of the State, bringing together many people with common interests to make them rally to a specific issue or specific interest.
- X allows its users to exchange views and share their opinions.

(Stumpel, 2009) realises the issue and sees X as a limited site in terms of its capabilities to contain any independent discussion or dialogue, due to its quick nature and its short messages that do not allow people to rationalize its tweets (ibid). In this context, we find the importance of clarifying the differences between all social networking sites. While X does not provide a suitable place to host lengthy discussions, Facebook has advanced capabilities in creating broad spaces to raise issues which necessitate a wider discussion.

It is evident from the foregoing that studies are optimistic and bodes those digital social sites, like Facebook in particular, can be considered modern tools in the service and promotion of deliberative democracy. Consequently, we find that there is a similarity and agreement to a

large extent, in terms of practical and theoretical aspects, between the Habermasian sphere and the virtual sphere in promoting deliberative democracy and building a civil society that seeks to achieve understanding and consensus to fulfil public interests through speech and linguistic deliberation in a free lifeworld.

CONCLUSION

In sum, we have already seen how modern information means have transformed the world in this digital age, particularly in terms of communication. As a result, everybody is connected via the internet and social media. Moreover, the realm of philosophy has been influenced by this digital transformation in a positive way in the lifeworld, bridging the gap between the conflicting parties on the one hand and reducing the circle of discord and violence on the other hand. The positive account of the virtual public sphere can also be noticed in Habermas's attitude and writings, as he shows the improved communication as a result of the digital media. According to him, the internet can also play a positive role in communication and in public domains when it is used properly in a certain context (Habermas, 2006: 423). Furthermore, the modern digital public sphere has had two dimensions: historical and philosophical. Historically speaking, digital means have replaced traditional ways of communication and public opinion. In spite of all challenges it has had, the internet, for example, has made the public intermingle and interact better and on a wider scale (Dahlberg, 2001: 615–633). The virtual public sphere has also enabled people to have more freedom to enjoy democracy and to express their views in their entirety and in total freedom (Ratto and Bolar, 2014).

Regardless of Habermas's conservative view of the digital sphere and social media, we have seen that the emergence and convergence of electronic media has radically changed the notion of the public sphere as well as the nature of civil society to a large extent since Habermas first wrote about the bourgeois public sphere. Social media has created a space in which public opinion can be shaped outside the control of the state or commercial interests in the spirit of the Habermasian public sphere, but with greater flexibility in terms of issues, audiences, and affiliations.

There has been a lot of academic work to examine social media dynamics, as opposed to traditional media as a means of political participation, in order to reveal the possibility of applying the theory of the public sphere to the potential for deliberative democracy and the creation of public opinion, particularly on social media. The positions of specialists, concerning the contemporary digital sphere have varied. For instance, a group of researchers believe that communication via social media does not lead to promoting social change because it is increasingly trivial, which fosters idle conversation and the preservation of relationships. Accordingly, this does not provide an environment that promotes a public sphere. On the contrary, while recognizing that social media certainly provides a space for idle conversations, specialists in social media see the potential of allowing new forms of democratic participation, on the condition that some of the gaps existing in the digital sphere are dealt with. Others argue that the digital sphere is an extension of Habermas's ideal public sphere in a more contemporary and pragmatic form, which creates the conditions for the potential of deliberative democracy. This form of political decision-making allows citizens to shape their opinions through a process of logical debate and the application of competing arguments.

It appears from the foregoing that the studies are optimistic and bodes those digital social sites, like Facebook in particular, can be considered modern tools in the service and promotion of deliberative democracy. Consequently, we find that there is a similarity and agreement to a large extent, in terms of practical and theoretical aspects, between the Habermasian sphere and the virtual sphere in promoting deliberative democracy and building a civil society that seeks to achieve understanding and consensus to fulfil public interests through speech and linguistic deliberation in a free lifeworld.

Finally, it can be stated that the contemporary digital sphere is an extension of the Habermasian public sphere, for digital means of communication provide a considerable resource for rational deliberation, enhance democracy, and provide an important place for the exchange of opinions concerning public interests. However, what may render the means of communication ineffective in this context is the lifeworld, which may differ from one region to another, so that it may not have the capability to apply these principles. There is an inverse relationship between the globalisation of the public sphere and the reality of the lifeworld.

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