

The Position and Transformation of the Public Sphere in the Internet Environment

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Abstract

Contemporary media theories increasingly encounter intense changes in social relations that are the result of changes in communication techniques and means. McLuhan called this dynamic a media-centric driver of social change. Media theories and communication disciplines are becoming more current because they have a historical opportunity to follow (post)modern society, which is in a state of constant change mediated by digital technologies.

The aim of this paper is to examine whether communication and organizing people through social networks can lead to the transformation of the public sphere as defined by Habermas and related authors. We will build on Habermas' categorization of historical transformations of the public sphere in order to understand the context and epoch of the current transformation. The second hypothetical question of the paper is whether the Internet could replace some social institutions and question the authorities and conventions achieved, especially if we pay attention to the criticism of democracy by authors like Colin Crouch (2018: 9) who questions the legitimacy of current democratic elections concluding that "people are not offered essential possibility to participate in political processes".

Finally, the question remains whether the Internet as a mass medium has a systemic-technocratic character of maintaining the status quo or whether it can serve as a driver of change or a means of direct democracy for users. We believe that this kind of work will be a nice link or a quality overview of theories and anticipations concerning the issue of political and electoral motivation - the topic with which Columbia University's major research on media effects began.

Keywords: Internet, social networks, public sphere, democracy

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Historical dialectics of the public sphere

The political history of humanity is the history of the exchange and juggling of the roles of private and public spheres. The way the public sphere was defined in a certain historical period says a lot about the character of the community and the social relations within it. The classical periodization of history into old, medieval, new and modern times corresponds to the periodization of the position of the public (and private) sphere in different epochs. In other words, it was possible to determine the social and cultural definition of the public only after a dialectical view of history and subsequent classification of the internal social dynamic of major historical movements and events.

The ancient Greeks had a division into private (*oikos*) and public (*polis*) sphere, but the concept of public was still not actively elaborated. This can be deduced from the etymological origin of the term (*res publica*) which developed among the Romans (Price, 1992). French encyclopedists, favoring Latin over Greek and Roman sources, affirm the notion of *publique*, which refers to openness, availability and accessibility, and by adding the prefix *res*, modern authors affirm the notion of a public place, matters of general interest, and more specifically matters related to state affairs (Posavec, 1995: 13). In contrast to public affairs, the relationship with property has always been important for humanity. Hana Arendt (according to Tadić, 1998: 16) in immovable property sees the attachment of a human to a certain place in the world and the condition of its organic survival.

Habermas identifies the dominance of the representative public in relation to the Medieval period. It is constituted not as a social area, but as a sign of stature. The feudal public is not a public according to the modern understanding of the term, but a royal or lordly representation of God's authority before the people (Đorđević, 1975: 73-74). The representative public could serve us as an indicative theoretical example for the analysis of the digital public sphere, which is the central theme of this paper.

In relation to Hall's interpersonal distance, the feudal socio-economic system erases the distinction between personal, social and public space. Let us take, for example, the dining room in the manor house. A personal space (dining room) can simultaneously serve as a public space for expressing the aforementioned stature in front of servants or guests. It is known that large tables had a multiple role - from a place for dining to convening meetings. After all, the very act of eating had a practical and symbolic role, given that every meal was preceded by a common ritual - prayer. Such a representation is in accordance with Habermas's explanation of the representative public, which manifested itself in the representation of the nobility and church ritual, closed in courts and temples, without the existence of a public sphere in its modern understanding (Habermas, according to Tadić, 1998: 41). If we were to compare the average 21st century Facebook user profile with the dining table of a 14th century lord, we would find several common characteristics: the unclear

boundary between the public, private and intimate spheres on a phenomenological level, and the actualization of the issue of privatization of the public sphere, which Habermas calls “refeudalization”. In addition to being symbolic and metaphorical, this comparison also has its own formal determination.

For Habermas in the 20th century, the rise of advertising, marketing and public relations that try to manipulate the public and discourage critical thought has influenced the state itself, political parties and interest groups to increasingly use the same approaches to get votes. Unlike publicity that exposes political dominance to public judgment, publicity imitates the aura of personal prestige and supernatural authority that was a key feature of the representative public sphere (Warner, 2013: 286). Gaining publicity has become one of the imperatives of social networks with the idea of “weakening democracy” (McChesney, 2016) on platforms that are privately owned and whose services, in addition to private ones, are also used by legal entities, states, politicians, political organizations and others. This is also supported by Arendt’s ontological critical perspective, which anticipates that with modern social processes the tendency to “dispossess the human being” intensifies, emphasizing that the main non-private feature of privacy is the possibility of withdrawing into one’s own four walls into the area of inner subjectivity, which is increasingly agitating for conformism and automatism. (Tadić, 1998: 17).

Limits of the public sphere and perspectives of the Internet

Hauser (1999: 61) defines the public sphere as a discursive space in which individuals and groups come together to discuss issues of common interest. It is the area of social life, where, according to Habermas (according to Asen 1999: 116), public opinion can be formed.

The public sphere is conceived as an area in which citizens deconstruct the ways and methods of managing the state, and the area of developing democratic practices (Mouffe, 1999). Some authors see the public sphere as a social space between the state and the market. With the convergence of mass media and the Internet, the notion of a digital public sphere has developed. The determination of the public sphere also depends on different aspects, such as the quality of the discussion, but also the amount of participation of individuals, which would actually mean that the more citizens or individuals participate in the discussion, the closer it is to the ideal of the public sphere (Grbeša, 2021: 111). The question naturally arises - why none of the theorists have accordingly characterized the Internet and social networks as perfect platforms of the public sphere, bearing in mind the number and intensity of opening accounts.

The public hypersphere or digital public sphere is created using modern information technologies, digital media and computer networks. Brisco and De Vilde (2006) develop the term digital ecosystem, which is seen as a socio-technical system with self-organization, sustainability and scalability features that functions positivistically similar to a natural ecosystem, only with more pronounced technical-technological determinants of the computer industry. The actualization of Habermas’

theme of the transformation of the public sphere under the influence of digital technologies is integrated in the concept of cyberdemocracy, as well as in the book of the same name (Levy, 2002).

For proponents of digital transformation, the public threatens institutions whose power is based on information and audience control, where mainstream media communicators must listen to what we have to say, whether we are using Twitter to complain about a product or Facebook to organize a protest. Institutions must learn how to approach equality, because according to such an optimistic judgment, the Internet will become a force for democracy, abolishing the monopoly of information and its centralized organization. Authors such as Diamandis and Kotler cite a 2009 Swedish government report that claims that the increased access to digital communications in developing countries has spurred “economic development, poverty reduction, and democratization, including freedom of speech, free flow of information, and promotion of human rights” (McChesney, 2014: 28). McChesney (2014) in his work *Digital Disconnect* criticizes supporters for overlooking the ability of institutions to act proactively in the face of given challenges, concluding that “the profit motive, commercialism, public relations, marketing and advertising as carriers of contemporary corporate capitalism are fundamental to any assessment of how developed the Internet and how it will develop further (...) To be clear, many of the Internet researchers I mentioned, almost no one defends existing capitalism. Many of them envision a world in which the excesses and problems of capitalism have been eliminated, if not capitalism itself.”

For Vaidhyanathan (2018: 19-21), the existence of Internet algorithms on social networks creates “filter bubbles” (Pariser, according to Vaidhyanathan, 2018) where Google and Facebook offer products and services to users based on data collected about their research on the Internet, thus creating an echo chamber of confirmed beliefs. In this way, social networks perform the classic role that traditional media played until then, which is to maintain the status quo. Such hermetically sealed “filter bubbles” narrow the field of information by gathering like-minded people, which deepens social divisions. In response to the hypothesis of whether social networks can serve as a substitute for democracy from below, we will try to find examples in the case study in order to determine the criteria and the extent according to which it is possible to achieve a constructive dialogue with the actualization of issues of social importance, while at the same time, we do not bypass the hermetic criterion of the algorithm. One of the criteria could be geographical.

Research by the “Pew Research Center” showed that as many as 62% of adults in the United States of America receive news through social networks, and as many as 66% of all users of the social network Facebook (Gams, 2023: 5), which means that traditional media achieve significant penetration within the sphere of social networks.

The Internet still remains a disputed issue of regulation of the content that appears on it, which gives political communication a significant non-institutional sign. The laws of individual countries are not the same regarding Internet regulation. This is best illustrated by cases such as the legal dispute against “Licra vs Yahoo”,

where different verdicts were issued by the French and American constitutional courts,² or the exclusion of the order of the American President Donald Trump, and then its return by plebiscite after a change in the ownership and management structure, whereby Twitter proves its institutional nature.³

One of the unavoidable ways of contaminating the public sphere on the Internet is the advertising of politicians on social networks. Politicians most often perceive Internet communication as “a means of promotion, marketing and political persuasion, as well as the creation of pseudo-events, which also become a very important segment of political promotion” (Boorstin, 1992, Slavujević, 2009, according to Vučetić, Ratković, 2022: 671) which corresponds to the expressive and technical possibilities provided by social networks in visual culture. They build an image-distortion and mix the private and public spheres. At the same time, they are opinion leaders, and they want to present themselves to the public as “people of flesh and blood”. As Machiavelli said (according to Čavoški, 2008), people take care primarily of personal interests, but this is not an indicative judgment, but an assumption that those who rule them must have. That is why insight into the public spirit is a very important assumption of democratic decision-making, which Gramsci (according to Lou, 2013: 30) sees as resorting to communication management and social management as a means of curbing eventual dissatisfaction.

Case study

For the analysis of the use of Facebook, a social network as a kind of a public sphere, we selected the annual work of the Facebook group “East Sarajevo - Current Events” (“Istočno Sarajevo – aktuelnosti”),⁴ which functions as an online space for gathering information, problem setting, and debate on topics in the form of multimedia posts that attract the attention of citizens of East Sarajevo, for the most part city municipalities East Novo Sarajevo and East Ilidža. According to simple sampling, the previously mentioned group is a good example of self-initiative, communal organization of citizens in order to start a general debate on city topics. The group consists of 9,175 members (Facebook profile). The observed sample consists of posts published by citizens in the period from January 1, 2022 to February 25, 2023. In the given period, citizens, and a significantly smaller number of group administrators, published 502 posts.

Local topics, which we will define as current problems of the wider city area about which citizens give their own opinion in the form of posting and commenting, most often were trying to remove the problem by appealing to authorities or

² <https://dig.watch/resource/licra-v-yahoo-case>, <https://www.supremecourt.gov/orders/courtorders/053006pzor.pdf>, accessed in December 2022.

³ <https://edition.cnn.com/2023/01/26/tech/meta-trump-mainstream-social-media/index.html>, accessed in December 2022.

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/groups/863918937061523>, visited in February 2023.

responsible fellow citizens. There were 298 such posts or 59 percent of the total number of posts in the mentioned group. A special subgroup of local topics consists of 31 posts on the topic of ecology, irresponsible cutting of parks, air pollution, irresponsible waste disposal, and the construction of mini-hydroelectric power plants, etc. The largest number of posts concerns the arrangement of city areas, parks, infrastructure problems, the cost of city services, prices of waterworks or electrical distribution, presentation of conceptual projects, criticizing investors, commenting on the intensity of urbanization, and illegal parking. Of particular interest are seven posts on the topic of events that resonated with the general public, and which within the group have a high level of “sharing” that would fall under the domain of “black chronicles” in a narrow-genre journalistic division. Such questions are interesting because their level of generality is high and they concern the exchange of opinions on socio-pathological topics such as in the above case: suicide, rape, bullying. During the analysis, it was noticed that regardless of the level of generality, such topics, although not only specific to the local area, attracted the attention of a large number of users who mostly reacted on an affective-value basis. During the processing of such topics, as well as those of a lower level of generality, it was noticed that citizens were more oriented toward the valorization and highlighting of their own impressions, than concretely proposing problem-solving strategies. As in the relationship with the media, it is mainly about finding like-minded people in order to confirm one’s own opinion. According to the principle of “localization”, an example of citizens arguing about photographs of the recorded public practice of religious rituals by a few fellow citizens, most likely members of the Arab population, is indicative. This kind of discourse is characterized by a high level of generalization, stereotyping and, contrary to the principle of relevance, paradoxically, a high level of user involvement in the commenting section. A tendency was noticed that with the decrease in the level of relevance of the topic, the level of homogenization of the community increases. In the case of a relevant topic, such as the citizens’ appeal to the city services regarding the lack of snow removal activities in pedestrian zones, the views of the citizens correspond to the social subgroups they form at the level of the center-periphery split or drivers-pedestrians. In the group, the response from the authorities is most often absent.

Another type of posts that we included in the categorization are service information posts, in which we include questions from citizens and classified ads. There were only five job ads, which indicates that there are other specialized publications for classified ads in online and print form. Citizens’ questions, of which there were 50 (10 percent), were mainly requests for urgent information about the city services, looking for or adopting animals, inquiries about the work of the public services, etc. This post type is characterized by a low level of social relevance and the number of reactions and valorization of users, but a high level of informative significance.

The third group of posts, also 50 (10 percent), consists of divisions from other media and platforms, one third of which is news about the city. Their informative value is pronounced, but their relevance is not as big, especially considering the small

number of citizens' reactions to such posts. Part of the media posts are about helping the weak and charity phone calls to donate money where the response of citizens is greater. These types of "actions" realized in multiple forms through web portals or direct addresses in the group represent 22 posts. Such posts are characterized by a low publication interval, but a high intensity of response. Given that the same "action" is repeated several times, the level of informative value decreases linearly.

A somewhat larger number of posts (35) are political posts that deal with general political, even ideological topics, which are less relevant for the local community. The reaction is mainly a valorization characterized by an extremely low level of constructiveness with indications of borderline or blatant hate speech. It happens that users and local topics "politicize" in a way that brings them into analogy with higher instances of public authority. This represents one of the key problems in achieving concrete solutions, due to the interference of the effects of politicization, which increases the affectivity of the responses and the generality of the conclusions. Politicization, by which some of the theoretical paradigms from the introductory explanation turned out to be correct, is the most pronounced means of contamination of public discourse.

The rest of the posts consist of promotions and self-promotions and creative content, most often for the purpose of entertainment, with a low level of relevance and reflexivity. In one year, five polls were published, four of which concern solving specific community problems, and one poll about general elections in the country.

Based on the conducted analysis, we conclude that one of the ways to achieve the public sphere on social networks is its clear geographical definition while treating current events, the relevance of which will be evaluated by the citizens themselves. The ingredients that are missing in order for the citizens' initiative to acquire a more concrete character of democracy are:

- clearer structuring of advertising rules
- statutory organization of the group
- institutionalization through the necessary involvement of decision makers, which means external openness
- limiting to urban topics
- sanctioning of hate speech (which is partially implemented for now)
- a greater number of surveys and questionnaires through which citizens' opinions would be integrated into a concrete initiative
- orientation toward problem prevention, not just subsequent valorization
- inclusion of existing initiatives - citizens' associations (which is insignificant for now)
- focus on the establishment of citizens' associations
- more regular information
- avoiding political contamination, etc.

Conclusion

The position of the public sphere on the Internet with an emphasis on the analysis of the given research is a consequence of wider social, political and even cultural dynamics. It is difficult to expect an individual initiative such as an informal group of citizens gathered on Facebook to respond to all the challenges pointed to by the media and political theory decades ago. It can only serve to reach indicative judgments from which we have tried to present several solutions in this paper that imply a more responsible approach, not only in deontological, but also in the practical approach of citizen initiative.

For this, in addition to diagnosing the problem and understanding its internal dynamics, recognizing the source of contamination of the public space, identifying the boundaries between public and private, and intimate spheres, each of which is threatened in the mediatized reality in which we live, we need the skills to use and evaluate media content. In addition to the fact that technologies have enabled us to solve problems within “our own four walls”, the issue requires us to look back at how much mediatized public space breaks through the veil of privacy and examine the effects of such media-mediated “outplay”.

Bearing all this in mind, the conclusion is that media literacy skills (access, analysis, evaluation, participation and creation) are needed to understand the possibilities of the digital public sphere. As Fromm inspiredly observes in “Escape from Freedom”: “the right to express an opinion is only meaningful if we are able to have our own opinion” (Fromm, 1983: 207-208). Jovanović (2012: 79) therefore states that it is not a special wisdom to impose but to insert a thought: “When someone adopts someone else’s thought, he becomes convinced that he himself is its creator and is therefore ready to represent, protect and defend it as part of his own being”. In other words, in order to set up one’s own exposition in the public sphere (no matter where it is located), it is necessary to clearly identify one’s own informational needs.

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Položaj i transformacija javne sfere u internet okruženju

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Sažetak

Savremene medijske teorije sve se češće susreću sa intenzivnim promjenama u društvenim odnosima koji su rezultat promjena komunikacijskih tehnika i sredstava. Ovakvu dinamiku je Mekluan nazvao medijacentričnim pokretačem društvenih promjena. Medijske teorije i komunikološke discipline postaju aktuelnije jer imaju istorijsku priliku da prate (post)modernu društvo koje je u stanju stalne promjene posredovane digitalnim tehnologijama.

Cilj ovog rada je da ispita da li komunikacija i organizovanje ljudi preko društvenih mreža mogu da dovedu do transformacije javne sfere kako ju definišu Habermas i srodni autori. Nadovezaćemo se na Habermasovu kategorizaciju istorijskih transformacija javne sfere kako bismo razumjeli kontekst i epohu trenutne transformacije. Drugo istraživačko pitanje rada glasi da li bi internet mogao zamijeniti neke društvene institucije i preispitati autoritete i postignute konvencije, naročito ako obratimo pažnju na kritiku demokratije autora poput Kolina Krauča (2018: 9) koji preispituje legitimnost aktuelnih demokratskih izbora zaključujući da se „ljudima ne nudi suštinska mogućnost učestvovanja u političkim procesima“. Konačno, ostaje pitanje da li internet kao masovni medij ima sistemski-tehnokratski karakter održavanja statusa kvo ili može da posluži kao pokretač promjena ili sredstvo direktne demokratije korisnika.

Smatramo da će ovakav rad biti lijepa poveznica ili kvalitetan pregled teorija i anticipacija koje se tiču pitanja političke i izborne motivacije – temom sa kojom su započeta velika istraživanja Kolumbija univerziteta o medijskim efektima

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