

In Light of Contemporary Social Media, Can We Still Speak of a Digital Public Today?

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ABSTRACT

Even though Habermas' public sphere is already a highly debated subject in academia, the growth of social media in the previous decade appears to generate a new transformation and influence the conception of the public sphere. While we consider the advent of digital media as the second structural transformation of the classic public sphere, some scholars have also criticized it for eroding the idea of 'public' and idealistically engaging every individual into the debate. Since it is still a controversial question lately, in this context, we are not able to declare with certainty whether a digital public is 'alive' or not. Based on two case studies about democratic social media, this article states that social media supports and revives the public sphere to some extent, but that the structural transformation brought about by this new media is limited. This article aims to shed some light on this topic and thus improve the public understanding of the role of social media in modern civil society.

Keywords: digital public sphere, social media, Habermas' public sphere, political communication

1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, social media, which first appeared around the beginning of the 21st century, had a total of 2.95 billion global users (Statista, 2020) [1]. As a result of this novel, unprecedented and interactive communication, social networking has given a new breath to academics concerning contemporary communication and Habermas' concept of the public sphere. 'Digital' and 'Online' public spheres have been linked to this phenomenon of citizens gathering together in online space to discuss issues of common interests. Certain scholars have viewed social media as a second structural transformation or an online equivalent of the defective 'old' public sphere, as it builds a communicative space open to every people (Schäfer, 2015) [2]. However, whether or not we can still speak of a digital public is a controversial topic until recently. Many cyber-optimists believe that social media offers a free digital arena accessible to everybody, allowing people to obtain knowledge and effectively debate, whereas opponents contend that we too much exaggerate social media's empowering function. This article will demonstrate that while social media supports and revives the public sphere to some extent, the structural transformation brought about by social

networks is limited. It will examine the #MeToo movement on Twitter and the '31st of January' Hashtag protest on Weibo.

This article aims to critically examine the democratic potentials of technological innovations associated with Web 2.0 communication technologies, particularly social media, to add new angles to existing debates on the digital public sphere. The framework of this paper will begin with a literature review of the public sphere's structural transformation. The author will next outline the democratic promise of social media and then dig into its dangers to the ideal public sphere. Finally, this study will conclude with a brief conclusion and suggestions for future research.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Habermas and the Idea of Public Sphere

In his seminal work *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962), Jürgen Habermas initially established the concept of the public sphere. Scholars later translated it into English as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989 (Bruns and Highfield, 2016) [3]. Habermas describes the evolution of the bourgeois public sphere over the centuries from its inception to its

deterioration and disintegration throughout the 18 and 19 centuries.

The public sphere, as according Habermas, is a sphere of people's social life where people form their public opinions (Habermas, 1991, p.398) [4]. In the public sphere, which is a space free from governmental intervention and apart from the market, all citizens have fair access to every debate, and they are guaranteed freedom of assembling and association, as well as the freedom to voice their ideas on subjects of common concerns (Habermas, 1974; Thomassen, 2010) [5] [6].

2.2. The Exclusion and Inclusion of Bourgeois Public Sphere

The notion of the bourgeois public sphere has evoked a broad range of critiques. One cluster of critiques concerns that people did not pay a sufficient amount of attention to the exclusions and bias within the public sphere (Thomassen, 2010 [6] & Fraser, 1990 [7]), even though it is inclusive in principle. For instance, feminist scholars have asserted that the public sphere is a masculine ideological conception. Fraser (1990) [7] argues that females of all classes and ethnic groups were excluded from formal political participation precisely based on ascribed gender status since informal obstacles to participatory equalisation can continue to exist even after everyone else has officially and legitimately authorized to take part in the public sphere. Similarly, Thomassen (2010) challenged Habermas' concept, arguing that it underestimated the significance of women's exclusions and paid inadequate attention to the patriarchal structure of the sphere. As a result, despite Habermas' emphasis on the bourgeois public sphere's accessibility to all, complete openness was not achieved (Fraser, 1990).

Nevertheless, Habermas (1989) stated that the public sphere could not ever completely close itself off and become consolidated as a group or a clique. Exclusions and conflicts, in other words, were not constitutive, but arose as incidental trappings (Habermas, 1992), and several researchers have then adopted this argument to some extent.

2.3 The Transformation of Public Sphere

In the face of the growth of monopolistic capitalism and the expansion of the state power, which had increasingly infiltrated the private space, the public sphere was going decay in the twentieth century. Habermas referred to this change as the "re-feudalization" of the public sphere (Barker, 2008). According to Thomassen (2010), this 're-feudalization' refers to the public sphere transforming into a representative one with feudal era features. In his words, producers of information and opinions are separated from consumers, and the public sphere functions to just

acclaim certain opinions and kinds of information from authority figures, as it formerly did (Thomassen, 2010). In a sense, the development of mass media has also resulted in the structural transformation of the public sphere. TV, newspapers and radio were the media of the public sphere in the 20th century (Habermas, 1974). However, this conventional modus of mass media remains structurally centralized one-way communication systems, which 'shape' citizens passive consumers of infotainment and ideas rather than active participants in a critical conversation with opinion providers or their peers (Barker, 2008 [8]; Thomassen, 2010 [6]). From a space for free speech to a representative sphere, it is the first structural transformation of the public sphere.

2.4. The Second Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

Along with the growth of personal websites, social networking and blogs in the 21st century, many *researchers* interpret the arrival of these contemporary media as a second structural transformation of the 'old' public sphere (Schäfer, 2015). These digital media create new public spaces that are open and free to the entire public, allowing citizens to get greater access to information online. According to Schäfer (2015) [2], digital media can radically alter the structure of societal communication and thus rebirth the public sphere, and this viewpoint was initially resonated widely within many academics.

Nevertheless, more pessimistic and critical views rapidly replaced this initial trend of internet optimism (Iosifidis and Wheeler, 2015 [9] & Valtysson, 2012 [10]). For instance, whereas admitting the greater potentials for democratic society generated by digital media, some researchers are much more pessimistic about the transformation, and they state that people overestimate the empowering function of digital innovations, claiming that many people consider social networking as a mechanism of narcissistic self-interest rather than collective activity (Iosifidis and Wheeler, 2015, p.4) [9]. In addition to strengthening the 'self' rather than 'public', scholars have also critically questioned whether online space is fundamentally inclusive. Valtysson (2012) [10] proposed 'digital adaptations' to Habermas' theory of public sphere, asserting that social media (such as Facebook) is a preprogrammed and carefully designed platform that allows and encourages specific communicative activities among users, thus prohibiting other actions and excluding a specific group of users.

Some scholars consider the advent of social media as the second structural transformation of the public sphere, but they also blame it for undermining the sense of 'public' and idealistically involving everyone in the conversation. In this way, the question of if it is still

possible to speak about a digital public in this context remains questionable. In response to this problem, the following section will critically examine the democratic potentials and dangers of technological innovations linked with social media.

3. DEMOCRATIC POTENTIALS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

The digital public sphere is a communicative environment supported by digital media or other online platforms in which people could engage and debate public issues (Schäfer, 2015) [2]. Compared to the traditional public sphere, the digital one allows for more open, quick, and free access to knowledge and provides more possibilities for users to participate in public discourse. As a result, many proponents of the digital public sphere have expressed strong expectations about the benefits of expanding the digital public sphere to democratic progress.

3.1. Social Media Can Support Subaltern Counterpublics

Firstly, many social media advocates argue that it encourages "subaltern counterpublics", allowing marginalized group of people to voice their opinions in civil society. Fraser (1990) [7] coined the term "subaltern counterpublics," which refers to alternative publics made up of members of marginalized social groups such as women, racial minorities, and LGBTQ community. In these counterpublics, members of subordinated social groups develop and disseminate counter-discourses, which in turn lets them establish interpretations of their demands, interests, and identities (Fraser, 1990) [7]. In this sense, social media empowers those who were previously marginalized or alienated from the predominantly bourgeois public discourse. The rise of the #MeToo movement on Twitter is a good example that exemplifies social media's empowering function. After the multiple sexual abuse accusations against former American film producer Harvey Weinstein in 2017, the "Me Too" protest spread globally as a hashtag on Facebook and Twitter. It then develops into one of the most influential social movement within the globe against sexual assault and harassment of women. In this movement, women worldwide have united online and offline to protest gender injustice and violence. Thanks to the social network, the public gets to know women's experiences and opinions from previously marginalized voices through an established online space. Therefore, social media has facilitated deliberation and public debate opportunities since it constructs a digital agora for alternative concerns to be presented, formulated, and effectively discussed (Iosifidis and Wheeler, 2015) [9].

3.2. Social Media Produce Greater Specificity of Online Public Debates

Secondly, researchers proposed that social media platforms increase the specificity of public discussions, thereby improving the quality of public deliberation to a certain extent. Cunningham (2001) [11] raised an alternative attitude towards the public sphere based on observations of contemporary publics. Cunningham's notion of 'public sphericules' are explained as social fragments that do not have critical mass [but] do share many of the features of the conventionally conceived public sphere (Cunningham, 2001) [11]. Instead of reflecting public discourses throughout whole spheres to society, such public spheres address specific thematic discussions within and across the broader domains, thereby drawing a smaller subset of members with a specific interest in these subjects (Bruns and Highfield, 2016) [3]. Despite the size reduction, this small-group discussion could improve the quality of public debates since participants in each subset could make more contributions than those in the conventional form. Members in public sphericules can be assumed as members in small-sized interest groups wherein members are more likely to think up constructive and contributive ideas and discuss them rationally. As sphericules imply a certain amount of shared interest and expertise among participants, the quality of group speech may thus improve (Bruns and Highfield, 2016) [3]. As a result, compared to the wide domain-based public sphere, such subsets may boost participation opportunities while somehow enabling high-quality deliberation.

Though social media facilitates a more open and inclusive form of public sphere and allows more active participation, such constant praise may be too optimistic. Indeed, Purcell et al. (2010) [12] discovered that only a minority of internet users actively participate in an online discussion, with merely 37% of American users contributing to creating news products and leaving comments on news content via twitter messages. Thus, social media users have not behaved completely differently than passive mass media consumers (Mitchelstein and Boczkowski, 2010) [13]. More than that, social networking may also exclude specific social groups, and the inherent exclusiveness of computerization and digitalization unavoidably bypasses 'new marginalized groups' such as rural residents and the elderly. People must also be aware of the rules of online communication. For example, how to address someone by typing @ plus their username, following trends with a hashtag (#), publishing public tweets rather than private tweets which are only visible to the user himself. In this approach, social media may serve to increase people's sense of inclusion in the discourse, resulting in a "false sense of empowerment" (Papacharissi, 2002, p.16) [14], while the majority of the

population remains passive recipients of the information. Therefore, some academics believe the public excessively overstated the democratization of the Internet and liberating potential (Iosifidis and Wheeler, 2015) [9]. As such, some have argued social media is highly hazardous for generating the democratic public sphere today, because of its increasing sense of 'self-interest' rather than the 'public or common interest'. The echo chamber effect could result in the polarization of debates and the fact that online public speech will be closely monitored or suppressed.

4. THE DANGERS OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO THE PUBLIC SPHERE

4.1. Social Media Results in Individualism

The first argument against the digital public sphere is that digital networks foster an extensive sense of "self" rather than "public," which might result in individualism. Some describe social media as an online communicative platform where users construct online communities to share knowledge, opinions, private messages, and other information (Merriam-Webster, 2019) [15]. As people share content with labels like 'user-generated/created content', 'personal/private information', and 'shared interests' on social media, it might support the construction of radical counterpublics (Curran, Fenton and Freedman, 2012) [16]. Thus, social media is more likely regarding individual liberation than collective emancipation, representing personal interests rather than social reform, and private life and entertainment instead of political communication. The study found that social media users pay closer attention to and concern their interests than those about public interests. Since a result, it appears that social media's ability to revolutionize and revive the public sphere is limited, as its expansion weakens the idea of 'public'.

4.2. Social Media Leads to an 'Echo Chamber' Effect

Moreover, there are questions about the diversity of online discussions. Social networking sites are computer-mediated platforms whose search engine algorithms recommend content similar to what the users like, based on their search history (Schäfer, 2015) [2]. For example, on Twitter, there is an option 'Show me the best Tweets first' in users' content preference setting. By turning this option on, Twitter will prioritize the Tweets that users are most likely to care about in their timeline. It implies that Twitter will prioritize information in a user's Twitter feed to show or not show certain content, thereby resulting in the so-called "filter bubbles" effect (Pariser, 2011) [17]. Social media users can choose which posts to read and whom to hear or follow, thus filtering out viewpoints they disagree with

(Schäfer, 2015) [2]. In this regard, like-minded people with shared interests will assemble online, construct small communities, and discuss matters that are important to them while neglecting other people's interests. This would not only result in a lack of diversity, but an 'echo chamber' effect, which would pose a serious threat to contemporary democracy (Sunstein, 2001) [18]. The 'echo chamber' effect describes the tendency of individuals to homogeneous group communities and to affiliate with persons who share the same interests with them (Colleoni, Rozza, and Arvidsson, 2014) [19]. These like-minded online deliberative groups are apt to comprise the same voices and ignore other opinions. More extreme positions and a higher polarization of views will replace critical, reasonable, and justified discussions (Sunstein, 2001) [18] in the context of online debates (Iosifidis and Wheeler, 2015) [9]. Regrettably, when separate groups advance in opposing directions to extreme positions, uncertainty, confrontation, accusation, and in some cases, violence may be the final result (Sunstein, 2001) [18]. As a result, social media poses a threat to the future of democracy in specific ways.

4.3. Social Media Strengthens Business Elites and State Power

The third criticism of digital media as an implement for enabling public discourse is that the deliberation in digital agora could be surveilled or censored by private corporations, institutions, and governments for a range of intentions. Users of Twitter, for example, may regularly encounter notifications such as 'This Tweets is unavailable' or 'This Tweet is invisible/unavailable sensitive material', and the platform providers have the authority to suspend accounts and block tweets for keeping its users 'safe' (Twitter, 2020) [20]. However, no comprehensive rules are outlining how and why Twitter banned these tweets on their official site, and only gave three blurred causes as explanations: (1) spamming, (2) account security and privacy at risk, and (3) offensive Tweets or actions (Twitter, 2020) [20]. In other words, it means Twitter monitors tweets and actions of every user using algorithms, staff, or even human curation, and they will block a voice to create a "safe online space" for the others.

Aside from business elites, the government obtains more sophisticated tools for monitoring and interdicting online activity (Shirky, 2011) [21]. For instance, South Korea requires its citizens to register for specific online services using real names and personal information to limit citizens' capacity to organize protests and amaze the government (Shirky, 2011) [21]. The Chinese state authority has spent great efforts on perfecting its 'great fire wall' systems to censor and manipulate public discussion and thus control political threats arising from

social networking sites. (Iosifidis and Wheeler, 2016) [22].

As it happened, to quiet the "1.31 protestors," the Chinese authorities blocked keywords on Weibo Hot Search (the most searched hashtags). The '1.31 protest' is a Weibo hashtag protest on January 31, 2020, against the Wuhan Red Cross and local authorities, as they failed to supply enough medical equipment and health care products to hospitals during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the protest, health workers have been asking for aid on social media since mid-January 2020, as they were saving lives while at high risk of being infected by coronavirus because of inadequate medical supplies and protection. Under this situation, citizens were outraged and upset with the Wuhan Red Cross and questioned why donations of decisive medical supplies from all across the country had failed to reach hospitals front line during the Covid-19 outbreak (Yuan, 2020) [23]. As a streaming-live interview from China Central Television, with much more than 1.3 million subscribers, was disrupted in one warehouse of Wuhan Red Cross on 31st of January, citizens worry that Wuhan Red Cross's process is deficient and opaque. Citizens have questioned why physicians are still not receiving adequate supplies after the entire nation has donated and supported them, and they started using the hashtag '#Wuhan Black (Red) Cross' to express their dissatisfaction, with Weibo users also altering their profile pictures into a black cross. Finally, the Wuhan administration and Red cross apologized for their negligence on Weibo. The Wuhan Red Cross subsequently issued a detailed document with records of the use of donations to the public, promising to update the information once per day.

Although the Wuhan Red Cross eventually calmed the public outrage, we can still see the government's involvement in manipulating online public debates in this case, as the popularity of the #Wuhan Black (Red) Cross hashtag dropped dramatically and unusually within merely one hour (see Figure 1). If anyone searches '#Wuhan Black (Red) Cross' on Weibo now (as the author did on December 10, 2020), you can scarcely discover anything regarding the movement. As a result, although the advent of social media has made public discussions more open and visible to everyone, it has also disclosed every tiny actions of users more vulnerable to be monitored. Thus and so, as Evgeny Morozov and Rebecca MacKinnon have argued, the usage of social media networking is just as likely to undermine authoritarian regimes as it is to enhance them (Shirky, 2011) [21].

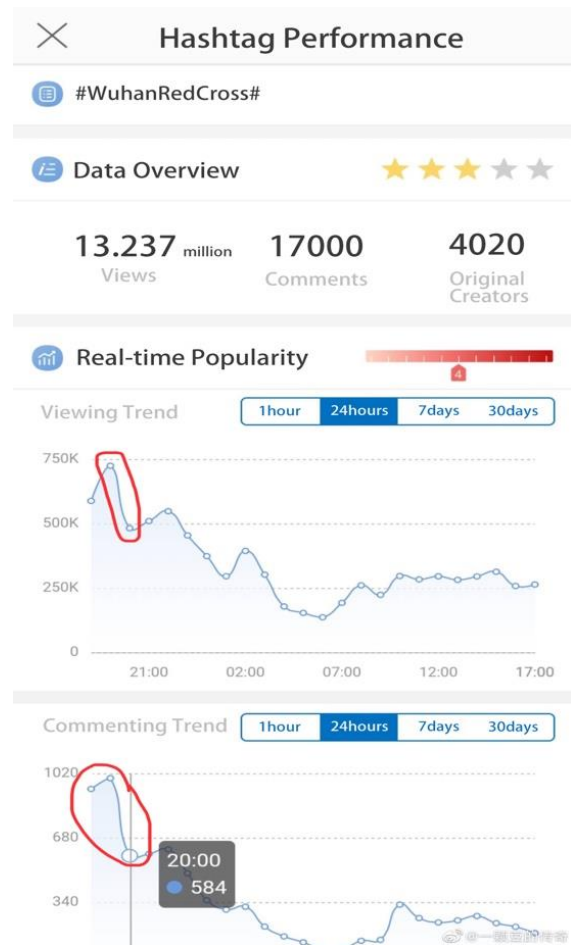


Figure 1 the popularity of the #Wuhan Black (Red) Cross hashtag dropped dramatically.

5. CONCLUSION

To summarize, we could conclude that the democratic potentials of contemporary social networking remain contested. Although this novel communication technology allows alternative voices to be heard, enables subaltern counterpublics, and may enhance the quality of deliberation, it is also, to a certain extent, harmful to the establishment of the public sphere. As a result, social media would develop a greater sense of self, leading to illogical and polarised public discussions; and would consolidate business elites and state power. In this sense, social media does not satisfy public expectations to transform and revive the public sphere structurally, but its capacity to facilitate public participation can indeed expand freedom. The technology itself is never the critical factor in transforming the public sphere against authority; instead, how to utilize it must be fully considered in future research. This article discussed the democratic possibilities of social media and the limitations and risks of the digital public spheres, bringing some new angles engaging in the existing literature about digital public spheres. With the advancement of computer and data science, human beings are no longer the only subjects

that interact through social media these days. Instead, algorithms and chatbots are new power dynamics that also play a role in online debate. Social media robots and this innovative human-computer interaction environment may point the way forward for the public sphere and political communication research. Instead of being eroded and controlled by social media, we should learn how to govern and manage it, turning it into a democratic weapon.

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