

The Decline of Deliberative Democracy in the Age of Digital Capitalism: Revisiting Habermas's New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

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Nearly 60 years after the publication of his seminal work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1962/1989), Jürgen Habermas makes a new effort to analyze the conditions of will formation and public debate in contemporary democracy. His premise centers on deliberative democracy as a normative framework and guiding principle, essential to delineate the function of the public sphere within the political process. In his essay *The New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (2023) sets forth conditions that allow for a grim conclusion: Deliberative democracy as "an existential precondition in pluralistic societies of any democracy worthy of the name" (p. 10) is fundamentally threatened as the public sphere is undergoing a profound transformation due to the rise of digital capitalism, the dissolution of boundaries between the private and public spheres of life, the fragmentation of audiences and user communities, and the decline of the printed press.

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1962/1989) analyzed how the bourgeois public sphere of the 19th century declined hand in hand with the rise of capitalist society in which commercial interests and political parties were manufacturing publicity, thereby undermining the norms of inclusive, rational, and undistorted discussions among free and equal citizens. Now his recent essay resumes his thoughts in *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1992/1996), when he explored the political functions of the public sphere and the conditions for public discourse in democracy. The public sphere, he argued, serves as a mediation space within the functionally differentiated structure of society, linking the life world of citizens to the center of political decision making. Eventually, Habermas also reconciled with the role of the media, particularly the quality press, in shaping the public sphere, a perspective he elaborated in a 2006 article in *Communication Theory* (Habermas, 2006).

The trajectories of these three works are crucial to understanding why Habermas must feel compelled to reflect on the recent changes in the public sphere. As the fundamental conditions of public communication have changed, its implications for democracy is the research program. "I will outline how digitalization is transforming the structure of the media and the impact that this transformation is having on the political process" (Habermas, 2023, p. 3). The aspiration is high, and readers anticipate how the philosopher will navigate the nature and the consequences of the recent transformation for deliberative democracy.

Habermas divides his essay of only 59 pages into sections, each focusing on one of the major components of the public sphere's transformation. The first assumption relates to deliberative politics and its fundamental importance in a democracy characterized by cultural and lifestyle heterogeneity where social differentiation prevents background consensus by default. Instead, continuous communication generating public opinion and political will formation is necessary. The civic consciousness, underpinning

deliberative democracy, embodies a belief in the legitimacy of participation, the inclusion of those affected, and the necessity of free deliberation preceding political decisions. At the same time, since dissent is inherent in political disputes, a consensus on shared constitutional principles remains indispensable after all. Another condition of deliberative politics is that the will of the citizens "depends essentially on the enlightening quality of the mass media's contribution to this formation of opinion" (Habermas, 2023, p. 15).

It is the discursive quality of the political public sphere which is at stake in Habermas's account of the transformation. The communication system lends itself as a problem-solving power of a democracy (Habermas, 2023, p. 20), a legitimization force of democratic institutions and early-warning system for policymakers into civil society. Now while the bourgeois public sphere was only possible through the separation of state and society, and the dissociation of private and public roles of citizens, the structural conditions of contemporary public communication undermine the inclusive discussion and will formation. The "digitalization of public communication is exactly blurring the perception of the boundary between private and public spheres of life" (Habermas, 2023, p. 21), and therefore the inclusive character of the public sphere as precondition of deliberative politics is disappearing.

This process is not one dimensional, nor solely due to changes in media structure but is accompanied by economic and cultural boundary conditions. The crisis tendencies in capitalist democracies undermine social bonds of solidarity, social equality, and citizen motivation to participate, while radical groups of non-voters emerge. In this context, the "populism of the 'disconnected'" manifests as a critical disintegration of society (Habermas, 2023, p. 26). Additionally, Habermas brings up neoliberal policies, the challenges of climate change, and immigration pressures that add complexity to the current practice of deliberative politics.

The core argument of the new transformation of the public sphere however relates to the media system's responsibility for sorting communication between civil society and opinion-makers. In this part of the essay, Habermas examines media use literature to account for the third revolution in communication technologies, and the ambivalent and potentially disruptive impact of digital communication (pp. 34–35). The main problem, he argues, is that tech companies from Silicon Valley act as intermediaries without responsibility. They "establish new connections and, with the contingent multiplication and acceleration of unexpected contacts, initiate intensive discourses with unpredictable content" (Habermas, 2023, p. 36). Essentially, this transformation of the public sphere has two significant effects. First, the seemingly democratic and inclusive promise of new media and the self-empowerment claim of media users are undermined by the "libertarian grimace" (Habermas, 2023, p. 38) of the global Internet industry, which also serves radical right-wing and authoritarian leaders. Second, these platforms do not contribute to the discursive examination of content but instead provoke fragmentation of political will formation. Habermas's review of empirical media use studies leads him to comment on the dramatic loss of relevance of print media, criticize the formation of echo chambers among like-minded social media users, and reject the notion that digital communities have the epistemic status of competing public spheres (p. 45).

While Habermas sees digital capitalism as an inherent evil, he recognizes the importance of the platformization for the public sphere because it forces traditional media to align their functions

economically and professionally, thereby compromising their relevance in public debate. What is at stake is the public sphere's ability to highlight topics that deserve shared interest and process them professionally and rationally to promote deliberation and mutual understanding of shared and diverse interests. For Habermas, it is not just the fragmentation of audiences that characterizes the transformed public sphere but also the seemingly plebiscitary nature of engagement, reduced to clicktivism of likes and dislikes, driven by the technical architecture and business models of social media. These spaces are neither truly public nor private but create "a new and intimate kind of public sphere" (Habermas, 2023, p. 55), which betrays the claim that the public sphere is fundamentally inclusive. Moreover, with truth becoming relative and often unidentifiable, communication in the public sphere is no longer capable of contributing to a discursive clarification of competing opinions or considering and gauging general interests. This form of publicness results in a "semipublic sphere" prone to polarization and disintegration. While Habermas acknowledges the communication studies literature that speaks of disrupted public spheres, he strongly warns against a standstill of analysis at this point. For him, this transformation is harmful to the democratic system as a whole, as dissonant communication in semipublic spheres can no longer fulfill the basic functions of a political public sphere, which are to organize deliberation and inclusion and to bring about qualitatively sorted opinions.

The first and the second transformation of the public sphere, in Habermas's diagnosis, share the underlying mechanisms driving the change: Commercial interests and economic ideology accentuate and accelerate the shift in communication modes and the political functions of the public sphere. The commercial use of digital networks and the global spread of neoliberalism provoke and expedite potentials that challenge, threaten, and undermine deliberative democracy. The contemporary public communication system, therefore, does not meet the normative requirements of a public sphere but rather challenges democracy in a fundamental way.

Habermas's essay is compelling since it tackles the complexity of the transformation of public communication in contemporary societies and also identifies the economic causes and ideological boundary conditions of the decline of the public sphere. However, the philosopher's account also leaves an ambivalent impression, with three critical points to consider: First, the essay falls short from his earlier work because it does not provide a theoretical framework for understanding the mechanisms that operate at the interface between the transformed communication system and deliberative politics. While his account of the content and consequences of digital platforms is insightful in many ways, the linkage with deliberative politics is not systematically developed but very general. His description of the semiprivate public sphere and their consequences is driven by empirical observations of disintegration and not further theorized with respect to the consequences for democratic will formation. The question remains at which point the necessary consensus on shared constitutional principles in society is challenged. Second, Habermas's analysis does not account for the fact that even prior to the newly transformed public sphere the differentiation of social life manifested itself in the proliferation of multiple dissonant public spheres that were hardly integrated by the mass media. However, he concludes his essay with a general plea for regulation toward truthful, responsible and liable platforms and the preservation of a media structure that enables inclusive and deliberative will formation. After all, he seems to adhere to the traditional gatekeeping model, wishing for the norms of traditional mass media to prevail, while knowing at the same time that the ghosts of digital capitalism are here to stay. Third, Habermas's analysis of digital transformation fails to recognize the true systemic change

of public communication due to the logic of networks and their basic quality of dissolving the unilinear direction and speed of communication. Network communication is inherently fluid, with connections and disconnections forming the structure of communication at any time. Digital connectivity thereby exceeds physical and political spaces. This quality is detrimental to deliberative politics and opinion formation within the boundaries of political institutions and nation states. While it is a pleasure to read Habermas's account of the new transformation of the public sphere and his critique of right-wing tendencies, populism, and polarization, his essay leaves one rather clueless regarding the future of deliberative democracy.

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