

A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO THE PUBLIC SPACE CONCEPT EVOLUTION: FROM HABERMAS TO INTERNET, BIG DATA AND SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

With the advent of the Internet, scientists and politicians, but also ordinary citizens have questioned whether the Internet, as a socio-political entity has a negative or positive impact on the formation of general public opinion. Some researchers have seen the Internet as the main force for decentralizing the communication process, which, in the context of freedom of expression, could provide citizens with new niches for public discussion. Other researchers have been more skeptical of the impact the Internet and social media could have on the democratic process. The methodology of this study contains literature reviewing, using the descriptive research method within the term of "public space." The study presents a comparison between the concept of public space in its classical version and the modern public space in its digital version. The key question of this paper is whether the Internet represents a real public space or not.

Keywords: *public space, Habermas, social media, public opinion, democracy.*

1. INTRODUCTION

What is public space? This is a question which theorists in the field of political theory and communication science have been trying for several decades to find a definition to, that would accurately describe its characteristics. The abstract nature of the notion of public space and its related terminology, which is quite ambiguous, makes the study of public space complex and less attractive. Public space is considered to be a common space - which provides equal access to social actors, who interact with each other through dialogue, exchange views and discuss issues of general interest. Also, in an ideal public space, individuals are equal in freely expressing their opinions without being subjected to any pressure.

Studying the evolution of the concept of public space is important in itself, especially for

developing democracies, because it allows us to analyse how public opinion is formed in public space and what impact it may have on the reforms implemented by decision-makers. The study of the concept of public sphere is important for the field of communication sciences through "its explicit emphasis on the central forms and procedures of communication of political and public life. The concept is essential for the study of public discourse, media, political communication and democracy" (LITTLEJOHN & FOSS, 2009). The emergence of media has contributed to the formation of public opinion in the public space even faster.

The theorists of the "information society" concept, in addition to probing the effects that new information technologies have on society and the changes they produce, have also questioned the relationship between the Internet and democracy and the impact it can have on a country's democracy. Can the Internet be a platform for rational public discourse? Can this discourse lead to the perpetuation and further development of democratic norms in a society? Despite the existence of a fragmented and large virtual audience, can there be consensus on decision-making? Is the Internet an alternative public space?

2. DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC SPACE

In ancient Greece, the Agora was the first public space where citizens met to discuss community issues, exchange views and discuss public life issues. The Agora of ancient Greece was a "public sphere dominated by freedom, all free citizens having equal rights to participate

directly in public affairs, while the private sphere is the space where the master of the house dominates" (REIFFEL, 2008).

The Agora of ancient Greece was an open physical space used for meetings and discussions, but in ancient Rome, however, with the increase in population and the beginnings of urbanization, the gathering of citizens took place in Forums, which were closed meeting spaces. In ancient times, the concept of freedom in the public space was a relative concept, since slaves, women, children, and foreigners did not have access to public discussions. Freedom of assembly and public expression belonged only to men, whom Jurgen Habermas mentions in his work *"The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere"*. The German philosopher Hannah Arendt was the first researcher to use the term "public space" in *"The Origins of Totalitarianism"* in 1951, but Habermas is the first scientist who studied and theorized the term. Over the years, many researchers have shown interest in the concept of public space, and many have come up with their own interpretations or definitions.

For example, in his comprehensive definition Denis Reynie, refers to public space as "the discussion of issues of public interest, a discussion organized in such a way that its actors are obliged to use the weapons of argument and place themselves in the interests of the general interest. Public space is the "place" of political participation, understood as an expression of interests and deliberations, decisions and control of power" (COMAN, 1999). However, the Romanian researcher Camelia Beciu explains what the public space is not: "it is not a specific place, an area or a construction (physical space can only facilitate the formation of public space). Public space is not to be confused with common space. Common space homogenizes, while public space combines practices, styles and identities" (BECIU, 2009).

3. THE PUBLIC SPACE CONCEPT ACCORDING TO HABERMAS

Jurgen Habermas is the representative of the Frankfurt School, a German philosophical school at the University of Frankfurt, which first became

known in the world during the inter-war period, especially thanks to its representatives Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno and their neo-Marxist theories. Jurgen Habermas was Theodor Adorno's assistant at the Frankfurt School. In 1962, Habermas published in German the work "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society." Twenty-seven years later, in 1989, the work was translated into English, becoming very popular among theorists and researchers in many fields of science.

Through a historical and sociological analysis, and not just an ideological one (a common feature of the representatives of critical thinking at the Frankfurt School), Habermas, considered to be "the theorist of public space" (THOMASSEN, 2010), describes the formation of public space in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in European countries.

In Habermas's opinion the public space is "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (HABERMAS, 1991). Therefore, according to Habermas, the notion of public space is the place where public opinion is formed and which all citizens have free access to. At the same time, the Habermasian public space is an argumentative, rational and critical one, characterized by the wide access of citizens, where there is no hierarchical scale, the autonomy of each participant in the debates being guaranteed. Influenced by the rational argument of Kant's ideology, Habermas is regarded as "the theorist who completely described the ideal of the bourgeois public sphere," in which the argument had decisive power (CALHOUN, 1992).

Habermas states that the bourgeois public sphere originated in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, with the advent of capitalism and the middle class, in countries such as England, France, and Germany, when representatives of the bourgeoisie gathered in cafes or lounges and discussed current issues facing the community at the time. And more importantly, these discussions were conducted in a "critical manner" (DOBRESCU, et al., 2007). It was during this period that the bourgeoisie began to claim and obtain its civil rights. Despite the element of social inclusion mentioned by

Habermas, however, the author emphasizes the exclusion of the participation of the poor or uneducated people in public debates, stating that participants must have “a certain social influence, with a certain prestige in those communities” (DOBRESCU, et al., 2007). It should be noted that the author did not see women as participants in the public debates of the bourgeoisie either, which later led to criticism from many researchers. The bourgeois public sphere, as described by Jurgen Habermas and all the criticisms vociferated by his contemporaries, is, however, a point of reference for further ideological and social changes and reforms in European states.

The Industrial Revolution led to the change in public space by the appearance of mass media which, through their activities, became those forming the public opinion. Thus, the debates of the bourgeoisie in the salons and cafes of the great European cities were replaced by the debates in the press of that period. Habermas specifies in this sense that the critical spirit so characteristic to the bourgeois public space decays with the appearance of media, this being influenced by the state and capital, but also by consumers. The horizontal communication between citizens has been replaced by the vertical one, between media institutions and their consumers.

4. IS THE INTERNET A REAL PUBLIC SPACE?

With the emergence of information technology and new media, much controversy is focused on the topic of public space. Since the Internet has led to the creation of a heterogeneous and transnational virtual space, it is already difficult to talk about the classic notion of public space, as it appears, for example in Habermas’s work. The emergence of information technologies and new media has offered new spaces for manifestation and public accession of individuals in the virtual space.

Camelia Beciu states that the Internet gives participants the feeling that they are not part of a “ready-made” audience, but can “trigger the formation of an audience,” and through its discursive participation this audience can draw

the media’s attention to some problems in society (BECIU, 2011). In this case there is a reversal of roles. One of the purposes or effects of the traditional media discourse is to signal social issues that the public takes note of, but in the case of social media, it is the public who, not always, but often, identifies and discusses different issues of public interest, which the traditional media later take over. At the same time, the virtual space is characterized by notions such as desynchronization and delocalization, where the “virtual” audience can signal both local and global problems at the same time, so there is an oscillating activism between globality and localism.

In the context of the globalization process, Volkmer claims that McLuhan’s “global village” is turning into a “diversified global public space,” since the development of information technology has allowed the media to create a transnational space where consumers can watch the same events at the same time (VOLKMER, 2003). According to the researcher, the global media can already be equated with the global public space. Hjavard also supports the idea of the emergence of a new global space, in which transnational media played a key role in covering international events such as Chinese student protests, United Nations conferences on the environment, women or social development, the death of Princess Diana (HJAVARD, 2003). The new global space is a real forum for political discussion and the formation of public opinion, but the author has a critical vision on the formation of the global public opinion, because in the case of major international events, political decision-makers are those who take the decisions on specific issues. Although Habermas’s work continues to be a real benchmark for researchers in the study of political science, political ideology or media, some researchers argues that Habermas’s ideas are far too Eurocentric and cannot be applied to the realities of the Middle East countries. Moreover, Habermas underestimated the role of religious traditions in shaping modern public opinion.

Thus, we could say that the academic environment is divided into two groups when discussing the power of the Internet and social networks as real forums for discussion and

dialogue, where participants analyse political issues in a deliberate way.

5. CRITICISM OF THE HABERMASIAN MODEL

a) The Internet - a real deliberative forum

The advent of the Internet has led to the decentralization of modern public space where the existence of several public spaces has been noticed. There is also the democratization of public space, where different social categories have unrestricted access. The Internet represents a new technological advantage for democratic communication because it is decentralized and the online content is provided by users of the virtual space (SALTER, 2003). As early as the 1990s, there were authors who compared the Internet to an “electronic agora” with a “high potential for democratization” (RHEINGOLD, 1993). But the same author wanted to warn us of the danger that the convenience of the Internet can have, as has happened in the case of traditional media.

Thanks to the Internet, citizens have new forms of access to public authorities, web users can interconnect and discuss general issues. Unlike the traditional public space, the Internet offers new forms and styles of connection between its users, such as online participatory journalism. Both the number of participants and the topics discussed are more varied, but also more numerous (RASMUSSEN 2008). Peter Dahlgren believes that with the advent of the Internet, the effects and impact it would have on public life could be anticipated. The arrival of the Internet has produced a real revolution in the field of information technology. According to the researcher, the Internet has led to the creation of an alternative public space and an intensification of dialogue and civic debate, which are indispensable for a true deliberative democracy (DAHLGREN, 2004). One of the promoters of the power of the Internet and social networks, Zizi Papacharissi considers that: “new technologies provide information and ways that could lead to increasing the role of the public in social and political life. The explosion in the number of online political groups and activism certainly

reflects the political usefulness of the Internet” (PAPACHARISSI, 2002). The same view is shared by Clay Shirky, who states that websites such as Flickr, YouTube, MySpace and Facebook have led to the creation of new opportunities for public involvement, offering new ways to access public information, so that citizens have the opportunity to take a stand on many issues of public interest (SHIRKY, 2008).

The power of the Internet and of social networks cannot be denied in the case of revolutions and popular uprisings, such as the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt or other countries in the Arab world, such as Syria or Libya. They had the same impact in 2013, in the case of the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul (2013). Despite the fact that online users may face problems such as censorship by some authoritarian states, high costs or lack of access to social media, Moyo believes that the existence of defining elements such as plurality and diversity make the Internet “the largest and unique public space” (MOYO, 2009).

At the same time, online communication based on text, audio and video increases the degree of participation and interaction between subjects, which brings the digital model of public space closer to the Habermasian model, which was based on the principle of dialogue, interaction and deliberation.

b) The Internet - not a real deliberative forum

Authors such as Sunstein are concerned that the Internet has led to an increase in the number of radical sites and discussion groups, giving the public the opportunity to express their views more moderately in the media. These sites are connected to sites of the same nature, which leads to a polarization of groups, leading to the emergence of extremist groups, violence and hatred (SUNSTEIN, 2001). Sunstein is one of the first researchers to write about the risk of “echo chambers” and “filter bubbles” and the danger they pose to the democracy of any state. In addition to the fact that many researchers have idealized the public space, in its classical sense, as a true Agora of deliberative democracy, there are still voices that sharply criticize the exclusion of women and vulnerable social strata from the institutions of the bourgeois public space

(POSTER, 1997). The debates and discussions of the bourgeois public space offered the opportunity only to privileged people to participate and exercise their influence. At the same time, only those people who have access to the Internet and computers can participate in online discussions, which proves once again the exclusive character of public space.

The exclusive nature of new communication technologies is also widely debated by Robert McChesney, who states that Internet access and the development of computer literacy skills are real obstacles to transforming the Internet into a real public space, adding that under global capitalism "Internet and the new technologies are more likely to adapt to the existing political culture than to create a new one" (MCCHESENEY, 1996). The principle of unhindered access of different social strata to social networks and their participation in the e-agora is seen by some researchers as incomplete and not always applicable, as there are a number of barriers that limit access to digital space. Bonfadelli states that there are at least 4 reasons for this: 1) older and less educated people do not have enough digital skills, 2) even if they had these skills for financial reasons, they could not afford to access the new media, 3) the lack of a friendly attitude online and 4) the use of the Internet is more about education, in general (BONFADELLI, 2002).

Although many researchers in the digital space point out that with the development of information technology, more and more people, representatives of different social strata, have unrestricted access to online discussions, according to the We Are Social 2020 Report the total number of network users is 4.2 billion people (53.6% of the total population), while 3.2 billion still do not have access to the Internet and women in developing countries are under-represented in the online environment. However, according to the same report, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to an acceleration of the Internet connection and the diversification of the digital demographic index, as the number of Facebook users over the age of 65 has increased the most in the last 12 months. (WEARESOCIAL, 2021)

In his attempt to demonstrate why the Internet is not a real public space, Dean comes up with a more ideological critique, based on two lines of

argument. The first direction talks about the "shortcomings" and "excesses" of the virtual space. By "shortcomings" the author mentions the beginnings of the Internet age that was dominated by young people, white people and Americans, and by "excess" he refers to the inclusion of other representatives of society as: the ignorant and the ill-informed. Thus, the Internet is characterized as a space "with too much equality, with too much inclusiveness". The second line of argument is to summarize the "shortcomings" and "excesses" by which the researcher states that the Internet is an "ideology of advertising in the service of communicative capitalism".

In the digital public space, the emphasis is more on emotion, not on reason, on factuality and not on theory. The modern public space is based on messages tailored to the expectations of a wider and more diverse audience. The digital public sphere is expanding, so we can neither talk about the quality of the discussion's characteristic of the bourgeois public sphere, nor about the values on which discussions focused. The 21st century is characterized by a constantly evolving techno-culture, and its constituent elements such as "communicative capitalism" or "Google capitalism" make it difficult to distinguish between what is public and what is private. The structure of the public also changes, gradually abandoning reason and critical thinking. This is because the norms and customs of capitalism transformed people's preferences and diverted their attention to consumption rather than critical thinking.

Nowadays, there is more and more talk about terms such as Big Data, data mining, data journalism, terms that describe the processes, phenomena and trends of the digital space. Hundreds of thousands of messages and information are distributed online every second. The intelligence and capabilities of the human brain are no longer sufficient to monitor and analyse this huge amount of data, which is why the concept of "artificial intelligence" is increasingly present in the international scientific research and in the media discourse. People can no longer rationally analyse what is there in the digital space. According to Habermas, reasoning is one of the most important attributes of the

correct formation of public opinion in a real public space, but since it is missing in the online environment, it is difficult to say that the Internet represents a real deliberative forum.

Another criticism of the online space, which calls into question the existence of a real public space, is the pressure that political regimes can have on people, through the use of censorship and control of social networks. In the digital age, censorship and control are not just the attributes of autocratic states, but any state can enforce laws that would restrict online freedom of expression. In addition to political regimes, the power and influence of large corporations is hard to deny.

People's growing dependence on digital gadgets, economic interests and fierce competition dictated by the rules of savage capitalism has allowed corporations to decide which messages may or may not appear online. Therefore, censorship and control, as opposed to traditional media, are more difficult to observe because they are decentralized. Being driven by profit, those behind social networks make them real agoras of messages and "fabricated" information dictated by their algorithms.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Since the advent of the Internet, the term public space has undergone a semantic-conceptual change. The emergence of information technology and new media has led to the emergence of more and more controversies regarding the topic of public space. The existence of an inhomogeneous and transnational virtual audience has led to the modification of the classical notion of public space, as it appears, for example in Habermas's work. The academic environment has been divided into two camps. Some researchers believe that the Internet is a public space that contributes to the perpetuation and development of democratic norms in a state, while the other camp has a more critical and reserved position towards the power of the Internet as a real deliberative forum where rational decisions are being taken.

In the digital public space, the emphasis is more on emotion, not on reason, on factuality and not on theory. The modern public space is

based on messages tailored to the expectations of a wider and more diverse audience. The difference between public and private space is no longer so visible because, owing to the Internet and new media, the border between public and private is blurring. The emergence of mass media and later the Internet, but also the rapid urbanization, has led to the relocation of public space from streets or cafes into people's private homes or virtual space, in other words there is a migration from social to individual.

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