



## The new agora: The space of public debate in the digital age<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This paper raises two questions: can the Web be a space for public debate? Can this debate be constructive? Adopting a non-normative and not overly narrow definition, it is possible to say that the Web is a space for public debate. However, some of its structural characteristics and some aspects of the dominant social media (individualism and the impossibility of establishing durable bonds of solidarity) can be interpreted as elements that contribute to social polarization on the Web. This makes it difficult to give a clear answer to the second question.

**Keywords:** digital capitalism; social media; public sphere; polarization.

### [es] La nueva ágora: El espacio del debate público en la era digital

**Resumen.** Este artículo plantea dos cuestiones: ¿puede la Web ser un espacio de debate público? ¿Puede este debate ser constructivo? Adoptando una definición no normativa y no excesivamente limitada, es posible afirmar que la Web es un espacio de debate público. Sin embargo, algunas de sus características estructurales y algunos aspectos de las redes sociales dominantes (el individualismo y la imposibilidad de establecer vínculos de solidaridad duraderos) se interpretan como elementos que contribuyen a la polarización de los públicos en la Red. Esto hace difícil dar una respuesta clara a la segunda pregunta.

**Palabras clave:** capitalismo digital; redes sociales; esfera pública; polarización.

**Summary.** 1. Questions raised. 2. Public debate and its space: an introduction. 3. Polarization. 4. Final remarks. 5. Authorship contribution statement. 6. References.

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## 1. Questions raised

Digital space and social media are *de facto* areas of permanent debate. This paper asks the following questions: are these platforms spaces for public debate? And if so, are there conditions for this debate to be constructive? These questions will be

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analysed in sections 2 and 3 of the text respectively. Following an approach close to critical theory, the paper will avoid overly technophilic (e.g. Rheingold, 2000) and technophobic positions (e.g. Young, 2006), preferring instead a serious discussion on the risks and possible opportunities offered by new technologies (Fuchs & Sandoval, 2014; Kellner, 2021; Morozov, 2013). By asking broad questions, this paper cannot examine every single technology in depth, something that would be necessary for more detailed analyses. With its perspective, however, this text can serve as a starting point for future research.

## **2. Public debate and its space: An introduction**

### **2.1. Public debate: An instrumental definition**

Public debate is a complex topic to define. This goes far beyond the scope of this paper, which will limit its discussion to the following definition: the public debate is the result of different channels and means of discussion that end up influencing the life of a society in a concrete way. This deliberately loose definition makes it possible to establish with an *a posteriori* and non-normative (Fraser, 1990, p. 72) rule of thumb the fundamental characteristic of the public debate: being the space and the engine that defines, more or less indirectly, social development and the decisions taken in the *loci potestatis*. The example of the Athenian agora (where full citizens, members of the political assembly gathered themselves aiming for a real impact in the courses of the city's actions) shows well the link between public debate and its social and physical space (Moreno-Pestaña, 2019; Vernant, 1984, 2000; Vidal-Naquet, 1986).

Power is required to take decisions, and it does so by following a set of criteria. For this, one of the fundamental elements in defining the degree of democracy of a society is precisely the possibility to influence the public debate (Bobbio, 2009), despite disparities in economic and cultural capital that make some actors more influential than others (Gramsci, 1971). Habermas (1991) proposed that public opinion is oriented towards the critique of power and not its achievement. However, his perspective is limited and exclusionary (Crawford, 1999). The balance of power in the public sphere is what determines the topics that are part of the debate (Fraser, 1990, p. 71): there is no *a priori* separation between public and private (for instance gender roles and sexuality were until recently considered to be a private and non-political issue). Conversely, insisting on a clear division between public and private affairs implies favouring the contemporary *status quo*. This is because «democracy is often treated as static concept that we either practice effectively, live up to honourably, or are unable attain. Democracy, however, is imaginary» (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 11). As can be understood, the clash between different positions, interests and perspectives (a clash over the very meaning to be given to the notion of public debate) is inevitable (Mouffe, 2005, 2013).

Thus, a more inclusive and realistic understanding of public debate cannot be based on a single space but must instead observe the multiplicity of spaces in which it takes place. As Fraser (1990, p. 70) states «[i]n stratified societies, like it or not,

subaltern counterpublics stand in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics. One important object of such interpublic contestation is the appropriate boundaries of the public sphere» Abandoning normativism and applying a descriptive analysis implies recognise the impossibility (beyond a sort of rule of thumb) of an *a priori* definition of the space for public debate.

If we want to define the public space as the space for public debate, we need to explain the meaning that we can give to this term. Public space, narrowly defined, can be understood as the physical space, accessible to the public, owned by the state, region or municipality, which characterises our territory (Purini, 2007). However, this definition is clearly too limited and limiting. The public debate does not take place in just one concrete physical space. Certainly, some spaces are built specifically to favour the meeting, the discussion, the development of an urban sociality that is characteristically linked to public debate. However, such functions can also be performed in private spaces. The mixing of public and private spaces does not completely overturn the nature of public debate but complicates its analysis by adding further power relations and hidden interests.

## 2.2. Some characteristics of digital space

One of the first elements to underline regarding the Web in general and social media in particular is that they constitute a new space-time layer that overlaps and mix with those in which we traditionally live. Following the idea of ‘mediatrix’ (Taylor & Saarinen, 1994), we can define the Web as a place or event in which there is an asynchronous and anonymous existence, and this leads to a redefinition of the frontiers between the public and the private and their convergence (Papacharissi, 2010). First, the Web is asynchronous because it is a recording-based technology (Ferraris, 2016; Ferraris & Torrenco, 2014): each user interacting with it can contribute, by leaving his or her own trace, at different times. A discussion may take place between different time zones, in different temporalities, but it may also conform like a traditional epistolary exchange, where time passes between each interaction. Even more, objects from the past can irrupt into the present. A post in a forum may receive new replies after years, a video published a decade ago may suddenly become viral. There is no single temporality on the Web that synchronises all users. Second, the Web is still some kind of an anonymous space. Although Big Tech has been developing tracking tools for years (Lyon, 2008; Zuboff, 2018), it is still impossible for the general public to establish a direct and unmistakable link between online and offline identities. The same person can have multiple accounts and change their IP via VPN. This makes the Web a liminal space, in which the rules and laws that apply in material space do not always and not everywhere apply. Finally, the Web is a layer of reality in which the boundaries between what was traditionally considered public and private in Western societies are broken. This is crucial because for a long time this ideological distinction has served as the keystone of the legitimising structure of liberal systems. With the current development of the Internet, especially but not only through social media, the private stops being private, it opens up to the public gaze. However, this change does not necessarily lead to the politicisation of private life but can also result in its commodification.

It is noteworthy that, after a first military phase and a second marked by public and anti-commercial character (McChesney, 2013, p. 101), the Web has been colonised by the private economy which, at the beginning of the 21st century, has turned it into one of the fastest oligopolised economic sectors in history (McChesney, 2013, p. 130). This is not surprising and signals the link between a society and the technology it is able to develop (Bernal, 1969): in this case, the Web shows the inequality (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010), privatisation and control features (Crawford, 1999) that characterise contemporary Western society. From the perspective of political economy, then, the Web is fundamentally an unequal space (e.g. Mosco, 2017). The very structure of the network imposes this inequality: links are the vector through which one moves in this space, so the central nodes are hyperconnected while the marginal ones are uninfluential. This provides us with a less egalitarian understanding of the network metaphor than we might initially think: «If we consider the architecture of the Internet more broadly, we find that users' interactions with the Web are far more circumscribed than many realize, and the circle of sites they find and visit is much smaller than is often assumed» (Hindman, 2009, p. 15).

Central nodes therefore perform the gatekeeper function that was thought to have disappeared with the advent of a decentralised network architecture. This raises several questions about the Web as a space for public debate. Indeed, the predominance of certain actors seems to limit the freedom of expression of most, thus distorting the debate that can emerge in this layer of reality, but this is hardly something new (Gramsci, 1971). The main nodes also influence less directly the content that is produced and circulates on the Web than centralised censorship. As Hindman (2009, p. 13) points out:

Some ways in which online information is filtered are familiar, as traditional news organizations and broadcast companies are prominent on the Web. Other aspects of online filtering are novel. Search engines and portal Web sites are an important force, yet a key part of their role is to aggregate thousands of individual gatekeeping decisions made by others.

The fact that there are dominant actors, technical limits to what can be created and shared on the Web, financial limits and communication styles makes the Web much more similar to other communication spaces than one might initially think.

Power imbalances within a society are not new; e.g.: active power control and access to democracy were in Athens *de facto* restricted to well-settled males, being purely native of the polis, living close to the agora and not being conditioned by daily agricultural duties which took most of time available to a middleman (Evans, 2010; Patriquin, 2015; Qvortrup, 2007). Unsurprisingly, this does not completely prevent the creation of democratic spaces and initiatives on the Web. The specific design of each of the Web platforms may favour the creation of community spaces that recognise their quality as public spaces and thus constitute places of public debate. Some platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, on the other hand, hinder the emergence of a collective consciousness among their users, so that they remain trapped in an advertising expansion of their own privacy without this constituting a real public space (Forestal, 2022).

This leads to other questions that it is important to ask to understand whether the Web is a suitable and favourable space for public debate. These depend, to a large extent, on the meaning one wishes to give to the concepts of public space and public debate. One must ask whether contemporary social media, whose economic model is fundamentally predatory and alienating and depends on the attendance it receives (Fuchs, 2014; Zuboff, 2018), can provide a sufficiently favourable basis for the development of a public debate that, to be so, should be inclusive. One of the main problems here is linked to exclusion: being private spaces, with their own dynamics, their own communication styles, these technological nodes impose a series of entry criteria that are not necessarily universal: internet connection, sufficient communication skills, a relatively well-developed social capital are just some of the obstacles that prevent these spaces from truly representing social plurality.

Another fundamental question is that of the political effectiveness of these spaces. Some, in fact, tend to consider the internal democratic nature of a community on a social media site as sufficient to speak of public debate (Forestal, 2022). Others, on the other hand, could argue that the public created in this way is weak, insufficient to make changes outside the digital space, and therefore fundamentally sterile from a socio-political point of view (e.g. Champion, 2016; Fraser, 1990, p. 76). The impossibility of directly and consistently influencing decision-making processes thus constitutes a constraint on the political effectiveness of debates on the Web. The propensity to consider the Web as a space of public debate will therefore change depends on how public debate is understood (whether as a single universalistic space within a society that must include all citizens, or as a multiplicity of spaces of micro-democracy with no output outside its community).

Although digital architectures explicitly work to favour certain uses, the spontaneity of users in appropriating these mechanisms and using them in a transformative way should not be underestimated, even if it leads, in most cases, to the creation of weak audiences that are not sufficiently able to influence the wider public debate. Again, how one defines the Web depends on one's interest in the democratic and transformative possibilities of the constitution of alternative publics and marginal groups, which do not have sufficient weight to transform the whole of society but can nevertheless constitute themselves as new political actors.

### **3. Polarization**

#### **3.1. The fragmentation of audiences**

If the digital space can host public debates, there is a further point worth discussing. The contemporary landscape, as far as the dominant social media are concerned, appears increasingly polarized. The years of digitalisation also correspond to a period that has seen a significant growth of populist movements, both right-wing and, in some cases, left-wing. Without wishing to establish a deterministic link, there are strong correlations between the two phenomena. This digitalisation has, for example, led to a major transformation of the media landscape. According to Hindman (2009, p. 100)

Audiences are moving in both directions. On the one hand, the news market in cyberspace seems even more concentrated on the top ten or twenty outlets than print media is. On the other, the tiniest outlets have indeed earned a substantial portion of the total eyeballs.

This shift in audiences implies, on the one hand, the strengthening of an increasingly homogeneous narrative in favour of the status quo, and on the other hand, the parallel strengthening of minority fringes completely opposed to this situation. In other words, the oppositions between the dominant, growingly totalising worldview and the increasingly polarized counter-hegemonic visions are strengthened, up to the paradox of phenomena such as knowledge resistance (Klintman, 2021), which break any claim of a common epistemic foundation. The movement towards a certain centralisation of the media is not surprising: on the one hand, it responds hand to the economic laws of capitalism (McChesney, 2013, p. 73), on the other hand to the logic of the cultural industry and advertisement in a mass society (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Sachs, 2011). What is striking, however, is both the strengthening of minority fringes and the increase in differences between these two types of audiences, which generate a series of social tensions between people socialised in increasingly separate worldviews; this is, the intensification of a confrontation that lies at the heart of politics (Fraser, 1990; Mouffe, 2005, 2013), what has been called discursive asynchrony (Cometta, 2020, 2021). This is where a perspective that focuses excessively on the importance of individual cultural consumption as an element in the creation of public debate may run into problems. As Papacharissi, (2010, p. 19) puts it:

As individuals become civically emancipated through acts of consumption, cultural forms of citizenship are claimed to fulfil a sense of civic belonging, and this further fragment civil society into multiple, culturally oriented, and consumerism-driven citizen spheres.

The shortcomings of conceiving of public debate solely as a sphere of cultural consumption (e.g., by referring to the weak publics of certain online platforms as paradigmatic examples of democracy without questioning their limits) are linked to the difficulty of establishing a general public sphere. The risk is twofold: focusing excessively on the universal is normative and produces exclusion, not doing so dissolves social bonds and solidarity. Finding the right balance between the need to criticise and subvert these limitations without destroying the idea and the possibility of a general public debate by a strong public is therefore an essential aspect of the critical analysis of public debate.

### **3.2. Individualising social media**

Social media are among the most interesting digital spaces from a socio-political point of view. A detailed analysis of these spaces exceeds the scope of this paper, but the discussion of some of their features is nevertheless necessary. One of the most problematic aspects of the dominant social media is their tendency to atomise social experience. Forestal (2022, p. 142) argues that



Both Facebook EdgeRank (the algorithm that curates one's News Feed) and the Twitter sorting algorithm gather users in durable ways, but these structures are invisible to users. This invisibility undermines users' ability to recognize their communities and form the political friendships necessary for democratic politics.

Significantly, this complete individualisation of the user experience is matched, on the part of the platform, by an impressive ability to determine groups of interest, common preferences and ties, an ability that allows the platform to profile users and exploit this information for advertising purposes (Zuboff, 2018). It is not that relationships do not exist they are hidden to avoid being confronted with users who are self-aware of their own position and interests.

Among the effects of this condition of imposed individualism there is an increased difficulty in perceiving a common belonging, which in turn limits instances of mutual solidarity, confrontation, and debate. According to Forestal (2022, p. 155)

These platforms are all designed, in other words, to facilitate users' individualism – encouraging users to withdraw into their own interests and eschew the wider communities of which they are a part. By making it difficult for citizens to recognize their membership in any number of communities on the site, in other words, the algorithms that organize Facebook and Twitter render the collective action of democratic politics all but impossible.

Political bodies presupposes a minimum degree of identification with the whole of society (Plato, 1969, V, 362). Where this is lacking, it is impossible to establish those minimum relations that allow for the civilised and arbitrated clash between distinct positions and interests that constitutes public debate (Mouffe, 2013). The architecture of some of the most important digital nodes undermines the ability of citizens to engage with otherness: a serious political problem given the central role of the Web in the contemporary information landscape.

### **3.3. Online polarization**

A fundamental aspect, linked to the difficulties of overcoming an individualist perspective, is the increased social and political polarization, defined here not as class stratification (Pratschke & Morlicchio, 2012) but as the adoption of a «them versus us» dynamic (Chatzopoulou & Exadaktylos, 2021). As mentioned, democracy requires a degree, albeit minimal, of collective identification. Here it is important to introduce the topic of echo chambers and filter bubbles, two of the environments most conducive to the advent of fake news. There are several reasons why human beings tend to seek information that confirms their worldview. When this remains at an unconscious level, it leads to the creation of a filter bubble, which generates less exposure to potential criticism. The echo chamber, on the other hand, is the active and conscious attempt to generate an information environment that excludes and discredits any divergent perspective (Flaxman et al., 2016; Nguyen, 2018). These two phenomena are particularly present in the social media scene. On

the one hand, as mentioned, the dominant social networks have fundamentally an individualistic structure, which undermines discussion and mediation. On the other, this is linked to the very architecture of the network and further fomented by dynamic Web pages, which allow great personalisation of the content visited. Both of these aspects are linked to consumerism and commodification processes: the less resistance and criticism one encounters on the net, the more one will interact (Han, 2015, 2017), the easier it will be to profile him and thus realise financial gains (Zuboff, 2018).

Fake news is a concept that is still being debated (Lazer et al., 2018; Tandoc et al., 2018). In spite of the absence of an agreed definition, it is clear that they play an important role in polarizing public debate (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Their strength lies in their ability to be shared very quickly, and to circulate uncontrollably, favoured especially by non-adversarial environments such as filter bubbles and echo chambers (Törnberg, 2018). The peculiarity of fake news lies in their immediate, pre-reflexive and uncritical impact. They favour the strengthening of intra-group ties at the expense of inter-group social cohesion (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2009). The tendency of the Web to personalise the information experience, favoured by both the network architecture and the tendency to commodification of digital capitalism, poses a few dangers to social cohesion in its traditional form. Again, this is not a mere problem of content, but rather of methodology and education: by fostering the advent of fake news, the dominant social media display a tendency to be spaces that are hostile to fundamental democratic practices such as constructive discussion, mediation, and critical reception of news. This is important because it shows that the problem has a structural cause. It is not merely a matter of those who do not have sufficient means to deal with the Web. In this regard Papacharissi (2010, p. 20) notes that «[e]ven for the digitally equipped and literate, net-based information technologies do not guarantee communication that will be goal-oriented, reciprocal, and enriching». This does not mean that the Web is the only or the main cause of polarization, but that it acts as a powerful facilitator.

Online polarization is very problematic for public debate. The destruction and fracturing of the world as a complex and shared reality is accompanied by the disappearance of pluralism as a normal element of public space (Arendt, 1998).

In this framework, the confrontation between different groups and interests risks increasing in intensity to the point of turning into an absolute war with no possibility of arbitration (Mouffe, 2013; Schmitt, 1985, 1996). Several approaches can be used to respond to this problem. First, by attempting to bring together people with distinct perspectives in conciliatory contexts, so as to foster constructive and non-exclusive public discussion (Bail, 2021). Another method is to create online platforms that foster community building and the development of democratic practices (Forestal, 2022). Finally, there is the need to strengthen a certain social bond, which can be achieved by public education as a normative force, as well as by social and economic reforms (Bobbio, 2009). The online space is only one layer of social reality and, therefore, is closely interconnected with the offline world: to deal with problems arising on the Web, it is also important to consider offline aspects that may affect them.



#### 4. Final remarks

This paper has attempted to show the great complexity behind the conception of public debate in the digital space. We asked two questions: whether the Web can host public debate and whether it can do so in a constructive way. If one does not adopt an overly narrow normative conception of public debate, the Web constitutes or can constitute a space of democratic expansion, especially for alternative audiences. Answering the second question is more difficult. The Web is influenced in important ways by anti-democratic economic and political dynamics. We emphasised the aspect of oligopoly, individualistic architectures and how this opposes the construction of solidarity communities in which it is possible to exercise the public debate. Other questions remain to be asked: how relevant is the role of memory and oblivion in the public debate? What is the impact of the Web being a space where everything is recorded, but these traces are only accessible to certain actors?

There are several possible paths to reform this situation. If one merely wants to make the Web more community-oriented, imagining new digital architectures (Forestal, 2022), a new legal framework (Lessig, 2006), or defining it as a public service (Fuchs & Unterberger, 2021) are likely to be sufficient steps. If, on the other hand, the aim is to further democratise society, then more incisive offline reforms will be needed, such as better critical digital education (Wilhelm, 2000) with respect to constructive debate (Schmitt, 2020), tackling fake news and discursive asynchrony (Cometta, 2020, 2021), as well as a greater focus on addressing socio-economic inequalities, although digital technologies have been developed predominantly in a neo-liberal or authoritarian environment, this does not mean that digital technology is necessarily and solely linked to this type of society. To develop this second path, further research is needed, both on specific aspects of the Web and more generally on society and democracy.

#### 5. Authorship contribution statement

Mosè Cometta: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Writing original draft, Writing review and editing, Funding acquisition.

Ignacio Marcio Cid: Conceptualisation, Writing original draft, Writing review and editing.

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