Social Media and the Digital Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

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Abstract

This article explores the question of how to understand social media following the Habermasian theory of the structural transformation of the public sphere. We argue for a return to political-economic fundamentals as the basis for analysing the public sphere and seek to establish a characteristic connection between digital-behavioural control and singularised audiences in the context of proprietary markets. In the digital constellation, it is less a matter of immobilising the citizen as a consumer but rather of their political activation – albeit in conditions under which commercial interests have primacy: privatisation without privatism.

Keywords

digital capitalism, Jürgen Habermas, public sphere, social media, structural transformation

The relationship between the public sphere and the economy is at the heart of Jürgen Habermas's classic analysis of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, 1991). According to Habermas, the historical constitution of the bourgeois public sphere was predicated on the role of private property as acquired and reproduced in the early capitalist (market-based) exchange of goods. The bourgeois entrepreneur acquired private power along with private wealth; this, however, did not translate into a comparable ability to shape the public sphere in light of the then still predominant principle of monarchical representation. Against this background – and connected with the

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validity claim of patriarchal, bourgeois nuclear families and a specific literary culture – the bourgeois public sphere developed. It became a vehicle for public criticism of monarchical representation and a place for the articulation of the interests of autonomous, largely equal, bourgeois market participants in the political sphere. Somewhat simplistically, one could say that the triumph of market principles was a condition for the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. The self-confidence individuals acquired as market citizens was brought to bear in the field of public interests.

Likewise, in his analysis of the disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere, Habermas describes material changes as the trigger: he argues that economic concentration effects and the social inequalities generated by the market initiated a second stage of the transformation of the public sphere from the late 19th century onwards. The horizontal market of small traders was replaced by industrial capitalism, which was dominated by large companies on the one hand and dependent, proletarian wage labour on the other. Two consequences were of central importance: first, there was the high concentration of economic power in the hands of individual entrepreneurs (or entrepreneurial families) and the simultaneous proletarianisation of large parts of the population, which made the idea of free and equal market actors increasingly implausible. Second, there were the welfare state interventions developed in response to rampant impoverishment, which changed the relationship between the state and society.

In the 'industrial society constituted as a social-welfare state' (Habermas, 1991: 229), the representational function of the bourgeois family faded as *late bourgeois* nuclear families increasingly retreated into privacy and hedonism. The establishment of the mass media in the form of radio and television and the associated rise of the culture industry are hence characteristic of the third stage of the transformation, which culminated in the mass society of the 20th century and its obsession with consumption. The citizens of the public sphere were now primarily consumers; the critical discourse was undermined by advertising and distraction. Building on early critical theory, Habermas diagnosed a return to unidirectional communication, a refeudalisation in which private actors brought their interests to the privatised public in the form of monarchical representation.

This brief summary of the argument of the structural transformation of the public sphere shows how important the materialist underpinnings of the transformation were for Habermas's original theory. This theory draws its strength from a combination of three elements: the functional logic of specific forms of media (literary criticism, print-media conflict over public opinion, mass-media entertainment), the subjectivity of the public (bourgeois self-consciousness, industrial class polarisation, late capitalist consumerism) and the surrounding structures of accumulation (bourgeois entrepreneurship, industrial monopoly capitalism, Fordism). Although the historically informed debate linking sociological and economic aspects is the basis for Habermas's later work, it is not revised in light of this later work or by the political theories of the public sphere formulated in its wake. The relationship between the public sphere and the market is thus generally and abstractly cited as a perennially problematic factor, but the analysis in later writings focuses mainly on the interface between the organised public sphere (especially civil society) and the political process. The fact that the structural transformation is ongoing is an issue that is addressed in these later works – transnationalisation and the digital transformation are identified as its expression – but its reconstruction for contemporary

society is less comprehensive and rather understood as a change in media which also affects social dynamics.

Our concern in this text is to provide an updated understanding of the triad of mediality, subjectivity and accumulation that is constitutive of the classical theory of structural transformation. We do this by formulating a proposal for the analysis and critique of social media and its role in the contemporary public sphere. Because social media only represents a specific part of the current hybrid media system, any generalisation of its logics can merely be described as an experimental hypothesis. Nevertheless, we argue that social media has become so important for the constitution of the democratic public sphere that a better understanding of it is essential for a critique of the contemporary public sphere.

The text advances two theses: first, concerning the phenomenon of social media itself, we argue that social media is characterised by a specific interrelation of digital behavioural control (mediality), singularised audiences and a characteristic proprietary market form. Second, and based on this, we interpret the digital transformation as a new, fourth stage of the structural transformation: in this stage, the role of the citizen once again shifts from the politically passive consumer to an active and expressive role. However, this is not (or not solely) realised as a societally oriented political activity: representation is privatised but without the privatism typical of mass society. A commercial politicisation emerges in which economic motives always threaten to corrupt the political.

In the following, we will initially (I) return to the development of the political theory of the public sphere and explicate how socio-economic aspects have increasingly faded in the later work of Jürgen Habermas as well as in the theories of the public sphere that have followed. Then, (II) we will present the three theorems for the socio-economic interpretation of the digital structural transformation of the public sphere, which proceed from the dimensions of mediality (data behaviourism: II.1), subjectivity (singularisation: II.2) and accumulation (the primacy of proprietary markets: II.3). In the last section (III), we will then contextualise these findings in relation to the theory of the structural transformation of the public sphere by discussing the transition from the principle of mass-societal-monarchical representation to that of digital-privatised representation as well as the inclusion of socio-economic analysis in the discussion on political theory.

I The Political Theory of the Public Sphere in Transition

The relationship between the public sphere and the economy is already embodied in the ancient distinction between the private household (*oikos*) and the public affair, the *res publica*. It was not until the modern era that this ideal of two separate spheres in a relationship of normative subordination was transformed. The differentiation of society was driven by political changes (such as territorial states), economic changes (such as early capitalism) and media-related changes (such as the printing press). The public sphere and the realm of institutionalised politics became more clearly differentiated and the increasingly popular liberal understanding of the public sphere defined it very broadly as the general, even non-political sphere of visible social life. In this context, market relations were understood as a form of public relationship. The relations between markets and the public sphere were also understood to be positive, since trade relations were viewed as a

civilising force and the marketplace of ideas was thought to be innovative in promoting progress (Hirschman, 1982).

The great achievement of the Habermasian theory of the structural transformation of the public sphere is to have revolutionised this long simplified conception of the public sphere – which had been viewed as a politically diffuse phenomenon that was unrelated to specific forms of media and mainly stabilised by the virtuous attitudes of citizens – and thus to have established a more comprehensive political theory of the public sphere. As described in the introduction, Habermas's work on structural transformation, first published in 1962, explicates the complex relationship between the economy, the development of the public sphere and democratisation. At the centre of the analysis are the reciprocal relationships between mediality, subjectivation and accumulation. Habermas thus goes beyond previous critical theory, especially that of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who, with their diagnosis of the culture industry, identified a central mechanism of the mass media public sphere and decoded it economically but did not systematically address the position of the public sphere in the political system. The theory of the structural transformation, on the other hand, represents an attempt to uncover the political meaning of the public sphere. Habermas criticised the development of the public sphere in the Western democracies of the 1950s, which, in his view, (re)institutionalised a feudal structure of one-sided representation through the focus on consumption and entertainment.

Habermas's great scepticism towards the mass media public sphere and the description presented in his work on the structural transformation represent the foundation of his lifelong examination of the public sphere, but his approach changed decisively in the following decades: the assumption that the modern public sphere was constituted by capitalism and shaped by the mass media remained stable, but the capacity of a democratic public sphere to nevertheless emerge and assert itself in this context became more important. To explain this, Habermas constantly introduced new elements: from the possibility that capitalism could be tamed by the welfare state (Habermas, 1976) to discourse ethics (Habermas, 1984) and the role of civil society (Habermas, 1996), to the investigation of systemic states of equilibrium in complex democracies (Habermas, 2006).

For Habermas, digitalisation and the digital public sphere represent a qualitative leap and thus a structural change, but he no longer devotes the same analytical attention to this upheaval as he once did to the mass media. According to him, digitalisation adds new aspects to the dangers of mass media democracy, such as unequal access to discursive power (agenda-setting, chances of manipulation): the centrifugal forces of this 'bubble'-inducing communicative structure. Habermas treats online publics as if they were structurally separate from 'normal' publics but amplifies their shortcomings. He fears that in the digital public sphere the possibility of inclusive and society-wide discourse – which, despite all the risks of domination and manipulation, still existed in the mass media public sphere – gets irrevocably lost. At the same time, the new form of public sphere – contrary to what was hoped for at the beginning of the digital revolution – is just as susceptible to democratic pathologies as the old one (Habermas, 2006). However, this fragmentation hypothesis is barely elaborated. In essence, Habermas reproduces the criticism of the development of filter bubbles and echo chambers as an effect of algorithmic dispersion.

He acknowledges that a socio-economic analysis would be of great benefit but has not attempted to elaborate one himself (Habermas, 2022).

Likewise, deliberative democratic theory, which builds on Habermas's work, devotes little systematic attention to the question of digital structural transformation and its socio-economic drivers. Of course, it examines how systematic distortions in a society's discursive capacities can be countered; the theoretical programme has also expanded from normative questions to more empirical ones (Elstub et al., 2016). Yet, although the spectrum of institutions studied today ranges from mini-publics to the connections between different discursive spaces – that is, *deliberative systems* – the analytical critique of socio-economic inequalities and power imbalances remains surprisingly underdeveloped. And even the related questions of mediality and subjectivity are predominantly uncharted territory. The analysis of the digital structural transformation is therefore one-sided: digitality is recognised as significant, but the analysis mainly examines the effects attributed to it, and, above all, the possible corrective instruments, rather than the socio-technical dynamics and their causes (Landemore, 2020). Compared to Habermas's classical analysis, deliberative democratic theory therefore remains depthless and mainly uses idealised juxtapositions of, for example, face-to-face interactions, mass media structures and digital tools to make its point.

Overall, with regard to the development of a political theory of the public sphere, we arguably do not have a political theory of mediatised democracy in the proper sense (Hofmann, 2019). The political theoretical discourse on digital public spheres is conceptually too one-sided, and it overlooks the interplay of sociological, technological-media and economic factors (Benson, 2009; Berg et al., 2020).

II The Market and the Public Sphere in the Context of Social Media

The fact that an analysis of the systematic connection between capitalist development, historical subjectivity and media forms has been neglected by the political theory of the public sphere is problematic for an analysis of the present, for both theoretical and empirical reasons – and motivates our proposal to update Habermas's theory of structural transformation. Before doing so, we must clarify two points. First, we need to briefly delineate the digital public sphere and justify why we are focusing specifically on the narrower field of social media in this analysis; second, we want to take a look at the research to date on social media and examine the extent to which our social theoretical proposal has already been described there.

The digitality of today's societies is based on the fact that almost every action and communication can be digitally recorded, operationalised and recursively turned into the object of subsequent action. Digital public spheres are characterised by algorithmicity, many-to-many communication, data collection and much more, and not just by the fact that they take place on a screen (Stalder, 2018). In the following analysis, however, we will partially ignore the complex multiformity of digital publics and instead focus solely on their currently most dominant manifestation: social media. The reason for this is twofold: first, we assume that the functional logic of the digital public sphere will become particularly evident in an analysis of social media. Second, the mass media system,

which is still undoubtedly of central importance, has been profoundly reconstructed by social media, so that today, it is best understood as a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). Hence, while an analysis of social media alone cannot enable us to understand the media system as a whole, social media is a particularly good place to start when considering the structuring of the news system and political/social communication with a view to understanding the actual change that has taken place in recent decades.

The digital public sphere is, of course, a booming topic in social science research quite apart from political theory. The question therefore arises as to how the connection of interest here, namely between capitalism and the public sphere, is discussed in the broad field of studies on social media and whether the social theoretical dimension that has been neglected in the debates on democratic theory can be found here.

Roughly speaking, the scholarship on social media can be divided into two parts: on the one hand, there are publications that directly address platforms as instruments of capitalist accumulation, such as the writings of Nick Srnicek (2016) or Christian Fuchs (2020). In these works, the particular logic of the extraction and use of personal data is reconstructed and the resulting findings are then placed in the broader analytical context of the development of capitalism. Yet, authors in this field shed little light on mediality and subjectivity. Studies from the other direction are centrally interested in describing the dynamics of digital publics. Only in recent times has the importance of economic incentives for platform companies been emphasised more strongly. Originally, the focus was on the user experience in social media, its affordances and the resulting social dynamics. While early work in this direction focused on technically induced dynamics, contemporary research in communication and media studies is more differentiated and reflexive (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018). In terms of economic analysis, however, consideration is usually limited to one or two essential mechanisms – mainly the monopoly position of the central companies (Hindman, 2018). The self-reinforcing logic of these economic settings is then invoked to explain the high affectivity of digital communication or even the willingness of platform providers to promote polarising communications (Gillespie, 2018). While this strand of research places mediality at the heart of its considerations and also talks about accumulation, it does not refer to historically specific forms of subjectivation, as Habermas originally emphasised.

In the following three subsections, we will therefore reconstruct the dimensions central to Habermas's original analysis (mediality, subjectivity and accumulation) with the help of three authors who have synthesised the multitude of empirical studies and findings in a theoretically comprehensive way: Shoshana Zuboff, Andreas Reckwitz and Philipp Staab.

II.1 Mediality: Data Behaviourism

The point of reference in the field of mediality is Shoshana Zuboff's influential study of surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). At the heart of Zuboff's analysis is the data generated in the context of the commercial internet, especially data that can be attributed to individual user profiles. Data is, first and foremost, the by-product of digital communication: whenever we communicate, we leave digital traces. According to Zuboff's account, this 'data as a by-product' was discovered – first by Google and Facebook – as the

actually profitable raw material of the commercial internet. Instead of treating their own products as such and selling them in portions or via user licences, they recognised the secondary value of personal data. This data can be used to create detailed profiles of individuals, which can be converted into money via advertising. The raw material, namely data, is extracted via surveillance processes, which, in Zuboff's view, form the very core of digital mediality. Since capital imperatives are at work, this extraction machinery must constantly expand. According to Zuboff, in recent years, increasing numbers of companies have begun to centre their value creation on surveillance profits, which is why she assumes that surveillance capitalism will rapidly advance. In this line of argument, the appropriation of data by surveillance capitalist corporations reflects the rise of an economic logic that is not focused on the resource-efficient production of physical products but rather on measuring, influencing and ultimately controlling our behaviour.

Zuboff invests great effort in lending suggestive power to the thesis that surveillance capitalism is about to become the guiding paradigm of the entire economy. Yet, a sober reading suggests that it is a description of the operational logics of advertising-financed platforms – especially social media platforms – that exploit their specific mediality. Unlike the classical mass media of the 20th century, social media is not unidirectional (one-to-many). Instead, the recipients of information are also senders of it. In Zuboff's work, a phenomenon that has long been described as the multidirectionality of communication (many-to-many communication, user-generated content, etc.) is analytically inverted by the insight that the actual communication generates observational data that a third party – the mediating platform – uses, which creates a strong vested interest in structuring the communication. This shatters the idea of horizontal or even domination-free communication. Instead, a triadic constellation emerges in which platform providers, which occupy a privileged position, analyse users and seek to influence their behaviour. The democratic promise of bidirectional communication is corrupted; an economic-exploitative dimension is ever present. The problem is exacerbated by the emergence of tools for targeted manipulation. In order to adapt content to meet individual tastes and especially to create personalised advertising, the so-called 'behavioural surplus' (Zuboff, 2019: 65) is aggregated and exploited. Zuboff's analytical description of the horizons of surveillance capitalist practice is of central importance in this context: the operators of social media platforms have long since shifted from measuring and elaborately processing personal data to a logic of 'behavioural control'. Their goal is neither the aggregation of historical data nor its processing to forecast future behaviour. The actual aim has long been to create specific behavioural patterns.

The intellectual framework for this is the guiding principle of data-centred behaviourism (Rouvroy, 2013), according to which choices in the digital space should be designed to generate specific behaviour. This is done, for example, through personalised content or through interfaces that limit possible variances in user behaviour. Through their design, social media platforms effectively restrict, control and channel users' actions. This can be described as behaviourist construction, because – following a socio-physicist understanding of society (Pentland, 2015) – the aim is to generate or prevent a specific human behaviour through the control of environments. In the context of digital publics,

the focus is usually on acts of consumption: advertising is integrated into user interfaces in ways that make users more likely to make purchasing decisions.

II.2 Subjectivity: The Principle of Singularisation

Zuboff's approach is strongly influenced by structural theory and sees users' actions as ultimately determined by the structures of capitalist domination. The recent theoretical history of sociology usually understands such constructions as theoretical simplifications and insists that the relationship between structure and action is more recursive (Giddens, 1984). Following Habermas's triad of mediality, subjectivity and accumulation, the question immediately arises as to what kind of subject can actually be addressed in the context of data behaviourism – or, underpinned by sociological scepticism towards techno-deterministic constructions: what motivates subjects to participate in processes designed to manipulate them?

One answer to this question is provided by scholarship that conceptualises social media as part of a digital gift economy (Elder-Vass, 2016; Fourcade and Kluttz, 2020). According to this, large parts of the commercial internet consist of a gift economy, as users do not pay money for many services. Social media could also be seen as free services in a simplified perspective. If we interpret subjects primarily as marginal utility optimisers, we can conclude that social media is popular primarily because it costs nothing. This argument chimes with how internet corporations describe themselves – they present the exchange of certain services (such as a social media network) for personal data as a fair and largely transparent, non-monetary act of exchange: a useful service for some personal information.

Sociology, of course, usually operates with more complex subject theories, and for good reason. Andreas Reckwitz's *The Society of Singularities* (2020) is probably the most ambitious approach to answering the question of the subject in digital behaviourism. According to Reckwitz, the present is characterised by a radical individualisation, which he expresses with the concept of singularisation. Whereas Ulrich Beck's original individualisation thesis still sought to describe the release of individuals into 'self-responsibility' and 'self-optimization', singularisation means 'the more complex pursuit of uniqueness and exceptionality, which has not only become a subjective desire but also a paradoxical social expectation' (Reckwitz, 2020: 3). Regarding social media in particular, Reckwitz recognises the great effort subjects make when staging uniqueness and identifies digital platforms as 'infrastructure for the fabrication of singularities' (Reckwitz, 2020: 168).

According to Reckwitz, the platforms perform a dual singularisation function. On the one hand, they are themselves engines for the production of the unique. For example, the logic of data collection and profiling, which the platforms operate for their advertising customers, amounts to the highly individual measurement of the individuals in question. These are mechanically singularised 'behind their backs' (Reckwitz, 2020: 183). Here, his approach is similar to that of Zuboff.

But unlike Zuboff, Reckwitz also has a theory of the demand side of digital publics in the context of social media. The singularised subjects are not primarily produced by the technology that seeks to control their behaviour. Rather, the strength of social media

grows from the fertile soil of the individual's need to stage their uniqueness. These needs have their origins in a dynamic of singularisation that can be explored in terms of cultural sociology, which no longer rewards conformity with the crowd but rather the presentation of exceptionality. Social media functions as a 'culture machine' by ensuring 'the omnipresence of culture and affectivity' (Reckwitz, 2020: 169). It is this permanent presence of affective stimuli that makes social media so interesting as a vehicle of singularisation.

Social media encourages the formation of entities that describe themselves as unique, both on the individual and on a group level. The distinction between commercial and political content in this context is basically irrelevant; the only important thing is that the content facilitates individual profiling. On the individual level, according to Reckwitz, this new form of media transforms the personal and private into something public or at least semi-public. This also applies to 'neo-communities' that are grouped around specific, particularist interests (Reckwitz, 2020: 179f.). Consequently, we are dealing with a logic of social fragmentation at the individual and the group level, which has resulted in the formation of increasingly singularised subjects and communities. Since they are primarily constituted affectively, their half-life is usually limited. The 'compulsory social orientation towards the particular can', therefore, not only 'lead to an erosion of the general' but also generates collective entities that are characterised by an 'affective actualism' and are relatively unstable precisely because of this (Reckwitz, 2020: 193f.).

II.3 Accumulation: The Primacy of Proprietary Markets

So how can we understand the emergence and current manifestation of the interplay between digital behaviourism and singularised audiences that characterises social media? In our view, the application of a political economy perspective to changing patterns of accumulation provides the best answer to this question, as it makes long developmental trajectories recognisable and allows a direct connection to aspects of mediality and subjectivity to be established.

If we look first at the historical-political-economic trajectories, we find that social media is the result of the long rise of contemporary information and communication technologies. Their triumphal march began in the 1970s at the very latest, when the first venture capital investors discovered the computer industry as a crucial field of future economic growth (Perez, 2003; Mazzucato, 2013). In the advanced economies of the OECD, the long phase of stable economic growth that had characterised the immediate post-war period was coming to an end. The Fordism of the 1950s and '60s was, in a historically new sense, a 'consumption-based economy' (Crouch, 2009), which was based on the productive combination of standardised mass production and expansive mass consumption (Aglietta, 2015). However, by the end of the 1960s, mass production and mass consumption in the Western world were already becoming decoupled. The markets for standardised, mass-produced goods were showing the first signs of saturation, as the population's basic needs had been satisfied (Streeck, 2012: 30). Aside from attempts to stimulate demand through public (Streeck, 2014) or private (Crouch, 2009) debt, there were responses by capitalist companies to the crisis of mass consumption in the form of various product-individualising strategies. By the early 1980s, this process

had already progressed to such an extent in the automotive industry that at Volkswagen's main plant in Wolfsburg, for example, the same car never rolled off the production line twice on any given day (Streeck, 2014). This logic also took hold in other industries – for example in the textiles sector. The calculation behind it made use of the basic theorems of consumer sociology, which state that in cases of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 2007 [1899]), a product's potential for distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) is a central motive for its acquisition. The individualisation of production thus aimed to create a form of consumption that could no longer be realised in the context of standardised mass goods.

A parallel development was required in the area of consumption: the new opportunities for product individualisation had to reach the audience of market citizens. Accordingly, there was a massive expansion of marketing and advertising. What is now described as the vanguard of digital capitalism in discussions of leading digital companies is merely the most current iteration of this principle of an individualisation of consumption following an individualisation of production (Staab, 2017).

Nowhere is this more evident than in the two key sources of profit for the commercial internet: e-commerce, whose advantage over brick-and-mortar retail primarily consists in simplifying access to products and services via personalisation; and online advertising, whose promise is to tap into, or even form (behavioural control), individual consumption preferences. As arenas of singularisation, social media platforms are the crucial providers of granular, personalised information and of stimulation of new desires among the audience. Their central source of profit is the personalisation of advertising. The fact that players such as Google (YouTube), Facebook (including Instagram) or Twitter have been able to gradually take market shares from the classic mass media in the TV and print sectors is mainly due to their promise to enable a highly individualised approach to individual consumers through the creation of user profiles.

In view of capitalism's secular crisis of consumption, social media platforms thus manifest as machines of consumption rationalisation: they are supposed to point the way to ever more individualised production and ever more specific consumer preferences. In a materialist reading, the structural function of social media thus seems to be less the 'curation of sociality' (Dolata, 2021: 109) – it turns out to be more a means of effectively individualising consumption, whereby data-behaviourist strategies are confronted with singularised demand.

What initially looks like a form of specialisation in the context of the broad field of the advertising industry gains the character of criticality against the backdrop of the political economy described above: in times of scarce demand, mediating access to consumers becomes an essential task. Only those who can generate attention for products – or in other words, those who are able to address the audience in its granular uniqueness – can hope to sell it. By providing this mediation between supply and demand, social media platforms are increasingly performing a market function in the digital sphere. Their profit model not only centres on selling advertising space but more comprehensively on taxing access to the market: what platforms in digital marketplaces (e-commerce) charge in the form of commission is operationalised in social media simply as the sale of advertising. In both cases, what is sold is access to consumers, that is, to the demand side of markets.

The design of social media platforms is consistently and unconditionally oriented towards this programme. They ultimately form 'proprietary markets' (Staab, 2022), arenas of capitalist exchange whose rules are determined by the platform providers. Data behaviourist promises of control are used as bait to sell access to singularised demand. This structure no longer distinguishes between citizens and consumers or between political public spheres and private worlds of consumption. The public sphere of social media is instead a market privatised by the respective platform providers.

III Digital Structural Change: Commercial Politicisation and the Future of Democracy

What does this mean for an analysis of the digital public sphere that seeks to update Habermas's approach? Let us first look again at the now expanding panorama of the structural transformation of the public sphere: the original bourgeois public sphere was set in opposition to the unidirectional, 'monarchical representation' of ruling interests, which had been rendered outdated by the material conditions of the economy. Bourgeois entrepreneurship provided the basis for a class-specific self-consciousness, which was articulated, for example, in the practice of literary criticism. In monopoly capitalist industrial society, these structures dissolved; in their place came a social polarisation according to subjectivised class position. A plebeian public met the bourgeois public and conflicts found their expression in print-media battles for public opinion. In the context of the Fordist combination of mass production and mass consumption, the political threatened to disappear from the realm of public debate, to be replaced by a combination of consumerist privatism and mass media entertainment. Habermas famously interpreted this last step of structural transformation as the return of monarchical representation under conditions of welfare-state capitalism: as refeudalisation.

Our analysis of social media in the context of the current structural transformation shows that the digital constellation represents a distinct fourth phase of this development. The difference is not simply a difference in the form of the media in question, and the digital structural transformation also triggers something other than a continued retreat into the private sphere and consumption. Rather, the change in the accumulation model that took place in reaction to the crises of Fordist capitalism led to an individualisation of production, which in turn demanded the corresponding individualisation of consumption, and the identification or production of consumer preferences that are as granular as possible. As aggregators of knowledge about these preferences and – at least according to the data-behaviourist promise – promotable acts of consumption, as well as gatekeepers to the audience attention, the platforms have become proprietary markets that trade in access to demand for manufacturers. The need for singularisation makes the audience susceptible to the constant stimulation of interests, which in turn prompts them to further participate in the dynamics of social media. The providers of social media, that is, the large social networks, profit from this engagement because each act of user participation generates data that can be sold in the form of advertising space.

As a result of this development, the distinction between the commercial and the political is becoming increasingly irrelevant for understanding both the platforms and the singularised audience. On the part of the platforms, both commercial and political

articulation serves to build profiles, that is, the mechanical singularisation of subjects that sustains the business model (Reckwitz, 2020). On the part of the subjects, commercial and political expression ultimately encourage the declaration of their own uniqueness. Subjects' political distinction thus becomes a matter of public concern. As a by-product the digital public sphere of social media is thereby to a certain extent politicised. In the digital constellation, the monarchical representation of late industrial mass society is replaced by a politicisation under the primacy of the commercial: privatisation without privatism.

In his 1990 preface to the new German-language edition of *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*), Jürgen Habermas notes that the strength of his original work lay in its general historical systematics but that its normative analysis had been overly influenced by the assumption that the public sphere had a determinant effect on democratic self-organisation. This is how Habermas justifies his turn towards discourse ethics and democratic proceduralism and the more differentiated view of recipient behaviour. With our re-framing of the systematic historical contribution, we do not want to claim that it is possible to simply return to the original determinism. Rather, it is a matter of understanding the updated account of structural transformation in its political effects more precisely and reflecting on the dangers and counterforces.

One way to do this is to highlight the indirect effects of the digital structural transformation, that is, to draw conclusions from society that can be applied to politics. This line of thinking includes, for example, the fragmentation or polarisation hypothesis already presented above and mentioned by Habermas himself, according to which the structuring forces of social media limit the societal possibilities for democratic will formation. Regardless of the abstract plausibility of these and similar theses, however, they are not suitable for understanding how the specific mechanisms of mediality, subjectivation and accumulation can be updated in relation to the political system or political action. For this purpose, we consider it more useful to chart the land-grabs of the new public spheres directly. This is especially evident in relation to 'data driven elections' (Bennett and Lyon, 2019). This term does not merely capture the fact that politics employs means of advertising and targeting (such instrumental appropriation is unsurprising); the development goes deeper: increasingly, a notion of democracy is being articulated in which the reading of singularised preferences, rather than the civic expression of opinion through active participation, is being interpreted as a democratic principle (Ulbricht, 2020: 431). The idea of representation as an active and reciprocal process that is creative and also stimulates the political public sphere is therefore withdrawn (Berg et al., 2020). In its place comes a conception of democracy that – shaped by the imperatives of the contemporary public sphere and its development – is little more than a struggle for attention, influence and data sovereignty. The identification of preferences comes to occupy the place once occupied by political contestation and there is an emergence of structural power mechanisms that – geared towards the operations of proprietary markets – seek to monopolise access to social life: representation without the public sphere.[1]

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Note

1. In addition to the investigation of direct effects, it would of course also be necessary to consider what possibilities arise for the recipients of mediatised democracy and how they appropriate the capitalist structures. Our narrow focus on social media and the power of platforms has so far excluded this aspect of digital self-organisation from consideration. Of course, digital media, with their reciprocal structure, their great reconfigurability and their potential to make collective action less dependent on resource-rich actors also offer possibilities that allow for a more emancipatory form of development.

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