



# Digital Transformations and the Ideological Formation of the Public Sphere: Hegemonic, Populist, or Popular Communication?

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## Abstract

This paper elaborates on a theory of the ideological public sphere in the age of digital media. It describes the public sphere as an initially ascending and then descending communication process that includes both polarising and integrating publics, which are organised by antagonistic media and compromise-building mass media. This framework allows us to distinguish between hegemonic, populist, and popular-oriented flows of communication, as well as register changes in the interplay of different publics driven by digital media platforms. Digital transformations of the public sphere give rise to antagonistic and networked-individualistic flows of populist communication that put public hegemony under constant pressure. The challenge is to find ways to strengthen popular communications that enable democratic learning processes and the flourishing of communicative competences of all citizens.

## Keywords

capitalism, communication, experience, Habermas, hegemony, ideology, platforms, populism, public sphere, social media

The rise of digital media signifies a structural change in the composition of the public sphere. Public communication mediated by mass media is socially selective, one-way, linear, centralised, and non-transparent, but through digital media it diversifies into participatory, interactive, net-like, decentralised, and transparent communication processes. Digital media enable ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells, 2007), within which mass and interpersonal communication are mixed, and thus many partial publics may

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'organically' link to a public of general interest. Digital media also lower access barriers for different experiences to enter the public sphere. Thus, 'lay' communication, PR and (professional) journalism are intermingled in digital media, making it more difficult to judge the 'quality' of publications, for example in terms of their truth content or generalisability. Participants of the digital public sphere can no longer rely on the editorial processes and their compromise-building rules and procedures. 'Quality' must prove itself after publication, at best in public discussion. Digital outlets from the classic media companies and established organisations share attention with new influencers. Phenomena such as the 'going viral' of individual content, but also the critique of mass media coverage, indicate that the (partial) publics organised by digital media continue to overlap in hybrid media systems (cf. Chadwick, 2017).

This disintermediation is about shattering the 'gatekeeper paradigm' that has long dominated the understanding of public-opinion formation. According to this paradigm, professionalised journalism with editorially organised news production, initially on the material basis of commercial financing through levies and advertising, achieved relative autonomy vis-à-vis the state and functioned as a decisive filtering authority in the process of opinion formation (cf. Herman and Chomsky, 2006). The modern mass media organised in this way possessed exclusive, non-public access to their sources and disseminated news to a dispersed audience that itself had hardly any feedback possibilities. With the rise of the internet and the channelling of digital communication through predominantly commercial social media platforms that are based on surveillance and exploitation of communicative activity (cf. Zuboff, 2019; Seignani, 2022), the public sphere is being reorganised along with the platforms that mediate it.

While some voices perceive this process of dis- and re-intermediation of the public sphere as problematic because it would create a situation that overstrains the communicative competences of normal citizens – resulting in a loss of 'epistemic editing' (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga, 2020: 710) and the dwindling relevance of truth criteria or 'fake news' or the disruption of social bonds within a fragmented public sphere where mass media have lost their integrative function (cf. Habermas in Czingon et al., 2020: 32f.) – others see positive aspects within this transformation. The popular chance that may lie in the now ever more relevant retrospective examination of journalistic 'quality' and 'truth' are twofold: First, to link these criteria to one's own world of experience. Second, a chance to empower oneself in the public sphere, i.e. to acquire and develop surrendered communicative competences and to learn 'authorship' instead of only a recipient role (cf. Habermas in Czingon et al., 2020: 32). A more diverse and more easily accessible public sphere may also have revitalising effects for democracies, as theories of a polarising public sphere (e.g. Mouffe, 2005) argue. In this paper, I make a theoretical contribution to disentangle the positive from the more problematic aspects that accompany the dis- and re-intermediation of the public sphere.

To start with this endeavour, the public sphere is best understood as an interplay of publics of different scope and reach. In its singular form it is a 'network for communicating information and points of view' that 'coalesce[s] into bundles of topically specific public opinions' (Habermas, 1996: 360), where the 'organisation of social experience' (Negt and Kluge, 1993: 3ff.) takes place in a topically structured communication process. In basic publics of interpersonal communication and direct encounter, i.e. at the

'encounter level' (Gerhards and Neidhart, 1990), the functional roles between speakers and listeners are not yet differentiated and are constantly changing. In the middle levels of the 'topic and assembly publics' (Gerhards and Neidhart, 1990), the first functional role assignments are formed, there are significant speakers and explicit communication rules emerge. Prototypical middle publics form around associations, citizens' initiatives, and social movements. In complex publics, such as those created by modern mass media, spokesperson roles are largely professionalised and relationships to certain sub-publics are well-rehearsed, whereby the audience becomes increasingly abstract and limited in its possibilities for action. Connecting to this multi-level model of the public sphere, I sketch out elements of a theory of the ideological public sphere and ask how we can use them to critically evaluate crucial aspects of the current digital transformation.

The paper proceeds in three steps: The theory of the ideological public sphere is drawing from Habermasian, pragmatist, subject-scientific, and particularly hegemony- and ideology-theoretical perspectives (Section I). While Gramsci's theory of hegemony conceives of publics as sites of struggles for cultural leadership (cf. Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1992) and outlines the necessity of consensus-creating structures, a 'theory of the ideological' (Haug, 1987; Rehmann, 2013: 241 ff.) can make it clear that the organisation of the public sphere can itself be ideological. It shifts the focus towards a critical-structural conception of ideology. Certain directions of communication flows help to make domination prevail and this makes the public sphere ideological on a structural level rather than focusing on specific ideologies, that is, communicative content and styles processed within it. This structural perspective not only allows us to rethink populism as a communication phenomenon but also provides for a critical horizon beyond ideology (Section II). To transcend the ideological public sphere, we need a democratic process of power redistribution in society which depends on democratic learning processes in publics that foster the flourishing of communicative competences. Finally, the developed theoretical framework is applied and scrutinised to understand the current digital transformation of the interplay of publics. This changes the ideological flow of communication towards new forms of populist communication, putting public hegemony under constant pressure (Section III). The challenge is to find ways to strengthen popular communications that enable democratic learning processes and the flourishing of communicative competences of all citizens.

## **I Elements of the Theory of the Ideological Public Sphere**

The conceptual elements of the theory of the ideological public sphere, which parallel the multi-level model of the public sphere, include, first, the people's common sense – which provides the frame within which experiences in antagonistic social relations can be made and which structures encounter publics; second, the organisation of topic and assembly publics on behalf of antagonistic media; third, the complex and compromise-building mass media; and, fourth, the cultural horizon of the bourgeois public sphere. Let me elaborate.

On the first level, the concept of 'experience' is helpful to mediate structural conditions and subjective activity which consist of passive elements of experiencing and active elements of processing. The reference to experiences allows for considering the

conditions of social structure in public-sphere theory (cf. Negt and Kluge, 1993). In the process of experience, subjective meaning and justification mediate between natural or social conditions and human action. For Gramsci (1971: 326ff., 422f.), the common sense – as a proven, experience-saturated, and secured stock of forms of knowledge, thought and feeling – organises the ‘primary process of experience’. In keeping with the pragmatist ‘principle of continuity’ (cf. Dewey, 1997: 33ff.), it consists of sedimented experiences and represents the background against which new experiences can be made. The elements of everyday understanding are fed from different sources, such as traditional convictions and experiences gathered in one’s own social career, patterns of life forms and ideas resulting from belonging to certain milieus, social groups, or different role expectations, as well as problems and experiences resulting from concrete contexts of action such as the family or at work. In addition, socially widespread interpretations and perceived ‘public opinion’ have an impact on it. Certain public interpretations thus appear plausible or subjectively agreeable, and it can be assumed that they will find greater public resonance if they can tie in with elements of everyday understanding and are able to bring several elements into a ‘coherent’ order. For example, it is possible to reconcile problems in the workplace with traditional knowledge of how to act and family values. On the other hand, it must be possible to disarticulate non-fitting elements and reduce their interpretability. Public spheres are then formed by those whose private capacity for action is experienced as precarious because they are affected by problematic consequences in a particular social situation (cf. Dewey, 1946: 3ff.) and who then try to regain or increase their agency (cf. Holzkamp, 2013: 19ff.). The public sphere thus becomes a problem-solving mechanism for interdependent social relations, in that it makes possible a reflexive distancing, an understanding of a problem or a collective meaning and justification, and the design of problem-solving strategies. The pragmatist theory of the public sphere starts with a constituent problem but leaves its emergence and the relation between the experience of the problem and social structures underexposed.

While Dewey situates conflicts only between old publics representing established problem solutions and new problem publics, he assumes relatively homogeneous interests within publics due to the shared constitutive problem reference. Capitalist societies, however, are characterised by social mechanisms – such as classification, subordination, exclusion, accumulation of opportunities, and exploitation – which link the happiness of the strong with the suffering of the weak (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007: 360ff.). We are dealing with antagonistic social relations between positions in capitalism’s complex division of labour. As an ‘institutionalized social order’ (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018: 52ff.), capitalism structures subjects’ concerns and agency along intersecting ‘axes of inequality’ such as ‘class’, ‘race’, ‘gender’ (cf. Winker and Degele, 2011). It can be assumed that in such capitalist-antagonistic social structures, problems arise that are interpreted against the background of a contradictory everyday understanding and basic publics are formed as a result. In these publics, experiences of conflict and related problems can be articulated, shared, shaped, or interpreted, and perhaps organised and mobilised (cf. Thompson, 1978: 149f.).

In the *Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci describes how a class – which we might substitute by a group that makes certain experiences within the antagonistic social structure of capitalism – can ‘work their way up’ to hegemony, which means a cultural,

consensus-based leadership. This cultural leadership, alongside the occupation of the executive and coercive state apparatuses, becomes necessary for a stable relationship of domination in societies with a pronounced civil society. To succeed in hegemonic struggles for consent, social movements must connect to people's everyday understanding by trying to structure it by re-hierarchising existing elements within their common sense (cf. Hall, 2011). Hegemony, as will be argued below, has a similar structure to the familiar multi-level model of the public sphere. 'What is called "public opinion" is tightly connected to political hegemony; in other words, it is the point of contact between "civil society" and "political society", between consent and force' (Gramsci, 2011: 213). In their discussion of Gramsci, which leads them to 'post-Marxism', Laclau and Mouffe (cf. 2001: 65ff.) criticise that the theory of hegemony presupposes (class) identities in economic terms and argue that such identities can only emerge in discourse. I agree with them because political identities (classes) do not automatically follow from experiences – these would have to be organised in publics. Unlike Laclau and Mouffe, however, I would like to mediate the distinction between the situation in the social structure that gives rise to experience and the cultural or ideological structures in which experiences from a certain situation are interpreted and articulated (cf. Hall, 1980) – in terms of a critical-pragmatist public sphere theory, but not in terms of a post-Marxist discourse theory.

Gramsci argues that at the start of becoming hegemonic, a sense of commonality emerges from the problems that arise from a group's respective position in the production process. We might extend his understanding of a society's base to a social structure that is divided by multiple but intersected axes of inequality. Gramsci states that from this sense of commonality a 'solidarity of interests within the existing fundamental structures' (Gramsci, 1971: 181) may develop. If these material commonalities are organised successfully, specific institutions emerge which I call 'antagonistic media'. In terms of content and funding, such media clearly take sides within the society's antagonistic relations and engage in 'public relations' for specific interests and organise publics around them. Antagonistic media certainly form basic gatekeeper hierarchies, but they offer their audiences the chance to develop attitudes in a collective context. Among their audiences, understandings and evaluations of social problems become more coherent and capable of generalisation. Financial resources, and cultural, and social capital are unequally distributed among antagonistic media, because these are still 'organically' linked to positions of power in the social structure. Antagonistic media strategically try to influence 'public opinion' in their favour. According to Gramsci (cf. 1971: 5ff.), the linking to and the organisation of common sense is done by 'intellectuals' whose role is taken over by scientists, PR specialists, and individual journalists who produce content for the antagonistic media.

However, to become hegemonic, a group must transcend such 'corporate limits' (Gramsci, 1971: 181) to reach 'cultural leadership'. Here, one's own interests 'can and must become the interests of other subordinate groups too' (Gramsci, 1971: 181). Existing power relations can be challenged in this way by forming a political movement that is 'bringing about not only a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity, posing all the questions around which the struggle rages not on a corporate but on a "universal" plane, and thus creating the hegemony of a fundamental

social group over a series of subordinate groups' (Gramsci, 1971: 181f.). In this hegemonic phase, 'equilibria' must be continually established 'in which the interests of the dominant group prevail, but only up to a certain point, i.e. stopping short of narrowly corporate economic interest' (Gramsci, 1971: 181). From Gramsci's model of 'working one's way up' to hegemony, the functional distinction can be drawn between 'organic publics', which tend to be exclusive, directed towards identity formation, self-assurance, and unification, and 'traditional publics', which are directed towards alliances, generalisation, and appropriating reinterpretations of experience. The degree of 'organicity' expresses the attachment to a social group and the experiences that are structurally justified for it.

On the way to political-cultural leadership, it is necessary for organic publicists to develop generalisable contents, and traditional intellectuals in mass media must be won over by these contents. In this process, media lose their specific antagonistic character on the threshold of becoming a mass medium. In this ascending process, communicative self-socialisation and problem-solving competences are handed over to 'socially transcendent instances' (Haug, 1987: 61) – and this is, in my opinion, an important extension of Gramsci by ideology theory.

On the level of mass media, the problems of living together cannot, due to the antagonistic structure of capitalist societies, be mediated and solved in life-world terms on the lower levels with their antagonistic media. Complex public spheres are largely produced by mass media and shaped by the mediating structures of journalism. Those affected cede their communicative self-socialisation and problem-solving competences to journalists, who, because they 'hover over things' in the social division of labour, can provide mediation for the unsolvable life-world problems. Professional rules and a journalistic habitus distinguish the actors in the ideological apparatuses of the media and communication (cf. Althusser, 2014) from the organic journalists and publicists, activists and PR agents in the issue and assembly publics. Mass media and their editorial offices are not neutral terrains but, to make a concept of critical state theory fruitful for the analysis of the 'density and resilience' of institutions of the public sphere, a 'material condensation of power relations' (cf. Jessop, 2008: 122ff.). Mass media are then compromise-building institutions for the antagonistic positions under the dominance of resource-strong forces. This is particularly evident in the criteria of journalistic 'quality' and their practical application. Particularly, some interests are, as 'significant silences', regularly not represented in mass media discourse. For example, an international comparative study of news coverage following Thomas Piketty's much-debated book *Capital in the 21st Century* identified the missing awareness that different interest groups are vying for dominance on distributional issues as a key blank space (cf. Rieder and Theine, 2019). Other voices, such as pro-worker positions, are represented in mass media but subordinated to pro-employer positions. Narratives such as, that without economic growth and profits, workers' interests cannot be satisfied (via fiscal redistribution) justify this condensation, which has a subordinating effect. Critiques of capitalism appear now and then in newspaper sections dedicated to arts and culture, but rarely or never in the business section or in stock-exchange news.

Finally, the topography of the ideological public sphere includes not only the levels of experiences, antagonistic media, and the ascending and condensing communication

processes around mass media, but also compromise-forming values such as impartiality, a discourse free of domination, and press ethics. Such values 'compensatorily place [. . .] the common over the element of division' (Haug, 1993: 197 as quoted in Rehmann, 2013: 258). It is from these values that mass media and the autonomy of the journalistic field legitimise themselves, but in this process the consensus-creating values are also interpreted in an influential way, i.e. in the sense of the aforementioned condensation of power relations. This is reflected in journalistic self-images or a 'journalistic ideology' (Deuze, 2005) which is committed to the common good, objectivity in reporting, autonomy, ideas of topicality and relevance, and an ethical orientation and significance of its own journalistic work. Concrete explanations (based on empirical research) of the frequently observed discrepancy between such self-images and their relevance for action within concrete journalistic practice can shed light on how institutional condensation processes take place, e.g. through hierarchical decision-making processes in editorial offices. However, the top level of these consensus-creating values forms a cultural reality of its own. Lower levels of the public sphere can refer to it in order to circumvent and challenge the existing institutional compromise structures through an alternative invocation of the common good. Similar to the previously described process of institutional consolidation and compromise formation, an absorption and hegemonic representation of different demands and articulation of interests through values takes place here in the realm of the cultural. This is the level where the post-Marxist discourse theory has its merits within a public sphere theory that does not lose its references to critical theories of capitalism. A particular demand takes on the role of a universal representation ordering and integrating many demands, thus ensuring the coherence of a system of meaning. In the process, this demand becomes an 'empty signifier' (cf. Laclau, 2007: 36ff.) in that it gradually loses its concrete content and its 'organic' reference to its origins within social groups and their specific interpretations. The chain of demands thus ordered and unified by an ideological value gains its always unstable unity through the common demarcation of its elements from an outside that negates them. The negated Other is thereby identified with a generalised state of deficiency. Social forces wage cultural battles over the legitimate occupation of values and the compatibility of demands with these values in the ideological public sphere. With the compromise-forming values, however, a further level of the ideological, a 'heavenly world', thus rises above the 'worldly heaven' (Haug, 1987: 95) of mass media. In my view, the term 'bourgeois public sphere' (Habermas, 1989: 89ff.) is, admittedly read in a subversive manner, suitable to conceptualise this element of the ideological public sphere.

According to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere indeed was an ideology, for its establishment was an exclusive class project of the rising bourgeoisie. At the same time, it also entails an ideal or, in hegemony theory terms, an 'empty signifier' capable of organising broader social consent. The public sphere was initially limited to the bourgeoisie, but everyone believed they could attain this status, and the idea of the public sphere appealingly promised 'the dissolution of domination into that easygoing constraint that prevailed on no other ground than the compelling insight of public opinion' (Habermas, 1989: 88). However, the bourgeois public sphere is characterised by the fact that, as Negt and Kluge critically note to Habermas, in it, 'the main struggle must be waged against all particularities' (1993: 10). In it, all socio-economic differences are

abstracted in such ways that both exploited workers and capitalists appear as free and equal private persons. It is thus suitable as a collective term for the compromise-forming communicative values to which the mass media are oriented. It tends to be universal and balanced and can thus ideologically create cohesion in a community that, however, is (intersectionally) fragmented in capitalism. If one engages with it, one simultaneously recognises the legitimacy and equality of other positions, e.g. a trade-union position is seconded by an employer position. The ‘ability to talk abstractly about all situations’ (Negt and Kluge, 1993: 48) which can be, for instance, frequently observed in political mass media talk shows with a ‘balanced’ cast, means that the political impulses and experiences that can still have an organising and mobilising effect at the lower levels of the public sphere are defused.

As long as a relatively distinct civil society exists, the theory of the ideological sphere is not only sensitive to register digital transformations (cf. Section III) but also cultural differences in media systems, e.g. between more polarised-pluralised, democratic-corporatist, or liberal models (cf. Hallin and Mancini, 2014). Mass media, their editorial offices and individual journalistic actors represent the ‘bourgeois public sphere’ only to varying degrees. Thus, public broadcasting in its main formats claim a more adequate representation than mass media with profiled paper lines. The latter also act like antagonistic media in some places. Contrary to the German media system, for example, from the background of the US media system, which saw a ‘rise of new partisan media’ (Hallin, 2019: 8), such as Fox News or (even more partisan) Breitbart, the autonomy and thus consensus-creating abilities of mass media may seem overrated. However, the suggested theoretical framework states that consensus creation is only one but a necessary element of the greater picture and does not anticipate its relative significance; rather, it allows us to register differences within the interplay of publics (shifting the focus on empirical research towards information and communication flows, cf. e.g. Gruszczynski and Wagner, 2017; Ognyanova and Monge, 2013: 84f.) and may thus inform a critical strand of critical media system research that compares public spheres cross-culturally on the mentioned four levels.

## II Communication Flows within and beyond the Ideological Public Sphere

Such a model of the public sphere has the merit of being capable of identifying different ideal-typical flows of public communication and of using them to evaluate the quality of different media systems that organise the interplay of publics. Distinguishing such directions of communication flows within the four-level structural topography may inform social movements’ general strategies of gaining public influence. We can identify:

- First, there is communication that vertically flows from the bottom to the top, that is from common-sense experiences organised through antagonistic media as a mass-media representation of the bourgeois public sphere, and then again back from there to organise the lower levels.
- Second, there is communication that also flows vertically but bypasses intermediaries, such as antagonistic media or mass media, in order to claim the bourgeois



public sphere directly. This affects changes ‘from above’ within the consensus-creating mass media intermediaries as well as communication flows back from there to the lower levels of the public sphere.

- Third, communication can also flow horizontally on the lower levels between the level of common sense and organising antagonistic media. Here, the ideological superstructure is taken back gradually.

The first direction of working ‘from the bottom to the top’ of the public sphere has been illustrated in the previous section, where I described the rise of the ideological public sphere as an ascending process that leaves behind the citizens in relative subalternity. However, as we are interested in understanding the public sphere as a dynamic interplay of different publics, there are at least two more directions of communication flows that challenge hegemony. I propose to further differentiate between populist and popular communication flows. Let me elaborate.

The structural theory of the ideological public sphere contributes to our understanding of populism, which is a heavily contested concept and thus open to interpretation. ‘Populism’ is widely used to refer to the politicisation of various social groups, sometimes pejoratively, sometimes benevolently. The existence and perception of a crisis of hegemony and representation seem to be the starting point for populist strategies. Such strategies aim at circumventing existing instances of representation and articulate a critique of the elites in a way that is comprehensible to broad social strata. Recently, some authors proposed a new take on populism, casting it as a communication phenomenon (cf. de Vreese et al., 2018; Aalberg et al., 2018; Waisbord, 2018). For instance, Engesser et al. (2017) situate populism within a model of political communication: populist actors (who?) have a political strategy (why?) to influence citizens and thereby use certain populist ideologies (what?) that are presented in a certain populist communication style (how?). While I think it is useful to understand populism as a communication phenomenon, the theory of the ideological public sphere can complement such an actor- and style-centred view (e.g. anger and indignation are used for mobilisation and frequently these affects are channelled towards a form of charismatic leadership). It does so by its structural focus on the interplay of publics and communication flows and thereby zooms out from the populist activities within publics to the interplay of levels of the public sphere. The proposed new take on populism, understood as a specific direction of communication flows ‘from above’, occurs when hegemony, i.e. existing compromise formations, come into crisis and have to be renegotiated.

The bourgeois public sphere, which is shaped by compromise-forming values such as impartiality, journalistic diligence, and the search for truth, can be called upon by lower levels of the public sphere, bypassing the current mass media representatives to bring about changes in the editorial offices and the compromise balances. This may start from the dominated but also the ruling social groups and their antagonistic media who think they can increasingly do without the compromise formation condensed in the mass media to assert their own interests more straightforwardly. If this happens on a larger scale, the existing hegemonic public order is in crisis. Populism aims to circumvent the ideological elites with the goal of replacing them because it is, on the one hand, an anti-establishment movement but, on the other, does not challenge the fundamental

consensus with the economic and political structure of a society (cf. Priester, 2017: 50). This is, for instance, apparent when right-wingers accuse the press of circulating ‘fake news’. Thereby they refer and seek to redefine values of the bourgeois public sphere, such as diversity, participation, balanced representation, tolerance, and truth. They intend to put mass media under pressure and to shift the balance of compromise condensed in editorial offices. Such populist narrations, although challenging liberalism, are not exclusively confrontational but incorporate liberal elements such as ‘popular sovereignty’ or ‘freedom of the press’ in a metaphorically twisted manner (cf. Gadinger, 2019: 142). Epistemological standards of public discussions may be eroded by strategies like these, which have serious effects to be further investigated, but I would propose that they do not necessarily escape the ideological structure of the public sphere. As populist flows are communication ‘from above’ (leaders who speak in the name of the bourgeois public sphere), it is important to understand that this involves only a feeling of directness for the citizens but no direct, multi-directional, and horizontal communication. Thus, the elitist status of some communicators is not challenged.

Stuart Hall (cf. 1980, 2011) has taken pains to qualitatively distinguish populist from popular social movements. In this respect, Hall’s thinking contrasts with Laclau, who refers positively to populism and makes no such distinction (cf. Colpani, 2021). Laclau tends to equate political struggle with populism and then goes on to make a critical distinction between inclusive, open-ended populism, on the one hand, and exclusive populism that terminates politics, on the other hand (cf. Panizza and Stavrakakis, 2020). Interestingly, from the perspective of maintaining hegemony, the distinction between popular and populist communication is likewise irrelevant because both communication flows, by mobilising against the compromises condensed in the mass media, threaten the hegemonic structure that has been achieved. However, the challenge is in one case levelled ‘from above’ (populist communication) and in the second case ‘from below’ (popular communication). Following Hall’s intuition, how can we differentiate between popular and populist communication? The theory of the ideological public sphere provides orientation in this regard by posing two interconnected questions: is the interplay of publics within a society suitable to bring about more equal social relations, and which communicative learning processes contribute to such equal social relations?

Antagonistic social relations give rise to the ideological sphere; thus, more equal social relations – that is, altering social relations in favour of the exploited and the oppressed – mitigate the need to transfer the process of problem-solving and reaching consensus on a specialised, socially transcendent, ideological level. This would also change the form of organising experiences through media on the second level of the public sphere. Antagonistic media may then become more ‘agonistic’ (Mouffe, 2002) in this process and part of horizontal political problem-solving. Losing their antagonistic quality would enable some of them to take on the role of mass media, which then, however, are legitimised not through a counter-factual notion of the public sphere but would represent differences between social equals. However, the quality of the process and the strategies of how to approach this are crucial. Some form of public learning that organises the contradictory common sense is necessary, which makes it impossible for the common sense and meaning-making of the people to remain as they currently are. It rather demands intermediaries that organise the common sense and thereby also

challenge the meaning-making performed by those involved to some extent. It is the quality of such learning processes that is decisive, especially if we assume that communication and some forms of subjective learning are strongly interconnected. Both the (im)possibility and the quality of communicative learning processes within specific public settings are a problem that certainly needs extensive reflection (cf. e.g. Biesta, 2014). Here, I hope to sketch out how it can be approached from the perspective of the theory of the ideological public sphere. Thereby I might also contribute to sharpening the problem of populism as a communication-flow phenomenon by asking: which learning processes are involved in distinct interplays of publics?

The emergence and permanent reproduction of the ideological, that is, the handing-over of communicative competences to social transcendent instances, such as consensus-creating mass media, rests on the fundamental need of subjects to gain agency at any given time and social situation. Agency 'refers to the human capacity to gain, in cooperation with others, control over each individual's own life conditions' (Holzkamp, 2013: 20). Having said this, the subject can strive for agency in two fundamentally different ways: either acting under the existing conditions by accepting limits given by current power relations or expanding agency in cooperation (cf. also Engeström, 2015). As Holzkamp argues, 'if I attempt to gain some freedom of action within given power relations, in a certain sense I negate this freedom myself, since it is vouchsafed by the particular authorities and can be rescinded at any time. In such a situation, for the sake of short-term security and satisfaction, I violate my general long-term life interest' (2013: 24).

The ideological public sphere and its typical ascending and then descending communication flows establish a 'competence/incompetence structure' (Haug, 1987: 73) that grants subjects with agency but at the same time secures the conflict-generating conditions of antagonistic social relations in capitalism that restrict agency. By giving up communicative capabilities and by not engaging in learning opportunities that are suitable to make the former flourish, which is a precondition to expand agency cooperatively, subjects acquire 'abilities for subalternity' (Haug, 2010: 1390) in communication flows 'from above'. Such restrictive communicative agency allows subjects to be informed in everyday life and thus to have at least partial control over the social contexts that affect their own concerns. However, this goes along with the loss of communicative abilities and learning qualities such as 'authorship' instead of only a recipient role (cf. Habermas in Czington et al., 2020: 32), to check information for truth and accuracy for example, and to express one's own opinions and feelings. These withering communicative capabilities are, however, needed to cooperatively reconstruct and gain a picture of how society is structured, to understand one's own position and situation in the social structure, and to organise experiences coherently in communications 'from below'.

By contrast, public discussion could provide the path to generalised communicative agency. In this case, a picture of the social context could emerge through comparison with the opinions and experiences of others. This is, of course, a complex process because, although social conditions and meanings are objectively given, they only become relevant to the subjects' actions when they become premises for their own justifications for action. The public sphere therefore does not create direct access to understanding social conditions. In public exchange, subjects with different justifications for their own actions meet

under given conditions and, on this base, an understanding in the sense of a meta-subjective standpoint can be achieved through the explication of their premises (i.e. the meanings of the conditions that are actualised in each case for their own actions). Such a standpoint is eventually possible because people depend on each other and live under connecting social conditions. Public understanding in this sense does not mean consensus; rather, it can also mean the clarification of real opposing interests, but it presupposes that the subjective justification of every action is taken seriously unconditionally, which must not be cut off by switching to an external perspective (cf. Holzkamp, 2013). The path to generalised agency is dependent on communication flows that come 'from below', oscillate on the lower levels, but never reverse this main direction. In principle, communication flows 'from below' set certain learning processes in motion, while communication flows 'from above' keep people in subalternity.

The short discussion of the (im)possibility and quality of different forms of communicative learning and agency in publics leads us to a clearer understanding of hegemonic, popular, and populist communication flows. Hegemonic communication flows provide space for an expanded learning of communicative abilities in and between antagonistic media aiming at the empowerment of one social group or class collaborating with other social groups or classes to the extent of third parties. The still preserved antagonistic social relations, however, lead to restrictions in communicative learning at the latest at the point of a group or class becoming the hegemonic force. If hegemony rests on the exclusive representation of the bourgeois public sphere, it is bound to communicative subalternity not only of those not included in hegemonic mass media but also of those represented but who transferred their communicative competences to media elites.

Popular communication flows enable forms of generalised learning of communicative abilities between antagonistic media, which then would gradually lose their antagonistic character. In the end, communicative subalternity is no longer needed to gain agency and all people would be included in the communicative learning process. Popular publics have an epistemic and a praxeological value: they aim to critically understand relations of domination and exploitation. This includes, first, an awareness of one's own position in (a fragmented) society and that one shares this position with others. Secondly, in popular publics one's own entanglement in antagonistic social relations can become evident and, based on such insights, they enable evaluative discussion about practices that expand one's agency in a sustainable way, that is due to the fundamental sociality of individual agency necessarily in a less antagonistic manner. Popular movements attempt to change the public sphere from the lower levels between common sense and antagonistic media. For this, experiences must be organised in a self-determined way which includes the creation of alternative intermediaries such as clubs, parties, associations, etc. and publics organised around them. Their aim is to change social power relations in favour of the dominated and exploited but not to gain a new representation of the bourgeois public sphere. This is the case with classical hegemonic strategies that erect the ideological instead of levelling it. Popular communication is not primarily about invoking 'imaginary' politics but about self-empowerment that advances the formation and refinement of the needs and capacities, including the communicative ones, for self-socialisation.

Hegemonic and popular communication entail communicative learning from others who have different opinions and social positions, which render both of them more democratic in this respect. However, the communicative learning involved differs qualitatively according to ideological effects. In hegemonic projects ascending within the ideological public sphere, people learn, above all, how to identify their own interests and to make compromises and alliances against this backdrop. Agency can be gained by the disadvantaged and may be expanded. However, there is a danger this will ultimately take on a precarious-restrictive form, namely in such a way that there is a risk that the newly gained agency will be withdrawn again. A hegemonic position that has been achieved can be challenged again. Subjects involved in such projects learn to surrender their own communicative competences to others who are acting in the socially transcendent instances of the ideological public sphere. Or, in the case of a journalistic career, they gradually learn, starting from an ‘organic’ communicator, to play the role of a ‘traditional’ communicator in the Gramscian sense. Thus, they develop a habitus that is oriented towards a counterfactually imagined common-good situation.

Populist communication flows encourage a restricted learning of communicative abilities in antagonistic media. These media aim at the empowerment of one social group or class at the cost of other social groups or classes by bracketing mass media’s consensus creation. The preserved antagonistic social relations that depend on communicative subalternity restrict the learning process shortly after interests are organised by antagonistic media. Populist communication foregoes popular communicative learning and compromise-building learning processes associated with the rise in the institutions of the ideological public sphere. Opinions and social relations among citizens do not have to transform, or, as Cas Mudde puts it: populists ‘do not want to change their values or their “way of life”’ (2004: 546).

In sum, any anti-ideological movement would require a social learning process that fosters sustainable self-determinacy within popular communication. ‘Popular’ in this sense is not the strategic exploitation but the practical levelling of power relations that makes the populist distinction between the ‘people’ and the (media) ‘elite’ plausible in the first place; it aims at the ‘redistribution [of] political power downward’ (Colpani, 2021: 14). For this, however, purely populist communication faces the problem of challenging those unequal social relations which permanently direct communication flows upward into an ideological arrangement and press popular towards hegemonic or populist communication flows.

### **III The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere**

Following up on the brief remarks in the introduction of this paper, we are now conceptually prepared to ask how the critical multi-level theory of the ideological public sphere can be applied to understand current transformations driven by digital social media in terms of social integration, organisation of experiences, and flows of communication. The rise of digital media eroded the gatekeeper paradigm of the mass media system. However, it was paralleled by a re-intermediation movement through predominantly commercial social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Weibo. As ‘meta-media’ they now mediate between an extended range of communicators and recipients and offer a platform

to the multitude of antagonistic digital media and the traditional mass media, but also to non-organised individuals. Although players in the public sphere multiplied and some new players gained in importance at the expense of some of the old, the unequally distributed attention in the now so-called 'long-tail' digital public sphere prevailed. How does this dis- and re-intermediation of the public sphere affect its ideological quality?

On the level of mass media and social integration, the rise of digital media platforms is first and foremost an economic-horizontal, not an ideological-vertical re-intermediation. This weakens the influence of consensus creation traditionally taking place in mass media by exercising their gatekeeping role. Surely, digital platforms organise selection processes and the production of relevance, but this follows a different logic. Here, selection processes aim at specific-individual rather than general-social relevance and audiences are constructed as consumers to be satisfied rather than citizens to be informed. In contrast to mass media, commercial social media (currently) do not compromise and condense as socially transcendent ideological instances (cf. Napoli and Caplan, 2017). They do not have editorial offices and do not carry out quality control in the narrower journalistic sense; this may only be the case when forced to do so by laws, e.g. to prevent hate crime and to ban obviously prosecutable content. However, this is still to be politically negotiated and to be further investigated. Newer cases, e.g. Twitter's suspension of Donald Trump's account (after he had lost the presidential election), may point in a different direction and lead to 'media capture' (cf. Nechushtai, 2018) processes through platforms also in terms of ideological functions traditionally fulfilled by the mass media. This should be carefully observed in the future.

Two equally important transformations take place on the levels of antagonistic media and the organisation of experiences and common sense because non-organised individuals have entered the public sphere via social media. Explicit and implicit algorithmic recommendation processes, that is filtering, sorting, and personalisation according to the individual's and the platform's commercial (and perhaps increasingly political) interests, determine communicative contact opportunities (cf. Stark et al., 2021). Within such filter bubbles, individuals, according to their preferences, may come across antagonistic media and mass media, which then may influence their opinion formation and co-organise experiences. Intersecting filter bubbles may lead to group-dynamical opinion-forming processes in personalised information environments, and such echo chambers that may take shape against alternative, contrasting perspectives or entire rival echo chambers. Those are often seen as hostile and thereby fulfil the function of strengthening one's own position. New and old antagonistic media (and partisan mass media) grow within echo chambers, often at the expense of balancing mass media influence. In addition to this relative gain in importance of antagonistic media in the transformed interplay of publics, there is a second crucial transformation: the networking of private opinions. Social media make it possible for the contradictory common sense to step into the public sphere directly, which also amounts to a quantitative explosion of communicative offers. As private opinions, they express a common sense that is not organised through some form of antagonistic or balancing communicative learning. Even antagonistic and mass media might be networked in this individualistic way, but then they also appear on the platform as and next to private opinions and not as focus points of their own (echo chamber or balanced) publics.

In this context, a sole focus on digital communication technology and the tendencies of aggregation, potential polarisation, quantitative explosion, and networked individualism may be sufficient to explain disintermediation within media systems but is ultimately limited to explain the quality of re-intermediation – and thus the digital transformation of the (ideological) public sphere in hybrid media systems. I would argue it is equally important to understand that the commercial character of social media platforms sets the main parameters for their socio-technological structuring or ‘curation’ (Dolata, 2019) of communicative activity and opportunities on the platforms. Following this assumption, political-economy analyses (e.g. Fuchs, 2014, 2021) suggest that there are strong interdependencies between profit motives of social media platforms and the acceleration, quantitative explosion, and superficiality of communicative activity. Their surveillance-based business models, aiming at personalised, targeted advertising (cf. Sevignani, 2022), follow supply logics which prioritise communicative stimuli that fit neatly into the user’s collected preferences. Additionally, attention on social media is a commodity (e.g. ‘sponsored stories’ on Facebook), and this favours those with large financial resources in the battle for attention (e.g. dominant political parties and corporations). Existing mass and antagonistic media invest their unequally distributed resources, e.g. attention and money, to extend their reach by social media strategies to accumulate ‘communication power’ (Castells, 2007). Considering the technological foundations as well as the political-economic organisation of the dis- and re-intermediation of the public sphere, we are challenged to make sense of the connecting tendencies of the commodified logic of accumulating attention, aggregation and potential polarisation, quantitative explosion, acceleration, personalisation, and networked individualism. The conceptual tools of the theory of the ideological public sphere may be useful in this context.

The commodified logic of accumulating attention reproduces antagonistic social relations by supporting the powerful and disadvantaging the oppressed and exploited. This results in a potentially more extreme inequality between antagonistic media and thus either more unequally distributed chances to reach hegemony and mass media influence or to put populist pressure on them ‘from above’. This is why social media, in their current predominant capitalist form, are not likely to cause a taking back of the ideological public sphere and to unleash popular communication flows. Lowering barriers to engage in the public sphere and thus allowing for a quantitative explosion of communication paired with personalised content, which is social media’s aggregation logic, supports all forms of hegemonic, popular, and populist communication similarly. If polarisation accompanies aggregation, then populist communication flows are more likely triggered than hegemonic or popular communication flows, as democratic learning from others with distinct opinions is inhibited at the same time. Social media’s acceleration makes it likewise harder to learn and to more likely remain on a superficial level of communicative exchange.

In terms of the much-discussed elective affinity between social media and populism (cf. Gerbaudo, 2018), it is true that not all populists use social media in the same way, and one cannot claim that social media simply fosters populist leaders (cf. Moffitt, 2018), but it can be argued that social media are backing populist communication flows. Gerbaudo suggests that ‘social media has favoured the rise of populist movements also because of the aggregation logic embedded in its algorithms and the way it can focus the attention of an otherwise dispersed people. Discussion forums on social media have

provided gathering spaces where the “lonely crowds” spawned by the hyperindividualism of neoliberal society could coalesce, where the atoms of the dispersed social networks could be re-forged into a new political community – into an “online crowd” of partisan supporters’ (2018: 750).

However, surveillance- and advertising-driven personalisation not only contributes to aggregation but also to the opposite effect of networked individualism, which gives rise to a new and not to be underestimated form of digital populist communication. The restricted learning within an antagonistic media environment is further restricted or even interrupted if private opinions are networked without any organisation of experience and common sense through antagonistic media. Not only partisan antagonistic media, which have found a new self-amplifying space of resonance in the social media environment, can now influence public opinion and the shaping of the bourgeois public sphere more directly by circumventing consensus creation in the mass media. Also below the antagonistic media, the contradictory common sense becomes more publicly visible. Without the intermediation of antagonistic media and the publics they organise, there is a danger that the examination of journalistic quality and truth, as well as meaning-making in general, will only take place privately. This corresponds to communication in the mode of restrictive agency and a *de facto* acceptance of antagonistic social relations because an intersubjective process of understanding, with its potentially emancipatory epistemic and praxeological effects, is dispensed with. In this context, Jodi Dean (cf. 2009: 25ff.) argues that such networked individualistic communication is subjectively motivated by the prospect of participating in a potentially global communication context and the hope that one’s own contribution still makes a difference in the large number of all contributions. In a similar vein, Gustafsson and Weinryb discuss the affinity to authority typical of populism. In digital communication, the charismatic leader slips into his own ego and its digitally mediated connective possibilities: ‘I can judge what is important, I can judge what is true, I can judge who and what is wrong, stupid, and bad. I am the superior judge of the faults of our society, and without the wish to coordinate collective action with respect for bureaucratic organisational processes, I can demand change at any price as long as I am cheering others and being cheered in return’ (Gustafsson and Weinryb, 2020: 436).

To conclude this discussion and the conceptual probing of the theory of the ideological public sphere, we can state that the relative gain in importance of antagonistic media and networked individuals’ private opinions means that hegemonic flows of communication are weakened and existing hegemony comes under pressure more easily in the hybrid media system. Hegemonic effects originating from attempts to alter the hegemonic block, without taking the tedious ascending path of consensus creation and even without the social power relations and resource distribution of antagonistic media having to change accordingly, are much easier to achieve. The digital transformation of the public sphere gave rise to an ‘immediacy regime’ (Werner, 2018) where hegemonic forces must constantly react to attacks launched by antagonistic and networked-individualistic populist communication. Given that we cannot and, seen from a critical-emancipatory, anti-ideological perspective, should not counteract the participatory dimensions of disintermediation and digital media, the current challenge is to develop theories, politics, and media infrastructures to strengthen popular communication.



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