

Social Media Filters and Resonances: Democracy and the Contemporary Public Sphere

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Abstract

Democratic conceptions of politics are tacitly or explicitly predicated upon a functioning arena for the formation of public opinion in an associated media-space. Policy-making thus requires a reliable connection to processes of ‘public’ will formation. These processes formed the focus for Habermas’s influential study on the public sphere. This contribution presents a look at more recent ‘structural transformation’, the causes of which are by no means limited to social media communication, and examines its consequences. It proceeds in three steps: 1) in some proximity to Habermas, but also by means of the theory of resonance, it seeks to determine the kind of public sphere that a democratic polity requires; 2) an analysis of problems within the contemporary public sphere will feed into 3) a discussion of the conditions for the restoration of a ‘functioning political public sphere’. These include changes in the realms of participation, representation and spaces of encounter.

Keywords

alienation, Habermas, public sphere, resonance, social media

Introduction

Democratic conceptions of the modern nation-state, or even of larger-scale supranational entities, are usually (tacitly or explicitly) predicated upon the existence of a functioning arena for the expression of public opinion – and for the *formation* of such opinion – and an associated media. It is impossible to base the democratic legitimacy of political action simply upon one-time acts of voting; it requires, instead, a stable and reliable connection to processes of ‘public’ will-formation, in which complex and ongoing negotiation between citizens, parliaments and governments, between ‘society’

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and ‘state’, constitutes the principle means through which the decision-making process is able to take place. The question of what kind of negotiation process this is, or should be, and of the channels through which a ‘public opinion’ that is to appear in some sense legitimate or ‘reasonable’ might be able to emerge, forms the starting point for Jürgen Habermas in his influential 1962 study on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.¹

In that book Habermas, still largely committed to historical materialism, adopts a somewhat pessimistic outlook. It seemed to him that the institutions, arenas and bearers of a genuinely *bourgeois* and ‘culture-debating’ public sphere (that is, in which citizens read, reflected and discussed, forming and examining their own judgements) inevitably would start to erode under the conditions of mass democracy (Habermas, 1990: 248–66). Habermas feared that patterns of free communication between citizens which allowed for the enlightened examination of arguments and therefore the discursive development of political reason – although they excluded the majority of the productive or reproductive working population – would give way to a ‘power-laden’ economic and governmental public sphere that transformed individuals into ‘culture-consuming’ and therefore manipulable recipients or clients. Habermas conceived of the ‘political public sphere’ as ‘autochthonously’ developed, i.e. uncontrolled communicative exchange between *citoyens*, i.e. citizens understanding themselves as *political actors* instead of purely economic bourgeois, albeit assisted by the press and other organs of publication. However, in a welfare capitalist society, in which wage-labourers begin to take on the role of clients in relation to the state, Habermas (1990: 326–42) envisioned that the public sphere would disintegrate into a multitude of different partial publics or *private opinions* on the one hand and into a ‘power-laden’ public sphere dominated by economic and political interests on the other.

In light of his paradigm shift away from historical materialism and towards his *Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1986), and in the wake of democratic euphoria which followed the collapse of socialism, in the preface to the 1990 edition of *Structural Transformation* and in his later work in *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1998), Habermas adopts a markedly more optimistic tone: the cultivation of discursive deliberation and even the control of state and economy via the arenas of public democratic will-formation and decision-making – which now included both electronic media and the ‘free associations’ of civil society – for him have become eminently more conceivable.²

However, in 2021, in the wake of political events such as the Brexit referendum, the 2016 election of Donald Trump in the United States, and the globally observable rise of right-wing populist movements such as those of Bolsonaro in Brazil, Modi in India, Duterte in the Philippines or Salvini in Italy – all of whom can be considered masterly manipulators of public opinion – little seems to remain of the widespread optimism of the 1990s, of which Habermas is surely not the only example. On the contrary, we are forcibly presented with the question as to how the idea of *public opinion* and the *public sphere* can be understood at all under conditions of the present and the rise of so-called social media. The election of Donald Trump, for example, took place precisely *in contradiction* to the opinions and explicit recommendations both of ‘papers of record’ such as the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* and of most members of the intellectual elites (Boczkowski and Papacharissi, 2018). It seems without question that processes, arenas

and cultures of public communication and public opinion-formation have undergone rapid and significant transformation in the age of Twitter, Facebook and Co., and that such changes are exerting significant pressure both on established politics and on existing theories of democracy and the public sphere (Dean, 2003).

In what follows, I will take a closer look at recent ‘structural transformations of the public sphere’ and examine their consequences for democratic decision-making. In doing so, it will become clear that the causes of transformation are by no means to be found only within the establishment of *social media communication*. My analysis will proceed in three steps. Firstly, in some proximity to and in partial connection with Habermas, but also by means of my own theory of resonance (Rosa, 2019a), I want to determine the kind of public sphere that a genuinely democratic polity requires. In the second step, I will explore the structural transformations and problems which have become visible within the currently dominant forms of public opinion formation. The results of my investigation will then feed into some deliberations on the forms of participation, representation and spaces of encounter needed for the potential re-establishment of a ‘functioning political public sphere’ in the third and final step of my analysis.

A Democratic and Resonance-Theoretical Conception of the Public Sphere

The main reason for why a ‘functioning’ (i.e. intact and active) public sphere is considered to be a requirement for the proper operation of democratic societies is the need for a constant and lively process of exchange between citizens and the political action and decision-making of the state, a process which can be understood in terms of mutual *listening and responding*³ and thus of mutual *adaptation*. The idea of adaptation points, here, to the way in which parliamentary legislators allow themselves to be inspired and influenced in their decision-making by processes of public opinion-formation on the one hand, and to the process by which citizens appropriate political decisions as an expression of their own political citizenship on the other. In order for such adaptation to take place, there has to exist a subtle interplay or process of exchange which gradually evolves to make a particular course of action capable of consensus, compromise or at least majority support among a range of different participants. In the complex interplay between the adaptation of politics to societal developments and needs and the adaptation of society to the resultant political decisions, society’s capabilities for reflection and democratic resonance are gradually tested and improved.

The representative institution of an elected legislative parliament obviously does not suffice here, since democratic opinion-formation itself is a continuous and dynamic process of change and development. In the realm of public politics, positions and interests not only are articulated, but are discussed and deliberated, channelled and filtered through a broad range of platforms and levels and in a great many different political ‘arenas’. It is crucial here that for many problems, especially acute ones, the opinions, positions and even the interests of citizens are by no means always clear from the outset: instead, they often only take shape in the course of public discussion and deliberation, and are subject to repeated alteration throughout such a process. For Habermas, this process of rationalisation – when oriented towards the principles of domination-free

discourse and the unforced force of the better argument – constitutes the means by which ‘the voice of reason’, through the testing of arguments against the facts and against the generalisability of positions, is ultimately able to prevail.

It is not necessary to share this particular, cognitivist conception of discursive rationality, however, in order to be convinced that democratic ‘adaptation’ has to be carried out in a process of mutual exchange in which the most diverse positions both *have a voice* and can be *heard* (which, of course, also implies that those involved need to have some form of ‘ears’). The core idea undergirding the republican conception of democracy lies in the conviction that citizens encounter one another as having something *reciprocal to say*. As a result, they will allow themselves to be reached and moved by the voices and arguments of others just as they, in turn, find themselves to have an effective voice in discussions, a process which leads to the continuous transformation not only of individuals’ own opinions and positions, but of their very subjectivities. Democracy in this sense is not simply a matter of reflexive-cognitive exchanges, but something which possesses alongside this a dimension of sheer ‘viscerality’: bodily and affective involvement has a vital role to play in an ongoing process of encounter which leads to the dynamic transformation of individuals’ opinions, positions and identities. Hence, the public sphere should be conceptualised not just as an arena for an abstract exchange of arguments or the negotiation of interests, but as a physical as well as virtual, conceptual and aesthetic space of encounter, the quality of which should be judged by the form, the variety and the solidity of relationships it enables and institutionalises. This is why I have developed the concept of ‘resonance’ as a yardstick for such a quality.

Resonance is defined as a specific form of relationship (between two or more entities which can be but need not be people) characterised by four distinctive elements (Rosa, 2019a: 164–74): 1) *Af↔fection*: being open and receptive to things that are touching or voices that are calling; 2) *E→motion*: being capable of answering and reaching out to the call or touch in a way that is characterised by self-efficacy. Thus, 1) and 2) define a dynamic relationship of mutual listening and responding. 3) *Transformation*: being transformed in this interplay of call/touch and response as well as being capable of exerting a transformative influence on the environment, too. 4) *Uncontrollability*: the fourth element is the open-endedness, the uncontrollability and unpredictability of this process. Resonance is not a stimulus-response or cause-effect form of relationship, but a dynamic and creative encounter. It is the place of ‘natality’ in Hannah Arendt’s (1998) sense: it defines the moment when chains of interaction can be broken and something new can be born.

This is the reason why I refer to the ideas of adaptation and appropriation: throughout the process of democratic opinion formation and decision-making, there is the potential for positions to move towards common ground as a basis for political decision. This by no means implies that clashes of interests and values disappear or that conflicts are miraculously eliminated. Indeed, decisions often end up being made on the basis of majority opinion and in opposition to the positions of minorities. However, only when such decisions come about as the result of a ‘functioning political public sphere’ and concomitant processes of adaptation are they able to be recognised as legitimate democratic decisions, even on the part of the defeated parties.

If 'public opinion' is to be understood in this sense, as the result of a shared process of articulation, discussion and deliberation, then the confusion between such a process and the result of surveys takes on significant theoretical importance. The steady stream of opinion surveys and 'polls' on all-important or contentious issues should by no means be taken to represent public opinion; rather, it is the aggregation of (so to speak pre-political) *private* opinions. Within the political public sphere, such private opinions surely represent salient considerations which need to be taken into account. They form the starting point for the formation of public opinion, not the end point or the result; they *are not* public opinion, but the basis from which it can develop. Politicians who take their clues from the 'polls' (e.g. surveys on opening the borders to refugees, on abortion, on a universal basic income, etc.) are therefore, contrary to popular parlance, orienting themselves precisely *not* on public opinion but on the private opinions of private citizens in their role *as* private citizens. Interestingly, this is a point upon which the (then still Marxist-inspired) Habermas and the conservative political theorist Wilhelm Hennis were in agreement, both drawing motivation from their concerns regarding the disintegration of the political public sphere. In a similar manner to Habermas, but a full five years before the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Hennis pointed out that for the modern state, 'which within the framework of the separation of powers demands and proclaims the co-determination, indeed the sovereignty, of the people, [public opinion] is not only a prerequisite for the existence of authority, but also its legitimising basis' (Hennis, 1999 [1957]: 48; my translation). In a similarly Habermasian sense, Hennis also emphasises the way in which public opinion-formation cannot simply be the result of (the aggregation of) *opinion*, but should instead be considered as a matter of *judgement* (Hennis, 1957: 52). Hennis writes that '40% yes and 35% no answers with a number of "I don't know"s as the remainder in no sense constitutes a public opinion'. He continues: 'Even the most basic laws of political anthropology forbid the equation of a private questioning of anonymous private citizens by private citizens with an expression of public opinion of any kind' (Hennis, 1957: 52, 59f).⁴

It is important to recognise that the distinction between public opinion and aggregated private opinions arises not simply because the former has undergone a process of argumentative 'filtering' and the latter has not, but because they are fundamentally different in nature. Political opinions which are expressed in public, and which therefore feed into political discourse, must of necessity adopt a civic perspective and a civic logic. This means that a political preference cannot be understood and apprehended as (an element of) public opinion if it is formulated simply as a matter of private interest. A connection to the common good (however rhetorically it might be made) is indispensable to the formulation of political arguments if they are to be distinguished from those which concern only private interests (Kielmansegg, 1977; Dean, 2003). An individual who wishes to demand the abolition of rent controls, for example, cannot justify this simply by saying that it would make them richer – instead, they have to argue that the abolition would in some way serve the common good (i.e. tenants as well as landlords). Following Rousseau, this distinction has commonly been framed in terms of a civic (*citoyen*) perspective on the one hand and a private or market-civic (bourgeois) perspective on the other. Habermas and Hennis both agree that, when it comes to matters of public opinion,

political will-formation must take on a civic perspective if it is to claim or confer legitimacy.

The central problem with which Habermas wrestles throughout *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is the problem that, within older theories of constitutional law, the concept of public opinion is based on the idea of economically independent deliberating citizens who are able to assert themselves in relation to the state in a confident and independent manner; however, such a process was obtained at the price of the democratically illegitimate exclusion of the majority of the population in the form of women and workers. As a result of the expansion of democracy and of the welfare state (which makes such participation possible in the first place), the citizens who constitute the contemporary political public sphere find themselves to be *always* also 'clients' and in many respects *dependents* of the state; in other words, they are *always interested parties*. This dilemma forms the basis for Habermas's pessimistic attitude in the original edition of his book. By contrast, Habermas's increasing optimism in the preface to the 1990 edition is based on the consideration that the separation of the bourgeois and *citoyen* perspective does not have to take place in the individuals themselves or in their thinking but can be the result of the very process of public opinion-formation instead. In situations where a 'functioning political public sphere' is able to operate effectively, civic viewpoints 'automatically' assert themselves, as it were, in a multi-stage process of filtering and channelling of positions and arguments. 'The morality that Rousseau requires of citizens, and which he accommodates in the motives and virtues of the individual, must be anchored in the process of public communication itself' (Habermas, 1990: 38, my translation).⁵ Such an optimistic assessment is, of course, based not simply on the contemporary historical events of that period, but also on the conceptual premises of *The Theory of Communicative Action*.

It is not necessary to share the premises of this argument, however, to accept the indispensable link between the nature of public opinion and the philosophical foundations of liberal representative democracy (Hennis, 1957: 58). If we hold fast to the idea that public opinion should be, firstly, *more* than the aggregation of private opinions and, secondly, the result of a dynamic *process* of collective democratic will-formation, then it is clear on the one hand that its formation requires specific spaces and practices for *rehearsal and exercise* along with appropriate structures of media for 'publicity' and, on the other hand, that it is dependent on the existence of a 'compliant lifeworld' in the sense that the experiential worlds of citizens must generate, or at least enable, a justified interest in such political will-formation in the first place. However, as I will sketch out in the next section, under conditions of late modernity both sets of presuppositions have once again become highly problematic.

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere in the 21st Century

It does not take much reflection to realise that Habermas's original conception of a public sphere that consists of 'culture-debating' citizens engaged in a continuous, coherent process of education and exchange through reading, deliberation and communication is very far from the political reality in the early 21st century. If the formation of public opinion

is dependent on a process of collective will formation in the course of which individual opinions are dynamically formed and reformed for it to serve as a basis of legitimacy for political action, then an analysis of the structural transformation of the public sphere must start with an investigation of the conditions under which political opinions are formed in late modern contemporary societies.

Perhaps the most striking and, at the same time, most disturbing trend in Western and most non-Western societies alike is the increasing separation between the lifeworlds of different population groups, i.e. communities of ‘race’/colour, class and belief, and the progressive drifting apart of their cultural practices and thus also of their bodies of opinion and knowledge.⁶ Such a drift is not necessarily, or at least not primarily, characterised by a fundamental *incompatibility* between different bodies of knowledge or practices, but instead by the lack of contact and exchange between different spaces of movement, practice and information.

Most interestingly, a group of scholars from the New England Complex System Institute managed to show in a study on US social fragmentation that the real-world separation of lifeworlds with respect to the structures of communication, movement, interests and experience is closely mirrored by the communicative structures emerging in the virtual spheres of the internet. ‘Our observations are consistent with the emergence of social groups whose separated association and communication reinforce distinct identities. Rather than eliminating borders, the virtual space reproduces them as people mirror their offline lives online. Understanding the mechanisms driving the emergence of fragmentation in the hyper-connected social systems is imperative in the age of the Internet and globalization’, they conclude (Hedayatifar et al. 2019).

A tendency which Habermas refers to as the ‘restructuring of the world of experience’ threatens, in this way, to undermine one of the most eminent preconditions for the existence of a politically functioning public sphere, namely the existence of vital spaces of physical, affective and discursive encounter within a shared lifeworld. This makes recourse to a pre-discursively shared stock of experience and knowledge increasingly difficult.⁷ Habermas’s optimistic idea of an ‘autochthonous’ public sphere, which succeeds in exercising the ‘critical functions of a self-regulated, horizontally networked, inclusive and more or less discursive communication process supported by weak institutions’ (1990: 28), is thus becoming increasingly unrealistic. Fragmentation is not simply a matter of growing segregation in terms of residential space – i.e. of people from different milieus living in different neighbourhoods – but gets even more problematic precisely where members of different social, cultural or ethnic groups live in close geographical proximity: a general intensification in patterns of spatial mobility and the concomitant loosening of socio-spatial ‘moorings’ result in neighbours often attending different kindergartens and schools, visiting distinct shops and recreational facilities, working in heterogeneous contexts, etc. (Van Eijk, 2011).

The differentiation becomes more radical when we take into account other lifestyle indicators beyond those of work, education and housing: individuals from different social and cultural milieus buy their food and clothing from different stores, visit different restaurants, take advantage of different cultural attractions and means of transport, spend their leisure time differently, watch different films, tune in to different radio programmes, TV channels and formats, read different print media and browse different

websites. One consequence of this is the loss of perceived common ground between different lifeworlds, as people from different socio-cultural (and ethnic) milieus are at home in very different universes of knowledge, practice and discourse. Some of these segregation effects also resurface between different age groups even within the same socio-cultural milieu: the physical as well as the virtual lifeworlds and thus the *experiential worlds* of young and old people are also highly differentiated. For sure, differences in lifestyle are far from a new phenomenon; on the contrary, as Pierre Bourdieu (2010) has shown long ago, social groups continually strive to establish markers of distinction at many levels of life. However, such distinctions have, up to now, functioned precisely within a *shared* lifeworld context in which members of different groups meet, interact and wrangle with each other in order to shape and interpret these common spaces of experience. Certainly, there always existed exclusive ‘niches’ for different social classes or milieus, such as the opera for the upper classes or the union hall for the workers, but in these spaces, experiences that had taken place within the shared sphere of the lifeworld were reflected upon, discussed and transformed into different interpretations and expectations, which could then, in turn, become subject to political and cultural negotiation. The erosion of these *shared* spaces (particularly those of the *media*) in the face of a digital world which is globally connected but increasingly differentiated, is perhaps *the* central challenge of the present time.

Phenomena challenging the basic tenets of democracy such as ‘fake news’ or the ‘post-truth society’ are, I believe, structurally rooted in precisely this state of affairs: If the diverging universes of discourse, spheres of practice and lifeworlds which individuals inhabit in day-to-day life no longer share a sufficient degree of overlap, it should not be surprising if each of these worlds ends up producing its own distinctive form of knowledge and reality.

There is a crucial difference between a common world in which people live, work and argue with each other under very unequal conditions – and thus have very different experiences and interpretations of the shared space – and a context in which they find themselves moving through worlds which are almost completely separated from each other. A down-to-earth example of such experiential separation might be found in the daily way from and to school which has always provided a crucial space of socialisation for adolescents: if children of affluent parents no longer make use of the school bus, but are instead driven to the gates of an elite grammar school in their parents’ SUV, they lose an everyday physical (i.e. visual, aural, olfactory, haptic) realm of encounter with children from other walks of life. On a more general level, a similar experiential fault line can be identified in David Goodhart’s (2017) analysis of the life-worldly and discursive separation between the day-to-day realities of the ‘somewheres’ and the ‘anywheres’.

As shown in the study of Hedayatifar et al. (2019), the physical separation of lifeworlds is reduplicated and mirrored in virtual space. The established construction of a common world out of facts, interpretations, stories and personalities on headline radio and television news programmes as well as in printed media has given way to a wide variety of media sub-universes that are not so much in competition as sealed off from each other. Sub-universes of this kind are often constructed by tight interrelationships between TV stations, radio and internet media and corresponding spaces of practice, as they each use facts, interpretations, stories and faces in order to construct a specific realm

of experience. Individuals who are megastars or prominent points of reference in one context (for example, on Netflix or Instagram) can thus be almost or even completely unknown in another media universe (for example, on HBO or TikTok). To simplify a little, whereas up until the 1990s, TF1 Actualités or BBC News served to establish a factual frame of reference that was then interpreted and discursively negotiated across a broad spectrum of political media, ranging from the *Socialist Worker* to the *Daily Telegraph*, late modernity offers a global cosmos consisting of only loosely connected universes of discourse. When Hannah Arendt (1958: 300, my translation) states that political action is about ‘what the world qua world [. . .] should look and sound like’, then the question that arises is: *which world exactly* does this now refer to?

Yet, the claim that we witness the emergence of media ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’ which are completely isolated from each other is too simple, if not outright false. Media studies scholars and political theorists have repeatedly and with considerable alarm postulated that an algorithmically reinforced and socially homophilic trend by which individuals restrict themselves to websites, information and communication channels and contacts that share their own preferences, views and values could lead to the emergence of informational *filter bubbles* and communicative *echo chambers* in which partial and onesided understandings of self and world are constantly reinforced and confirmed, and alternative views are perceived as increasingly deviant and treated with growing hostility. According to this thesis, such developments inevitably lead towards massive social fragmentation and polarisation and thus endanger the very grounds which serve as the foundation for democracy.⁸ They produce *epistemic immunisation* against unwelcome facts or arguments and thus undermine society’s ability to engage in reflection (Magnani and Bertolotti, 2011).

Empirical studies demonstrate, however, that, apart from a few small groups on the social margins, the vast majority of media users both access and make use of mainstream public sources of news and that they appreciate informational *diversity*, i.e. they specifically seek out and perceive opinions and media publications belonging to other social groups and especially political opponents on the internet (Möller and Helberger, 2018; Colleoni et al., 2014). A study by Seth Flaxman, Sharad Goel and Justin Rao (2016) on internet usage of 50,000 US Americans is particularly revealing in this regard. The authors conclude that the use of social media in fact leads to greater engagement with the views of those with different political opinions, especially those who might be considered to be political opponents. This finding clearly undermines the idea of mutually isolated filter bubbles. However, the study also shows that the ideological distance or antagonism between these groups did not decrease but actually *increased* as a result of these media encounters; a radicalisation or hardening of positions seemed to take place precisely through the encounter with dissenting opinions.⁹ At first glance, this stands in sharp contrast to the expectation developed above that, once citizens engage with each other in a deliberative dialogical manner, they will reach out to each other and be drawn closer together as a result. Here, the opposite seems to be the case: polarisation becomes further entrenched through citizens’ encounters with one another.

Everything depends now on understanding why this might be the case. My thesis is that while the perception of significant real-world developments – such as the storming of the Capitol in Washington DC or the completion of Brexit in January 2021 – and

political reactions to them clearly extend beyond the bounds of individual filter bubbles, communication surrounding such events – their discursive ‘adaptation’ into the lifeworlds of observers and the development of interpretations surrounding them – nevertheless increasingly takes place in ‘echo chambers’. This is what the findings suggest. However, it is only in the communicative appropriation of events that they become real *experiences*, and discussion and deliberation increasingly take place between those who think similarly and not between those who think differently. Within such ‘harmonised’ discursive spaces and worlds of experience, homologous opinions go on to reinforce one other and the distance between those who think differently increases. In other words, people search for dissenting opinions precisely with the intention of being outraged by them and, in this and through this process, they strengthen and confirm their own identity and world view.

In the absence of shared real-life spaces of experience and encounter, the discursive worlds of others become stimulators of media excitement; they serve to generate waves of indignation which affectively charge and secure the existing social worlds. These processes form the basis for phenomena such as the *shitstorm* and radical media-based intolerance. Transformative resonance, which takes place in a process of mutual reaching and being reached, rarely occurs in such a context. Quite to the contrary, instead of a ‘functioning political public sphere’, as Habermas envisages it, we find a fragmented and polarised pluriverse of subgroups that are ideologically sealed off and whose experiential worlds are largely disconnected from one another.

Beyond Fragmentation, Confrontation or Fusion: A Democratic Sphere of Resonance?

Whilst we should not overestimate the scope or effects of filter bubbles and echo chambers (Borgesius et al., 2016), there can be no doubt that the structural change which has taken place in the media and the socio-structural public sphere alike, and in the interplay between them, represents an enormous challenge for the establishment of a politically resonant public sphere which can form the basis for representative democracy.

In order to adequately grasp the functioning of democracy as a collective sphere of resonance, Habermas’s suggestion that democracy enables citizens to *rationaly comprehend* the collective order, and their part within it, clearly does not suffice. Rather, modern democracy is fundamentally based on the idea of *giving an audible voice*, a *noticeable, visceral presence* to each and every individual, so that the political formation of the world becomes the expression of a vital polyphonic choir. This means, however, that the global attractiveness of democracy can only arise in concert with the associated conviction that all voices carry a sense of self-efficacy. It should be abundantly clear that such a process is not possible without the mediation of media, or without the prerequisite creation of media spaces for resonance. In modern society, this kind of democratic sensibility and world experience is dependent upon the functioning of a political public sphere in the sense developed at the outset, that is, as a sphere in which voices from a multitude of stages, arenas and institutions are made audible and are filtered through a mediated, reflexive process which itself is ‘resonant’ with respect to people’s everyday worlds and spaces of experience. Democracy, then, is not simply a matter of negotiation between

conflicts of interest or (legal) rights, but rather an ongoing process of sensitisation to the diversity of perspectives, ways of existence and forms of relating to the world.

Authors such as Nancy Love and George Kateb have convincingly argued that democracy is not simply a matter of teasing out the ‘voice of reason’, nor simply a sphere for cognitive debate, but must instead be understood literally as a visceral ‘sounding space’ for civil society. Kateb (2000: 31) speaks here of a *democratic aestheticism* as a state of ‘receptivity or responsiveness to as much of the world as possible – its persons, its events and situations, its conditions, its patterns and sequences’.¹⁰

This conception, however, has little persuasive power as a description of the late modern political public sphere. The voices transported and multiplied through the media today seem to be made audible either as *laughter* or as an angered *cry of protest*. In the former case, a mass media audience is brought together in front of a screen through political comedy or satire such as the record-breaking and award-winning *The Daily Show* (formerly with Jon Stewart, now with Trevor Noah) in the US. This serves ultimately to create the exact opposite of a space for political resonance, as politics and politicians are ridiculed and set at a distance; they become personifications of alienation. The cry of protest, on the other hand, resounds in the streets and squares of urban centres worldwide, having made its way both onto the steps of the German Reichstag and into the venerable halls of the US Capitol. Both vocal manifestations can be understood as expressions of alienation. They are the result of an experience of the political world in which voices seem to find no listening ear, no reverberation, and where even *voting itself* has become ineffective; it is an experience of the world marked by feelings of political inefficacy on the part of citizens. Remarkably, this corresponds to an experience of powerlessness on the part of political representatives, too. Politicians often report that they feel out of tune with an electorate they are no longer able to reach (Saward, 2010; Urbinati, 2019). The consequence of such a loss of resonance is an increasingly slavish orientation around the polls when it comes to formulating political agendas. As we have already seen, such developments do not serve to strengthen but instead serve to undermine the possibility of a functional political public sphere. They can be read as evidence for a growing crisis of mutual political alienation in Western democracies (Dörre et al., 2019). At the heart of this crisis we find the disappearance of self-efficacious political subjects – who are a basic promise of modernity – and their replacement with individuals who experience themselves as powerless and alienated not only from economic but from political conditions: the socio-political world no longer responds to them; rather, it serves to dictate frameworks for action through constraints which manifest themselves through the emergence of policies to which ‘there is no alternative’.

The central question of this essay, therefore, is how the development of democratic sensibility and the establishment of a civil ‘sounding space’, which together enable the reconnection and feedback of representative politics into a functioning political public sphere, can become structurally conceivable and culturally liveable under conditions of socially fragmented and globally interconnected states of the 21st century. As I have tried to show, such a public sphere is grounded upon a two-way process of resonance encompassing the visceral, emotional, and cognitive mutual adaptation of differing positions, interests, and perspectives in a space of encounter between citizens on the one hand and between ordinary people and political representatives on the other. The

successful functioning of this process leads to the dynamic unfolding of multifaceted acts of listening and responding, which in turn provides the basis for a public opinion that serves to legitimise the decisions of representative democracy as a whole. The pre-conditions for such a process are threefold: firstly, they require the procedural development of a civic participatory perspective from the bottom up; secondly, they demand a top-down sense of responsiveness from representatives; thirdly, and most importantly, they require the existence of physical and media meeting spaces that are capable of setting in motion and preserving the corresponding processes of resonance. In closing, therefore, I want to propose three corresponding institutional levers under the triple headings of *participation*, *representation*, and *spaces of encounter* which could be used to create such conditions – and hence, to bring about what Habermas once had in mind with the idea of a ‘politically functioning public sphere’, or what could be called ‘democratic resonance’ in my own diction.

A) *Participation*: With regard to the quality of the public sphere, there obviously is a tension between the idea of a processual, *deliberative development of arguments* on the one hand and the demand for a universal, equal inclusion of all opinions on the other. Whilst the former requires participatory involvement in which civic perspectives are gradually able to unfold, the latter can, for example, be achieved through referendums or representative opinion polls. A team of researchers led by the American political scientist and communications scholar James S. Fishkin has therefore been working for many years on the development and testing of institutional designs that are able to combine the one with the other (Fishkin, 1995). Fishkin and Robert Luskin (2005: 285) identify an almost global trend towards a shift in balance from the first demand to the second: ‘Giving the mass public, which is not generally very deliberative, more say has meant decreasing the level of deliberation behind political decision-making. As political equality has gone up, deliberation has gone down.’ To the extent that this assessment is correct, political decisions, which by necessity must be guided by public opinion, are increasingly matters of *gut feeling*. Fishkin and his colleagues have therefore developed and tested an instrument which they entitle ‘*Deliberative Polling*’, in which a random, but as representative as possible, sample of citizens enter into a process of common deliberation in which they formulate their convictions on a particular political issue, inform themselves further, develop and test their arguments, discuss the issue with one another, and attempt to reach a common decision. ‘The deliberation lies in the learning, thinking, and talking that distinguish deliberative polls from conventional ones. The political equality stems from random sampling. In theory, every citizen has an equal chance of being chosen to participate, and on average, over infinitely repeated sampling from the same population, the sample would resemble the population exactly’ (Fishkin and Luskin, 2005: 287). To the extent that such a group of advisory citizens is free from the considerations of party or career politics and so long as they are not subject to any prior influence on the part of lobbyists, there are good reasons for assuming that such a process of opinion formation can obtain a greater degree of ‘resonance’ in its *mode of listening and responding* than can be found in normal parliamentary proceedings. The effects of selective political responsiveness, which research has identified within current legislation in the USA as well as in Germany as the political preferences of better-off social groups, are given significantly greater consideration in decisions (Ura and Ellis, 2008;

Elsässer et al., 2017) and are also likely to be significantly lower in such procedures. Following on from this work, Hubertus Buchstein has considered the way in which institutions of an ‘aleatory’ democracy in which there exist advisory and possibly also decision-making bodies whose representatives are chosen by lot from the general population can aid in the revitalisation of a politically functioning public. He presents empirical evidence in support of a number of conclusions: firstly, such bodies make a broader diversity of voices audible than conventional representative bodies allow; secondly, they not only give rise to higher experiences of self-efficacy among the participants, but they also allow them to develop a better understanding of other positions, of the process of *listening and responding*; thirdly, the positions of participants are significantly transformed as a result of their participation in the process: ‘A [. . .] robust finding from the empirical research was that, in the course of the process of consultation, there were clear changes in the opinions of the participants at the aggregate data level’ (Buchstein, 2018: 229, my translation).

Hence, the divergence between these findings and the polarisation of positions which takes place as a result of mutual apprehension through the channels of social media is utterly striking: while the latter carries the danger of growing fragmentation, radicalisation and mutual hardening, leading to increased hostility or even hatred and disgust between proponents of different political positions,¹¹ the procedures of participatory-deliberative encounters seem to enable a fluidisation of differences and a concomitant process of mutual rapprochement. Where such institutions are developed and deployed, they seem to transform not only the political attitudes of those directly involved, but those of the political public writ large, since all now experience themselves as potential decision-makers.

B) *Representation*: Elements of such participatory (and quite visceral) *bottom-up* transformation of the opinion-forming process are not meant, however, to make the institutions of conventional political representation superfluous. Yet, a full-fledged conception of an opinion-forming and decision-making process that is resonant both for those represented as well as those representing requires a change in the *practical mode of* relationships constituting representation, too. In very much all established democracies, over the course of the 21st century, opinion *polls* have gained an almost paramount importance in the formulation of political programmes, policy proposals and the positions of parties and candidates (Genovese and Streb, 2004). The core relationship between politicians and voters is such that parties and politicians ask, sense and research ‘what the people want’ and then try to deliver it, or at least to promise it in a convincing manner. Thus, political representatives become, as it were, ‘delegates’ of something which ultimately represents a non-public public opinion, whilst nevertheless attempting, for their part, also to influence that opinion in their favour through the medium of ‘spin doctors’. At first glance, this might give the appearance precisely of *listening and response*, but a closer look reveals that such a relationship between voters and representatives is precisely *not* a relationship of resonance: it is *not* a process of a mutually reaching, or connecting, listening and response, since the political programmes created in such a manner constitute nothing but a kind of ‘empty echo’ in response to an *aggregate of private opinions*. These opinions, in turn, are *not* the result of processes of public opinion formation which might take place within a ‘functional political public sphere’

but are formed in advance of any kind of political dispute. Voters and delegates are not able to 'reach out' to each other here in a transformative process of encounter and exchange, but they remain in a kind of half-delegative, half-manipulative relationship. The 'voice' that is expressed through this process ultimately belongs *to no-one*, it has no power to bring about resonance between citizens and institutions or in relation to the future.

Critics of such a mode of representation have, following the example of Max Weber and Edmund Burke, repeatedly called out for political 'leadership': politicians should *shape* public opinion, not be driven by it, or so the argument goes (Körösenyi, 2005). According to this view, people would be ready to follow the voice of a political 'leader' who possesses sufficient charisma and authenticity. The relationship between voters and delegates in this model is a (one-sided) *relationship of trust*; public opinion here serves almost exclusively to support ex-post and bottom-up processes of appropriation or legitimisation.¹²

A conception of democratic representation based on resonance theory, by contrast, starts from the idea that this relationship should be predicated upon the mutual reaching out of voices: politicians and parties make themselves 'audible' by articulating a particular, 'authentic' and *substantial* conception of public policy which they believe to serve the common good. They then prove themselves to be receptive to objections and counter-proposals from the public sphere, although not in such a way as to simply adapt their positions to the latter, but through a reaching out to – and co-transformation of – the latter through argument.¹³

C) *Spaces of encounter*: This kind of mutual adaptation and appropriation, however, requires more than just the provision of spaces for political debate on the one hand and for the articulation of particular views and interests on the other. It presupposes that the heterogeneous lifeworlds and media universes of citizens still share a certain minimum stock of knowledge and interpretation, but also that they still share significant images, stories, narratives and even songs – i.e. that they share a *visceral basis* – which allow for the contours and building blocks of a world to be shaped politically to be recognisable in the first place. Such contours are a precondition for determining the fault lines and points of difference in such a way that discursive confrontation and political transformation become possible. A functional political public sphere requires, as we have seen, the sufficient overlap of different lifeworlds. That there are hardly any stories or songs left that children or young people from different social milieus would be able to tell or sing together might be an important indicator of the current *absence of* such a shared, visceral background structure.

There can be no doubt that access to the world through the media is of utmost importance both when it comes to securing a shared basis of knowledge and visceral experience and when it comes to the creation of spaces of encounter in which political and cultural differences can be articulated and made visible in such a way that they do not simply generate repulsion, harden and intensify, but liquefy and become workable. The existence of state-secured and guaranteed public media therefore is of critical importance. For late-modern subjects, media constitute, in many respects, the central means of access to the world in general; the media literally create or generate connections with the world 'out there'. Radio, television and the internet are channels through which subjects

confirm to themselves that the world exists and is present, and this is by no means the case simply for isolated individuals, for whom the voice from the radio or the face on the screen are literally indispensable for their sense of a living, speaking outside world. In many ways *what this outside world is like* is conferred on individuals precisely in and through the (electronic) media. If, in the struggle over attention, clicks and quotas, the media (re)present the world as threatening, dangerous, alienating, spectacular and overwhelming, then media consumption contributes to social and cultural fragmentation and polarisation in the manner outlined above. Such media prevent the establishment of spaces of encounter for a functioning public sphere. The existence of special-interest broadcasters, internet channels and chat communities to suit every ideological position or lifestyle does not in itself serve to secure a public meeting ground, but rather to endanger it. The argument repeatedly put forward by opponents of public service media that the pluralism of lifeworlds demands a corresponding media pluralism and makes ‘state broadcasting’ superfluous or even illegitimate fails, in my opinion, to recognise its actual role in the formation of public opinion. Public service media should not themselves stand for an opinion or position but, as infrastructure which provides a visceral platform for knowledge, interpretation and discussion, enable the deliberative and transformative *encounter* of a plurality of voices. Their mission must be the connection and holding together of a social multiverse through the creation of a common ground of knowledge on the one hand and through the establishment of a forum for democratic exchange that serves as a meeting space for all groups, milieus and strata on the other. If *listening and responding* form the basic pillars of a resonant relationship to the world, then *listening* (in its broadest sense of a perception that includes seeing, reading and even *smelling* and *feeling*) and *responding* should also serve as the yardsticks which point the way for the restructuring of public service media offerings (Rosa, 2017). It is precisely when the lifeworlds of different milieus close themselves off from each other that media exchange and media-mediated encounters become the central forum for civil society. It is here that lifeworlds can be brought into resonant relationship with each other so as to enable the reconnection of democratic politics with public opinion formation. For this, however, programmes and formats must not be tailored to specific target groups, but should aim to generate a space in which even the most diverse target groups meet and find a common ‘visceral foundation’.

The exact manner in which such a mandate is to be fulfilled, however, and how exactly the media space can function as a space of resonance, remain difficult questions to answer. Of crucial importance here is that *listening and responding* mean something other than ‘finally speaking one’s mind’. There are already countless forums in which citizens are able to express their opinions, to vent their anger, or to express agreement or disagreement by means of *likes* and *dislikes*. These might well be means for the voicing of opinion, but they prevent democratic resonance more often than they promote it. The intention here is *not* to allow oneself to be touched, but rather to silence the dissenting opinion. Talk shows and other formats designed for the intensification and escalation of conflict may bring in the ratings, but they reinforce a form of encounter in which the aim is to score points, to ‘finish off’ the arguments of the other person through strategic manoeuvre. This does not create a sphere of resonance which is open to a process of mutual transformation. The conflictive space thus created then extends into the streets

(or to the steps of the Capitol or the Reichstag) and becomes an antagonistic battleground in which the major task is that of *self-assertion*.

An additional problem for conventional media is that their formats often serve to prevent the fundamental uncontrollability and open-endedness of resonant interaction (Rosa, 2020): radio formats, but to a much greater extent TV shows, even where they stage encounters between different perspectives, are regularly conceived in such a way that particular topics have to be dealt with in precisely defined periods of time and in precisely predetermined steps. Such formats act as sterile ‘resonance killers’: here, people are not supposed to listen, be touched and respond; and unanticipated transformations are certainly not supposed to take place.

However, there is no systematic reason to assume that digital media are not capable of being ‘reconstructed’ from spaces of confrontation which are designed for conflict and polarisation and are based on the fragmentation of worlds of experience, into democratic-participatory zones of resonance. After all, the media have more to offer than just words and arguments; they are also sounding spaces and galleries, and they have the capacity to make the visceral and aesthetic dimension of civic sounding space visible and audible in all its colour and breadth. Feature films, music programmes, sports programmes, etc. may well contribute to this. The more those sounds, images, stories become *shared* across all milieus, the more potential they have to open up a democratic space of resonance.¹⁴ Such a space does not serve to stifle or repress conflict, but to provide a shared, visceral context for them to be settled or negotiated. The concept of resonance can thus serve as a compass for redesigning the organisation and orientation of public spaces of encounter.

Because people are embodied beings, media-based spaces of encounter cannot completely replace physical places of interaction. A functioning political public sphere also requires zones of togetherness and interaction in which different classes, milieus and age groups encounter each other in a genuinely visceral – that is, aural, haptic, olfactory – manner. These include forums of dialogue that are designed from the outset not for the purposes of argumentative confrontation but for the exchange of ideas and stories regarding a successful common life together. Spaces of encounter should also include, for example, local committees and citizens’ assemblies, in which decisions are actually made at the local level and through which political self-efficacy and the transformation of particularistic bourgeois interests into a civic perspective can actually be experienced in due process. As long as three decades ago, Benjamin Barber attempted to work out how shared political participation in common *projects* can create a sense of community and a (civic) perspective that is non-exclusive since it is not based on *previously* shared ethnic, religious, social or historical commonalities, but on concrete, material cooperation (Barber, 1992).

The formation of a public space that not only promotes physical and discursive encounters between different social groups but is also capable of creating a shared ‘visceral’ space of resonance can also be fostered by institutions which are neither political nor deliberative by design. These could include story cafés in which biographical stories and experiences generate narrative resonance; schools and day-care centres which are desegregated; associations that aim to be inclusive across as many social boundaries as possible and that enable everyday lifeworld encounters. For those who want to hold on

to the idea of a functioning political public sphere this infrastructure is of paramount importance. It is a crucial prerequisite for processes of public political opinion-formation and genuine democratic governance to get off the ground.

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Notes

1. Cited according to the new edition published in 1990, to which Habermas added a substantial foreword.
2. Habermas defines and refines this concept further in *Between Facts and Norms* (1998).
3. *Listening* and *responding* constitute the key moments of ‘democratic resonance’ (Rosa, 2019a: 215–25; 2019b: 160–88).
4. On the confusion of the results of surveys with public opinion see also Habermas (1990: 352–9).
5. Habermas goes on to approvingly quote Bernard Manin, writing that: ‘[T]he source of legitimacy is not the predetermined will of individuals, but rather the process of its formation [. . .]. A legitimate decision does not represent the will of all, but is one that results from the deliberation of all. It is the process by which everyone’s will is formed that confers its legitimacy on the outcome, rather than the sum of already formed wills.’ He later elaborated this idea in detail in *Between Facts and Norms* (1998).
6. The drifting apart of lifeworlds has been researched in particular in urban sociological studies, cf. for example Kronauer and Siebel (2013). On the extent and the effects of such life-world separation for the possibility of a public sphere see also Dawson (2006).
7. This restructuring is of central concern in the studies of Robert D. Putnam (see e.g. Putnam, 2020).
8. Cf. Cass R. Sunstein’s influential publication *#Republic* (2017); see also Pham et al. (2020). The concept of the filter bubble goes back to Eli Pariser (2011).
9. A similar result can be found in the research of Kitchens, Johnson and Gray (2020) regarding Facebook users in the USA. There seems to be a counter-trend towards greater political moderation amongst Reddit users – Facebook, however, is the more common medium.
10. A more radical conception can be found in Love (2006).
11. Cf. the ERC-funded project ‘The Age of Hostility: Understanding the Nature, Dynamics, Determinants, and Consequences of Citizens’ Electoral Hostility in 27 Democracies’, led by political scientist Michael Bruter, of the London School of Economics.
12. On the resemblance of this conception to contemporary forms of political populism see Urbinati (2019).
13. Hanna F. Pitkin’s (1972) influential conception of representation, and in particular her notion of responsiveness (between representatives and the represented), is already very close to this resonance-theoretical conception of democracy. For a critique of this, see Saward (2010).
14. Cf. the illuminating study by Maria Pia Lara, *Beyond the Public Sphere: Film and the Feminist Imaginary* (2021).

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