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# The platform society considered under the conditions of a public sphere characterized by different theories of democracy

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## Zusammenfassung

*Castells' (2001) Netzwerkgesellschaft hat sich zunehmend in eine Plattformgesellschaft verwandelt (van Dijck, Poell, de Waal, 2018). Aus demokratietheoretischer Perspektive müssen die großen Tech-Plattformen fünf wesentliche Anforderungen erfüllen, um eine Öffentlichkeit zu ermöglichen, die Voraussetzung für eine funktionierende demokratische Gesellschaft ist. Bisher haben die großen digitalen Tech-Plattformen diese Anforderungen nicht oder nur unzureichend erfüllt. In diesem Beitrag werden relevante Aspekte der Plattformgesellschaft mit den Anforderungen der Demokratietheorien abgeglichen. Er zeigt auf, wo Regulierung notwendig erscheint.*

**Keywords:** Plattformgesellschaft, Demokratietheorie, Öffentlichkeit, Regulierung

## Summary

*Castells' (2001) network society has increasingly transformed into a platform society (van Dijck, Poell, de Waal, 2018). Looking at this from a democratic theory perspective, the large tech platforms must meet five essential requirements to enable a public sphere, which is a prerequisite for a functioning democratic society. So far, the major digital tech platforms have not met these requirements or have done so only inadequately. This contribution maps relevant aspects of the platform society with the demands of the theories of democracy. It shows, where regulation seems necessary.*

**Keywords:** platform society, public sphere, theory of democracy, regulation

## **Introduction**

Processes of digitization and the proliferation of digital communication technologies have led to a wider range of changes to politics, economy, and society. Today, some 25 years after Castells coined the term network society, social, political, and economic order are increasingly characterized by digital network platforms. Communication and the processing of all kinds of transactions via these platforms have become increasingly normal, the platformization of daily life can be considered an impactful and at the same time still ongoing process.

This leads to a variety of questions about the impact that these processes potentially have and the challenges and demands that arise, especially from a perspective of democratic theory, under these conditions. In this paper, we seek to approach these questions, focusing on challenges and demands as well as on patterns of regulation proposed to deal with these.

## **The network society**

In the original conceptualization, Castells describes a development in which networks become the central category for social order and its analytical understanding. Networks induce a transformation of space and time, altering the meaning and importance of both categories; technological developments lead to fundamental changes in the economy, politics, and society (Castells 1997: 13-15; 2001a: 426-427). This also regards mass communication and political communication in particular: information is distributed and received differently, often less dependent on traditional channels and media (Castells 2001b: 378-385, 389-390).

This does, even in the original conceptualization, not exclude the possibility of encroachment of (few) resource-rich actors into this new digital public sphere (its potential commercialization), yet arguably the developments of the last years, namely the emergence and drastically increasing importance of digital platforms, have led to an unforeseen (and unprecedented) dominance of these platforms and their providers. From this point on, questions emerge regarding the potential impact that this transformation of the public sphere has on politics and political communication. Subsequently and especially important

from a normative point of view, further questions emerge regarding the need and the potential for regulation dealing with this impact. Reflecting from a perspective of democratic theory: Is more regulation a necessity or even an inevitable consequence?

## **From network society to platform society**

Contrary to early conceptualizations of a digital agora, a state in which digital means of communication would function as equalizers of public discourse, often eradicating power structures and unequal distributions of power (Nitschke/Donges/Schade 2014: 745), the online sphere has become increasingly dependent on digital platforms and their providers. While this does not, despite the popularity of arguments on online 'normalization' (Margolis/Resnick 2000), necessarily imply a mere replication of offline power structures in the digital sphere (Wright 2012: 248-251), it indicates a dominance of a specific set of actors. These large and economically powerful actors and those following their (new) economic logic have colonized the digital sphere (Beck/Jünger 2019: 29); they now function as essential intermediaries in many regards (Nachtwey/Staab 2020: 289).

Under these conditions, what has been previously described as a network society is arguably now evolving into a platform society (Srnicsek 2018: 112-113). The latter is characterized by commercial digital infrastructures that enable new forms of interaction between different actors, if that is the decisive *Conditio sine qua non* of this new model, these agree to follow the rules and logic set by the providers (van Dijk/Poell/de Waal 2018: 9).

In essence, platforms establish new modes of content selection and distribution in inter alia political communication; furthermore, they also alter the conditions under which (political) coverage is financed. They now appear almost ubiquitous and, due to network effects, can hardly be ignored by those actors that strive for and/or depend on visibility in political coverage and public political debate; exclusion here comes at high (not purely monetary) costs (Romele et al. 2017: 217-218). The very same network effects disproportionately benefit already resource-rich actors and platforms and their providers alike (Schweitzer/Fetzer/Peitz 2016: 4).

Under these conditions, the colonization of the digital public sphere by these platforms and providers increases even further, bringing them into new positions of power and allowing them to (partially) circumvent existing rules and regulations (Bonfadelli/Meier 2021: 431). At the same time, both users and regulatory bodies face a situation where these platforms appear as black boxes, as entities that are intransparent concerning their usage and (predictive) analyses of data – this is especially relevant when it comes to political information online – the algorithms they utilize for selecting, highlighting (or hiding) content (van Dijck/Poell/de Waal 2018: 52-53).

Given the impact that these developments have on the public sphere as the main political arena, questions arise concerning the potential need for regulation. To reflect on these, recourse to democratic theory is necessary.

### ***Models of the public sphere in democratic theory***

The public sphere and democracy are closely related, arguably even intertwined. A functioning democracy requires sufficiently informed citizens and communicative exchange between them and their representatives (Klier 1990:23). The space in which such tasks are fulfilled is to be understood as the public sphere. Democratic theory has argued extensively on the normative demands (and sometimes also empirical realities) of such a sphere. Within this discussion, one can identify at least three fundamentally different influential approaches that formulate distinct sets of demands. What these do have in common is a principally normative orientation, yet at the same time, there are also some identifiable differences.

First are the *representative liberal theories of democracy* (Schumpeter, 1942; Kornhauser, 1960). In them, the role of the people is largely limited to appointing responsible and accountable representatives through regular elections. The public's primary role is to ensure the transparency of the political process. This is done, first, so that citizens have enough information about the government, parties, and candidates to make a rational choice, and second, to ensure popular control of (positional) elites (Sartori 1992, 181; Downs 1968, 75-200).

Second, there are the *participatory-liberal models of democracy* (Barber, 1984; Warren, 1992; Hirst, 1994).

According to this model, for political interests, preferences, and abilities to develop on the part of citizens, everyone must have an equal opportunity to have their say in the public sphere. The aim is therefore to 'empower' citizens: to enable them to participate actively in the political process.

Finally, there are the *deliberative theories of democracy* (Etzioni 1968; Habermas 1992; Gutmann & Thompson 1996). According to this model, the core task of the public sphere is to produce a discursively formed rational public opinion that leads to rational political decisions. To achieve this, public communication processes must have a discursive or deliberative structure.

A synoptic view of these three models of a democratic public sphere reveals five fundamental normative criteria: 1. unrestricted access to the public sphere (to opinion-forming platforms), 2. responsiveness (openness to concerns and demands from the people), 3. diversity of opinion (enabling plural opinion formation), 4. respectful interaction (no insults, threats, bullying, etc.), 5. empowerment (participation, involvement).

### **Negative effects of the platform society and possibilities of their containment**

As already partially outlined above, the structure of the platform society gives rise to several key problematic aspects that limit or even undermine a functioning public sphere. These include Lock-in effects, platforms as closed-off markets, platforms as (subtle) rule-makers, and platforms as multipliers without content control (van Dijck/Poell/de Waal 2018; Dolata 2019: 185-187). To meet the normative requirements of a functioning public sphere, a variety of regulatory measures seem therefore necessary but have to be discussed elsewhere more in detail. These include the possibility for users to transfer data from one platform to the next (interoperability), the guarantee of open platform markets, public participation in internal rule-making of platforms, and the responsibility of platforms for the content they distribute. (cf. fig. 1).

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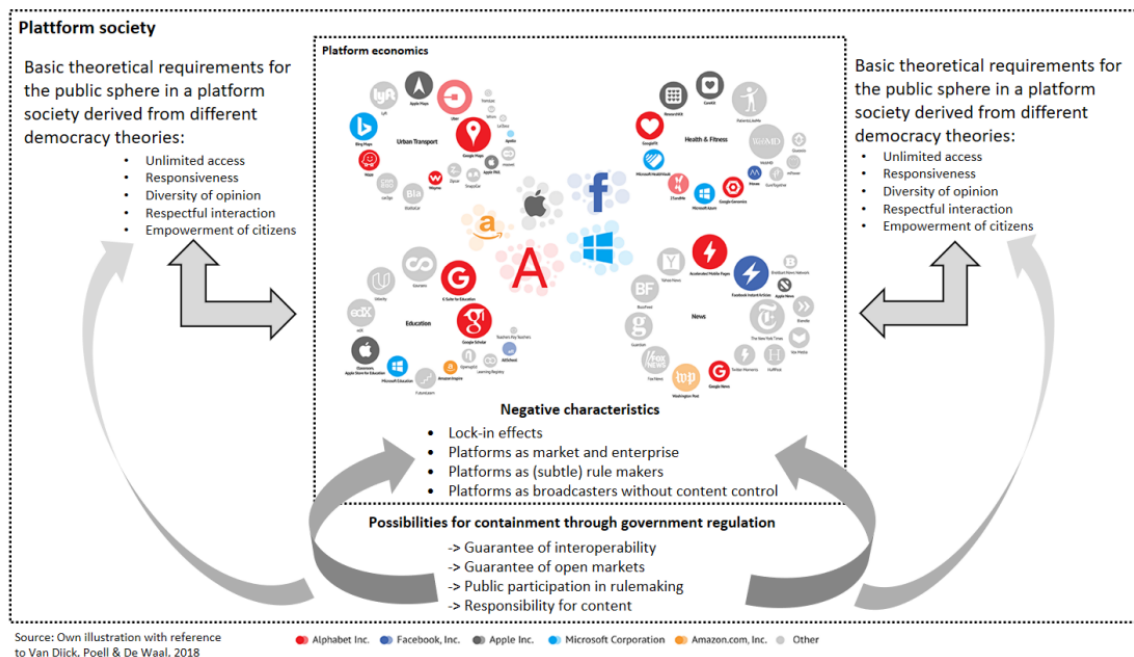
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Requirements of a democratic platform society