What is a Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere? Some skeptical remarks on the discourse of digitality
Peisker, Johannes

Erstveröffentlichung / Primary Publication
Konferenzbeitrag / conference paper

What is a Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?

Some skeptical remarks on the discourse of digitality

Peisker, Johannes
Martin Luther University
Halle (Saale), Germany
johannes.peisker@gmail.com

1 EXTENDED ABSTRACT

According to Richard Rorty, the concept of the public sphere probably belongs to the final conceptual revolution democracy has had and even needed (Rorty 1989). Another major public sphere thinker, Jürgen Habermas, has dealt extensively with just such a conceptual revolution in his seminal work "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (Habermas 1989). Both observations by Rorty and Habermas serve as a starting point for theoretical inquiries into the following assumption: For all the changes digital technologies bring about, they do not force a seismic shift in concepts of political public spheres in theories of democracy. Like the rise of the normative concept of civil society before (Cohen, Arato 1992), the emergence of digital communication had long been couched in evolutionary master narratives of ascending freedom, rising communication and broadening democratic participation, in short: a more direct and representative public sphere and thus a more reasonable public opinion. The discourse of digitality, while often sophisticated, reflexive, and self-critical, is not immune to such normative narratives of deliberative improvement (e. g. Rheingold 1993, Dahlberg 2001, Froomkin 2003, Bohman 2004, Benkler 2006, Sunstein 2007, Münker 2009).

In the face of certainly new possibilities of the digital communicative means of production, questions concerning central political communicative relations of production have not fundamentally changed, for example: quantity and quality of participation, delegation or representation, general will formation, different forms of public opinion for power control and legitimacy, and responsive and accountable political decision making. Hence, it is here pointed out that digital public spheres do not necessitate new understandings of political public spheres or democracy. Rather, the normativity of digitality has come full circle and faces the same old questions of political theory, just like previous new media (books, newspapers, radio TV, satellite) or once novel concepts of collective agency (proletariat, civil society).

One aim of my contribution is to point to potential critical questions on what it might mean to speak of structural transformations of political public spheres in modern democracies. In order to do so, one possibility is to advocate for a more general, theoretical, historical and comparative approach to public sphere research. The argument is expounded in two steps: First, a sketch of the analytical wealth of Habermas's concept of epoch-making socio-historical structural transformation helps to explain why it is not yet possible to speak of a sweeping new transformation of the political public sphere via digitality. Second, a glance at concepts of political public spheres, public opinion and agency offered by different theories of democracy sheds light on a central normative aspect, namely the legitimacy connection between the (increasingly lost) idea of public opinion and political institutions and elites.

1) Continuously, concepts of political public sphere transformation are narrowly linked to innovations in communication technology (daily newspapers in cafés, hourly radio and TV in living rooms, smartphones everywhere and every minute). However, digital public spheres have not yet initiated a structural transformation of democratic political public spheres understood along the line of Habermas's seminal work. Following Habermas, a structural transformation is not just the invention of reading newspapers in cafés and debating news. Instead, he notes long term changes in basic social dimensions. His sociological analysis combines ideal types on a macro level with rich micro level observations and finds, for example, new subjective understandings of subjectivity itself (that is, mostly the individual bourgeois self of civil society). He differentiates between intimate, private and public as well as cultural, economic and political spheres. Habermas's overall argument is quite sweeping and has been heavily criticized. For example, the historical narrative of the differentiation of the feudal system into state and bourgeois society during the 18th century and the subsequent re-

fusion of society and state beginning at the end of the 19th century is selective and imprecise. Especially the exclusion in his analysis of folk culture and the long-standing political exclusion of women forced Habermas to revise much of the idealist typology of his old model (Calhoun 1992).

Nevertheless, a main aspect of his sociological concept is that a structural transformation does not happen just because actors use new means of communication. The concept of structural transformation implies fundamental changes in social relations, economic production, cultural self-understandings and political agency and institutions (Fraser 2010). For example, institutionalization or de-institutionalization (understood as shared mental models) of collective will-formation and collective decision-making processes with the power to produce individual obligation in public and private in a democracy rely on such a structural transformation. Political public spheres are themselves institutions of this kind, shared believes of an area, space, or logic of multi-directional communication that potentially makes a political difference. In this regard, digitality very meaningfully supplements, but does not yet revise general thinking about democratic public spheres.

2) A glance at political public sphere concepts of selected theories of democracy reveals that a normatively central aspects of political thought, namely the relation between public opinion and political elites, is not substantially changed by digitality. In a nutshell, democracy in modern society is understood along the lines of a cultural civic self-understanding of subjective rights and citizenship participation in general will formation with a non-determinative view to institutionalized political decision making. The link between will-formation and decision-making is, of course, the legitimacy producing effect of public opinion. In this regard, public opinion can be described in various theoretical vocabulary. In constructivist or systems theory terms: members of a chaotic and complex society set an agenda and imagine a conscious self-regulation in the name of problem-solving (Luhmann 1970, 2010). In liberal theory terms: civil society limits a bureaucratic and possibly tyrannic state in the name of freedom and balance (Rorty, Habermas). In Marxist terms: the bourgeoisie uses state and public opinion in the name of political-economic power (Marx 1867). In plebeian terms: spectators publicly disrupt or accredite political elites in the name of populist sovereignty (Green 2016). This plurality of theoretical perspectives had been overshadowed in the past thirty years by research on and concepts of democratic deliberation (Chambers 2009).

A more general view on deliberative and especially discursive ideas of democracy promises a wider scope of epistemic analysis and interpretation. In concepts of discursive democracy, public and digital deliberation is but one mode of political action. Others are, for example, public relations, propaganda, "scut work" (Walzer 2007), or plebeian disruption, who are a vital if often troubling part of democratic public spheres. The opening and closing of discourses within a given dispositive, their communicative clashes, coexistence, and fusions hardly rely only on the available means of communication. In modern democratic political public spheres of any technological make up, they are as much a power struggle between actors to shape public opinion: competing elites, a plethora of gatekeepers, differing abilities to organize and advocate ideas and interests in processes of collective will-formation and political decision-making. Again, digital communication supplements such forms of action, but sparsely evokes new categories of political thinking. Concludingly (and contra Rorty), in social research on structural transformations of political public spheres in modern democracies novel concepts are possibly discovered more easily if theoretically diverse and historically informed paths of normatively heterogenous comparisons and contrasts are applied.

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