

Public Space & Social Media:

New politicization possibilities, "echo chambers" or fora of neo-populism?

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Abstract

Sixty years ago, Jurgen Habermas proposed public space as the area where contemporary citizens express themselves. Internet today has become the main tool for peoples' politicization, including introvert mentality, possibilities for new kinds of mass movements, and exploitation from governing teams. Thus, public space takes another form for modern people to intervene in politics.

Keywords

Public space, public sphere, politicization, social media, populism

1. Introduction

The concept of the Public Sphere has been dynamically introduced into modern thought since the early 1960s, when Habermas defined a space where individuals converse with each other and criticize issues related to public life, without limitations and constraints. It is a sphere of discourse, with practices distinct from those of the state apparatus and in which the issues of everyday life are discussed in a free and unrestricted way. What matters is not so much the specificity of this space as the overall accessibility to it and the interaction within it. Word is expressed by anyone and addressed to anyone [1].

Printed word's form is also of particular importance in the formation and expression of opinions. With the assistance of the written word, but also of the mass media, a structural transformation of the public sphere takes place, in which the urban audience of homogenized and abstract individuals turns into the "differentiated" audience of civil society.

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All this meant a new conception of the modern "city", in which – ideally – its members could seek and find the valuable consents for their common future. The contradictions, however, of this dynamic also demonstrated its limits along the way. Walking on the same path, there have been many critical approaches to the same concept, as an intermediate space between the domain of the private and the state [2].

2. The emergence of Social Media

Electronic Social Networking Media (hereinafter: SM, Social Media) in their various forms (e-mail communities, blogs, etc.) begin to appear at the end of last century [3]. Their initial stage is characterized by the creation of the online infrastructure, the search for their operating contours and the gradual formation of what will be called the "platform society", i.e., the interdependence of these heterogeneous mechanisms. Gradually, the sizes increase, spread across different fields, attract research interest, and connect to more social aspects. As the landscape moves toward completion, interest is rapidly shifting from simple communication to commercial interest and political exploitation. Within layout of new settings, each social component (social organizations, state institutions, media, etc.) seeks its own place.

It is now clear that this digital mediation between private and public space, by the "platform societies", is restructuring social dynamics. The "new" public space is co-shaped through heterogeneous components of diverse perceptions standing next to each other, new cultural imaginaries, practices followed by ordinary users and professionals, technological architectures, and business models. These connections in turn bring some additional data. First, socio-cultural activity is deeply intertwined (and therefore interacts) with techno-economic digital infrastructures – with all that this entails. Beyond that, the new political economy of the public landscape constitutes a mosaic of complexity (and sometimes contradictions), in which the self-evident have no place in particular. This in turn means that the correct assessment of the new conditions does not favor one-dimensional approaches, but the widest possible view of this innovative and multifaceted dynamic [4].

3. Politicization through Social Media

3.1 The new "audience"

In this new picture that shapes the landscape of SM, some clear deviations from the Habermasian proposal can be found. First, the audience of the public space is active in other contexts, with different forms of information and social practices than those the German philosopher had in mind. Now, it is a set of citizens that operates relatively anonymously, partially "invisible", since it has access to the media and with the morphological limitations that they place on the monitoring of communication.

A different issue is the commercialization of the media: SM operate in terms of privacy, in the sense that their owners monitor the movements of users (not in complete ignorance of the latter) and after analyzing them, promote and develop specific consumption practices and products. The ancient Greek *agora* [5] (that is, forum) operates in both dimensions of its concepts, both economic and political [6].

3.2 Social Media and mass movements

Separately, however, the SM function in the direction of strengthening the collectives stands out. It is an obvious kind of creating new identities, or a new way of expressing common identities. The development of community feelings, solidarity and mutual support found a vital space in the groupings formed digitally. The online "we" is a way of forming collective identities and further multiplies the voices of individuals. Petitions, protests, and activism [7] derive much of their momentum from the capabilities of SM. Through posts, hashtags, retweets, etc., ideas are exchanged and spread, calls to action find ground to grow, and simple communication is transformed into political action, sometimes on a large scale. Discomfort and indignation may initially manifest themselves in a virtual way, as "cloud protesting", but sometimes relatively soon they will be expressed in the real world.

It should not be considered a coincidence, therefore, that the greatest mobilizations of our time were supported by SM. The advantages of rapid communication (especially Twitter), self-expression, and sharpening of political polarization offered by SM have not gone unnoticed by activists and have been used almost exclusively to spread ideas and organize their movements. At the same time, however, they also influenced the form of these movements, as shown by studies of the uptake of the data offered by the SM to their users [8].

3.3 The introversion of the Social Media

Nevertheless, this development has another peculiarity: SM users are basically organized in groups of like-minded people (e.g. on the same Facebook pages), so the circulation of ideas is not distinguished so much for its critical character, as for the escalation of admiration of the fans. It is estimated, therefore, that the design of the media supports their function rather as "echo chambers". Reverberation chamber was actually used as a sound effects room, producing echoes so that during a recording it is creating a feeling as if the conversation took place in a large room. Now, the term broadly refers to digital communication, where users choose to enter media where they will only hear the echo of their own voice. In some cases, in fact, the SM algorithms, which determine the approach of the user, cooperate in this regard, so the technological morphology of each medium interacts with the form of social involvement. A more or less vast area of information/opinions is thus created, which the user himself does not see and does not want to see. Thus, everyone "consumes" opinions similar to his/her own ones, relays others that agree with them, and constructs a version of reality that is favorable to them. Inevitably, this morphology and the mentality it cultivates contribute at the same time to the aforementioned increase in political polarization, the easier adoption of radical attitudes and extreme forms of action, but also to the more favorable prevalence of a populist [9] climate.

By the lack of serious dialogue and critical interventions, but also with the predominance of cheers instead of disagreements, popularity of electronic pages is conquered by their "agreed" supporters. This image essentially affects the quality of political discourse (and therefore democratic functioning), as differentiation and (necessary) reflection is discouraged and the recycling of similar ideas and perceptions prevails. Many times, this phenomenon of "fenced" politicization is found to mark a limit to the temporal scope of socio-political action. At the same time, protagonists of the political groups transfer their profile's center of gravity inside their space [10]. This aspect of the political aspect of SM can explain why not only older

people, but also citizens with more education are more likely to engage in "off-line" political behaviors (that is, regardless of the use of electronic media) [11].

3.4 Exploitation of the Social Media by the governing groups

Another fact that is recorded nowadays concerns the increasing involvement of governments and political figures in the SM. It is now evident that elected officials are turning to these new ways of communicating with their constituents, with novel terms of interaction, evolving codes of ethics, and generally opaque control guidelines. This particular aspect becomes particularly important in cases of restrictions and prohibitions, which are obviously in direct opposition to the specifications of the original ideas of J. Habermas and in what is understood as the public sphere since then (beyond the sensitive issue of violations of freedom of speech). It would be hopelessly utopian and romantic, however, to expect the ruling elites to remain mere spectators of events and not bother to intervene in an advantageous way for themselves.

In recent times, it is becoming less and less rare for the courts to be concerned with the right to prohibit the participation ("blocking") of persons and activities in some SM; it is examined, e.g., whether it is legal for a company to block certain messages or a politician to block a user who posts critical comments about him. Corresponding questions also arise with the "reports" to persons or even for their blocking in SM, since these means are considered Public Space. On the other hand, issues arise when citizens consider that the policy of a SM is directed against them or against the rights of minorities. For their part, SM present corresponding prohibitions that they imposed on government organizations or officials, claiming that they do not discriminate when they consider that the principles they have set are being violated.

As a special case (and extremely worrisome for the future) the fact of governmental pressures towards SM for specific actions of a political nature, against persons or groups (e.g. suspension of activist accounts or pages of groups used for planning rallies) must be considered. Incidents of harassment, tracking and even targeting of persons who are politically active, monitoring of social/political websites, closing them in times of social unrest or systematic restrictions on their use (as well as Internet services in general) have already been recorded on the part of specific regimes [12].

4. In Epilogue

We have already entered a historical period where the status of a citizen is more and more intertwined with that of the internet user of SM. The new term 'Netizenship' [13] obviously captures this reality. It is clear that modern political scene differs in many points from the open framework of the Public Space, as at least it was formulated during its initial conception. It may in many aspects offer important possibilities for communication, but it includes aspects that degrade it and undermine its offer to man. Once again, our species' achievements are ambivalent, and it takes vigilance and sensitivity (rather than the usual reckless enthusiasm or equally uncritical denial) to assess them in their proper dimensions and perspectives.

References

- [1] There is an issue concerning the terms “public space” and “public sphere”. In general, the first term means a physical field that is accessible to and usable by everyone (e.g., parks, squares, streets, etc.). On contrast, the latter is an abstract term, referring to public information or discussion. Of course, we use both terms in this second form, keeping in mind that in modern literature the Public Space takes different interpretations according to the various research objectives. For example, for humanities it means the interpretation of public opinion, while for communication theories it is mostly the area either of publicity, or the intertwining of persons and events, in terms of commenting and criticizing. For architectural and urban planning, especially, public space still keeps takes the meaning of the open public spaces of cities. By mediation of digital technologies, many aspects see them deviating each other, and so some speak for “second public sphere”. In our paper, we are interesting on the way social media interact with politicization, so we interpret both terms in a common view.
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- [3] The genealogy of the phenomenon places Web 1.0 (which was "read and/or listen-only") in the "prehistory" of Social Media, which evolved into the interactivity and interpersonal communication of Web 2.0 (where you can "read and write"). See M.S. Ankerson, "Social Media and the "Read-Only" Web: Reconfiguring Social Logics and Historical Boundaries", *Social Media + Society* 1(2), 2015, 1-12. doi:org/10.1177/2056305115621.
- [4] See C. Tsironis, "Church, Community Ties and Social Networks", *Synthesis* 5 (2014), 151-7 (in Greek). J.v. Dijck – T. Poell, "Social Media and the Transformation of Public Space", *Social Media + Society* 1(2), 2015, 1-5. doi:org/10.1177/2056305115622482.
- [5] It is interesting, relatedly, that philosopher Hannah Arendt approached precisely the concept of the Public Space in terms of the ancient Greek concept of the forum (in Greek: agora). H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 21998, pp. 28-37. S. Çöteli, *Cyber Public Sphere and Social Movements, ibid.*, pp. 24-7.
- [6] T. Tierney, *op. cit.*
- [7] We may see as typical here the cases of the "Arab Spring" (2010 onwards), the movement in Toronto (Toronto Occupy Movement, 2011), the student mobilizations in Mexico "I am number 132" (2012), the uprising for Gezi Park in Istanbul (2013) et al.
- [8] R. Sandoval-Almazan – J.R. Gil-Garcia, "Towards cyberactivism 2.0? Understanding the use of social media and other information technologies for political activism and social movements", *Government Information Quarterly* 31 (2014) 365–78. J.v. Dijck – T. Poell, *ibid.*, 2-3. A. Al-Rawi, "News Organizations 2.0: A comparative study of Twitter news", *Journalism Practice* 11(6), 2016, 705-20. doi:org/10.1080/17512786.2016.1195239. B. Burak, "Social Media as a Public Space for Political Activism: The Use of Twitter During Gezi Park Protests", *e-Journal of Media & Society* 7 (2021), 3.
- [9] The involvement of SM in mass movements also seems to correspond to the analyzes of the theory of "mediated populism", about how populist practices are applied in contemporary political communication, as they are mobilized by mass movements in order to gain visibility and legitimize politically themselves. In this context, strategies of constructing reality, defining the agenda of political discourse and filtering information are developed. In general, 4 phases are recognized regarding the development of their

action. In the first phase, there is a systematic engagement with citizens' discomfort and the causes that cause it. It is mainly about the low standard of living as opposed to the corruption of governing layers. The second phase constitutes the rebellion, so the question is the expansion of social support. During the third phase, the movement is recognized as a distinct political entity in the political life of the country. Finally, the phase of decline follows, during which the movement loses its dynamics and social foundations. In this whole process, SM (but also the media) have a key, almost leading, role especially in the first two stages, while in the last stage they are not used so much. With the help of the various media, therefore, communication and information acquire an emotional and sometimes dramatized tone, the use of violence is indirectly or directly legitimized, the news obeys the rules of post-truth mechanisms, rival leaders are ridiculed and deconstructed while the leaders and the "doctrine" of the movement is purged, sanctified and their popularity promoted. J. Stewart, G. Mazzoleni & B. Horsfield, "Conclusion: Power to the media managers", in: G. Mazzoleni, J. Stewart & B. Horsfield (eds.), *The Media and Neo-populism: A contemporary comparative analysis*, Praeger, Westport 2003, pp. 217-37. P. Chakravartty – S. Roy, "Mr. Modi goes to Delhi: Mediated populism and the 2014 Indian elections", *Television & New Media* 16(4), 2015, 311–22. doi:org/10.1177/1527476415573957. G. Mazzoleni – R. Bracciale, "Socially mediated populism: the communicative strategies of political leaders on Facebook", *Palgrave Communications* 4(50), 2018, 1-10. doi:org/10.1057/s41599-018-0104-x. B. Burak, *op. cit.*, 5.

- [10] Of course, the extent and variety of social media use also shows - apart from cases of "echo chambers" as well the barren, sharp and sometimes vulgar confrontations - either points of fruitful and open dialogue or positive functions of introversion. We consider, however, that the extent of the negative aspects constitutes a wound for the quality of the democratic dialogue and therefore we place more emphasis on highlighting this aspect.
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