The Public Sphere in the Digital Age: Exploring the Continued Relevance of Habermas' Theory of the Public Sphere

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Abstract: *This article explores the relevance of Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere in the digital age. It examines the original concept of the public sphere as a space for open discourse and its historical development, and how this concept applies to the contemporary media landscape, particularly the rise of social media and digital communication technologies. The article argues that Habermas' concept of the public sphere remains significant in democratic countries, but it faces challenges from digital innovations. While the internet offers new possibilities for public participation and debate, it also presents problems like corporate influence, a lack of critical thinking skills, and the spread of misinformation. The article also draws upon the perspectives of Herbert Schiller on corporate capitalism and information, and Manuel Castells on the network society. By examining these different viewpoints, the article aims to provide a new understanding of the public sphere in the digital age and the complex interplay between communication technologies, power structures, and social change.*

Keywords: *public sphere, corporate capitalism, networked society, digital divide, refeudalisation*

Introduction

Jürgen Habermas' work on the public sphere is an influential element in the modern study and understanding of democratic theory, political communications, and how public opinion has historically developed over the years. Per Habermas' perspective, the public sphere acts as a venue for political discussion where interested parties can come together to debate issues of common concern. The public sphere has developed drastically to fit into our society today, since its first appearance in the 1960s. This article will contextualise Habermas' work on the public sphere by analysing its main concepts, historical growth, and modern relevance to understand its continued significance for democratic theory and practice. Its pros and cons will be discussed as a working concept in our modern world, and whether or not its limitations overpower its favours. Contrastingly, this article will analyse Herbert Schiller's perspective on Corporate Capitalism and Information, and Manuel Castells' perspective on the Network Society.

The public sphere

Habermas defines the public sphere as "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed." (1964: 49). The creation of the public sphere was so that there could be a space where people, or "any citizen" (ibid) could have free and open discourse opposing the overpowering authority of the state and the church. Habermas states that the public sphere was established because of major aspects of the developing capitalist economy in Britain in the 1700s. In the later half of the eighteenth century, the "bourgeois public sphere" (ibid: 52) surfaced, which was essentially caused by capitalist entrepreneurs. They gave more aid to the field of 'letters'- coffee houses, salons, theatre- lessening reliance on benefactors and encouraging the creation of a space devoted to criticism that was independent of the conventional institutions. (Webster, 2014: 209). As a result of market expansion, there was a rise in public eagerness for free speech and newspapers independent from the state's control. Thus, new literary journalism, or as Habermas calls it, "intellectual journalism" (1964:52) was created. These rivalled the earlier years' newspapers, as they defiled the state authority and clergy, or, as we refer to it nowadays, merely public opinion. When these newspapers began to serve their current purpose of informing the public of opinions, comments, and criticism, they promoted discussion among the newly rising bourgeois and academic classes. Karl Bücher explains that "newspapers changed from mere institutions for the publication of

news into bearers and of public opinion-weapons of party politics. (cited in Habermas, 1964:53). This was a new political force for citizens.

However, as capitalism expanded, corporate interests began to infiltrate public life. Private organisations, not individuals, now constitute the public sphere. Habermas recognised that the public sphere had undergone significant transformations in the modern era, as new forms of media and communication had emerged that had transformed the way that public discourse took place. The public and private spheres have become so intertwined that political leaders now perform both political and social tasks in the areas of product exchange and social labour. With the spread of public relations and lobbying culture, more information became available, but it was now 'controlled' to persuade and influence people. As a result of these events, Habermas uses the term "refeudalization" (1964: 54) to indicate how public affairs are used as platforms for power 'displays', "rather than spheres of contestation between different policies and outlooks." (Webster, 2014:211). The public sphere is turned into a theatrical, supervised show. A second aspect of "refeudalization" (Habermas, 1964:54), is the development of mass media and how this has aided in the commodification and commercialization of the public sphere. "Today, newspapers and magazines, radio, and television are the media of the public sphere." (Habermas, 1964:49). However, these media outlets function has changed over the years as they are "shifting towards a role of public opinion former and away from that of information provider." (Webster, 2014:211).

Habermas' perspective on the public sphere has changed over the years, as nowadays, the public sphere is digitised and networked. It has expanded on a global scale. The public sphere is essentially declining as the mainstream media pushes propagandistic opinions onto the public in our society. As of elevated commercialization, the world of 'letters' digresses into what can be a 'best-selling' commodity, "the purpose of which is to encourage 'cultural consumption' rather than stimulation of critical debate." (Webster, 2014:212). Despite these transformations, the public sphere, according to Habermas, continues to play a crucial role in democratic countries, and initiatives that restore and revitalise the public sphere are crucial for the viability of democratic politics. He proposed that this might be accomplished by encouraging citizens to participate more in public debate, developing critical thinking abilities, and creating media and communication infrastructures that promote democratic dialogue. If not, "What does more information matter if it is in the service of deception?" (Ibid: 212).

Corporate capitalism
The second perspective this article seeks to look at is Hebert Schiller's view on corporate capitalism and information. Different from Habermas' public sphere, capitalism has rarely undergone any transformations. Years later, capitalism and its main concerns have remained incessant. "Contrary to the notion that capitalism has been transcended, long prevailing imperatives of a market economy remain as determining as ever in the transformations occurring in the technological and informational spheres" (Schiller, 1981: xii). Schiller was one of the first theorists to make the realisation that Karl Marx's view on capitalism "had changed to something at once more pervasive and less visible." (Gerbner, 2001). Schiller's main outlook on corporate capitalism is the relationship it holds with the media and information. This close-knit relationship is what allowed the emergence of a public sphere, but it also allowed the decline of the public sphere in the late twentieth century. Schiller had at least four main concerns about corporate capitalism, which he gave deep analysis. Firstly, the importance of market criteria and the relevance of market standards in technological improvements. It is critical to understand how market forces such as profit-driven purchasing, selling, and trading have a significant impact on the growth of information and communications. (Webster, 2014:153). This importance is due to a second concern, namely, that information is a commodity. According to Schiller, knowledge is a commodity that is created and used for economic gain. In this situation, media companies prioritise profits over the public interest and the welfare of society. "Information today is

being treated as a commodity. It is something which, like toothpaste, breakfast cereals and automobiles, is increasingly bought and sold" (Schiller and Schiller, 1982, cited in Webster, 2014:154). Similarly to Habermas' perspective, this concern is what helped cause the downfall of the public sphere, as the mass media care more about what sells than what the public thinks and believes.

Schiller's third case argues that corporate capitalism dominates the information landscape, which leads to the concentration of media ownership and control. Therefore, the allocation of, availability of, and capacity to produce information are significantly influenced by class disparities. In turn, class influences who receives what information and the potential nature of that knowledge, limiting the diversity of information and perspectives available to the public. Likewise, in Habermas' public sphere, the 'bourgeois public sphere' was a class of elitists who, with their power, helped create the public sphere through their money and education. They were seen as belonging to a higher class because they could acquire this information and, in turn, hold an opinion, that eventually became public. Schiller's final concern is one that he entitled 'cultural imperialism'. He introduced this concept, which alludes to the dissemination of superior values and cultures via media and different kinds of communication. He made the case that media companies, in their quest for financial gain, favour the ideals of the superior culture over competing viewpoints and opinions, which leads to the deterioration of regional cultures and the silence of opposing viewpoints and voices. "Cultural imperialism as domination is regarded as the outcome of a set of economic and cultural processes implicated in the reproduction of global capitalism." (Barker, 2004:3). Overall, Schiller emphasises how corporate capitalism has a detrimental effect on the creation and distribution of information. He contends that media corporations limit the variety of information that the general public can access and put economic interests ahead of the common good. This is similar to Habermas' view that the public sphere is detrimental to democracy, and if media corporations limit important information, how is democracy supposed to flourish?

The networked society
The third perspective this article is going to analyse is Manuel Castells' approach to the networked society. Castells believes that the two main factors influencing social and political development are the economy and technology, yet he doesn't believe that the working class is the key element for change. The networked society is an innovative interpretation of how digital technologies have altered social norms, cultural rules, and corporate practices. This is similar to how, many years ago, Habermas noted that the 'bourgeois public sphere' changed social norms and public opinion. Castells mentions that "around the end of the second millennium of the common era, a number of major social, technological, economic, and cultural transformations came together to give rise to a new form of society, the network society." (2010: xvii). Castells acknowledges that capitalism is a fundamental component of society today, but he also promotes the view that the emergence of a "network society" has resulted in important shifts and that such networks are essential for upcoming iterations of social organisation. He states that our society is "certainly capitalist, but of a new brand of capitalism" (Castells, 2009:33, cited in Webster, 2014: 109). Likewise, Schiller's view is that capitalism and information go hand in hand in today's society.

Since the 1970s, a new idea of capitalism, 'informational capitalism', has operated its business by utilising information networks. This links in with Schiller's perspective on globalisation, as the 'network society' is a capitalist activity because of the digital divide around the world. "The emergence of a new technological paradigm organised around new, more powerful, and more flexible information technologies makes it possible for information itself to become the product of the production process." (Castells, 2010: 78). Inequality in accessing new, digital technologies is referred to as the 'digital divide'. This can also worsen social and economic inequalities that already exist. The networked society is a factor in the decline of Habarmas' public sphere, as nowadays individuals connect and interact online as a result of the broad application of digital technologies, which also ties in with

corporate capitalism because these digital technologies care more about profit than people. Simultaneously, our interpersonal connections and sense of self are changing as a result of the new social organisations that these technologies have sparked, such as online communities and social networks. "New information technologies, by transforming the processes of information processing, act upon all domains of human activity, and make it possible to establish endless connections between different domains, as well as between elements and agents of such activities." (Ibid: 78). Castells mentions his worry about parts of the technological developments that have been around before the wide adoption of the internet, as they have the potential to worsen social disintegration. Webster uses the example, that "cable and satellite television have developed in ways that target audiences to receive a pre-selected diet of programmes, dividing those who watch, for instance, Sky Sports from those drawn to rock music channels." (2014:114)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Habermas' public sphere, Schiller's corporate capitalism, and Castells' networked society are all different perspectives that offer unique outlooks on how media, communication, and technology have changed society. Castells and Habermas share the view that communication is widely responsible for shaping society. While Habermas highlights the value of communication in creating a democratic society, Castells focuses on the influence of technological advances in communication on social structures and cultural values. Castells and Schiller share a view on the importance of communication in societal power structures. Castells underlines the ability of communication technology to revolutionise society, whereas Schiller focuses on its ability to increase revenue. Overall, we can develop a more sophisticated and thorough knowledge of the effects of communication and technology on society by comprehending the parallels and discrepancies between these ideological perspectives.

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