Rethinking the Public Sphere in a Digital Environment: Similarities between the Eighteenth and the Twenty-First Centuries

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Introduction

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, the emergence of transnational communication flows and the rise of digital technologies have drawn the attention of a large community of social scientists in the field of sociology, cultural studies, and politics. Yet the sociological and political issues relating to the emergence of digital devices have often been categorically distinguished. On one hand, political sciences and researchers in the field of public administration mainly focus on the application of digital ICTs to increase political engagement and implement a participative democracy. Consequently, political approaches to digital communication devices stimulated a broad range of studies on e-governance, e-voting, cyber activism, and online campaigning. On the other hand, sociology and cultural studies tend to focus on the emergence of new transnational and diffuse communities for which social media enable to share and experience new social identities. Although some attempts have been made to understand the correlation between the cultural and political practices of the digital era, these theories need to be merged to address the influence of today's technological environment on the public sphere.

This article reviews Habermas' theory of public sphere in the context of the digital era, and identifies the parameters likely to in-

fluence the way consumers and citizens from the twenty-first-century express their subjectivities and shape their political reality. It considers the latest criticism towards virtual public spaces from the perspective of the emergence of *publicity* and public opinion in the context of the eighteenth century, and highlights the similarities between this historical environment and the digital revolution. In the first place, it will discuss the idea of technological determinism and present one aspect of the critique against *connective culture*, according to which online social interactions are conditioned and limited by the technological design of new communication devices. Simultaneously, it will envisage the impact of economic interests in the emergence of a digital public sphere and demonstrate that Habermas recognized the positive influence of *mercantilist motivations* over the democratizing society of the eighteenth century. Additionally, this paper will address the argument according to which the digital era affects the quality of public discourses by empowering amateurs with the same legitimacy as traditional leaders, professionals, and experts. This will underline a major distinction between the normative public sphere and today's connective culture, which lies in the fact that everyone is now likely to contribute to public discourses. Finally, this article will present alternative views regarding the need of technology's users to express their subjectivities. Considering the latest research in the field of cyber-activism, it will emphasize the fact that online social interactions increase the attractiveness of collaborative projects and political engagement by providing users with the opportunity to uphold their individual identity, while being part of a large social movement.

Technological determinism in the digital era

One of the most recurrent debates in the field of media studies regards the hegemony of corporate media and their cultural influence on global audiences. In the context of mainstream media, this question has been significantly influenced by the earliest works of the School of Frankfurt, like the ones of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer on *cultural industry* (1947), or Walter Benjamin on the *mechanical reproduction of art* (1968). This school of thought introduced a critical approach named the *cultural imperialism thesis* (Chalaby 2007, p.64), which regarded international communication flows as a manifestation of global news corporations' power. According to this paradigm of imperialism, mainstream media maintain an impartial power over the dissemination of cultural and political discourses. Yet the emergence of the internet and social media provided information consumers with the opportunity to become *information producers* and to shape their cultural environment. This generated new perspectives on the question of cultural imperialism and led social scientists like Henry Jenkins (2006) to think that the digital revolution empowers citizens with more freedom of expression and more influence on their cultural and political environment. On the other hand, some theories (Van Dijck 2013) argue that digital collaborative media are also driven by economic interests, which affects the quality of online social interactions. Additionally, aside from the corporate interests likely to affect future sociological patterns, online interactions are potentially shaped by technological infrastructures. This suggests that, unlike the traditional public sphere, new forms of public deliberation might be subjected to technological determinism. Beyond the latest research on the question of technological determinism (Turkle 2012), Bourdieu analysed the application of communication tech-

nologies such as photography (1965) and television (1996) before the emergence of the internet. According to Bourdieu, such technological devices are generally applied to perform instinctive sociological practices that have been inherited by the members of a specific culture or social class over time and history. In Bourdieusian terms, this phenomenon corresponds to the concept of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1993), which reflects individuals' belonging to socio-economic environment and leads to the reproduction of power relationships through generations. In fact, the application of information and communication technologies can be interpreted as a manifestation of a social *habitus* and is, therefore, mainly conditioned by sociological parameters. According to Jonathan Sterne (2003), Bourdieu's theory supposes that a medium is hardly employed to fulfil one specific duty or social practice, despite its technical characteristics. In other words, users, just like engineers, assign a role to the technology in question:

> We can see this in Bourdieu's approach to photography: technology is not simply a 'thing' that fills a predetermined social purpose. Technologies are socially shaped along with their meanings, functions, domains and use. Thus, they cannot come into existence simply to fill a pre-existing role, since the role itself is co-created with the technology by its makers and users. More importantly, this role is not a static function but something that can change over time for groups of people. (Sterne 2003, p. 373)

Such hypothesis prompts the idea that users are free to construct their own social reality online. As such, it supports Henry Jenkins' *technological optimism* as well as his thesis on participatory culture (2006). Yet the prominence of connective technologies in postmodern societies is considered a threat to individual freedom of speech, as well as to the transparency of public discourses.

In her study on the *culture of connectivity,* José Van Dijck (2013) precisely argues that freedom of expression is dependent on the way social platforms are designed. As a matter of fact, content providers such as YouTube, Facebook, My Space, and Twitter generated new forms of social practice for which they became exclusive providers. Furthermore, such platforms have an unilateral control over the technological applications offered by social media. In that sense, they modify the founding characteristics of social interactions:

> Companies tend to stress the first meaning (human connectedness) and minimize the second meaning (automated connectivity). […] however, "making the web social" in reality means "making sociability technical". Sociality coded by technology renders people's activities formal, manageable, and manipulated, enabling platforms to engineer the sociability in people's everyday routines. On the basis of detailed and intimate knowledge of people's desires and likes, platforms develop tools to create and steer specific needs. (Van Dijck 2013, p.12)

Admittedly, the fact that consumers co-produce online information suggests they contribute to shape media content. However, they do not control the infrastructure through which online social practices take place. Rethinking cultural and media studies over the light of the digital era requires differentiating the medium (technology) from the media (mediated social practices). Supposedly, if online social practices are mostly determined by their technological infrastructure, they do not give users the opportunity to perform their social reality. In the opposite way, such social dynamics could only be artificial and limited by the technological facilities available. Foremost, Van Dijck argues that the way social platforms are designed is conditioned by economic interests and intends to ensure that a large number of users provide content, creating opportunities for commercial transactions. From this perspective, economic parameters are most likely to affect

the quality of social interactions as well as citizens' ability to debate rationally on public matters. Not only does this criticism echo the traditional debate on cultural imperialism, but it also emphasises certain similarities between the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere and the *culture of connectivity*.

Reviewing Habermas' public sphere

The historical context in which Habermas describes the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere helps distinguish the characteristics of public opinion shaped by mainstream and digital media. First of all, it is important to recall that, to a certain extent, the normative public sphere can be considered as an elitist process, through which highly educated social classes from the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century in France, Germany, or Great Britain, gained leadership and political influence. Indeed, leading public opinion by becoming a public figure was not only the privilege of the intellectual elite, but also a groundbreaking process for which most people could hardly understand the cultural and political outcome. Indeed, Habermas (1962) demonstrates that *publicity* and public opinion themselves progressively emanated from the profusion of intellectual circles sharing their taste for arts and their ideological views in salons, coffee houses, and secret societies.

Simultaneously, the evolution of the press gave the opportunity for intellectual leaders to be heard by a broader range of the population. From this perspective, the revolutionising public sphere of the eighteenth century certainly democratised rational thinking and conveyed the legacy of the Enlightenment. However, Habermas emphasises the fact that this democratising process was partly motivated by the need of bourgeois elites to gain political power and liberalise markets. As a matter of fact, by attributing the rise of a public

opinion to the emergence of capitalism, Habermas recognises the positive side effects of liberalism and underlines the fact that bourgeois societies of the eighteenth century promoted rational criticism among a broader population. Furthermore, he demonstrates that *publicity* instituted the notion of common good and stimulated the engagement of individuals for common interest:

> A few years before the French Revolution, the conditions in Prussia looked like a static model of a situation that in France and especially in Great Britain had become fluid at the beginning of the century. The inhibited judgments were called "public" in view of a public sphere that without question had counted as a sphere of public authority, but was now casting itself loose as a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion. The *publicum* developed into the public, the *subjectum* into the [reasoning] subject […]. (Habermas 1962: p. 25-26)

In this regard, the notions of *publicity* - galvanised by the bourgeois public sphere - and citizenship should be considered as indivisible in the context of our postmodern democracies.

This aspect of Habermas' theory partly explains why his work diverges from the earliest work of Frankfurt School. The development of bourgeois intellectual circles appeared as an experience of the democratic process among members of the educated elite, which foreshadowed the French Revolution. Acknowledging that the bourgeois public sphere generated the social capital and the criticism necessary to the establishment of a democracy, Habermas supposes that an efficient public debate should be led by a community of philosophical leaders, experts, and social thinkers. Admittedly, the fact that this community of intellectual leaders improves public deliberation does not depend on its economic privileges. However,

such community might be keener to gain legitimacy and stimulate debates on public matters as long as this will ensure economic or political power. From this point of view, one can easily argue that preserving freedom of speech or liberalising social interactions is correlated with the liberalisation of markets. This implies that economic interests are not affecting the quality of public discourses in terms of diversity and rationality. Quite the opposite, economic motivations ensure the sustainability and the expansion of the public sphere. Moreover, the concern of private economic interests encourages the expression of individuals' subjectivity in the field of arts, literature, theatre or popular culture:

> Like the concert and the theater, museums institutionalized the lay judgment on art: discussion became the medium through which people appropriated art. The innumerable pamphlets criticizing or defending the leading theory of art built on the discussions of the *salons* and reacted back on them - art criticism as conversation. Thus, in the first half of the eighteenth century the *amateurs éclairés* formed the inner circle of the new art public. (Habermas 1962, p. 40)

Yet according to the normative public sphere, this phenomenon contributed to build the legitimacy of individual citizens as autonomous thinkers able to argue, justify their views, and shape their political environment. The literature of the Enlightenment evidences the exclusivity of the bourgeoisie in the process of shaping public opinion. Voltaire, in his *Letters Concerning the English Nation* (1734), claims that a happy and peaceful society is a world of luxury that promotes the arts, as the flourishing of the arts increases intellectual capital. Yet this ideal can only be achieved when the primary material needs have been satisfied. Consequently, according to Voltaire, wealth and commercial transactions ensure social happiness.

Trade enriches citizens and guarantees their freedom by providing them with economic independence. Inversely, individual freedom stimulates commercial transactions and assures economic growth. According to Voltaire (1734), English society perfectly illustrates the beneficial effects of economic profit, such as the fact that financial interactions improves relationships between religious communities.

> Take a view of the Royal Exchange in London, a place more venerable than many courts of justice, where the representatives of all nations meet for the benefit of mankind. There the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Christian transact business together, as though they were all of the same religion, and give the name of Infidels to none but bankrupts ; there the Presbyterian confides in the Anabaptist, and the Churchman depends upon the Quaker's word. (Voltaire 1734, p.36)

Voltaire expresses similar views in is famous poem *Le Mondain*, where he praises the libertine culture of a new wealthy middle class driven by material plaesures. He opposes the libertinism of his time to religious morals, and describes this philosophical transition as an ideological progress. This aspect of the Enlightenment undeniably illustrates the causality between ecnomonic privileges and the emergence of a rational public sphere in which individuals' subjective views had the opportunity to be expressed. Besides, it is worth noticing that Voltaire is in line with Adam Smith (1776) in suggesting that individual material motivations indirectly promote society's economic interests. In this regard, like Adorno and Hochmeiker in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), one could easily argue that some of the great philosophers of the eighteenth century helped (alt: contributed to the establishement of the ideals...) to establish the ideals and principles of the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, from a Habermasian perspective, this suggests that - in both cultural and political

contexts - liberalism originally improved major components of democracy, such as rational thinking, social capital, and freedom of expression. Therefore, it is surprising to notice that recent critiques of digital culture tend to perceive economic interests as a threat to freedom of expression and natural social interactions.

From the leadership of an intellectual elite to the recognition of amateurs

One of the reasons why social scientists distinguish virtual environments from the normative public sphere is because digital technologies provide everyone with the opportunity to contribute to public discourses. In other words, the factors likely to affect the rationality of social interactions, as well as the sustainability of public opinion in a digital world, might reside in the fact that the online public sphere provides every citizen with the opportunity to express himself publicly. This is one of the most significant differences between Habermas' model of a bourgeois public sphere and the online public spaces of the twenty-first century.

According to social theorists such as Patrice Flichy (2010) and Dominique Cardon (2010), online discourses are considerably affected by a lack of rational thinking and effective deliberation. In their recent essays on online social practices, the two sociologists develop an analysis similar to Van Dijck's criticism, claiming that social media platforms simplify discourses and reduce the robustness of public opinion.

Observing how people live and share their domains of interest in the digital era, Patrice Flichy (2010) considers three fields of activity in which internet users progressively gain credibility. He introduces the idea that the Web 2.0 provides amateurs with the opportunity to contribute to their themes of interest, confront differ-

ent opinions, and find an audience. In that sense, amateurs acquire an influence that, not so long ago, was the exclusive privilege of professionals and experts. According to Flichy, this social recognition of amateurs is particularly significant in the field of arts, popular culture, science, and politics.

In the case of politics, this democratisation of the debate affects the fundamental parameters of the public sphere, because bloggers and internet users are not subjected to any form of control or gatekeeping. Their publications are likely to be less reliable, and their arguments lack rationality. Therefore this online form of public sphere fails at confronting and discussing political issues in an organised and critical way. However, the author admits that the advantage of online deliberation is that a wider range of opinions can be expressed, and that the quality of the public sphere might not be affected as long as the debate is moderated by professionals of public expression:

> The autonomous and competent amateur, who might not be involved in the traditional political circle, is ready to explore new forms of public debate. This online deliberative democracy works provided that formalised rules are respected and accepted by the participants and reminded by moderators. (2010, p. 53)

From another perspective, Flichy underlines the fact that the quality of an online public sphere is subject to the diversity of participants contributing to the debate. Yet the fact that the internet tends to target very specific audiences leads citizens to express their different opinions in a very diffuse way, which makes the range of political views harder to identify. Unlike the *Habermasian public sphere*, the online public space cannot be localised. Indeed, it is unlikely that different ideologies are confronted on the same platform and internet

users have the tendency to visit websites or connect with networks that promote their own opinions. Therefore, these diversified and diffuse public spaces are not led to face opposite views and improve their arguments.

Likewise, Flichy observes that online political engagement tends to be less sustainable and does not gather the same communities of citizens sharing similar ideological views. He argues that the digital era has transformed the traditional forms of political networks that were active in the second part of the twentieth century. Whereas citizens engaged themselves in the long run to promote a party or an ideology, the amateurs of the digital era operate from time to time to support specific political projects in order to preserve their individual interests. Furthermore, as political audiences are not as strictly structured as before, individuals are not exclusively associated to one particular organisation and may be involved in very different causes. According to Flichy, this is precisely where the paradox of amateur engagement in politics lies: their partnership to political networks, which brings them to seek common good, is in fact subjected to personnel motivations.

Flichy explains this phenomenon by the fact that the boundary between private and public space is hard to define. Initially citizens collect information and exchange their personnel experiences. In a second phase, other internet users are able to structure this information in a co-ordinated and sometimes institutionalised network to promote political changes. This is how individuals progressively contribute to large social movements, without understanding their strategic dimension neither to anticipate their outcome.

Therefore, it appears that the latest criticisms against the credibility and legitimacy of amateurs in an interactive and participa-

tory cyberspace also emphasises the fact that digital communication devices tend to ease the boundary between public and private identity. Social media leads individuals to share and develop their personal identity publically. Simultaneously, an individual's social life is considerably shaped and determined by the way they manage their online public image.

Incorporating individualities in the political message

These new social dynamics inevitably impact the way citizens become politically involved, and the way individuals negotiate their views on public matters to produce some form of public opinion. On one hand, the fact that individual identities become more visible within social groups stimulates political engagement, as it provides the satisfaction of being part of an ideological movement whilst freely expressing one's personality. Recent studies on cyber-activism demonstrated that, similarly to any form of online social activity, activist movements emerging on social media prove to be extremely flexible and constantly evolve with members' contributions. The potential impact of every single contributor increases the attractiveness of this new form of political action – *connective action* – given that individuality can be expressed within the global social structure.

As they draw the distinction between militant organisations and online activism, Bennett & Segerberg (2011) define online activism and *connective action* as a more strategic way to personalize the message of protesters. They argue with a large majority of social scientists on the fact that, as opposed to traditional forms of collective actions, connective networks have a particularly rapid expansion, and gather wide and diversified audiences. Yet one of the most interesting and advantageous characteristics of cyber-activism is its ability to reinforce an individual's engagement to the

cause, by giving every single member the opportunity to contribute to its global message. Given that individuals can personalize the object of common interest, the action becomes more fluid and is more likely to appeal to members from different social and cultural backgrounds. Admittedly, this also explains why the evolution of connective actions is less predictable.

Interestingly, Bennett & Segerberg associate two more qualities to connective networks that seem to contradict some of the recent theories on social media. Firstly, they claim that *connective networks* tend to be less emotional than traditional forms of collective action, as the latter generates more violent demonstrations. This position contrasts with the theory upheld by Flichy (2010) and Cardon (2010), according to which individuals' involvement in the public sphere affects the rationality of public debates, by giving the opportunity to non-professionals to express their subjective opinions.

Secondly, their research on cyber-activism introduces the idea that activist networks can enhance the sustainability of *collective actions*, as they meet the need underlined by Mancur Olson (1965) to stimulate individuals' interest in a common cause. Indeed, Olson considerably influenced the Resource Mobilization Theory when he demonstrated that some individual free-riders would not take part in mobilizations as long as they could benefit from others engagement for common good. Bennett and Segerberg argue that the interactivity of digital media enables activist organisations to raise the attention of these potential members, by giving them the opportunity to personalize the action. Furthermore, the temporal and territorial flexibility of these networks releases the movement from its local infrastructures and enables it to be constantly active and independent from its individual members:

> Such networks are flexible organizations in themselves, often enabling coordinated adjustments and rapid action aimed at moving political targets, even crossing geographic and temporal boundaries in the process. As Diani (2011) argues, networks are not just precursors or building blocks of collective action, they are in themselves organizational structures that can transcend the elemental units of organizations and individuals. (Bennett and Segerberg 2011, p.24)

The latest findings in the field of cyber-activism clearly indicates that, as with the normative public sphere of the eighteenth century, the digital era provides individuals with the opportunity to express their subjectivity, which stimulates their political engagement. Whereas some social theorists (Cardon 2010; Flichy 2010) perceive this new rise of subjectivity as an obstacle to rational thinking, studies on online activism demonstrate that some other characteristics of the normative public sphere – like freedom of expression – might actually be improved by digital communication technologies. However, while describing online networks as an emancipating public space for activists and militants, Bennett & Segerberg suggest that these participative organisations could be more sustainable and efficient. Nevertheless, this potential sustainability and efficiency needs to be assessed in accordance with the criteria specifically relating to the emerging connective culture, as opposed to the framework of traditional forms of political action.

The new intellectual leaders of the public sphere

Among the few cases for which connective interactions have proved to be politically efficient, it is worth examining the Tunisian and Egyptian 2011 protests. Indeed, it has been argued that social media significantly contributed to the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions (Breuer 2012). Not only did digital technologies enable

the circumvention of censorship imposed by former governments to inform local populations, they also raised the attention of an international audience. Yet the efficiency of the online public debate in Tunisia and Egypt potentially relies on the sociological characteristics of internet users in the Middle East. In fact, due to the lack of economic and technological recourses, the majority of the Tunisian and Egyptian populations have no regular access to digital devices (Meraz& Papacharissi 2013). According to Dubai School of Government (2011), in December 2010, Tunisia was among the emerging countries in terms of Facebook penetration, with 17.55% of the population having access to this social platform. Egypt was still considered as one of the developing users with only 5.49% of the population. Comparatively, Facebook penetration reached 46.22% in USA and 45.92% in UK. Given the small proportion of citizens accessing social media, it is very unlikely that the population of internet users truly reflects the sociological diversity of the entire population. Moreover, statistics show that the population of internet and social media users fails at representing all generations:

> The demographic breakdown of Facebook users indicates that they are a youthful group. Youth (between the ages of 15 and 29) make up 75% of Facebook users in the Arab region. [...] Moreover, the percentage of Arab Facebook users who are between 15 and 29 years of age is significantly higher than the proportion of youth (15-29) in general in the Arab world (roughly 40% of 15 year-olds and above). (Salem & Mourtada 2011, pp.7-8)

This suggests that internet and social media users actively contributing to online public deliberation constitute an elite of young and educated citizens. In this regard, one could argue that the Tunisian and Egyptian intellectual middle class is promoting a democratic and collaborative culture online, just like the bourgeoisie of the eight-

eenth century initiated a critique of the *ancien régime*. This hypothesis has been confirmed by the statistical data collected from the Egyptian e-government, after the 2012 Referendum on the Egyptian Constitution.

In August 2012, the Sharek initiative was launched on the Egyptian e-government's portal. This interactive platform was designed to provide citizens with the opportunity to discuss the project of the new constitution. The drafts elaborated by the constituent assembly have been uploaded online, allowing users to comment and rank every single article. After the referendum, the statistics of the Sharek project indicated that the majority of participants were male aged between 24 and 34. Only 14% of participants were females. The majority of participants connected in Egypt were located in the urban areas of Cairo and Alexandria. Apart from Egypt, many participants have been localised in Kuwait, UAE and Saudi Arabia as well as in USA, where a significant proportion of the intellectual Egyptian diasporas live. This suggests that, despite the fact that digital divide decreases very quickly in the Middle East; the educated middle class is still leading the online public debate. Accordingly, digital public discourses in Tunisia and Egypt are more likely to match the definition of the bourgeois public sphere. In that sense, there are potentially more effective when it comes to produce an impartial, critical and rational public debate. However, one could argue that, just like the bourgeois public sphere, these virtual environments tend to be more elitist and thus less democratic.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rediscovering Habermas' public sphere from the perspective of today's virtual public spaces underlines the similarities between the digital era and the historical context of the eighteenth

century. First of all, the economic parameters that are likely to impact the technological design of today's communication devices are comparable to the commercial and political interests that indirectly motivated the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere. The second similitude between the normative and virtual public sphere resides in the emancipation of individuals' subjectivities. In the case of the twenty-first century connective culture, this phenomenon can be interpreted as the rise of amateurism, as everyone is regarded as a potential contributor to the collection of public discourses. Whereas the expression of individuals' subjectivities is described by Habermas as a beneficial process, given that it stimulates criticism among the population, some theories argue that today's individualities are only expressed in a very superficial way, which paradoxically affects the process of rational thinking. Furthermore, according to a certain criticism, the new boundaries between private and public spaces allow subjectivities to be expressed in a less critical way. However, from the perspective of online activism, the expression of subjectivities is regarded as an advantage, given that it enables every single member to reflect their own identity in a social movement. Thus, similar to the Habermasian public sphere, the connective culture renders individuals conscious of their political power, and promotes a democratic culture. Yet it is not clear to what extent this form of political engagement is sustainable in the context of a representative democracy.

Applying Habermas' theory to the digital and connective culture of the twenty-first century shows that one of the most significant differences between the emergence of the bourgeois public sphere and the liberalisation of online public discourses lies in the intellectual leadership. Whereas *publicity* and public opinion were led

by members of the bourgeois elite in the period that preceded the French Revolution, every citizen now has access to the public scene. Interestingly this is probably the reason why digital technologies appear to be prominent in democratizing countries, such as Tunisia and Egypt, where social media contributed to the rise a revolution. Indeed, the Tunisia and Egypt revolutionary movements proved to be led by an elite of young educated activists. In this regard, the historical changes currently occurring in democratizing societies might be a particularly appropriate reflection of the democratizing culture of the eighteenth century.

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