

Revision of public sphere: changing role of journalism in contemporary democracy

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Abstract: This paper mainly discusses the Habermasian public sphere with the contemporary media environment, arguing that the original concept requires redefinition as the media ecosystem becomes more and more digitized. In respect of changes in journalism practice and its function, the revision of the public sphere focuses on redefining inclusiveness, contents, public participation, and rationality. It concludes that social media and online journalism promote contemporary democracy by creating a “communal communicative space” that is more open, diverse, active, and emotional.

Keywords: Public sphere; journalism; democracy; social media

1. Introduction

It has been decades since the birth of the concept of the public sphere, which has been criticized by many scholars in various aspects but it remains valuable to study journalism in the 21st century as it offers a critical perspective of democracy and public opinion. However, there still exist some limitations of the concept in view of the current situation. Thus, this essay begins with the discussion of the original concept of the public sphere and how journalism took a role in facilitating democracy at that time. The revision of the term is then proposed in terms of changes in contemporary journalism practice.

2. Public Sphere in the 18th Century

The concept of the public sphere was first introduced by Jürgen Habermas, which is one of the most important and influential frameworks in media study. Especially in the field of journalism, it provides a solid theoretical foundation that is used to interpret and analyze social and democratic functions of journalism in practice, as well as the role of media in this process.

2.1 Original definition

Habermas ^[1] defines the public sphere as “a realm of social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed”. By public opinion, Habermas means that citizens can both formally or informally criticize and control the public body, elections, and the state.

For Habermas, the public sphere is composed of three key elements. Firstly, democracy is a fundamental prerequisite for the formation of the public sphere that citizens are free to access and publish information. Habermas believes that there is no public sphere in authoritarian countries when the state power is over citizen power. Moreover, the public sphere is a “communal communicative space” in which citizens express their opinion about “matters of general interest” rather than private issues. Besides, rational and critical discourse is one of the determining elements to the quality of the public sphere. Habermas argues that real public opinion can only take place when a “reasoning public

is presupposed". Overall, the existence value of the public sphere is to achieve changes in public and political affairs.

2.2 Characteristics of Habermasian public sphere

Habermas' public sphere in the early period revealed a communicative space that is elite-dominated, highly centralized, and limited to local areas. In the Structural transformation of the public sphere, the key work of Habermas that focuses on discussing the "bourgeois public sphere", he mentioned that the emergence of the public sphere can be traced back to the early 18th century when bourgeois democracy sprouted in Europe^[2]. The rise of capitalism empowered citizens with voting rights, which generated public demand for information and the need for a place to freely discuss public affairs. "Coffee house culture" was prevalent in Europe at that time in which the bourgeois public, who are educated and wealthy men, would gather to read newspapers and make comments on its contents^[3]. Additionally, there were only a small number of media organizations delivering news to the public.

2.3 Role of journalism

According to McNail^[4], journalism had five major functions in facilitating the development of democracy and the formation of the public sphere at the early stage. Firstly, journalism provides information to citizens to make informed decisions in the election. Secondly, newspapers also help citizens to interpret complex information. Furthermore, journalists also act as a watchdog to investigate and question the state's power. In addition, public opinion can be represented in the newspaper by writing a reader's letter. Lastly, journalism and media companies also have the power to influence public opinion on politics while they have the right to choose to support one side of the party.

3. Revision of the Public Sphere in today's media ecology

It is worth noting that the new media technology has led to a dynamic change in the field of journalism, which directly shaped how the public sphere operates in contemporary democracies. Connecting with the current practice in journalism, I argue that the public sphere needs to be revised from the following aspects.

3.1 Redefining inclusiveness

The initial concept of the public sphere is no longer applicable in the current situation as digitization of media and journalism increased the inclusiveness of this communicative sphere. Habermas' public sphere failed to serve the majority of the population and many people are excluded, including women, minority groups, and people who do not have voting rights. On the contrary, the Internet and new media technologies create an online public sphere where people can freely access information without limitation of time, space, race, and class, which help people to make political decisions. For example, many news organizations, such as BBC and the Guardian provide free content online, which moves a large step to a sphere of "publicly access knowledge".

Moreover, a lot of evidence indicates that social media offers great contribution in promoting non-western countries, and particularly evident in the birth of citizen journalism. For instance, citizen journalists have reported the train crash in Wenzhou on Weibo in 2012 and pressured the local government to provide reasons behind the crash, which generated huge public attention at that time. As a result, the present public sphere is distinguished from Habermas' concept as it expanded from elitism to mass public and from western democratic society to non-western countries.

3.2 Redefining contents

While the internet and social media empowered more and more people, the contemporary public sphere also includes more diverse news content than before. Today's journalism is shifting its role from providing information to the general public to serve the interests of niche audiences. For example, The World Indigenous Television Broadcasting Network, which mainly targets indigenous audiences and aims to spread their voice to a wider audience, played an important role in enhancing the diversity of the public sphere.

In addition, personal issues have also become an important topic in contemporary public discourse. Taking domestic violence as an example, it was once perceived as a private issue between wife and husband that journalism rarely reports. In contrast, discussion of domestic violence is particularly common. Especially in China, the discussion of domestic violence has facilitated the formation of the online public sphere, as well as affected social attitudes and policy making^[5].

Consequently, social media makes today's public sphere more diverse by allowing minority groups to spread their voice and seeing more topics as "matters of general interest".

3.3 Redefining public participation

Another major impact of digitization is that social media changed the way audiences interact with journalism and thus transformed the public into a more active role. Compared with the situation in the 18th century, there are few channels for audiences to deliver feedback to the news organizations, whilst audiences can now directly and immediately express their thoughts about the news content simply by comment under the news article on social media.

Furthermore, the audience also can create content by themselves to attract public attention on social media. In Thorsen and Sreedhara's^[6] research, they revealed that netizens use the EndMaleGuardianship hashtag to post their opinion on Twitter during the Saudi women's rights campaign to directly conduct cross-gender communication without intervening of news corporations. In contrast to the role of journalism functioned as a bridge that connects between state and the public, audiences are now able to get in touch with politicians through social platforms bypassing the traditional public sphere. Therefore, as audiences were empowered by the new media technology, it also transformed the practice of engaging in the modern public sphere.

3.4 Redefining rationality

The Habermasian concept of the public sphere also failed to explain the emerging public sphere on social media where the public often raised emotional opinions. The rationality of the public sphere has been continuously criticized by other scholars from many aspects for many years. In the past decades, scholars have shifted attention to evaluate the role of journalism and media in creating an emotional public sphere. Rosas and Serrano-Puche^[7] took a step further, believing that citizen practice in the public sphere is not merely limited to bring their "expectations, beliefs and arguments abilities" to the public discourse space, but also their "socially relevant effective concerns. This can be found in Wahl-Jorgensen's study^[8], which found that coverage of anger in the UK newspaper during the protest in 2015 encouraged citizens' political motivation and served as a "barometer of public feeling". Thus, the positive role of emotions in the public sphere was overlooked by Habermas and became more distinct in the digital era.

4. Conclusion

This essay suggests a revision of the Habermasian public sphere by arguing that digitization transformed it into a more inclusive, diversified, participatory, and emotional communicative space. The traditional public sphere can hardly explain the growing complexity of the media and journalism environment, in terms of more participation, various discourse topic, active audience engagement, and complex public emotions. Moreover, journalism has also experienced a 180-degree change in the past decades and functioned differently in the contemporary public sphere. The online public sphere became a trend that social media and online journalism take a core place to continue to facilitate global democracy. Things continue changing where further research is required to verify the conceptualization of the public sphere based on the latest developments of democracy and the media ecosystem.

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