Check for updates

Theory Culture & Society

Theory, Culture & Society
2022, Vol. 39(4) 145–171
© The Author(s) 2022
Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/02632764221112341
journals.sagepub.com/home/tcs

Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere

Jürgen Habermas
University of Frankfurt

Abstract

This article contains reflections on the further structural transformation of the public sphere, building on the author's widely-discussed social-historical study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, which originally appeared in German in 1962 (English translation 1989). The first three sections contain preliminary theoretical reflections on the relationship between normative and empirical theory, the deliberative understanding of democracy, and the demanding preconditions of the stability of democratic societies under conditions of capitalism. The fourth section turns to the implications of digitalisation for the account of the role of the media in the public sphere developed in the original work, specifically to how it is leading to the expansion and fragmentation of the public sphere and is turning all participants into potential authors. The following section presents empirical data from German studies which shows that the rapid expansion of digital media is leading to a marked diminution of the role of the classical print media. The article concludes with observations on the threats that these developments pose for the traditional role of the public sphere in discursive opinion and will formation in democracies.

Keywords

capitalism, communicative legitimisation, digitalisation, normative and empirical theory, public sphere, structural transformation

As the author of the book published nearly six decades ago and chosen by the editors of this special issue as the starting point for the current discussion, I would like to make two remarks. Judging by sales, the book, although it was my first, has remained my most successful to date. The second remark concerns the reason, I suspect, for this unusual reception: the book contains a social and conceptual history of the 'public sphere' that has attracted a great deal of criticism but has also provided new stimuli to

Corresponding author: Ciaran Cronin. Email: ciarancronin@textwright.de
TCS Online Forum: https://www.theoryculturesociety.org

more wide-ranging historical research. This historical aspect is not our topic. But for the social sciences, it had the effect of embedding the political concept of the 'public sphere' in a wider socio-structural context. Until then, the term had been used in a rather unspecific sense, primarily within the conceptual field of 'public opinion' that, since Lazarsfeld, had been conceived in demoscopic terms; but my study assigned the sociological concept of the public sphere a place in the functionally differentiated structure of modern societies between civil society and the political system. As a result, it could be studied with a view to its functional contribution to social integration and, in particular, to the political integration of the citizens.[1] Although I am well aware that the social significance of the public sphere goes far beyond its contribution to democratic will formation in constitutional states,[2] I also discussed it subsequently from the perspective of political theory.[3] In the present contribution, too, I take as my starting point the function of the public sphere in ensuring the sustainability of the democratic political community. Martin Seeliger's and Sebastian Sevignani's interesting reflections have persuaded me to reflect on the further structural transformation of the public sphere, although I have been dealing with other topics for a long time and have only been able to take very selective note of the relevant publications. However, I have had an opportunity to read most of the interesting contributions in this collection and am grateful to my colleagues for this instructive reading.

I will begin by addressing the relationship between normative and empirical theory (I); then I will go on to explain why and how we should understand the democratic process, once it is institutionalised under social conditions marked by individualism and pluralism, in the light of deliberative politics (II); I will conclude these preliminary theoretical reflections by recalling the improbable conditions that must be fulfilled if a crisis-prone capitalist democracy is to remain stable (III). Within this theoretical framework, for which *Structural Transformation* (1962; English translation 1989) provided a preliminary social-historical analysis, I will outline how digitalisation is transforming the structure of the media and the repercussions of this transformation for the political process. The technological advance of digitalised communication initially fosters trends towards the dissolution of boundaries, but also towards the fragmentation of the public sphere. The platform character of the new media creates a space of communication alongside the editorial public sphere in which readers, listeners and viewers can spontaneously assume the role of authors (IV). The reach of the new media is shown by the findings of a longitudinal survey on the usage of the expanded media offerings. Whereas both television and radio have been more or less able to hold their ground in the course of the rapid increase in internet usage over the past two decades, consumption of printed newspapers and magazines has plummeted (V). The rise of the new media is taking place in the shadow of a commercial exploitation of the currently almost unregulated internet communication. On the one hand, this is threatening to undermine the economic basis of the traditional newspaper publishers and of journalists as the affected occupational group; on the other hand, a mode of semi-public, fragmented and self-enclosed communication seems to be spreading among exclusive users of social media that is distorting their *perception of the political public sphere* as such. If this conjecture is correct, an important subjective prerequisite for the formation of public opinion and political will in a more or less deliberative way is jeopardised among an increasing portion of the citizenry (VI).

I

In studies that deal with the role of the political public sphere in constitutional democracies, we generally make a distinction between empirical investigations and normative theories. John Rawls, for example, speaks in this connection of 'ideal theory'. I think that this alternative is oversimplified. In my view, the role of democratic theory is to reconstruct the rational content of the norms and practices that have acquired positive validity since the constitutional revolutions of the late 18th century and, as such, have become part of historical reality. The very fact that empirical studies of the formation of opinions under democratic conditions become pointless if they are not *also* interpreted in the light of the normative *requirements* they are supposed to satisfy in constitutional democracies highlights an interesting circumstance. However, understanding this calls for a brief historical digression. For the revolutionary acts that endowed fundamental rights with positive validity first made citizens aware of a new *normative gradient* [*normatives Gefälle*], which thereby became part of *social reality* itself.

The historical novelty of this normativity of constitutional orders based on fundamental rights, whose 'unsaturated' character pointing beyond the status quo makes it peculiarly demanding, can be better understood against the backdrop of the usual form of social normativity. Social phenomena, be they actions, streams of communication or artefacts, values or norms, habits or institutions, contracts or organisations, have a rule-governed character. This is shown by the possibility of deviant behaviour: rules can be followed or broken. There are different kinds of rules: logical, mathematical and grammatical rules, game rules and rules of action, where the latter comprise instrumental and social rules of action, which can be differentiated in turn according to strategic and normatively regulated interactions. It is the latter norms, in particular, that are distinguished by the peculiar mode of validity of the 'ought'.[4] As the nature of the sanctions for deviant behaviour shows, such normative behavioural expectations may make *more or less strict* demands, with morality imposing the most stringent demands. The *universalistic moral conceptions* that arose with the Axial Age world views are distinguished by the fact that they call for the equal treatment of all persons in principle. In the course of the European Enlightenment, this moral-cognitive potential became detached from the respective religious or metaphysical background and was differentiated in such a way that – according to the still authoritative Kantian conception – each individual in his or her inalienable individuality *ought to* be accorded equal respect and receive equal treatment. On this conception, each person's conduct must be judged in the light of his or her individual situation in accordance with precisely those general norms that are equally good for everyone from the discursively examined point of view of all those possibly affected.

A particular sociological implication of this development is especially interesting in the present context. We must recall the unprecedented radicalness of rational morality in order to gauge the demanding character of the oughtness claim raised by this egalitarian-individualistic universalism and, switching perspective from rational *morality* to the rational *law* inspired by this morality, to understand the historical import of how, since the first two constitutional revolutions, this steep moral-cognitive potential has formed the core of the basic rights sanctioned by the state, and thus of positive law in general. With the 'declaration' of the basic rights and human rights, the substance of rational morality migrated into the medium of binding constitutional law constructed out of

subjective rights! With those *historically unprecedented* founding acts that give rise to democratic constitutional orders in the late 18th century, the *hitherto unknown* tension of a normative gradient lodged itself in the political consciousness of legally free and equal citizens. This encouragement to develop a new normative self-understanding went hand in hand with a new historical consciousness turned offensively towards the future (investigated by Reinhard Koselleck). Taken as a whole, this amounted to a complex shift in consciousness that is embedded in the capitalist dynamics of a transformation of social conditions accelerated by technological progress. In the meantime, however, this dynamic has aroused in Western societies a more defensive mindset that instead feels overwhelmed by the growth in social complexity propelled by technology and the economy. But the persisting social movements that continually reawaken the consciousness of the incomplete inclusion of the oppressed, marginalised and degraded, of afflicted, exploited and disadvantaged groups, classes, subcultures, genders, races, nations and continents, remind us of the steep gradient between the positive validity and the still *unsaturated content* of the human rights which have, in the meantime, been 'declared' not only at the national level.[5] Hence, and this is the point of my digression, among the preconditions of the survival of a democratic polity is that the citizens should regard themselves from the participant perspective as involved in the process of progressive realisation of the basic rights that, although *unexhausted*, already enjoy positive *validity.*

Quite apart from these long-term processes through which the basic rights are realised, what interests me is the *normal case* in which the status of free and equal citizens in a democratically constituted polity is associated with certain taken-for-granted *idealisations.* For when the citizens *participate* in their civic practices, they cannot avoid making the intuitive (and counterfactual) *assumption* that the civil rights they practise generally deliver on what they promise. Especially with a view to the stability of the political system, the normative core of the democratic constitution must be anchored in civic consciousness, that is, in the citizens' own implicit beliefs. It is not the philosophers, but the large majority of the citizens who must be intuitively convinced of the constitutional principles. On the other hand, citizens must also be able to *trust* that their votes count equally in democratic elections, that legislation and jurisdiction, the actions of government and the administration, are mostly above board, and that, as a general rule, there is a fair opportunity to revise dubious decisions. Even though these expectations are *idealisations* that the actual practice sometimes falls short of to a greater or lesser extent, they create social facts insofar as they are reflected in the citizens' judgements and conduct. What is problematic about such practices is not the idealising assumptions they demand of their participants, but the credibility of the institutions, which must not openly and enduringly repudiate these idealisations.

Trump's fatal exhortation would hardly have met with the intended furious response of the citizens who stormed the Capitol on 6 January 2021 if the political elites had not for decades disappointed the legitimate, constitutionally guaranteed expectations of a significant portion of their citizens. Hence, a political theory tailored to this kind of constitutional state must be designed in such a way that it does justice both to the peculiar *idealising surplus* of a morally based system of basic rights which assures the citizens

that they are involved in the exercise of democratically legitimised government, as well as to the social and institutional conditions which lend *credibility* to the idealisations that the citizens necessarily associate with their practices.

A theory of democracy, therefore, does not need to undertake the task of designing, i.e. *constructing* and justifying, the principles of a just political order on its own in order to instil them in the citizens like a teacher; in other words, it does not have to understand itself as a normatively *designed* theory. Its task is instead to *rationally reconstruct* such principles from existing law and from the corresponding intuitive expectations and conceptions of legitimacy of the citizens. It must render the fundamental meaning of the historically *established* and *proven*, and hence sufficiently stable, constitutional orders explicit and explain the justifying reasons that can invest the de facto exercise of government with actual legitimising power in the eyes of their citizens and therefore also ensure civic participation (see Gaus, 2013). That political theory, by making *explicit* the implicit consciousness of the mass of the citizens who participate in political life, can in turn *shape* their normative self-understanding is no more unusual than the role of academic contemporary historiography, which performatively influences the further course of the historical events it describes. This does not mean that political theory plays an inherently pedagogical role vis-à-vis politics. Therefore, I do not see deliberative politics as a far-fetched ideal against which sordid reality must be measured, but as an existential precondition in pluralistic societies of any democracy worthy of the name (see Habermas, 2018). The more heterogeneous the conditions of life, the cultural forms of life and individual lifestyles are in a given society, the more the lack of an a fortiori *existing* background consensus must be counterbalanced by the commonality of the public *formation* of opinion and political will.

Because the origins of the classical theories predate the constitutional revolutions of the late 18th century, they could present themselves as normative blueprints for establishing democratic constitutions. However, a contemporary political theory can simply note that the exacting democratic constitutional idea introduces a *tension* between the positive *validity* of binding constitutional norms and the constitutional *reality* into *the very reality* of modern societies and, when extreme dissonances become apparent, this tension can still trigger the mobilising dynamic of mass protests. Hence, such a theory must recognise that its task is *re*constructive in nature. The republican and liberal theoretical traditions, however, already distort this idea by *one-sidedly* according priority either to *popular sovereignty* or to the *rule of law*, and thereby miss the point that the subjective freedoms exercised by individuals and intersubjectively exercised popular sovereignty are equally original. For the idea that underlies those two constitutional revolutions is the foundation of a *self-determined* association of *free* consociates under law, whereby the latter, as democratic co-legislators, must ultimately grant themselves their freedom through the *equal distribution of subjective rights in accordance with general laws*. According to this idea of collective self-determination, which combines the egalitarian universalism of equal rights for all with the individualism of every subject, *democracy* and the *rule of law* are on a par. And only a discourse theory that revolves around the idea of deliberative politics can do justice to this idea (see Habermas, 1995, 2009).

II

The approach of deliberative politics can be traced back to the early liberal world of ideas of the *Vormärz* period but, in the meantime, it has unfolded in the context of the welfare state. Its chief merit is that it explains how, in pluralistic societies that lack a shared religion or world view, political compromises can be reached against the background of an intuitive constitutional consensus. The secularisation of state power gave rise to a gap in legitimation. Because the belief that the ruling dynasties were divinely ordained no longer sufficed to legitimise them in modern societies, the democratic system had to legitimise itself *out of its own resources*, as it were, through the legitimacy-*generating* power of the legally institutionalised *procedure* of democratic will formation. Religious conceptions of legitimacy were not replaced by a different idea, but instead by the *procedure* of democratic self-empowerment, which is institutionalised in the form of equally distributed subjective rights, so that it can be exercised by free and equal citizens. At first glance, it seems quite mysterious how the legal institutionalisation of a procedure of democratic *will formation* – in other words, sheer 'legality' – could nevertheless give rise to the 'legitimacy' of universally *convincing* results. Essential to explaining this is the analysis of the meaning that this procedure acquires from the perspective of the participants. It owes its persuasiveness to an improbable combination of two conditions: on the one hand, the procedure calls for the *inclusion of all those affected* by possible decisions as equal participants in the political decision-making process; on the other hand, it makes democratic decisions in which all individuals together are involved, dependent on the more or less pronounced *discursive character* of the preceding *deliberations*. As a result, the inclusive formation of *will* becomes contingent on the *force of the reasons* mobilised during the preceding process of *opinion* formation. *Inclusion* corresponds to the democratic requirement that all those affected should have equal rights to participate in political will formation, while the filter of *deliberation* takes into account the expectation that solutions to problems should be cognitively correct and viable, and *grounds* the *assumption* that the results are rationally acceptable. This assumption can be justified, in turn, by the falsifiable *supposition* that, in the consultations preceding a majority decision, all relevant topics, requisite information and suitable proposals for solutions are discussed as far as possible with arguments pro and con. And it is this *requirement of free deliberation* that explains the central *role of the political public sphere*.[6] Incidentally, this abstract consideration is confirmed by the historical fact that something like a 'bourgeois public sphere' emerged at the same time as liberal democracy, first in England and then in the United States, France and other European countries.

However, those two requirements of the democratic process – namely, deliberation and the inclusion of all citizens – can only be realised, even approximately, at the level of the institutions of the state, and especially in the representative bodies of parliamentary law-making. This explains *the essential but limited contribution* that *political communication in the public sphere* can make to the democratic process. Its contribution is *essential* because it represents the sole locus where public opinion and political will are formed in a manner that in principle includes *in corpore* all adult citizens who are eligible to vote. And this can, in turn, motivate the decisions that citizens make collectively, but as individuals and in the isolation of the voting booth – that is, 'of their own free

will'. These electoral decisions lead to an outcome that is binding on all citizens insofar as they determine the political composition of parliament and, directly or indirectly, of the government. On the other hand, the contribution of the public sphere to the formation of public opinion and political will in a democracy is *limited* because, as a general rule, no collectively binding individual decisions are taken there (only in rare cases do fundamental issues have such a clear structure that they can be decided by such plebiscites). The formation of opinion steered by the mass media gives rise to a plurality of *public opinions* among the dispersed audience of citizens. These public opinions, which are compiled out of topics, contributions and information and thus assume a distinctive profile, compete over the relevant issues, the correct policy goals and the best problem-solving strategies. One circumstance is especially relevant in our context: the overall influence that the will of the citizens, hence of the sovereign, acquires over the decisions of the political system depends essentially on the enlightening quality of the contribution of the mass media to this formation of opinion. This is because opinion formation is sustained by the prior processing of the topics and contributions, alternative proposals, information and supporting and opposing positions by journalists. The function of the professional media is to rationally process the input that is fed into the public sphere via the information channels of the political parties, of the interest groups and PR agencies, and of the societal subsystems, among others, as well as by the organisations and intellectuals of civil society. This more or less *informed pluralism of opinion* filtered by the media system gives every citizen the opportunity to form his or her *own* opinion and to make *an election decision* that, from his or her point of view, is *rationally motivated*. However, the result of the competition over opinions and decisions remains open within the public sphere itself; here deliberation is still separate from the decisions of the individual voters, because the electoral votes are only prepared in the public. It is only beyond the threshold of general elections that the elected members of parliament can consult and decide *with each other* in accordance with democratic procedures. Only in the representative bodies and the other state institutions, and in an especially formal way in the courts, are procedural rules tailored to the deliberative format of opinion and will formation that justifies the presumption that majority decisions are more or less rationally acceptable.

In order to correctly assess the *limited contribution* that the political public can make, we must examine the organisational section of the constitutional text and the structural division of labour within the political system *as a whole* – and read it like a flow chart. It then becomes apparent how the democratic flow of the citizens' public opinion and will formation branches out beyond elections and is directed into the channels – besieged by the lobbying of the functional systems – of party politics, legislation, jurisdiction, administration and government. It ultimately flows into the decisions that stem – within the framework of the law – from compromises between functional imperatives, political and social interests and voter preferences. The legitimate political results are in turn evaluated and criticised in the political public sphere and are processed into new voter preferences after the conclusion of legislative terms.

The assumption that political discourse is also *oriented* to the *goal* of reaching an agreement is often misunderstood. It by no means implies the idealistic conception of the democratic process as something like a convivial university seminar. On the contrary,

one can assume that the orientation of reasonable participants to the truth or correctness of their argued convictions adds even more fuel to the fire of political disputes and lends them a fundamentally *agonal character*. To argue is to contradict. Only in virtue of the right, and even the encouragement, to say ‘no’ to each other can the epistemic potential of conflicting opinions unfold in discourse; for the latter is geared to the self-correction of participants who, without mutual criticism, could not *learn from each other*. The point of deliberative politics is, after all, that it enables us to *improve* our beliefs through political disputes and get *closer* to correct solutions to problems. In the cacophony of conflicting opinions unleashed in the public sphere only one thing is presupposed – the consensus on the shared constitutional principles that legitimises all other disputes. Against this consensual backdrop, the whole democratic process consists of a tide of dissent that is stirred up over and over again by the citizens’ search for rationally acceptable decisions oriented to the truth.

The deliberative character of the formation of public opinion and political will by the voters is measured *in the public sphere* by the discursive quality of the contributions, not by the goal of a consensus, which is in any case unattainable; rather, here the participants’ orientation to the truth is supposed to ignite an open-ended conflict of opinions that gives rise to *competing* public opinions. This dynamic of *enduring* dissent in the public sphere likewise shapes the competition between parties and the antagonism between government and opposition, as well as differences of opinion among experts. The arguments mobilised in this way can then inform the binding procedural decisions to be taken in time by the appropriate organs of the political system. All that is required to institutionalise the anarchic power of saying ‘no’ unleashed in public debates and election campaigns, in disputes between political parties, in the negotiations of parliament and its committees and in the deliberations of the government and the courts, is the *prior political integration* of all participants in the consensus over the basic intention of their constitution. The latter is simple enough: it merely spells out the plain will of the citizens to *obey only the laws they have given themselves*. Without such a consensus on the *meaning* of deliberative democratic self-legislation, the respective minorities would not have any reason to submit to majoritarian decisions, for the time being at least. In making this point, however, we must not lose sight of the main factor on which the fate of a democracy depends: judged from this normative standpoint, the institutionalised formation of political will must also actually function on the whole in such a way that the voters’ constitutional consensus is *confirmed* from time to time by *experience.* In other words, there must be a *recognisable* connection between the results of government action and the input of the voters’ decisions such that the citizens can recognise it as the confirmation of the rationalising power of their own democratic opinion and will formation.[7] The citizens must be able to *perceive* their conflict of opinions as both consequential and as a dispute over the better reasons.[8]

‘But this is at odds with reality,’ one might object, even now in the oldest Anglo-Saxon democracies. The approval that the storming of the Capitol found among Trump voters must probably also be understood as the emotive response of voters who for decades have lacked a sense that their ignored interests are taken seriously by the political system in concrete, discernible ways. The dynamic of political regression into which almost all Western democracies have been drawn since the turn of the millennium can be measured by the decline, and in some countries almost the demise, of this *rationalising*

power of public debates. On the other hand, this dependence of the *problem-solving power of a democracy* on the flow of deliberative politics highlights the central role of the political public sphere.

Without a suitable context, however, the essential preconditions of deliberative politics for the democratic legitimisation of government cannot gain traction among a population from which, after all, ‘all authority’ is supposed to be ‘derived’.[9] Government action, landmark decisions of the higher courts, parliamentary legislation, competition between political parties and free political elections call for an active citizenry, because the political public sphere is rooted in a civil society which – as the sounding board for the disruptions of major functional systems in need of repair – establishes the communicative connections between politics and its social ‘environments’. Moreover, civil society can only play the role of a kind of early warning system for policymakers if it brings forth the actors who organise public attention for the relevant issues that are preoccupying citizens. In the large territorial societies of the modern Western democracies, however, there has always been a tension between the functionally required level of civic commitment and the private commitments and interests that citizens both want to and need to fulfil. This structural conflict between the public and private roles of citizens is also reflected in the public sphere itself. In Europe, the bourgeois public sphere in its literary and its political form was only gradually able to free itself from the shadow of older formations – above all the religious public sphere of ecclesiastical government and the representative public sphere of the personal rule of emperors, kings and princes – once the socio-structural prerequisites for a *functional separation of state and society*, of the public and private economic spheres, had been satisfied. Viewed from the lifeworld perspective of those involved, therefore, the civil society of politically active citizens is inherently situated in this field of tension between the private and public spheres. As we shall see, the digitalisation of public communication is blurring *the perception* of this boundary between the private and public spheres of life, although the social-structural prerequisites for this distinction, which also has far-reaching implications for the legal system, have not changed. From the perspective of the semi-private, semi-public communication spaces in which users of social media are active today, the inclusive character of the public sphere, which was hitherto clearly separate from the private sphere, is disappearing. This represents, as I would now like to show, the disturbing phenomenon on the subjective side of the users of the media that at the same time draws attention to the inadequacy of the political regulation of those new media.

III

Before addressing specific changes in the structure of the media and hypotheses concerning their implications for the political function of the public sphere, I would like to interpolate some remarks on the economic, social and cultural boundary conditions that must be fulfilled to a sufficient extent as a precondition for deliberative politics. For it is only against the backdrop of the complex causes of the crisis tendencies of capitalist democracies in general that we can assess the limited contribution that the digitalisation of public communication may add to the other relevant causes of an impairment of deliberative opinion and will formation.

Active citizenship requires, *firstly*, a largely *liberal political culture* consisting of a delicate fabric of attitudes and taken-for-granted cultural assumptions. This is because the population's basic understanding of the democratic constitutional principles, which remains for the most part implicit, is embedded in an extensive network of historical memories and traditional beliefs, practices and value orientations; these are preserved from generation to generation only thanks to customary patterns of political socialisation and institutionalised patterns of political education. The time span of half a century required, for example, for the political resocialisation of the population of the (old) Federal Republic of Germany after the end of the Nazi era – despite the preceding 150 years of constitutional development – is an indicator of the obstacles that generally have to be overcome by any acclimatisation to a liberal political culture. For the moral core of such a culture consists in the willingness of citizens to reciprocally recognise others as fellow citizens and democratic co-legislators endowed with equal rights (see Forst, 2013). This begins with regarding political adversaries in a spirit open to compromise as *opponents* and no longer as *enemies* – and it continues, beyond the limits of different ethnic, linguistic and religious ways of life, with reciprocal inclusion in a shared political culture of strangers who want to remain strangers to one another. Under conditions of cultural pluralism, this political culture must have differentiated itself from the relevant majority culture to such an extent that every citizen can recognise himself or herself as a member. The social bond of a society, however heterogeneous, will remain intact only if political integration generally ensures a form of civic solidarity that, far from demanding unconditional altruism, calls for a limited reciprocal readiness to help. This kind of solidarity goes beyond the willingness to make compromises based on one's interests. Nevertheless, among fellow members of the same political community, it is only bound up with the expectation of reciprocity at some indeterminate time in the future – specifically with the expectation that others will feel obliged to provide similar assistance in a similar situation.[10] A 'liberal' political culture is not a breeding ground for 'libertarian' attitudes; it calls for an orientation to the common good, albeit one that makes modest demands on its addressees. If an outvoted minority is to be able to accept majority decisions, then not all citizens may base their electoral decisions *exclusively* on their short-term self-interest. A sufficient – and, moreover, *representative* – proportion of citizens must *also* be willing to engage in the role of democratic co-legislators who adopt an orientation to the common good.

A *second condition* that is necessary for an active civil society is a level of *social equality* that allows the electorate to participate spontaneously and to a sufficient extent in the democratic process through which public opinions and political will are formed, although such participation must not be made compulsory. The architecture of the constitutional state's system of fundamental rights – which guarantees, on the one hand, the *freedoms of private citizens* through subjective private rights (and welfare state entitlements) and, on the other, the *political autonomy of citizens* through rights of public communication and participation – only becomes fully accessible in the light of the functional meaning of the complementary roles that the *private* and *public autonomy* of citizens also play for *each other*, aside from their respective intrinsic value. The political rights empower, on the one hand, citizens to participate in democratic legislation, which decides, among other things, on the distribution of private rights and

entitlements, and thus on the citizens' opportunities to acquire an appropriate social status; on the other hand, this social status in turn creates the prerequisites and motivations for the use that public citizens actually make of their civic rights in each case. The close correlation between social status and voter turnout has been widely documented. But this expectation that democratic participation and securing social status should facilitate each other will function only as long as democratic elections actually rectify substantial and structurally entrenched social inequalities. Empirical studies confirm the vicious circle that takes root when, due to resignation over the lack of perceptible improvements in living conditions, *abstentionism* becomes *entrenched* among the lower status segments of the population. Then the parties that were once 'responsible' for the interests of these disadvantaged strata tend to neglect a clientele from which they cannot currently expect to receive votes; and this tendency in turn strengthens the motivation for abstentionism (see Schäfer, 2015). Today, we are not observing a reversal, but rather an ironic *inversion* of this vicious circle insofar as populist movements are successfully mobilising the potential of non-voters (Schäfer and Zürn, 2021). Then, of course, these radicalised groups of non-voters no longer participate in elections under the accepted *presuppositions* of a democratic election, but instead in the spirit of obstructionist 'opposition to the system'.[11] Even if this populism of the 'disconnected' cannot be explained solely by increasing social inequality, because other strata that are struggling to adapt to accelerated technological and social change also feel 'disconnected', it is at any rate a manifestation of a critical disintegration of society and a lack of successful policies to counteract it.[12]

This draws attention, finally, to the precarious relationship between the *democratic state* and a *capitalist economy* that tends to reinforce social inequalities. The balancing of the conflicting functional imperatives by the welfare state is (at this level of abstraction) the *third precondition for the success* of a democratic regime worthy of the name. Political Economy first revealed the systematic connection between the political system and society; this was the perspective from which I traced the structural transformation of the public sphere in the earlier work.[13] However, a liberal political culture is more a boundary condition for the state, one which happens to be satisfied to a greater or lesser extent, rather than something that depends in turn on administrative intervention. The situation is different with the social stratification of society and the existing degree of social inequality. In any case, self-perpetuating capitalist modernisation generates a need for state regulation to curb the centrifugal forces of social disintegration. The governments of those national welfare states that emerged in the West during the second half of the 20th century find themselves compelled to undertake such political countermeasures while the conditions for political legitimation are becoming increasingly demanding. To avoid crises of social integration, governments, as Claus Offe has shown, are trying to satisfy two conflicting demands: on the one hand, they must ensure sufficient conditions for the valorisation of capital in order to generate tax revenues; on the other hand, from the point of view of political and social justice, governments must satisfy the interest of the population as a whole in securing the legal and material preconditions of the private and public autonomy of every citizen – otherwise they will be stripped of their democratic legitimacy. However, capitalist democracies will only be able to tread a path of crisis avoidance between these two imperatives if they possess sufficient governance capacity.

In other words, the scope of the interventionist policies must match the extent of the economic cycles relevant for securing national prosperity. Evidently, the Western democracies satisfied this condition sufficiently only for a limited period – namely, only until the worldwide deregulation of markets and the globalisation of financial markets that have constrained the fiscal policies of the states.

A historical account of national public spheres based on these roughly outlined systematic viewpoints would reveal how difficult it is to arrive at any tenable generalisations at all about the framework conditions for the functioning of national public spheres in different historical periods. National peculiarities overlay the general trends towards the kind of nationally organised capitalism that shaped the post-war development of democracy in the West until the neoliberal turn. While during this period the development of the welfare state strengthened popular support for democracy, privatist trends towards depoliticisation already emerged in the course of the development of a consumer society (about whose beginnings I was probably too sceptical at the time of writing *Structural Transformation* – in what was felt to be the authoritarian climate of the Adenauer period). Since the shift towards neoliberal policies, however, the Western democracies have entered a phase of increasing internal destabilisation, which is being aggravated by the challenges of the climate crisis and the growing pressure of immigration. A further aggravating factor is the perceived rise of China and of other 'emerging countries' and the resulting transformation of the global economic and political landscape. Domestically, social inequality has increased as the scope for action of nation-states has been constrained by imperatives of globally deregulated markets. In the affected subcultures, the fear of social decline has grown in tandem with anxiety over the inability of the nation-state to cope with the complexity of the accelerated social changes.

Even apart from the new global political situation created by the pandemic, these circumstances suggest that the nation-states united in the European Union must strive for greater integration – in other words, that they should try to recover the competences they have lost at the national level as a result of this development by creating new political capacities for action at the transnational level (see Habermas, 2012). However, a sober description of institutional approaches to global governance, which have consolidated rather than dismantled international asymmetries of power, does not inspire hope (see Zürn, 2021). In particular, the indecisiveness of the EU in the face of its current problems raises the question of how nation-states can unite at the transnational level to form a democratic regime which, without itself taking on the character of an actual state, would nevertheless acquire the power to act globally. This would also presuppose a more pronounced *opening* of the national public spheres *to each other*. But both the divisions within the EU and the halting but ultimately accomplished Brexit suggest instead that existing democratic regimes are being hollowed out – and that the foreign policy of the great powers might even revert to a new kind of imperialism. For the time being, we do not know how the national and global economic problems facing a world society stricken by a pandemic will be perceived and processed by the political elites in our countries who still have some power to act. At the moment, there are few pointers for the desirable policy shift to a social and ecological agenda leading to greater integration of core Europe at least.

IV

The *media system* is crucially important if the political public sphere is to fulfil its role in generating *competing public opinions* that satisfy the standards of deliberative politics. For the deliberative quality of these opinions depends on whether the process from which they emerge satisfies certain functional requirements on both the input side and the throughput and output sides. Public opinions are only *relevant* if those from the ranks of politics, as well as the lobbyists and PR agencies of the functional subsystems and, finally, the various actors from civil society, are *sufficiently responsive* to *discover* the problems in need of regulation and to ensure the correct input. And public opinions are only *effective* if the corresponding topics and contributions of those who produce the opinions find their way into the public eye and, on the output side, attract the attention of the wider – voting – population. Our primary interest here is in the media system responsible for the throughput. Although for civil society actors, *face-to-face encounters in everyday life* and in *public events* represent the two *local regions of the public sphere* in which their own initiatives originate, the *public communication* steered by *mass media* is the only domain in which the noise of voices can condense into relevant and effective public opinions. Our topic is how digitalisation has changed the media system that steers this mass communication. The technically and organisationally highly complex media system requires a professionalised staff that plays the *gatekeeper* role (as it has come to be called) for the communicative currents from which the citizens distil public opinions. This staff comprises journalists who work for the news services, the media and the publishing houses – in other words, specialists who perform authorial, editorial, proofreading and managerial functions in the media and publishing business. This staff directs the throughput and, together with the companies that manage production and organise distribution, forms the *infrastructure of the public sphere* that ultimately determines the two decisive parameters of public communication – the *scope* and the deliberative *quality* of the offerings. How *inclusive* the reception of the *published* opinions actually is – how *intensively* and with what investment of time they are received on the output side by readers and listeners and are *processed further* into effective public opinions in the two aforementioned local areas of the political public sphere and, finally, are paid out to the political system in the currency of election results – ultimately depends on media users, specifically on their attention and interest, their time budgets, educational background and so on.

The influence of digital media on a further structural transformation of the political public sphere can be seen, for example since the turn of the millennium, from the extent and nature of *media use*. Whether this change in scope also affects the *deliberative quality* of public debate is an open question. As the relevant research in the fields of communication science, political science and the sociology of elections demonstrates – especially studies on voter turnout and public ignorance – the values for these two dimensions of public communication by democratic standards were already anything but satisfactory prior to digitalisation; however, they pointed to democratic conditions that fell short of stability-endangering crises. Today, the signs of political regression are there for everyone to see. Whether and to what extent the condition of the public sphere is also contributing to this development would have to be shown by examining the *inclusiveness*

of the formation of public opinions and the *rationality* of the prominent opinions in the public sphere. Evidently, empirical studies of the latter variable face major obstacles. While data are available for media use, a theoretical quantity such as 'deliberative quality' is already difficult to operationalise for the procedurally regulated opinion formation in individual bodies such as committees, parliaments and courts (Steiner et al., 2004), but is even more difficult to operationalise for the unregulated communication processes in extensive national public spheres. However, the data from a long-term comparative study of media use provide a basis to infer from an independent assessment of the quality of the media *offerings* that are being consumed to the level of reflectiveness of public opinions. Before pursuing this question further, however, we need to get clear about the revolutionary character of the new media. For this is not just a matter of an expansion of the range of media previously available, but of a caesura in the development of the media in human history comparable to the introduction of printing.

After the first evolutionary advance to recording the spoken word in writing, the introduction of the mechanical printing press in early modernity meant that the alphabetic characters became detached from handwritten parchment; in recent decades, as a result of electronic digitalisation, binary-coded characters have become detached in a similar way from printed paper. As this further, equally momentous innovation has unfolded, the communication flows of our garrulous species have spread, accelerated and become networked with unprecedented speed across the entire globe and, retrospectively, across all epochs of world history. With this global dissolution of boundaries in space and time, these flows have simultaneously become *condensed*, *differentiated* and *multiplied* according to functions and contents, and have been *generalised* across cultural and class-specific divisions. The innovative idea that ushered in this third revolution in communications technologies was the worldwide networking of computers, as a result of which anyone could communicate from any place with anyone anywhere else in the world. Initially the new technology was used by scientists. In 1991, the American National Science Foundation decided to make this invention available for private use, which meant that it was also available for commercial purposes. This was the decisive step towards the establishment of the World Wide Web (WWW) two years later, which created the technical basis for the logical completion of a development in communications technology that, over the course of human history, gradually overcame the original limitation of linguistic communication to face-to-face oral conversations and exchanges within hearing range. For many areas of life and activity, this innovation opens up undoubted advances. But for the democratic public sphere, the centrifugal expansion of simultaneously accelerated communication to an arbitrary number of participants across arbitrary distances generates an ambivalent explosive force; for, with its orientation towards the centre constituted by organisations that have the political power to act, the public sphere is for the time being limited to national territories.[14] There can be no doubt that the expansion and acceleration of opportunities for communication and the increase in the range of the publicly thematised events has benefits for political citizens as well. The world has also shrunk on the television screens in our living rooms. The content of press, radio and television programmes does not change when they are received on smartphones. And when films are produced for streaming services like Netflix, this may lead to interesting aesthetic changes; but the changes in reception and the regrettable

hollowing out of the cinema have long been heralded by the competition of television. On the other hand, aside from its evident benefits, the new technology also has highly ambivalent and potentially disruptive repercussions for the political public sphere in the national context. This is a result of how consumers of the new media make use of the availability of limitless possibilities for networking, that is, of 'platforms' for possible communications with arbitrary addressees.

For the media structure of the public sphere, this platform character represents what is actually novel about the new media. For, on the one hand, the platforms dispense with the productive role of journalistic mediation and programme design performed by the old media; in this respect, the new media are not 'media' in the established sense. They radically alter the previously predominant pattern of communication in the public sphere by *empowering* all potential users in principle to become independent and equally entitled authors. The 'new' media differ from the traditional media in that digital companies make use of this technology to offer potential users the unlimited opportunities for digital networking like blank slates for their own communicative content. Unlike traditional news services and publishers, such as print media, radio and television, these companies are not responsible for their own 'programmes', that is, for communicative contents that are professionally produced and passed through editorial filters. They neither produce, nor edit nor select; but by acting in the global network as intermediaries 'without responsibility' who establish new connections and, with the contingent multiplication and acceleration of unexpected contacts, initiate and intensify discourses with unpredictable contents, they profoundly alter the character of public communication itself.

Broadcasts establish a linear and one-way connection between a broadcaster and many potential recipients; the two sides encounter each other in different roles, namely as publicly identifiable or known producers, editors and authors responsible for their publications, on the one side, and an anonymous audience of readers, listeners or viewers, on the other. In contrast, platforms provide a multifaceted communicative connection open to networking that facilitates the spontaneous exchange of possible contents between potentially many users. The latter are not differentiated as regards their roles by the medium alone; rather, they encounter each other as participants in communicative exchanges on spontaneously chosen topics who are in principle equal and self-responsible. Unlike the asymmetrical relationship between broadcasters and recipients, the decentralised connection between these media users is reciprocal in principle, but *its content is unregulated* because professional filters are lacking. The egalitarian and unregulated nature of the relationships between participants and the equal authorisation of users to make their own spontaneous contributions constitute the communicative pattern that was originally supposed to be the hallmark of the new media. Today, this great emancipatory promise is being drowned out by the desolate cacophony in fragmented, self-enclosed echo chambers.

The new pattern of communication has given rise to two remarkable effects for the structural transformation of the public sphere. At first, the new media seemed to herald at last the fulfilment of the egalitarian-universalistic claim of the bourgeois public sphere to include all citizens equally. These media promised to lend all citizens their own publicly perceptible voice and even to equip it with mobilising power. They would free users from the receptive role of addressees who choose between a limited number of

programmes and would enable every individual to make his or her voice heard in the anarchic exchange of spontaneous opinions. But the lava of this at once anti-authoritarian and egalitarian potential, which was still discernible in the Californian founding spirit of the early years, soon solidified in Silicon Valley into the libertarian grimace of world-dominating digital corporations. Moreover, the worldwide organisational potential offered by the new media is at the service of radical right-wing networks as well as the courageous Belarusian women in their sustained protest against Lukashenko. One effect is the self-empowerment of media users; the other is the price the latter pay for being released from the editorial tutelage of the old media as long as they have not yet learned to make good use of the new media. Just as printing made everyone a potential reader, today digitalisation is making everyone into a potential author. But how long did it take until everyone was able to read?

The platforms do not offer their emancipated users any substitute for the professional selection and discursive examination of contents based on generally accepted cognitive standards. This is why there is currently so much talk of the eroding gatekeeper model of the mass media.[15] This model in no way implies the disenfranchisement of media users; it merely describes a form of communication that can enable citizens to acquire the necessary knowledge and information so that each of them can form his or her own opinion about problems in need of political regulation. A politically appropriate perception of the author role, which is not the same as the consumer role, tends to increase the awareness of deficits in one's own level of knowledge. The author role also has to be learned; and as long as this has not been realised in the political exchange in social media, the quality of uninhibited discourse shielded from dissonant opinions and criticism will continue to suffer. This is what first gives rise to the danger of *fragmentation* for political opinion and will formation in the political community in connection with a simultaneously *unbounded* public sphere. The boundless communication networks that spontaneously take shape around certain topics or individuals can spread centrifugally while simultaneously condensing into communication circuits that dogmatically seal themselves off *from each other*. Then the trends towards fragmentation and the dissolution of boundaries reinforce each other to create a dynamic that counteracts the integrating power of the communication context of the nationally centred public spheres established by the press, radio and television. Before going into this dynamic in greater detail, I would first like to review how the share of social media in the overall media offerings has evolved.

V

Empirically speaking, the impact of the introduction of the internet, and of social media in particular, on the formation of opinion and will in the public sphere is not easy to circumscribe. However, the findings of the long-term study on media use in Germany conducted by the national broadcasters for the period from 1964 to 2020 permit some rough conclusions about changes in the media offerings and how they are used.[16] There was a considerable *expansion* of *offerings*, first as a result of the introduction of private television, and then above all as a result of the wide range of online options. This holds not only for the national level, since the internet also makes a large number of 'foreign' press, radio and television programmes available. Interested people from around the

world were able to watch the storming of the Capitol live on CNN. Correspondingly, the time budget invested in daily media consumption has ballooned. The usage time for all media has risen sharply since 2000, but peaked in 2005; since then, it has levelled off at a saturation level of an astounding eight hours a day. The proportions of the different media have shifted over the decades. Since 1970, the use of the then-new medium of television overtook that of the traditional media of daily newspapers and radio. But even since online competition became clearly felt from the year 2000 onwards, television and radio still claim the greatest reach. Book consumption also remained quite stable, with fluctuations, between 1980 and 2015. What must be emphasised in our context is that, in contrast, the corresponding reach of daily newspapers underwent a steady decline since the introduction of television, from 69 per cent in 1964 to 33 per cent in 2015. The slump since the introduction of new media is reflected in the dramatic decline in the reach of printed newspapers and magazines from 60 per cent in 2005 to 22 per cent in 2020. This trend will continue at an accelerated rate, given that 40 per cent of people in the age group of 14 to 29-year-olds were still reading printed newspapers or magazines in 2005, compared with 6 per cent in the same age group in 2020. At the same time, the reading intensity has decreased: While the average reader spent 38 minutes a day reading daily newspapers in 1980 (and 11 minutes reading magazines), the average daily reading time decreased to 23 minutes in 2015 (or 11 minutes for magazines), and to 15 minutes in 2020 (for newspapers and magazines combined). Of course, newspaper consumption has also shifted to the internet; but aside from the fact that reading digitalised texts presumably does not demand the same level of intensive attention and analytical processing as does reading printed texts, the apps or podcasts of the corresponding online offerings cannot fully compensate for the offerings of daily newspapers. The daily time spent reading digital texts among the population as a whole – 18 minutes in total, 6 minutes of which are spent on newspapers and magazines – is an indicator of this.

The most recent representative Eurobarometer of the populations of the then 28 EU countries, which was conducted at the end of 2019, confirms the current scale of the availability and use of the various media: on a daily basis, 81 per cent of respondents use television, 67 per cent the internet in general, 47 per cent social media, 46 per cent radio and 26 per cent the press, compared to the 38 per cent proportion of daily newspaper readers in 2010. The Eurobarometer records daily use of social media separately from that of the internet in general, and this share has risen astonishingly rapidly from 18 per cent of all respondents in 2010 to 48 per cent currently. Interestingly, television and, at a lower level, radio also maintain their leading role in the demand for ‘political information on national affairs’. In this connection, 77 per cent of those surveyed name television, 40 per cent radio and 36 per cent the print media as their ‘main sources of information’, while 49 per cent cite the internet in general and 20 per cent social media. The fact that this figure, which is of interest in the present context, has already risen by a further four points compared to the previous year’s survey confirms the increasing trend also documented elsewhere. In any case, the drastic decline in the consumption of daily newspapers and magazines is also an indicator that, since the introduction of the internet, the average amount of attention paid to political news and the analytical processing of politically relevant issues have declined. Nonetheless, the relative stability of the share of television and radio also in media consumption in general suggests that, for

the time being, these two media are providing reliable and sufficiently diverse political information to at least three-quarters of the electorate in the EU member states.

This makes another trend all the more striking. Evidently, the increasing infiltration of the public sphere by fake news, especially the spectacular development towards a 'post-truth democracy' that became the alarming normality in the US under the Trump administration, has also reinforced distrust in the media *in Europe*. Forty-one per cent of respondents doubt that the reporting of the national media is free from political and economic influence; 39 per cent of respondents explicitly affirm this distrust with regard to the public media that today form the backbone of a liberal public sphere; and as many as 79 per cent claim that they have encountered distorted or false news.

These data provide information about the changes in the spectrum of available media and their use; however, they only provide indirect indicators of the quality of the public opinions formed on this basis and of the extent of citizens' involvement in the process of opinion and will formation. Therefore, I must confine myself to educated conjectures. On the one hand, the dramatic loss of relevance of the print media compared to the dominant audio-visual media seems to point to a declining level of aspiration of the offerings, and hence also for the fact that the citizens' receptiveness and intellectual processing of politically relevant news and problems are on the decline. This diagnosis is confirmed, by the way, by how the politically leading daily and weekly newspapers have adapted to the 'colourful' format of entertaining Sunday newspapers. On the other hand, the participant observer finds daily evidence that what is left of the more sophisticated national newspapers and magazines still functions as the leading political media from which the other media, especially television, continue to take over the reflected contributions and authoritative positions on the main topics. However, mistrust in the truth, seriousness and completeness of the programmes is increasing among the general population in Germany, even though each of the two leading public television and radio channels continues to ensure a reliable supply of news and political programmes. The growing doubts about the quality of the state-financed media seem to correspond to the increasingly widespread conviction that the political class is either unreliable or corrupt, or is at any rate suspect. This general picture suggests that, on the one hand, the diversity of the media on the supply side, and a corresponding pluralism of opinions, arguments and perspectives on life, fulfil important preconditions for the long-term formation of critical opinions that are immune to prejudice; but that, on the other hand, the increasing dissonance of a strident diversity of voices and the complexity of the challenging topics and positions is leading a growing minority of media consumers to use digital platforms to retreat into shielded echo chambers of the like-minded. For the digital platforms not only invite their users to spontaneously generate intersubjectively confirmed worlds of their own but seem to lend the stubborn internal logic of these islands of communication, in addition, the *epistemic status of competing public spheres*. But before we can assess this subjective side of the changes in recipients' attitudes as a result of the media offerings, we must first examine the economic dynamics, that increasingly distort subjective perceptions of the editorial public sphere. For the idiosyncratic character of these modes of reception fostered by social media should not blind us to the economic anchoring of the roughly outlined, and for the time being politically largely unregulated, transformation of the structure of the media.

VI

The description of platforms as 'media offerings for networking communicative content across arbitrary distance' is, in view of the far from neutral performance of algorithm-steered platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Twitter, if not naïve, at least incomplete. For these new media are companies that obey the imperatives governing the valorisation of capital and are among the most highly quoted corporations on the stock exchange. They owe their profits to exploiting data, which they sell for advertising purposes (or otherwise as goods). These data consist of information that accrue as by-products of their user-oriented offerings in the form of the personal data their customers leave behind on the internet (now subject to formal consent). Newspapers are also generally privately owned companies that are financed to a large extent by revenues from advertising. But while the old media are themselves the advertising vehicles, the kind of value creation that has provoked criticism of 'surveillance capitalism' (see Zuboff, 2018) feeds on commercially exploitable information that is randomly 'captured' by *other* services and in turn enables individualised advertising strategies (see Fuchs, 2021). On this algorithm-controlled path, social media also foster a further advance towards the commodification of lifeworld contexts.

However, I am interested in a different aspect, namely the pressure to adapt that the exploitation logic of the new media exerts on the old media. The latter were suitable as vehicles for advertising only insofar as their contents were commercially successful; however, these contents themselves inherently obey a completely different logic – namely, the demand for texts and programmes whose form and content must satisfy cognitive, normative or aesthetic standards. That readers and audiences evaluate journalistic performances according to such epistemic standards (broadly understood) becomes immediately apparent once we grasp – from the philosophical perspective of analysis of the lifeworld – the important function that the media fulfil in providing orientation in the increasingly confusing 'media society'. In view of the complexity of society, the media are the intermediary which, in the diversity of perspectives of social situations and cultural forms of life, whittle out an intersubjectively shared core from among the competing interpretations of the world and validate it as generally *rationally accepted*. Of course, the press, with its classic threefold division of newspaper contents into politics, business and feature pages, is never the *final* authority regarding the truth or correctness of individual statements or canonical interpretations of facts, of the plausibility of general assessments, even of the soundness of standards or procedures of judgement. But with their daily stream of new information and interpretations, the media constantly confirm, correct and supplement the blurred everyday image of a *world that is presumed to be objective*, and which virtually *all contemporaries* assume is also accepted by everyone else as 'normal' or valid.

The informative article by Ottfried Jarren and Renate Fischer (2021) explains why the advance towards the 'platformisation of the public sphere' is creating difficulties for the traditional media, both economically and in view of dwindling journalistic influence and the weakening of professional standards. Since there is a correlation between circulation and advertising revenues, the decline in demand for printed newspapers and magazines is jeopardising the economic basis of the press; and thus far the press has not found a

really successful business model for commercial sales of digital formats, since on the internet it is in competition with new media that offer their users corresponding information free of charge. The result is cutbacks and precarious employment conditions with negative effects on the quality and scope of editorial work. But the losses in the advertising and audience stakes are not the only factors that mitigate the relevance and interpretive power of the press. Adjusting to the competition on the internet calls for changes in how journalists work. Even if the 'audience turn', i.e. the greater involvement of the audience and an increased sensitivity to the reactions of readers, are not necessarily disadvantages, the trends towards deprofessionalisation and the understanding of journalistic work as a neutral, depoliticised service – as a matter of managing data and attention rather than of targeted research and precise interpretation – are intensifying: 'As a result, newsrooms, previously places of political debate, are being transformed into coordination centres for the sourcing and the management of the production and distribution of content' (see Jarren and Fischer, 2021: 370). The change in professional standards is a reflection of the adaptation of the press, whose greatest inherent affinity is for the discursive formation of public opinions and political will by the *citizens*, to the commercial services of platforms that are vying for the attention of *consumers*. With the triumph of the imperatives of the attention economy, however, the new media are also reinforcing the trends long familiar from the tabloid and mass press towards entertainment and the affective charging and personalisation of the issues with which the political public sphere is increasingly concerned.

With the alignment of political programmes with offers of entertainment and consumption addressed to the citizens as consumers, we touch on trends towards depoliticisation that have been observed in media research since the 1930s, but which are evidently intensifying as a result of the availability of social media. Only when we turn our attention away from the objective side of the expanded structure of the media and its transformed economic basis towards the side of the recipients and their changed modes of reception do we touch on the central question of whether social media are changing how their users perceive the political public sphere. Of course, the technical advantages of commercial platforms, and even of a medium like Twitter that compels its users to produce concise messages, offer the users benefits for political, professional and private purposes. But these advances are not our topic. Our question is rather whether, through the changed mode of use, these platforms also prompt a kind of exchange about implicitly or explicitly political views that could influence the *perception of the political public sphere as such*. Philipp Staab and Thorsten Thiel (in this special issue) refer with regard to the subjective aspect of the use of the new media to Andreas Reckwitz's theory of the 'society of singularities' and, in particular, the incentives that the activating platforms provide their users for narcissistic self-presentation and the 'staging of singularity' (Reckwitz, 2020). If we make a clear distinction between 'individualisation' and 'singularisation' – that is, between the distinctiveness that individuals acquire through their life history and the visibility and gain in distinction they can achieve through spontaneous contributions on the internet – then the 'promise of singularisation' may be the correct term for influencers who court the approval of followers for their own programme and reputation. Be that as it may, when it comes to the contribution that social media make to the formation of opinion and will in the political public sphere, another

aspect of reception seems more important to me. As has been frequently observed, the spontaneously self-directed and fragmented public spheres that split off both from the editorial or official public sphere and from each other generate a pull towards self-referential reciprocal confirmation of interpretations and opinions. If, however, the experience and perception of those involved in these milieus of what was hitherto called the public sphere and the political public sphere were to change, and if the hitherto customary conceptual *distinction between private and public spheres* were to be affected, this would necessarily have far-reaching consequences for the self-understanding of internet consumers as citizens. For the present we lack the data to test this hypothesis; but the indicators that prompt such a hypothesis are troubling enough.

The social basis for the legal and political differentiation of the public sphere from the private sphere of economic, civic and family intercourse has not undergone any structural change during the period under consideration, for the capitalist economic form is itself based on this separation. In constitutional democracies, this structure has also been reflected in the consciousness of citizens. And their perception is the crucial issue. Citizens are expected to make their political decisions in the field of tension between self-interest and the orientation towards the common good. As we have seen, this tension is played out in the space of a political public sphere that as a matter of principle includes all citizens as a potential audience. The very fact that public streams of communication flow through editorial sluices sets them apart from all private and business contacts. Different standards apply to the composition of printed matter addressed to an anonymous reading public than to private correspondence, which for a long time was still written by hand.[17] What is constitutive of the public sphere is not the disparity between active and passive participation in discourse, but rather the topics that deserve *shared* interest and the respective professionally examined form and rationality of the contributions that promote mutual understanding about common and different interests. The spatial metaphor of the distinction between private and public 'spaces' should not mislead us; the decisive factor is the perception of the *threshold* (itself politically contested) between private matters and public issues that are discussed in the political public sphere. This perception is also shared by the social movements that create counterpublics to combat the narrowing of vision of the media public. Apart from the reference to the central political authority that has the power to act, it is the form and relevance of the selected editorial contributions that attract the attention of the audience. And this expectation of the reliability, quality and general relevance of public contributions is also constitutive for the perception of the inclusive character of a public sphere that is supposed to direct the attention of *all* citizens to the *same* topics in order to both stimulate and enable each of them to make their *own* judgements in accordance with the recognised standards about the relevant issues for political decision-making.[18]

It is true that, since the emergence of 'media societies', nothing essential has changed in the social basis for such a separation of the public sphere from the private spheres of life. Nonetheless, the more or less exclusive use of social media may have led in parts of the population to a change in the *perception of the public sphere* that has blurred the distinction between 'public' and 'private', and thus the inclusive meaning of the public sphere. In the literature in communication studies, one increasingly encounters observations of a trend away from traditional perceptions of the political public sphere and

politics itself (see Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018). In certain subcultures, the public sphere is no longer perceived as being inclusive, and the political public sphere is no longer seen as a space of communication for a generalisation of interests that includes all citizens. Therefore, I will try to explain a hypothesis and render it plausible as such.[19] As mentioned, the internet opens up virtual spaces of which users can take *immediate* possession as authors in a new way. Social media create freely accessible public spaces that invite all users to make interventions that are not checked by anyone – and which, as it happens, have also long enticed politicians to exert direct personalised influence on the voting public. This plebiscitary 'public sphere', which has been stripped down to 'like' and 'dislike' clicks, rests on a technical and economic infrastructure. But in these freely accessible media spaces, all users who are, as it were, released from the need to satisfy the entry requirements to the editorial public sphere and, from their point of view, have been freed from 'censorship', can in principle address an anonymous public and solicit its approval. These spaces seem to acquire a peculiar anonymous intimacy: according to previous standards, they can be understood *neither as public nor as private*, but rather as a sphere of communication that had previously been reserved for private correspondence but is now inflated into a new and intimate kind of public sphere.

Users empowered as authors provoke attention with their messages, because the unstructured public sphere is first *created* by the comments of readers and the likes of followers. Insofar as this leads to the formation of self-supporting echo chambers, these bubbles share with the classical public sphere their porousness to further networking; at the same time, however, they differ from the fundamentally inclusive character of the public sphere – and the contrast to the private sphere – through their rejection of dissonant and the inclusion of consonant voices into their own limited, identity-preserving horizon of supposed, yet professionally unfiltered, 'knowledge'. From a point of view fortified by the mutual confirmation of their judgements, claims to universality extending beyond their own horizons become fundamentally suspect of hypocrisy. From the limited perspective of such a *semi-public sphere*, the political public sphere of constitutional democracies can no longer be perceived as an inclusive space for possible discursive clarification of competing claims to truth and the generalisation of interests; precisely this public sphere, which hitherto presented itself as inclusive, is then downgraded to one of the semi-public spheres competing on an equal footing.[20]

One symptom of this is the twofold strategy of spreading fake news while simultaneously combating the 'lying press', which in turn unsettles the public and the leading media themselves (Jaster and Lanius, 2020). But when the shared space of 'the political' degenerates into the battleground of competing publics, the democratically legitimised, state-enforced political programmes provoke conspiracy theories – as in the case of the anti-Corona virus demonstrations, which are staged in a libertarian spirit but are in fact driven by authoritarian motives. These tendencies can already be observed in member states of the European Union; but they can even take hold of and deform the political system as such, if that has been undermined and riven long enough by social-structural conflicts. In the United States, politics has become trapped in the maelstrom of persistent polarisation of the public sphere after the administration and large sections of the ruling party adapted to the self-perception of a president who was successful on social media and sought the plebiscitary approval of his populist following on a daily basis via

Twitter.[21] The – we can only hope, temporary – disintegration of the political public sphere found expression in the fact that, for almost half the population, communicative contents could no longer be exchanged in the currency of criticisable validity claims. It is not the accumulation of fake news that is significant for a widespread *deformation of the perception of the political public sphere*, but the fact that *fake news* can no longer even be identified as such (see Hohlfeld, 2020).

In the communication and social sciences, it is now commonplace to speak of *disrupted public spheres* that have become detached from the journalistically institutionalised public sphere. But scholarly observers would be mistaken to conclude that the description of these symptomatic phenomena should be separated from questions of democratic theory altogether.[22] After all, communication in independent semi-public spheres is itself by no means depoliticised; and even where that is the case, the formative power of this communication for the world view of those involved is not apolitical. A democratic system is damaged as a whole when the infrastructure of the public sphere can no longer direct the citizens' attention to the relevant issues that need to be decided and, moreover, ensure the formation of competing public opinions – and that means *qualitatively filtered* opinions. If we recall the complex preconditions of the survival of inherently crisis-prone capitalist democracies, it is indeed clear that there may be deeper reasons for a loss of function of the political public sphere. But that does not exempt us from looking for *obvious* reasons.

I see one such reason in the coincidence of the emergence of Silicon Valley, i.e. the commercial use of the digital network, on the one hand, and the global spread of the neoliberal economic programme, on the other. The globally expanded zone of free flows of communication, originally made possible by the invention of the technical structure of the 'net', presented itself from the outset as the mirror image of an ideal market. This market did not even need to be deregulated. In the meantime, however, this suggestive image is being disrupted by the algorithmic control of communication flows that is feeding the concentration of market power of the large internet corporations. The skimming and digital processing of customers' personal data, which are more or less inconspicuously exchanged for the information provided free of charge by search engines, news portals and other services, explains why the EU Competition Commissioner would like to regulate this market. But competition law is the wrong approach if one's goal is to correct the basic error that platforms, unlike traditional media, do not want to assume liability for the dissemination of truth-sensitive, and hence deception-prone, communicative contents. The fact that the press, radio and television, for example, are obliged to correct false reports draws attention to the fact of interest in the present context. Because of the special nature of their goods, which are not mere commodities, the platforms cannot evade all duties of journalistic care.

They, too, are responsible and should be liable for news that they neither produce nor edit; for this information also has the power to shape opinions and mentalities. First and foremost, it is not subject to the quality standards of commodities, but to the cognitive standards of judgements without which for us there can be neither the objectivity of the world of facts nor the identity and commonality of our intersubjectively shared world.[23] In a hard-to-imagine 'world' of fake news that could no longer be identified as such, i.e. in which it could not be distinguished from true information, no child would be able to

grow up without developing clinical symptoms. Therefore, maintaining a media structure that ensures the inclusive character of the public sphere and the deliberative character of the formation of public opinion and political will is not a matter of political preference but a constitutional imperative.

Translated by Ciaran Cronin

Notes

1. See Peters (1993, 2008); from this perspective, see also Wessler (2018).
2. On the relationship between political and literary public spheres, see the sideways glance in Habermas (2018 [2016]).
3. The chapter on the role of civil society and the political public sphere in *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1996: 329–387) takes up the reflections in the final chapter of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and especially in the introduction to the new German edition of 1991 (Habermas, 1992). For my most recent reflections on this, see Habermas (2009).
4. Usually, however, sociological theories choose a basic conceptual approach that leaves the cognitive meaning of this dimension of validity out of account and attributes the binding effect of ought-validity [*Sollgeltung*] to the threat of sanctions.
5. The text of the French Constitution of September 1791 opens with a catalogue that distinguishes between *droits naturels* and *droits civils*. In this way, it took into account the temporal discrepancy that exists between the current domain of validity of the general civil rights and the as yet unrealised claim to validity, extending far beyond the territorial boundaries of the French state, of the 'natural' rights to which all persons have an equal claim in virtue of their humanity. Paradoxically, however, the human and civil rights that have been institutionalised as fundamental rights preserve the meaning of universal rights within national borders as well. In this way, they remind the present and future generations, if not of a self-obligation to actively propagate these rights, then at least of the peculiar character of the *context-transcending normative* content of universal human rights beyond the provisionality of their *at present* territorially restricted implementation. The moral surplus also leaves traces of an as yet unexhausted normative content in the existing basic rights, which exhibit something of the troubling character of an *unsaturated* norm. The lack of 'saturation' concerns the *temporal* dimension of the *exhaustion* – still to be achieved in the political community and still to be specified as regards its content – of the indeterminately context-transcending substance of established fundamental rights, as well as the *spatial* dimension of a still outstanding *world-wide* implementation of human rights.
6. See the contribution of Martin Seeliger and Sebastian Sevignani, 'The New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?', in this special issue, where they specify this role in terms of the transparency of public issues, the general orientation of citizens and the reciprocal justification of topics and contributions.
7. Normatively speaking, the so-called output legitimacy of government action that keeps citizens happy does not meet the conditions of democratically legitimate action; for although such services of the state coincide with citizens' interests, they do not satisfy the latter *by executing a democratically formed will* of the citizens themselves.
8. See my review of Cristina Lafont, *Democracy without Shortcuts* (Habermas, 2020).
9. Article 20 para. 2 of the Basic Law, the German federal constitution, declares that 'All state authority is derived from the people.' [Trans.]
10. On the political concept of solidarity, see Habermas (2015: 98–100).

11. The phenomenon of contemporary right-wing populism illustrates how, in reasonably stable democracies, the steep *normative gradient* between the idea of deliberative politics, on the one hand, and the sobering reality of opinion and will formation, on the other, is anchored in social reality itself *through the intuitions of the citizens*. We have long been able to form a realistic picture of how political opinions and will are shaped as a result of empirical studies on voting behaviour, the level of information and political awareness of the population, on the parties' professional election advertising, public relations, campaign strategies, etc.; but neither these facts themselves nor knowledge of them normally shake the assumption of the active and passive electorate that the 'will of the voters', whether one agrees with the outcome or not, is sufficiently respected and sets the course for future policies. As the talk of 'system parties' shows, however, even such *forbearing* normative assumptions can become inverted into their opposite if confidence in them among the population at large is enduringly shaken. Then 'we' are the people who know what is true and what is false, while a bridge cannot be constructed to the 'others', even with arguments.
12. In contemporary German public discourse, '*die Abgehängten*' refers to groups of citizens who for various reasons feel disconnected from the political process or abandoned by the mainstream political parties and, in recent years, have tended to identify with or actively support mainly right-wing opposition movements (such as those that rallied against the public measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic) and political parties (in particular the Alternative for Germany). [Trans.]
13. See Philipp Staab and Thorsten Thiel, 'Commercial Politicisation and Social Media: Digital Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere', in this special issue.
14. The global expansion of accelerated and multiplied communication flows leads Claudia Ritzi to suggest that, rather than the image of centre and periphery, 'the concept of the "universe" should be used as a metaphor to describe contemporary political publics. It generates an awareness of the unboundedness of the contemporary public space' (Ritzi, 2021: 305).
15. See Sebastian Sevignani, 'Digital Transformations and the Ideological Formation of the Public Spheres: Hegemonic, Populist, or Popular Communication?', in this special issue.
16. In the following, I am relying on my correspondence with – and on the interpretive proposals of – Jürgen Gerhards, who drew my attention to the results of the ARD/ZDF long-term study on mass communication between 1964 and 2020. The autumn 2019 Eurobarometer provides additional data that permit further conclusions.
17. A consistent exception to this is, of course, literary correspondence, which – as the pertinent example of the Romantics demonstrates – satisfies aesthetic standards and thus also a public interest.
18. I regret that the set framework did not allow me to address the more far-reaching reflections of Hans-Jörg Trentz (2021).
19. For an illustrative account, see Barthelmes (2020, esp. ch. 7, pp. 128–155).
20. The milieu of this 'semi-public sphere' can be described equally well as a semi-privatised public sphere. Philipp Staab and Thorsten Thiel capture this character in this special issue.
21. On Trump and fake news, see Oswald (2020).
22. For a plausible statement of the position, see Berg, Rakowski and Thiel (2020).
23. Anyone who sees through this connection will recognise the ultimately authoritarian character, aimed at the foundations of a discursive public sphere, of the contemporary rampant criticism of the facilities and programme scope of the public broadcasters. Together with the quality press, whose economic basis can probably soon be secured only with the help of public support, the television and radio broadcasters are for the time being resisting the pull of a 'platformisation' of the public sphere and a commodification of public consciousness. On this, see Fuchs (2021).

References

Barthelmes, Andreas (2020) *Die große Zerstörung: Was der digitale Bruch mit unserem Leben macht*. Berlin: Duden Verlag.

Bennett, W. Lance and Pfetsch, Barbara (2018) Rethinking political communication in a time of disrupted public spheres. *Journal of Communication* 68(2): 243–253.

Berg, Sebastian, Rakowski, Niklas, and Thiel, Thorsten (2020) Die digitale Konstellation: Eine Positionsbestimmung. *Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft* 30: 171–191. https://doi.org/10.1007/s41358-020-00207-6

Forst, Rainer (2013) *Toleration in Conflict: Past and Present*, trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fuchs, Christian (2021) Soziale Medien und Öffentlichkeit. In: *Das digitale Kapital: Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie des 21. Jahrhunderts*. Wien: Mandelbaum, pp. 235–272.

Gaus, Daniel (2013) Rational reconstruction as a method of political theory between social critique and empirical political science. *Constellations* 20(4): 553–570.

Habermas, Jürgen (1989) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen (1992) Further reflections on the public sphere. In: Calhoun, Craig (ed.) *Habermas and the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 421–461.

Habermas, Jürgen (1995) On the internal relation between the rule of law and democracy. *European Journal of Philosophy* 3(1): 12–20.

Habermas, Jürgen (1996) *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg. Cambridge: Polity.

Habermas, Jürgen (2006) Constitutional democracy – a paradoxical union of contradictory principles? In: *Time of Transitions*, trans. Ciaran Cronin and Max Pensky. Cambridge: Polity, pp. 113–128.

Habermas, Jürgen (2009) Political communication in media society: Does democracy still have an epistemic dimension? The impact of normative theory on empirical research. In: *Europe – The Faltering Project*, trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge: Polity, pp. 138–183.

Habermas, Jürgen (2012) *The Crisis of the European Union*, trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge: Polity.

Habermas, Jürgen (2015) *The Lure of Technocracy*, trans. Ciaran Cronin. Cambridge: Polity.

Habermas, Jürgen (2018 [2016]) Interview. In: Bächtiger, André, Dryzek, John S., Mansbridge, Jane, and Warren, Mark E. (eds) *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 871–882.

Habermas, Jürgen (2020) Review of Cristina Lafont, *Democracy without Shortcuts*. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 16(2): 10–14.

Hohlfeld, Ralf (2020) Die Post-Truth-Ära: Kommunikation im Zeitalter von gefühlten Wahrheiten und Alternativen Fakten. In: Hohlfeld, Ralf, Harnischmacher, Michael, Heinke, Elfi, Lehner, Lea, and Sengl, Michael (eds) *Fake News und Desinformation*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 43–60.

Jarren, Ottfried and Fischer, Renate (2021) Die Plattformisierung von Öffentlichkeit und die Relevanzstruktur des Journalismus als demokratische Herausforderung. In: Seeliger, Martin, and Sevignany, Sebastian (eds) *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit?* Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 365–384.

Jaster, Romy and Lanius, David (2020) Fake News in Politik und Öffentlichkeit. In: Hohlfeld, Ralf, Harnischmacher, Michael, Heinke, Elfi, Lehner, Lea, and Sengl, Michael (eds) *Fake News und Desinformation*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 245–269.

Oswald, Michael (2020) Der Begriff 'Fake News' als rhetorisches Mittel des Framings in der politischen Kommunikation. In: Hohlfeld, Ralf, Harnischmacher, Michael, Heinke, Elfi, Lehner, Lea, and Sengl, Michael (eds) *Fake News und Desinformation*. Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 61–82.
Peters, Bernhard (1993) *Die Integration moderner Gesellschaften*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Peters, Bernhard (2008) On public deliberation and public culture: Reflections on the public sphere. In: Wessler, Hartmut (ed.) *Public Deliberation and Public Culture: The Writings of Bernhard Peters, 1993–2005*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 134–159.
Reckwitz, Andreas (2020) *The Society of Singularities*, trans. Valentine A. Pakis. Cambridge: Polity.
Ritzi, Claudia (2021) Libration im Öffentlichkeitsuniversum. Anziehung und Kräfteausgleich in der digitalisierten Kommunikationsstruktur. In: Seeliger, Martin, and Sevignany, Sebastian (eds) *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit?* Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 298-319.
Schäfer, Armin (2015) *Der Verlust politischer Gleichheit*. Frankfurt am Main: Campus.
Schäfer, Armin and Zürn, Michael (2021) *Die demokratische Regression*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
Steiner, Jürg, Bächtiger, André, Spörndli, Markus, and Steenbergen, Marco R. (2004) *Deliberative Politics in Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Trentz, Hans-Jörg (2021) Öffentlichkeitstheorie als Erkenntnistheorie moderner Gesellschaft. In: Seeliger, Martin, and Sevignany, Sebastian (eds) *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit?* Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 385–405.
Wessler, Hartmut (2018) *Habermas and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity.
Zuboff, Shoshana (2018) *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*. New York: Public Affairs.
Zürn, Michael (2021) 'Öffentlichkeit und Global Governance'. In: Seeliger, Martin, and Sevignany, Sebastian (eds) *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit?* Baden-Baden: Nomos, pp. 160–187.

Jürgen Habermas (b. 1929) is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at Goethe University Frankfurt and one of the most influential living philosophers and social theorists. In addition to over 60 books, many of which have appeared in translations into numerous languages, he recently published a monumental two-volume survey of the history of western philosophy, *Auch eine Geschichte der Philosophie* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2019).

This article is part of the *Theory, Culture & Society* special issue on 'A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere?', edited by Martin Seeliger and Sebastian Sevignani.