

# The platformization of the public sphere and its challenge to democracy

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## Abstract

Democracy depends on a vivid public sphere, where ideas disseminate into the public and can be discussed – and challenged - by everyone. Journalism has contributed significantly to this social mediation by reducing complexity, providing information on salient topics and (planned) political solutions. The digital transformation of the public sphere leads to new forms of media provision, distribution, and use. Journalism has struggled to adapt to the new conditions. Journalistic news values, relevant to democracy, are being replaced by ones relevant to social media platforms' attention seeking business model. We plead for a broad public debate about the ongoing platformization and about possible policies to ensure a media system that serves and strengthens democracy.

## Keywords

public sphere, democracy, journalism, social media, platform regulation

The public sphere has changed due to advancing social differentiation, accelerating digitalization processes and the institutionalization of digital platforms. Information provided on digital platforms permeates the public sphere according to the platforms' algorithms which are based on the rules and norms of global private-sector companies. This has triggered a severe transformation of the public sphere (Jarren and Neuberger 2020) as existing media and journalism react on the growing importance of news aggregators and social media for news reception. The initial hopes that platforms would enable everyone to take part in the public sphere proved to be in vain: the platforms' attention seeking economic business model prevents real inclusion and equal participation

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of all. The fragmentation of the public sphere leads to less societal orientation and integration. As we will show, the digital transformation of society has particularly affected journalism and the media. These transformation processes have sparked off debates about the new norms of the communication society.

## **I. Demands on and functions of the public sphere as a societal mediation system**

The term public sphere describes (a) the social sphere where people exchange their opinions, discuss, and deliberate on public topics and (b) the process of public deliberation which leads to the formation of a public opinion (Jarren and Klinger 2017; Mahl and Jarren 2020). It is an important prerequisite of democracies (Krotz 2019) as it enables people to observe the opinion building on political and societal topics, and therefore allows an introspective view on society (Imhof 2011, 28).

In democracies, a public sphere should encourage citizens to participate in discussions that shape and further develop society. People should get involved in discussions about political decisions to comprehend their scope and possible consequences. As such the public sphere is to be understood as a system of social mediation – an important function in today’s democracies. Democracy can be seen as an ‘ensemble of institutions’ (Dahrendorf and Polito 2003, 9), all of which have the goal of bringing about social change legitimately and without violence. In modern, highly differentiated societies, the public sphere is largely constituted by media (mediatization) (Donges and Jarren 2017, 76). The emergence of new media has always had an impact on the public sphere and opinion formation. And with every change in the media environment, the question arises as to whether the changed public sphere is still able to fulfil all functions necessary for democracy.

Theories of the public sphere define basic requirements for public communication and can be assigned to three different paradigms. They are based on distinct understandings of democracy, address different demands on the mediation system, and focus on diverse aspects of the opinion-forming process (e.g. Donges 2020; Donges and Jarren 2017, 78; Ferree et al. 2002; Friedrich and Jandura 2012; Martinsen 2009, 60):

- (1) In the liberal paradigm, the public sphere serves as a representative sounding board for all issues and opinions on political topics. However, majorities should get a proper share in public discussions. Debates are supposed to be factual, and professional expertise is highly valued. Because of these requirements, this paradigm tends to be elite-centred and results-oriented: In theory, a majority opinion emerges in the process (output) which is then taken up by politics and implemented into new policies. In the liberal paradigm, the public sphere has to ensure that citizens are informed in a transparent way. This paradigm is linked to the model of representative democracy.
- (2) In the deliberative paradigm, the power of the better argument is considered essential. The goal is to find a rationally based social consensus. As such, this approach is focused on problem-solving (throughput). As in the liberal paradigm,

deliberative models require some adherence to rules of civility. The outcome of the deliberations is compromise. Deliberative models are open to all kinds of topics with one exception: fundamental rights are non-negotiable (Donges 2020).

- (3) The participatory paradigm demands that everyone should be involved in public decision-making processes and all opinions should be considered. The focus is on access to the public sphere (input): Everyone should be able to take part and have access without discrimination. Today's plural societies should be reflected in the public sphere, marginalized groups should be visible. That is one of the reasons why there are hardly any rules or style requirements for public discussions. In this paradigm, all opinions need to be taken into consideration and a premature closure of the opinion-forming process should be avoided. In this understanding, topics that were previously assumed private can also become political if they do not refer to individual cases but to parts of the population and are regarded as relevant to society.

While participatory approaches place a great emphasis on ensuring the participation of all in the public sphere (input), deliberative approaches focus on problem-solving (throughput). The liberal paradigm, on the other hand, focuses on the majority opinion (output).

As a social mediation system, the public sphere always assumes various functions: It integrates different topics and opinions, legitimizes political decisions by informing citizens about facts and debates (transparency) and thus provides a prerequisite for participation (Martinsen 2009). In addition, it enables public deliberation and participation in discussions. With these capacities, the public sphere contributes significantly to social orientation (Imhof 2011). Journalism and the media play an essential role in these processes.

## 2. Traditional media's services to society

Traditional media, which have institutionalized journalism, play an essential role in societal mediation processes: they disseminate information, ensure public communication, and still play a key role in the creation of public spheres. As established organizations, the media provide continuously information on a permanent basis which allows to observe, to analyze and to evaluate processes and decisions relevant to society. Media reduce complexity and provide orientation. Therefore, they are regarded as a key player for vital (mediatized) public spheres and the tenor of their reporting (= published opinion) is equated to public opinion. Traditional media have had the power to set topics on the public agenda as well as to shape public opinion in a broader society. That is why media have been considered to have a strong social impact (Beck 2019). Traditional media still permeate society with their products – not least thanks to online distribution channels. However, they primarily reach the older members of society, less so younger people. In addition, the increasing media variety has led to very differentiated media repertoires (Hasebrink 2015).

Traditional media are relevant to society in terms of social mediation as media organizations provide their services on a permanent basis. Information is delivered continuously and is reliable: It is structured by journalistic programs (e.g. politics, economics and culture) and formats (e.g. report, commentary and feature) which the (older) audience is familiar with. This structure grants orientation and generates attention, both of which are needed to ensure follow-up communication in the media and in face-to-face conversations (Blöbaum 1994).

Journalism has developed its own selection and presentation programs which are known throughout society. This has a stabilizing effect on expectations. However, criticism of the media and journalism has increased during the past years: Journalistic media are defamed as *Lügenpresse* (Gadinger 2019; Holtz and Kimmerle 2020). Journalists are accused of a biased selectivity. These accusations cannot solely be seen against the backdrop of populism: Economization and an increasing media concentration have had consequences for spatial and social diversity in the media, too. There is a pronounced focus on people in power which has always been criticized, historically as well as functionally. It is one of the structural problems of journalism (Greck 2017). Consequently, trust in media fluctuates (Blome et al. 2020). Positive signs of higher news consumption and rising trust levels during the pandemic were only short-lived. As the 2022 Digital News Report shows, ‘overall news consumption has declined considerably in many countries while trust has fallen back almost everywhere’ (Newman et al. 2022, 10).

Referring to the three paradigms of the public sphere presented above, journalism has fulfilled the demands of both the liberal and the deliberative paradigms with its selection and presentation of news, e.g., by pitting topics and opinions of experts and elites against each other. Journalism with its selection criteria has structured debates and has contributed largely to public opinion formation. But these achievements are not sufficient regarding the participatory paradigm as this paradigm postulates a broader access to public communication in order to involve as many people as possible in decision-making processes. In contrast, social media offer easily accessible alternative channels to discuss all topics publicly. Journalism and the media have lost their monopoly on gatekeeping access to the public sphere.

Nevertheless, people on social media oftentimes use journalistic products or refer to them. Information provided by traditional media can be disseminated, shared with others, commented on and evaluated on social media. Younger users obtain information about current topics via platforms (Kleinen-von KönigsLöw 2020). This has consequences for media and journalism: They have lost reach and revenue in the advertising and the (paying) audience markets. As a result, they have also lost cultural and political relevance as well as their interpretative power. In addition, there are many partial or sub-publics on platforms which have a significant impact on the visibility of actors and topics, on the course of discussions, and on opinion formation. Because of the sheer volume of information provided on different channels, minorities might still find it hard to reach a broader audience. Due to the shift of public communication to platforms, mass media seem to be expendable.

## 2.1 *The significance of mass media for public communication in a changing society*

Mass media are among society's intermediaries, as are political parties, associations, trade unions and social clubs (Jarren 2008; Rucht 2007). Intermediaries take up concerns from society, process them and coin policy issues, goals and programs which are then taken up and processed by the parliamentary system with the aim to define and implement political measures. At the same time, intermediaries communicate these political decisions back to society, primarily via mass media. Thus, political processes, decisions and measures can be publicly discussed and evaluated; people can get involved in the decision-making process.

Historically, media were linked to the intermediaries: parties, trade unions or churches each had their own media to reach their members but also a general public. As such, the process of internal opinion formation was coupled with the formation of a political public opinion. With the de-coupling of intermediaries, newspapers transformed into commercial organizations. As from the 1960s this business press was primarily financed by advertising. Further economization resulted in a steadily advancing press concentration. Press content was supposed to be politically neutral and increasingly geared to higher circulation by incorporating more entertaining features. The higher circulation and political neutrality also served the interest of advertisers. Even before the onset of the press' financial crisis, which started with the increasing use of the internet, the press market was highly concentrated. Journalistic diversity was already an issue as was the inadequate information supply in some political areas or economically weak regions.

Traditional media such as the press, radio and television were the most important intermediaries – until the establishment of the internet and communication platforms. Anyone who wanted to reach all members of society, both politically (citizens) or economically (consumers), had to do so through mass media. Even to reach their own members, intermediaries like parties or trade unions depended on the media. The central position of media and journalism led to the term of 'media society' because there was no other way for anyone to communicate to a general audience without them (Meyen 2009). Stakeholders became dependent on the media for an effective public communication, especially because of the monopoly or oligopoly structures in many media markets.

And for audiences, the media became the central social institution for societal observation. In the mediatized society, media messages construct social realities (Kuhn 2018, 430–434) and media logic has been a crucial power factor for enabling or hindering social opportunities. The media has been a social, cultural and political gatekeeper – without them new social movements or societal concerns could hardly reach a broader audience. This was not a new phenomenon at the time. Workers had to establish their own media to gain public visibility for their concerns. And in the 1960s, social movements had to establish counter-publics via free radio stations or new newspaper initiatives like *taz* in Germany. Mass media and journalism have acted like filters for critical inquiries towards elites. Many of these inquiries never reached a wider public, a fact which is still strongly criticized today. Nowadays, new political interest groups bypass traditional media by

using social media because they are able to gain access to the public sphere without the obstacles journalism has posed before.

The relatively close coupling of the media with intermediaries like political parties or other social groups has been a defining feature of the intermediary system for a long time, and the model continues to have a constitutive effect. Even today, the national print media in particular are described as politically left or right, or even see themselves as explicitly politically oriented, for example, in Germany, there is the *FAZ* on the right or the *taz* on the left of the political spectrum. Quality media pursue a distinguished normative journalistic program. And for public broadcasters in Germany the coupling to all relevant intermediaries has been institutionalized. Market developments in the area of national quality print media, on the one hand, and guidelines for public broadcasting led to a mediation structure that follows the central political and social cleavages. Thus, a distinction can be made between ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ media products. This media structure enabled political orientation, reciprocal references, and discourse. Debates were conducted along the right-left axis, a structure that made political processes and discussions easier to observe (Neidhardt 2007).

## 2.2 The structure of journalism and its contribution to society

Journalistic programs (e.g. regarding selection and presentation of topics) of media organizations are determined by the owners of newspapers or the socially relevant groups in the case of public broadcasters. Together they form the journalistic supply structure and formats (Altmeppen 2006). Over time, there has been a shift from a journalism which focused on individual political interests, where journalists oftentimes were also members of parliament, towards an understanding of journalism as a ‘non-biased’ service. At the same time journalism has become a highly differentiated full-time occupation. Today, more journalists work for entertainment or specialist media than for news media (Dernbach 2010). In Germany, the number of journalists has been shrinking from 54,000 in 1993 to around 41,220 people working in journalism in 2016 including around 10,000 freelancers (Steindl et al. 2017). Margreth Lünenborg and Simon Berghofer (2010) determined that there were just over 6,100 political journalists in Germany in 2010. The self-image of journalism has changed from the former group-centred mediation role towards a neutral or non-biased presenter of news. In addition to the reduction in jobs, journalism studies currently observe de-professionalization, a dissolution of job boundaries, an increase in precarious terms of employment, and declining incomes (Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch 2020). Driven by the success of platforms, traditional media offer more content on various different channels, which was only possible through an increase in content production. Newsrooms are now the most common form of work which demands both generalist and highly specialized skills including new technical skills and database management. As a result, journalistic workplaces which were formerly a place of political debate, are increasingly transforming into coordination centres for procurement, control of production, and distribution of content. The automatization of these processes which is based on algorithms supersedes former journalistic activities. Commercial pressures gain importance: Content is produced to maximize views, editorial

analytics replace journalistic relevance, search engine optimization overrides quality and integrity. Content of other providers is re-used and visually staged on social media which reduces production cost and increases visibility of the own media brand (Lobigs 2018, 315–316). Due to the pressure of native advertising and increasing the brand's reach on social media, traditional media align their content with the immediate user behaviour. 'Social media introduce new techno-commercial mechanisms in public communication' (Poell and van Dijck 2014, 185). A whole sector as well as a profession are in a state of upheaval, in a fundamental transformation process – outcome unknown.

The demands on journalism have increased significantly in this process. As Neuberger (2018) notes, traditional journalism continues to discuss salient societal topics but has to cope with more complexity: journalism has to observe, analyze, and evaluate larger social contexts and more topics in ever broader fields. On social media, people expect increased audience involvement, both in production of content and in the debate about the covered issues (co-production, collaboration). The new communication possibilities on platforms are said to have triggered a participatory turn or an audience turn of public communication. To keep up with these expectations, journalism must involve the audience to maintain reach and legitimacy, but also has to fulfil its function of criticism and control (Loosen et al. 2020).

What are the core functions of journalism under these tremendously changing socio-technical and socio-cultural conditions? Journalists and researchers have not come to a final conclusion yet. It is recognized that, in addition to select and interpret issues, journalists need to take into account the new logics of attention and staging of topics in public communication due to the data-driven distribution and evaluations of posts on platforms. Journalists and editors are active on social media, they run blogs or produce and post videos online. In addition to traditional print and digital media products (e.g., websites and e-paper), subscribers are served with (sometimes personalized) newsletters. What is the purpose of journalism? Is it merely a service or a 'gate watcher', does it moderate public communication or merely help the audience to navigate through a vast amount of information? Corresponding models are being discussed for all the above functions: for example, 'participatory journalism' (e.g. Westlund and Murschetz 2019), 'data journalism' (e.g. Anderson 2018), and 'civic or citizen journalism' (e.g. Roberts 2019).

In short: it is no longer enough to select issues and to publish articles or features with a strong emphasis on elites' and experts' opinions. Journalism must cope with new expectations. It has to fulfil the expectations of the participatory paradigm of the public sphere by covering more and different people's opinions without excluding any group from public communication. This is partly at odds with previous selection rules which focused on incumbents, celebrities, and experts with the aim to form a majority opinion. This – until now – dominant selection program is not consistent with the demands for political as well as social equality which is based on collective learning and knowledge management (Allen 2020) with the aim to optimize political decisions.

### 3. The consequences of platformization

With online platforms, a ‘new, global social information and communication system’ (Jarren 2019) has been established. Mark Eisenegger (2021) describes the process of platformization as the third, digital structural change of the public sphere; the recent change is thus on the same level as the emergence of mass media at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the economization of journalistic media, described as the second structural change. Online platforms change the structure of the public sphere with implications for actors, media products and contents – and consequences for social mediation and democracy.

#### 3.1 *Media and journalism’s adaption to platform logic*

Digital platforms are new intermediaries that constitute, coordinate and control markets by offering a wide variety of services such as the exchange of goods, the provision and exchange of information, and the facilitation of communication, in public and in private. Our focus is on platforms that contribute to the public sphere by providing information and facilitating communication: search engines, news aggregators, social media and video platforms. These platforms can be seen as new ‘structure-forming, rule-setting and action-coordinating’ (Dolata 2020) intermediaries: They do not provide information services themselves but enable others to place information on the platform and communicate with each other. Although they do not contribute any content, they offer options to third parties for displaying text, images and sound, as well as algorithmic control of public reach. With their algorithms they influence whether and how content becomes visible, they provide the rules how users can share, follow or rate the contributions. Platforms determine which social interactions are possible and which are not. As new, private institutions they determine their general terms and conditions as well as their community standards, the rules for information and communication and with those who can use their services and who is excluded.

The new players with their new business models where users benefit from ‘free’ access by paying for the services with their data, have a major impact on traditional media. Their core business model is based on professional selection, the supply of verified information in known formats, bundled in different sections or linear distribution of information for radio and television. Journalism was mainly financed through advertising revenue, but users have also paid for the services. Now, users can access information for free which makes news consumption on the internet attractive. And because there is an increasing amount of information available free of charge, people are less willing to pay for traditional news media. Advertisers are able to target their customers more efficiently via platforms (Lobigs 2018). These processes have led to a funding crisis for journalism even if the overall reach of their content increases (Weischenberg 2018) due to the new distribution channels the platforms offer. Especially in the beginning of the COVID pandemic, free access to information has increased considerably (Newman et al. 2020, 10).



Platforms are changing the norms and rules of journalism. Even quality media try to expand their reach with attention-seeking posts on social media. News is provided in snippets 24/7: Posts instead of articles, interviews, or features. Media and journalism had to adapt to the multiple new distribution channels all of which have their own logic. Journalism geared to a general audience cannot afford to forego multi-channel activities (Dolata 2020) without losing entire age groups (Newman et al. 2020). Media brands need to maintain the visibility of their brand and they cannot afford to lose the group of younger adults. This requires an increasing effort by journalists who have to adapt their content to the logic of the different distribution channels with repercussions for the rules and the way of journalistic work. From the perspective of institutional theory, platforms exert an institutional pressure to adapt (Donges 2013) its rules of selection and the presentation of news. Just as mass media once forced politics to adapt to the media mode of production, platforms are now triggering a change in journalistic rules. Traditional media have become ‘platform complements’ (Eisenegger 2021, 21).

The changes of societal mediation are characterized by the decoupling of content production, distribution, and the context of use. In traditional media, journalists produced content which was distributed via their own channels: The audience got their newspaper in the morning or watched or listened to news which was broadcasted at a certain time – journalism produced content for a pipeline. On platforms, supply and demand are de-contextualized. In addition, users will find private and public topics next to each other – seemingly equivalent in reach and importance (Antić 2020). Relevance and quality of content are manifold and mixed with advertising or public relations content. Users need to be media-savvy in order to distinguish the differences.

### *3.2 Increasing tabloidization and emotionalization throughout the public sphere*

The new forms of provision, distribution and use of journalistic content have a variety of effects on how traditional media outlets produce content. Now they have to produce content in different formats, condensed to individual snippets of text or video so that they can be easily shared and disseminated on and across various platforms. As every platform has its own logic, content has to be adjusted accordingly to ensure the content matches the platform’s algorithm and therefore reaches a broad audience. In traditional media, content’s relevance was determined by its social or political scope. That has changed: as journalists and the media need to reach a broad audience on the online platforms, they have to consider other criteria. Relevance on social media is related to clicks, views, likes and shares. Practices we know from tabloids are now being adopted by quality media: strong, emotional headlines attract attention. The orientation towards an attention-seeking economy is increasing. Content is adapted accordingly. Ever more topics need to be covered and distributed. Successful social media posts trigger attention and excitement. Traditional media, now seeking success on platforms imitate this kind of content. Research shows that emotionally charged, personalized posts generate more attention than others. The same holds true for fake news. The social media logic is rubbing off on

journalism: journalistic news contributions have been found to be increasingly emotionalized and personalized (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020).

There have been attempts to establish news aggregators, enabling access to various media brands on one platform. The U.S. has been the only country where this form of news distribution has had some success. In other countries, this form of access has not been as popular (Newman et al. 2020, 34). That is the reason why, it has been considered to institutionalize public platforms as a kind of ‘Spotify for journalism’ (Buschow and Wellbrock 2020). However, music can be listened to repeatedly, but the audience is rarely interested in yesterday’s news. Journalists produce topical news for a certain audience, relating to political areas, to specific current processes. Daily news cannot be repeated endlessly, let alone be sold over and over again.

### 3.3 Audience fragmentation and news avoidance

Mass media have provided relevant information based on professional selection criteria. They ensured that various topics and opinions were known to the public. But traditional media are losing their audience: In the 2020 Reuters Institute’s survey, 72% of respondents reported that they mostly accessed news via social media, search engines, mobile alerts, aggregators or email. Only 28% of all respondents said that they accessed traditional media directly. Among 18 to 24 year olds only 16% accessed traditional media via their own channels, the most common gateway to news was social media (Newman et al. 2020, 24).

On social media, users take an active role by liking, sharing or commenting on journalistic contents or by creating their own news. This is possible on social media but less so on the websites of traditional media. Social media with their free access meet one of the central requirements of the participatory paradigm of the public sphere. The broad range of news provided by journalists and other actors and the substantial number of different channels (‘platformized long-tail public sphere’ (Eisenegger 2021)) lead to individualized media repertoires in which the boundaries of private and public are increasingly blurred.

Another more recent development, which is worse, is the fact that people ‘choose to ration or limit their exposure to [...] news’ (Newman et al. 2022, 13). In average, 38% of all respondents of the Reuters’ 2022 survey said they actively avoid the news. The main reasons for news avoidance were too much news about politics or the pandemic, news having a negative effect on the mood, or being worn out by the sheer amount of news (p.13).

## 4. The transformation of the intermediary system

At this point in time, we cannot conclusively assess the effects of the institutionalization of platforms on the intermediary system. What can be determined is that we see not merely a process of convergence, that is, the establishment of a new media in addition to the existing traditional media. Platforms are new institutions in the intermediary system who are not (yet) pursuing their own journalistic objectives. They do not see themselves as

media, but they provide media services. However, with the increasing dominance of platforms for public communication, they establish new norms and rules in the intermediary system. Platforms have a different business model than traditional media, but their market entry has structural and procedural effects on traditional media, journalism, and the public sphere.

Political journalism is losing resources as well as relevance. The financial crisis of traditional media has negative effects on the profession and the profession's performance. Attempts to stabilize the media market by boosting journalistic performance or by introducing pay walls as a new business model have not been successful so far. The multitude of providers and different media products makes it hard for users to evaluate single brands and services. And media brands – except for international ones like *The New York Times* or *The Economist* – are too weak to bind users to their products especially in terms of the willingness to subscribe and pay for the services. Media brands are not perceived to be exclusive, because there is a wide supply of digital news. And investigative journalism reaches its audience via blogs or platforms (Schrape 2017). Therefore, Frank Lobigs and Gerret von Nordheim (2014) do not ask but claim 'journalism is not a business model.'

Furthermore, platforms influence the way users select information. Bundled services (print) or linear programs (TV and radio) are in less demand. Circulation or reach, the willingness of an integral use of news provided by traditional media are in decline. It remains to be seen whether journalism as a service will survive in other organizational contexts than publishing houses or with other financing models than by subscriptions or donations (Pickard 2020).

The decontextualization of content, topics, and issues, in addition to the change of how people use media services could trigger social problems: The highly individualized media repertoires might lead to separate user communities, even sub-publics. How do we ensure societal integration as traditional media cannot or do not want to meet this demand due to economic problems? Under the new high choice media conditions (van Aelst et al. 2017) it is now up to the users to determine through their selection behaviour and their willingness to pay if journalism and the traditional media will survive the current turbulences.

## 5. Concluding remarks on the current debate and legal regulation

The influence of platforms on the intermediary system needs to be discussed from the perspective of public sphere and democracy theories. Platforms do not see themselves as media, in their point of view they do not perform a public task. But they do provide media services: Platforms are relevant for the formation of group, organizational, or network publics. They provide a stage for topics and opinions and enable individuals and groups to network. Institutionally, they influence journalism and traditional news media and accelerate the process of individualization (Reckwitz 2019). Platforms enable the constitution of communities and the formation of topics, both temporarily and permanently. New publics can be formed (Klinger 2018) by influencers who can nudge the formation of groups or topics. Even hashtags can start a public discussion about a specific topic and

contribute to the formation of a public opinion. Through platform metrics such as the number of hits, followers, likes or the compilation of news feeds or recommendation lists, users get an impression of the perceived relevance of topics or groups. Platforms create new forms of social visibility and relevance beyond the respective online community.

Because of platforms, the public sphere is becoming more diverse in terms of space and time. More people gain access, and more topics are being discussed. The universal access changes the constitution of the public sphere, it is getting more dynamic. However, due to these dynamics, the vast number of participants, the diversity of perspectives, views and interpretations as well as instant reactions, the aggregation of the underlying communication towards a public opinion is difficult. The public sphere loses its power to stabilize society and to integrate and it is becoming increasingly difficult to transform deliberative processes into political ones, as [Habermas \(2022\)](#) pointed out recently.

When the public sphere was dominated by mass media, journalism contributed significantly to an intermediary system that met the normative requirements of the liberal paradigm. It thus enabled a permanent and systematic societal introspection; society was observable and steerable towards a non-violent transformation which is the core objective of democracy according to Ralf Dahrendorf ([Dahrendorf and Polito 2003](#)). Platformization has established a broader access to the public sphere which – from the perspective of the participatory paradigm and the demands for political equality (‘epistemic egalitarianism’ ([Allen 2020](#))) – can be regarded as fundamentally positive. But at the same time, this broad access leads to pathologies such as hate speech and to forms of polarization in public communication.

The market entry of platforms has had structural as well as procedural consequences for the public sphere and political communication: Platforms have facilitated the access to the public sphere (input) and have also partially democratized it. However, processing topics (throughput) has become unclear and messy due to the sheer volume of topics which are now discussed in public simultaneously, and aggregation has become demanding as there are no institutionalized actors taking care of the process. Discussions in the public sphere should lead to a result (public opinion as output) which can be taken up by the political system. There are still open questions: Can individual communications trigger selective effects on political decisions? What are the risks associated with the increasing dynamics of public communication? Even if there is a discussion of individual phenomena regarding the changing structure of the public sphere, there is still a lack of a systematic ongoing debate about the platforms and their effect on society.

The institutionalization process of platforms requires – beyond intensified communication – new policies. Platforms need to be regulated to enable new forms of social mediation as well as personal expression. A new balance must be struck between general, public concerns and individual, private concerns. To this end, the institutionalization process requires scientific observation and analysis as well as the participation of civil society in a critical public debate. This debate could be intensified through new social actors, both nationally and at the European level ([Jarren 2018](#)). However, only if the discourse is taken beyond the platforms, we will be able to develop a broad public debate. Platform owners institutionally deny the debate to take place on their own platforms. They did not respond to societal demands before political pressure,

parliamentary hearings and concrete regulatory measures forced them to. In the debate about opportunities and threats of the new structures of the public sphere, journalists and the traditional media must play an important role, in addition to discourses of the scientific community and civil society (Jarren 2018). However, the crisis of traditional media limits their ability to initiate broad debates, in general but also in relation to the ongoing process of platformization. If one adheres to the principles of liberal democracy, but advocates a change in norms, institutions, and processes, then a fundamental debate about the future constitution of society as well as the development of a ‘new public media system’ (Pickard 2020, 161) needs to be held.

### Author note

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