Democracyinthedigitalpublicsphere:disruptiveor self-corrective?

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Abstract
The article assesses the post-democratic scenario of a public sphere that is detached from democracy. By describing how public spheres are transformed by the Internet, it is asked whether the co-constitutive dynamics between the public sphere and democracy still apply in the digital age, or whether we are witnessing an ultimate rupture. The field of contemporary public sphere struggles in response to the digital transforma- tions is discussed in terms of: (1) the rebalancing of privacy and publicity; (2) the truth orientation and rationality of public debates; and (3) the modes of empowerment of the will of the people. By evaluating the empirical evidence for the deep disruptions of the public sphere and democ- racy, it will become possible to develop a better understanding of the self-corrective mechanisms of public sphere resilience and renewal in the digital age.
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The post-democratic scenario and the public sphere

The modern public sphere has emerged in a co-evolution with democracy as the organizing principle of legitimate political order (Habermas, 1989). Habermas' "Structural Transformation" (1989) provides the systematic reconstruc- tion of the intrinsic relationship between the public sphere and democracy. Laying the foundations of what in his later work will be called a discourse theory of democracy (Habermas, 1996), the public sphere is an open and inclusive space of communication that grants equality of status to par- ticipants who seek common understanding. As a "space for the communicative generation of public opinion" (Fraser, 2007, p. 7), the public sphere delivers the normative script for democracy and relates to the intermediary institutions and communicative infrastructures (in broad terms: the media) that sustain the unfolding of critical discourse (Eder, 2006; Trenz, 2015). More specifically, a public sphere is meant to be truth oriented and inclusive, giving public communication an epistemic value (in search of truth) and a democratic value (in search of collective self-determination). Individuals who seek understanding with others need to claim that what they say is true, i.e., that it relates to facts, and that it is right, i.e., that it is supported by shared norms. They raise validity claims with regard to the objective world and the social world, which again can be tested and challenged by others (Habermas, 1985). This process of "seeking collective under- standing" comprises key areas of personal and collective iden- tities (who are we and how shall we live?) and of politics (what problems do we need to deal with collectively and what could be possible solutions?). A discourse theory of democ- racy is not based on prescribed norms or procedures of will formation (such as a preference for participation or represen- tation), but on a set of pragmatic presuppositions that people need to make to enter into argumentative exchanges about the desirable mode of self-government (Olson, 2011). Democracy refers to the realm of justifications that are pro- vided by the participants to consider any form of government to be in the common interest. The discourse of democracy is principally open to universalistic justification, even though the institutions and procedures of democracy are commonly contextualized and scaled, for instance in the form of national democracy. The public sphere as the communicative infra- structure of such institutionally and culturally bounded de- mocracies reaches however always beyond the political community, provides cross-cultural and transnational link- ages and upholds the bonds to universal justification (Bohman, 2005). The public sphere defines in this last sense, not only the norms of democracy and provides its communi- cative infrastructure, but triggers also a democratizing mecha- nisms in the form of critique of the incompleteness of existing democracies.

This raises the question of whether there is, as sustained by Habermas, an intrinsic linkage between public sphere infra- structures and democracy or whether the public sphere can be also separated from democracy to generate political legiti- macy of a non-democratic regime. This question gains rele- vance in the current debate about post-democracy, which could be conceived as a regime where public communication through various types of new and digital media is still central for the generation of legitimacy, yet democratic principles and procedures no longer apply (Crouch, 2020; Schlesinger, 2020). Can the public sphere persist in a post-democratic scenario?

The possibility of a public sphere without democracy can be approached with historical reference to the pre-modern representative public sphere of the aristocracy that is revived in new acclamatory ways of sustaining political power (Habermas, 1989, pp. 5–13). Deprived of its core normative elements, the acclamatory public sphere would not embrace the principles of equal inclusion and rationality of debates,

but merely provide a space of visibility: the public exposure of political power and of the political community (Luhmann, 1971; Nassehi, 2002). While the maximum normative defini- tion of the public sphere would aim at the generation of dem- ocratic legitimacy, the minimum definition would reduce the public sphere to a publicity generating mechanism. The public sphere in illiberal regimes could then be discussed either as the loudspeaker in the service of authoritarian government to reach out to the population through controlled media (the au- thoritarian variant) or as the stage of popular sovereignty and unitary representation of the political community (the popu- list variant). The way such an acclamatory public sphere would be able to generate a stable form of non-democratic le- gitimacy does however not only depend on the short-term popular support of authoritarian or charismatic leadership (which is, of course, an empirical possibility). The post- democratic scenario would also imply the absence of critical discourse, i.e., a situation where the core normative elements of democracy are no longer hold valid by substantive parts of the population and no longer used as critical standards to evaluate government.

As I am going to argue in the following, such a detachment of public sphere infrastructures from public criticism is an em- pirically unlikely case. The question of whether we enter the age of post-democracy cannot be responded to on the basis of an empirical measurement of the indicators for democratic and non-democratic performance. To assess whether a regime change from democracy to post-democracy is taking place, we need to explore the legitimacy beliefs and normative dispo- sitions that inform about the rightfulness of government. The observation (shared by most theorists of post-democracy, e.g., Crouch, 2020) that the rules of democratic government are still hold valid is then not simply counter-factual and dis- proved by the many factual violations of democracy. There is a likelihood that such disruptive processes continue rather than interrupt public sphere criticism in the form of critical publicity, new progressive movements and practices of demo- cratic renewal. These self-corrective mechanism of the public sphere can be empirically approached at the moment of rup- ture, i.e., when public sphere disruptions (in the following an- alyzed in the form of privacy violations, aggressive publicity, misrepresentations or systematic disinformation) become a *public* concern and, as such, not only require corrective meas- ures but also an investment in the search of innovative solu- tions. The identification of the symptoms of post-democracy is then to be understood, in itself, as a performance of public sphere criticism. As such, it is not limited to critical media studies but extends to contemporary political struggles over the use and impact of digital media technologies and infra- structures and their potential of democratic renewal.

Symptoms of post-democracy

In light of the above, the post-democratic scenario would be one where public sphere infrastructures might persist in the form of media organizations that fabricate publicity and im- pact public opinion, but where the underlying norms that in- form critical discourse are no longer hold valid. Political legitimacy as a form of acclamatory support of government would be detached from public reasoning and normative criti- cism, thus making the modern (strong) notion of the public sphere redundant. The post-democratic regime would be also truly post-modern in terms of an existential uncertainty or

fuzziness of values and a lack of moral authority to validate a common normative understanding (Bauman, 2013). In the available literature, such a strong claim of an epochal change that grounds post-democracy in the post-modern constella- tion of society is often raised, but hardly substantiated. What we find instead is a broad discussion of the symptoms of post- democracy with regard to disruptions of the public sphere and the media (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018), comparative accounts of the hollowing of political parties and electoral systems (Mair, 2013) and of episodes of corruption of demo- cratic institutions and procedures (Crouch, 2020) or a general reconstruction of attitudinal changes of Western populations that have lost their enthusiasm with core liberal values and in- creasingly embrace populist leadership (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Democracies, according to this post-democratic ac- count might simply die or fade away (Runciman, 2018). Democratic norms and principles would thus not necessarily be replaced by post-democratic legitimacy, but, in principle, still be held valid even though, in practice, they are constantly violated or simply no longer matter.

A post-democracy, in short, is not described as a *distinct*, but as an *incomplete* political regime, within which demo- cratic norms still claim validity, public spheres proliferate in various forms and political communication is used for profit and propaganda. Post-democracies exist within democracies as a dystopia that is mainly characterized "ex negativo" by the way it deviates from the model of legitimacy provided by the modern public sphere of democracy. This empirical ac- count of the symptoms of post-democracy has mainly a criti- cal intent but lacks explanatory force, as we do not learn about the structural preconditions for the digital transforma- tion of the public sphere and democracy. My argument is that there is a continuity of critical discourse in the diagnosis of post-democracy, which is not only responsive but also con- tributes to the digital transformation of the public sphere in specific ways. In the following, I will account for this inter- linkage of critical discourse and structural transformation of the digital public sphere.

Contemporary public sphere struggles

By asking how public spheres are transformed by the Internet, we arrive at a response to the more fundamental question of whether the co-constitutive dynamics between the public sphere and democracy still apply in the digital age, or whether we are witnessing an ultimate rupture. I propose to discuss the field of contemporary public sphere struggles in response to the digital transformations in terms of: (1) the rebalancing of privacy and publicity; (2) the truth orientation and ratio- nality of public debates; and (3) the modes of empowerment of the will of the people.

Rebalancing privacy and publicity

The modern public sphere is not, as this is sometimes as- sumed, based on a sharp distinction between the realms of the private and the public. Habermas (1989, p. 3) locates the "authentic public sphere" rather in the facilitation of private interactions among individuals who have the rights (and one should add, also the means) to define themselves as "privates." In the bourgeois public sphere, the private auton- omy of individuals is constitutive to their public relations and participation in the public realm (Splichal, 2018).

One challenge of public sphere research is to understand the contested ways of drawing the boundaries between public and private (Papacharissi, 2015). Against the original bour- geois public sphere and its fluid boundaries, mass culture and mass society can be distinguished by establishing a more rigid regime of separate spheres for private and public interactions. The private as the sphere of cultural consumption (e.g., through TV) was separated from the public as the representa- tive arena for staging the political (Adorno, 2001). Digital public spheres instead reintroduce a new fluidity in the transi- tions from public to private, but also threaten the autonomy of public and private spaces in unprecedented ways. In digital media markets, invisibility as much as visibility become more fragile, and ownership over content is contested. Sharing economies, however, are not entirely based on public use (like a public ground or a public library), but on the facilitation of transfers between private individuals that can be made eco- nomically profitable for the providers of services. The media markets logics, therefore, change and instead of monetarizing the publicity of the few celebrities, companies make money from the privacy of the many.

In traditional media markets, the surplus of privacy has led to an increase in the value of publicity. Privacy was for the many and publicity, for the few. In digital media markets in- stead, the surplus of publicity leads to an increase in the value of privacy. Publicity is for the many and privacy is for the few. This reversion of the logics of mass media markets goes hand in hand with a reversion of the logics of public sphere struggles over privacy and publicity (Splichal, 2018). In the traditional public sphere of mass media, publicity was highly selective and could guarantee visibility for some elected pro- tagonists. Individuals rarely chose to go private; they were rather assigned to private places as passive media consumers (Blatterer et al., 2010), or as excluded categories of people (such as women). In digital public spheres, the capitalist logics of media markets require an investment into new practices of transition between publicity and privacy (Sevignani, 2015). Through the use of digital media, people are not only offered the opportunity to escape their assigned spaces of media con- sumption (what is emphatically referred to as *users' empower- ment*); they are called upon to search for publicity themselves, e.g., through daily updates on their timelines.

As a result of these individualized and diversified mass pub- lication activities, digital media markets reverse the correla- tion between publicity and visibility, and privacy and invisibility. In traditional mass media, publicity could guaran- tee at least some degree of visibility (even though selective mechanisms applied and resulted in visibility rankings), while privacy meant invisibility. In turn, the new digital media often uncouple publicity from visibility, and hence increase the risk of making privacy visible. On social media, the opportunities for publicity are enhanced, but still highly selective mecha- nisms apply on the public attention market, which restrict vis- ibility for shared content. To publish on social media, e.g., by sharing private content, is not a guarantee of being watched and listened to by many. Instead, a new experience of private publicity applies where the sharing of user content through social media mainly serves the purpose of profit and surveil- lance by industry.

The new salience of privacy concerns in the digital public sphere can only be understood in relation to the extended struggle over the public status of the Internet, the public duties of its (private) owners and the rights of its (private) users.

Critical users call for the protection of privacy as a new public good, accessible to all and guaranteed by state and law, while at the same time containing unsolicited publicity as a public vice. Privacy is in this sense not to be understood as distinct or opposite from the public emancipatory struggle, but rather linked back to the old public sphere promises of individual autonomy, freedom and self-determination, while the threat- ening and damaging effects of excesses of publicity are em- phasized in terms of loss of control and surveillance, either by states or by capitalism. This is why many groups in their calls for privacy claim public status, raise public voice and claim to represent the public interest.

The turn towards privacy in the digital public sphere does in this sense not revert the modern praise of publicity as this has been claimed by Splichal (2018), but rather emancipates privacy struggles as part of the progressive movement for democracy.

In the digital sphere, scholars speak of the liquefaction of the public-private distinction through the emergence of hybrid forms of communication and interactions, such as interper- sonal chats on video platforms, or remote cameras and micro- phones (Splichal, 2018). Still, border management between the public and private plays an important role, e.g., in the way the Internet is commercialized, or individual users seek to protect their data. While borders between public and private become more liquid, they still matter for most people, and me- dia users are ready to invest time and resources in border management. Privacy, in this sense, is increasingly individu- ally defined. Playing with the border of privateness and pub- licness becomes part of creative media use, where users need to implement their own privacy policies.

The new privacy struggles in response to digitalization be- come political in the sense of fighting for public recognition of demands for privacy, raising critical questions against indus- tries but also forms of self-critique and empowerment. The claim for "informational self-determination" is intrinsically political, not only because state authority is required to guar- antee privacy protection, but also because the rights for pri- vacy need to be publicly respected and their validity tested (Nassehi, 2019, p. 199). Privacy claims rely on public recogni- tion and seek public affirmation and, in this sense, should be interpreted as classical normative and ideological struggles of the public sphere, linking back to well-known political agen- das such as anti-capitalism, individualism and conservatism. Privacy struggles as a form of public sphere resilience, do not simply end up in the restitution of privacy and the retreat from publicness, but also reconstitute the publics of collective self-determination.

Behind the struggle over the protection of privacy is an on- going struggle over the value of publicity, and ultimately, about the price a political community is willing to pay for the quality of its communicative infrastructure. The digital public sphere has not opened these normative struggles, but simply continues and relaunches them, for instance, in the way the traditional institution of journalism needs to reinvent itself to survive in the online world. Whoever wants to revalue privacy also needs to raise the question of the value of publicity, and give new responses to the old question regarding how to de- fend the quality standards of debates and the value of infor- mation that "deserves" to be public. In fact, the question of how to revalue our private lives and protect them from the risks and possible devastating effects of excesses of publicity can only be decided collectively, with norms and standards

that need to be scrutinized in public and by publics. Without this intrinsic linkage to publicity, privacy would fall apart, and individuals would no longer be able to meaningfully re- late to it.

The political field of online privacy resilience is demarcated by the unfolding practices of anti-surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). In response to the logic of capitalist media markets and their exploitation of private social media interac- tions for profit, the "lost privacy struggle" could be consid- ered as anti-capitalist or even anti-systemic. The struggle over privacy thus further politicizes the digital public sphere, and confronts private actors such as social media companies with demands for public responsibility. The private strikes back against state domination and capitalist exploitation. While traditional media industries were mainly content providers for mass consumption, with only a very restricted interest in private information of individual media users, the new profit logics of digital media markets is "big data," rich in private information (Helles and Ørmen, 2020).

Individual and privatized practices of resilience against sur- veillance capitalism are not a social movement in the tradi- tional sense. They can but do not need to take shape in political mobilization. Resilience against surveillance capital- ism is often based on individual choices, awareness of Internet risks raised in schools, families or other informal institutions, and incentives for changing user behavior as facilitated by new apps or start-ups. Risk avoidance and critical awareness of surveillance results from learning and new creative media usage that challenges the monopoly of the tech giants. By expressing these fears of surveillance and turning them into political mobilization, the anti-surveillance movement targets the heart of the public sphere and the public use of media technologies.

In the battle over the digital future, civil society becomes the wooed ally, not only for states, but also for global compa- nies. Tech giants, like Facebook or Google, have always prop- agated the image of "being friends." Their self-declared mission is not simply "making profit," but enhancing techno- logical progress combined with public welfare. They also reg- ularly sustain liberal values, such as free speech and freedom of information, and the rights of their users for limitless access to content. To be targeted by civil society as "evil" in the bat- tle against surveillance capitalism, therefore, affects them in a particular way and directly undermines the credibility on which they base their business models. Once users have learned to fear the tech giants, their marketing strategy of propagating an open access Internet increasingly falls on deaf ears. This again offers an opportunity for states to take the lead in the social and political struggle over the digital future, laying the political pathways for recoupling digitalization to social norms, and the values of privacy and property.

Embedding the digital world in a world of social norms and values could become the major state task of the 21st century (Staab, 2019). More than ever, states who are willing to en- gage in this struggle will need to seek alliances with other states and with civil society. The regulation of the Internet is a cooperative state tasks that includes a world society in its for- mation. Partnerships between state authorities, civil society and consumers will ultimately also need to get the digital me- dia industries on board by appealing to their responsibilities and making use of their know-how for creative solutions.

The digital public sphere accounts for an information surplus paired with net-information losses (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). On the one hand, digital media technologies are con- stant data providers. The information universe of the digital media world is expansive, not simply in the way it turns ana- logue data like written texts, books, or music into digital data, but also in the way it constantly produces new data through its own proceedings, for instance, in the way it gener- ates user data for commercial purposes On the other hand, in- formation within this flow of data remains a scarce resource. News that are collected and bundled from the flow of data be- come increasingly unreliable and media users are exposed to the risk of disinformation (Broersma, 2013). Yet, there is a confusion about what we mean when we say that digital data, or modes of data processing, inform or disinform.

In the following, I propose to differentiate digital data that conveys information, non-information and disinformation. *Information* results from any kind of data usage. It relates to any digital data that is turned into an object of observation about the social world. As such, it is typically followed up by communication, for instance, in the way my mobile app informs about nutrition, fitness and weight losses after a long walk in the forest. In information science, this process is re- ferred to as "making data intelligent": information is gener- ated in the transfer from "raw data" to "analysed data" (Ra¨sa¨nen and Nyce, 2013). Data usage would, however, be wrongly understood as an operation that simply picks up available data or recombines it in a particular social context. The usage of digital data simultaneously generates new data through its forms of activation and recombination, for in- stance, in the form of social media sharing facilities provided by my fitness tracking app. Through the public sphere, we can observe how information is generated and what people do with information. The attraction of social media lies pre- cisely in this possibility to sort out information about mine or other people's lives as socially relevant. The social media network sphere is thus turned into a meta-sphere of societal self-observations (Trenz, 2005). It is based on multiple observations by users who, supported by various apps and algorithms, constantly generate new information out of the observation of the social media behavior of others. As such, it is imploding with data that informs about observations per- formed by its own users. Whatever information is retrieved by a user is turned into new information for other users. My Google searches, or my Facebook clicks to access content, even gain economic value and can be traded by companies for profit.

Non-information relates to data that is generated by digital media with a potential to be used by someone. This relates, for instance, to the accumulation and endless recombination of data that are facilitated by digital media technologies, but that, for the time being, are not accessed by the user and con- nected to ongoing processes of communication. Not every- thing that digital media technologies do is observed and talked about. Digital data is constantly produced and recom- bined by machines, but it is not necessarily picked up and used by someone to mark a distinction and denote something. A webcam or my fitness app can produce infinite amounts of digital data about what is going on in a particular physical space, but this data remains non-information as long as no- body picks it up. Only if someone with access to this data

asks what happened at a particular time at that location is in- formation generated. Digital data contains, in this sense, the potential of usage. There is always the possibility that existing data could inform about something. This potential is acti- vated by turning data into information, i.e., marking it as an observation of something in ongoing communication. If non- information relates to all potentially available data, we need to face the logical impossibility that we cannot see it without turning it into information about something. When we start looking for it, and search for non-information in the endless flow of data, we continuously produce information. As soon as we spot something as non-information, it starts to inform about something (even in the minimal sense that it does not inform). The idea that digital data contain "unused" informa- tion is, in fact, widespread in the public discourse about big data, and implied in the call to explore it as a potential source of knowledge that can drive economies, empower citizens and improve government (Lupton, 2014, p. 95).

Disinformation, finally, is not "non-observation," but "wrong observation." As such, it can only result from previ- ous observation and thus relates to the usage of data in ongo- ing communications that observe and interpret the social world, and contribute to shared knowledge and meaning (Nassehi, 2019, pp. 99–107). Disinformation is qualified in- formation. it can best be approached as a specific form of in- formation that is valued with regard to shared cultural patterns and normative standards. The standards used are those established by the modern public sphere, as codified, for instance, in ethical guides of journalism, or in the discourse ethics of communicative rationality. This qualification process is a public sphere test of validity to establish whether informa- tion which is retrieved from the flow of data is connected by users in the right or wrong way. Disinformation thus implies an attribution of responsibility for the wrong use of informa- tion. It is a form of usage of data that is interpreted as wrong because of being non-factual or truthless. Such a "mistake" can be attributed to particular people who make "wrong" us- age of information either because they lack the capacities for correct usage, or are morally corrupted and have wrongful intentions. The qualification of *wrong* information usage in the form of disinformation, at the same time, reminds us of the *correct* use of information. Disinformation, in this sense, is embedded in both a factual–scientific discourse about the objectified world and in a moral–ethical discourse about the just world. Only by combining the factual and the moral di- mension, the observation of disinformation can be linked to corrective measures, such as the call for truth or the right use of data. (Scholl, 2019).

This does not yet explain why the impression prevails that digital media have increased the risk of disinformation enter- ing a new post-truth age of politics (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Farkas and Schou, 2020). In the digital information economy, the overflow of information decreases its value. The more information becomes available and accessible, the higher the risk of disinformation, i.e., the possibility that in- formation is taken up and used in social contexts that are ex- perienced as disruptive and disconnecting. Analogue public spheres build on an economy of scarcity of information that is made available through approved channels at controlled price. A filter applies in the application of the distinction be- tween information and disinformation that is collectively identified and interpreted. Digital public spheres build on an economy of information overload that is constantly retrieved

from endless flows of data. This often makes the distinction between information and disinformation ad-hoc and con- tested. No filters apply that would allow us to sort out what has been approved, and what has not.

Beyond this context, the digital public sphere can be distin- guished by the enhanced contestation over the value of infor- mation. Digital media users and related groups tend to disagree about the way information "informs." The claim for information is no longer exclusive, but becomes competitive. Competing claims about what informs, or should inform, are confronted with counter claims about data that disinforms, is abused, retrieved in the wrong way, or misinterpreted. Such contestation typically takes place in the paradigm struggles between different epistemic communities that link knowledge of science back to political power to inform political decision- making, for instance, in world politics, when governments and NGOs discuss the effects of climate change, or the risks of nuclear energy (Antoniades, 2003). Digital media have a tendency to expand such paradigm struggles to intergroup conflicts in a way that is increasingly detached from debates within science (van Dijck, 2014).

The point is that such epistemic struggles are rarely fought among equals. An increase of epistemic conflicts diagnosed as a symptom of post-truth politics would rather be an impor- tant indicator for new inequalities and the asymmetry of resources to access and use digital data (Bennett and Livingston, 2018). Post-truth politics are in this sense only in- sufficiently described in terms of "epistemic uncertainty" in the relationship between science and politics. They are also in more fundamental sense about questions of "epistemic (in)justice" unveiling the entanglement of reason and power in public truth seeking processes (Conrad et al., 2022, Medina, 2018). Political struggles about the truth value of in- formation are also about who in a democratic society should have the authority to draw the line between information and disinformation, to decide about "facts" and to take corrective measures against the spread of "alternative facts" One possi- bility is that states should take their responsibility to guaran- tee the "correct" use of procedures for the establishment of truth. The truth value of information would turn into a legal category and, as such, justify regulatory interventions in the functioning of news media and journalism. Such attempts to gain state control over the truth value of news are prominent in the fight against "fake news." Authoritarian states defend their version of truth with vigor, while liberal-democratic states try to regulate news markets to hold information pro- viders legally accountable for the accuracy of information and prevent audiences from the perceived negative effects of disin- formation (such as possible health damage), (Alemanno, 2018; Klein and Wueller, 2017). Another possibility is to re- cur to the authority of science to decide about the truth value of information. The scientification of the public sphere has, however, destructive effects on democratic modes of will for- mation and overall risks to increase uncertainty and to further undermine trust in democracy (Weingart, 1999). The call for making public debates more "scientific" and fact-based also disregards the possibility of the politicization of science, and collides with conflicting calls for measures to re-establish democratic means of control over the functioning of science (Brown, 2009). The public sphere can, at best, establish an arena for science and democracy to enter into a dialogue, but it does not empower science over democracy to impose its ver- sion of truth in public debates, and use it for the legitimation

of democratic politics. The third liberal solution is to leave the decision about the truth value of information simply open to be decided by the market space of ideas (Eisenegger et al., 2019). The market value of information would be established by supply and demand. Traditional public spheres of mass media were able to impose the value of information based on the assumption of scarcity: the more privileged and informed the eye of observation, the higher the price of information. If scarcity establishes the market price, the demand for quality news can be more easily coupled with the exclusivity of infor- mation, the status of expertise of the informant, or the partic- ular efforts of journalistic investigation necessary to "uncover truth." In the context of information and news abundance, such established price mechanisms of journalism collapse.

Free information markets, therefore, do not necessarily en- hance the quality of democracy. If the competitive market of attention and the market of truth-seeking collide, the mere quantity of information needs to be balanced by introducing quality criteria that are normatively grounded and justified, and allow the filtering and interpretation of information according to shared criteria of relevance. In short, the public sphere is not only needed for accumulating information, but for qualifying it. Through the public sphere filters, every piece of new information is embedded in a web of formerly quali- fied information as the output of previous observations of the social world that has already undergone a validity check. We can speak of disinformation as a form of unranked informa- tion that results from the collapse of selective public sphere fil- ters and its mechanisms of establishing the shared value of information in a collectively binding way. Disinformation, in this sense, is a form of disconnected information that still claims to inform about something without being bound by the critical force of discourse.

New modes of empowerment of the will of the people

Another important testing ground for contemporary public sphere struggles is found in the digital challenges to democratic representation. New media and the Internet are not nec- essarily bad for representative democracy. The Internet does not simply replace representation by participation. By enhanc- ing new forms of participatory democracy, the Internet has also multiplied representative claims, for instance by various civil society actors, or by global interest representatives (Dahlgren, 2013). Social media struggles over democratic rep- resentation have a potential to unfold an all-inclusive dy- namic, and demarcate political spaces that reach beyond the national. While democratic representation has been opened up by digitalization and globalization, there are at the same time increasing efforts to reclaim representation in a way that re-establishes the linkage to territory and community. Such attempts to close the discursive spaces, within which claims for political representation can be raised by plural actors and groups distinguish the *new populism* from democracy (Shaw, 2020, pp. 181–222).

Populism as an invocation of a unitary representation of the people is neither new nor very original. Public sphere struggles have always been organized around such cultural repertoires of representations of the people and the popular will. Historically speaking, it should be restated, however, that the modern public sphere emerged in opposition to the representative publicness of *ancient regime* (Habermas, 1989,

pp. 5–13). The public sphere disaggregated the body of the king, and the claim for a unitary representation of truth. With the emphasis on the public use of reasoning, participation and deliberation always precede political representation in the form of the expression of a popular will that remains open to criticism. The sovereign people then have a double space in democracy: as the constituent power and as an artefact of popular will formation (Canovan, 2005). They underlie de- mocracy and they are constructed through democratic poli- tics. Representation, on the one hand, is a demand raised by the people as the constituent power of democracy. On the other hand, representation is only made through democratic politics, which is why the people cannot exist prior to democ- racy, or constitute it. National representative systems accommodate this dual space of the people with reference to an imagined community of democracy, while at the same time, upholding relatively inclusive processes of will formation with an emphasis on individual freedom and equality (Balibar, 2014). This framework kept demands for a unitary represen- tation of the people low.

Populism is the attempt to suspend the dual space of demo- cratic representation. By insisting on the unitary representa- tion of the people, populists do not simply continue the myth of the people as the constituents of democracy, but close the discursive spaces through which popular sovereignty finds expression. Populism insists on the myth of the unitary represen- tation of the people, but does not allow for demystification. This bipolar conceptualization of democratic politics as a struggle between "the people" and its "enemies" is the strong and the weak point of populism. Calls for the people are strong in terms of their persuasive power, but weak in terms of their conceptual vagueness and contradictions that can be easily pointed out by political opponents (Me´ ny and Surel, 2002). Populism remains a provocation for democrats that triggers new forms of anti-populist mobilizations in the form of a democratic backlash against the "cultural backlash" of the new authoritarianism (Norris and Inglehart, 2019). The weak point of populism is precisely this lack of ideological strength and its reduction to a single claim. The people can be evoked and mystified, but they cannot really be seized, which makes the mobilization *of the people* notoriously unreliable. The imposition of popular sovereignty can become a burden for individuals that are subsumed under "the people." The anti-populist claim results from such feelings of obtrusion by the populists. It demystifies the people and restores pluralism and diversity of political opinion. While the populist will in- sist on simple language and reduction, the anti-populist oppo- nent reintroduces complexity in public debates.

To understand why such a unitary representation of the people has gained in popularity, it is not sufficient to point only at the success of populist mobilization and the persuasive power of traditional nationalist discourse. The new salience of "the people" in political mobilization rather needs to be explained with reference to a change in the communicative environments through which democracy is enacted, and the way publics, who *claim to represent* the people of democracy, are constituted. Digital media and public sphere transforma- tions have a profound impact on our ability to imagine politi- cal representation. On the one hand, they have increased the demand for a unitary representation of the people, while, on the other hand, they contribute to the liquefaction of the col- lective thus making any form of representation implausible. The anti-social and disconnected social media dynamics

demystify the notion of the people, yet still the Internet is full of old and new myths that drive the collective imagination of democratic politics.

The field of populist and anti-populist contestation is opened up by the media. On the one hand, populism is performed through the media (Moffitt, 2016). New and old me- dia, and not parliaments, are the main arena for populist parties to challenge representative democracy. Media logics are generally believed to contribute to the rise of populism, and its charismatic leaders can often be found to be innova- tive media strategists (Esser et al., 2017; Kra¨mer, 2014). In political campaigning, the populist communicative style aligns with journalistic demands for personalized and conflictive news stories. News framing often follows a similar polarizing logic, for instance in the way foreign politics are framed in terms of "our national interests" against the rest of the word (Kim and Zhou, 2020). On the other hand, traditional (leg- acy) and new (digital) media do not necessarily provide fertile ground for the amplification of the populist demand, but can also erode it. The idea of the authentic people, evoked by pop- ulism, must be different from the audience of the mass media, which addresses "masses" and not "the people." The immedi- acy of populism seems anti-media, which is why many popu- list leaders prefer social media as their mouthpiece to talk to "the people" in an "immediate" way. This is commonly ac- companied by the critique that mass media do not allow for the authentic expression of popular will (Canovan, 2005,
p. 90). The emphasis on cultural closure by the populists can also be seen in contradiction to the media expansive market logics. As market actors, media institutions rather avoid po- larization, and seek to find common denominators to recon- cile different audience taste and opinion, and to address the plural interests of their readers.

Digital public sphere transformations and their far- reaching impact on the re-definition of publicness embrace populism more often than they seek distance. In particular, social media are ambivalent allowing, on the one hand, claims for political representations to multiply, and, on the other hand, facilitating a populist communicative style that escapes public accountability. In claiming for political representation, a populist logic of belonging or not to the "the real people" has become dominant in social media campaigns that are run by populist leaders and parties. Their success in turning social media into a battlefield over political representation is remarkable, as social media analysts commonly assume the opposite, that social media would mainly contribute to the fragmentation of the political space.

If populism is distinguished as a "style of communication" (Moffitt, 2016), we can also distinguish a communicative style for the performance of anti-populism. Rejecting the pop- ulist logics of acclamation can only mean recurring to the use of argumentation and public reason. Through anti-populist mobilization, the debate about democratic legitimacy is thus re-embedded in the public sphere where the question is not so much who is the most credible in upholding the myth of uni- tary representation of the people, as who has the best argu- ments to defend the public interest. The resilience of the public sphere against the populist challenge is measured in the indignation of the anti-populist voice, those who hold plural arguments, diverse identities and individual life projects against the hubris of the unitary representation of the people. The presumptuousness of the populist leaders to represent the people never really unifies, but divides, while creating

antagonism and ultimately exacerbating the divisions they claim to overcome. As the populist claim for the unitary repre- sentation of the people, by default, fails to unify the people, it can at least have the effect of unifying the opposition against populism. In the same way the many potential minorities and fractions of society are targeted by populism as adversaries, they also feel reason to object to and oppose populism. Their visibility as a negative status group is the outcome of populist mobilization and the triggering moment for anti-populist mobilizations, groups that claim democratic rights, but would not come into existence if not as a response to populist mobilization.

Anti-populism is responsive: it develops its distinctive com- municative style in critical exchange with populism, and through the mobilization of public reason to refute the popu- list demands (Moffitt, 2018). Anti-populism is a backlash against the populist backlash. It emerges out of a public sphere struggle of argumentative exchanges that does not sim- ply seek confrontation with populism, but convincingly argues to reject it. According to (Hamdaoui, 2021, p. 2) "(.. .) a stylistic anti-populism is made of formal and pro-institutional language, has a technical or intellectual approach to politics, encourages respect towards political elites and favours composure over exuberance." The language of anti- populism is deeply institutionally ingrained, but it is also more difficult to translate into political mobilization. The ef- fectiveness of the available tools employed by democratic op- position actors to revert autocratization and to combat the pernicious effects of polarization will also change as the dis- ruptive processes of the public sphere and the media infra- structures advance (Somer et al., 2021). The language of the democratic public sphere's resilience is still raised but might no longer resonate if the structural preconditions for the sus- tainability of democracy are no longer met. Anti-populism points in this sense both at the potential and at the limits of the self-corrective mechanisms of public sphere resilience.

The self-corrective mechanisms of the public sphere

While the public sphere and democracy continue to face deep disruptions of media communications and infrastructures, I argued in this article for a better understanding of the poten- tial of public sphere resilience and renewal in the digital age. The identification of such self-corrective mechanisms of the public sphere adds in important ways to the diagnosis of post- democracy, which is reinterpreted as a form of attribution of norm violations and particular actors' abuses of power with a critical intent. Such self-corrective mechanisms do not simply apply through law, but are related to collective mobilizations and institutionalized procedures of public opinion and will formation. The concerns with disrupted media communica- tions become *public* concerns of media users in search of the protection of privacy, of collective representation and of voice against being disempowered by government and disowned by the digital industries. This is a public sphere of critical dis- course, which turns against the consolidation of acclamatory forms of publicity to claim for the democratic legitimation of digital markets and politics. As an empirical yardstick for the triggering of such self-corrective mechanisms of public sphere renewal, I proposed to look beyond the measurement of the frequency of violations of democratic norms and procedures to understand how such moments of rupture of privacy,

misrepresentations and disinformation are collectively inter- preted and translated into critical discourse (or not). In the three empirical cases of digital disruptions analyzed (surveil- lance, populism and post-truth), we overall found the revali- dation of the normative principles and critical standards of democracy, of which the diagnosis of post-democracy itself is part of. In the absence of an alternative template for the legiti- macy of political order, progressive social movements raise the agenda of equality, justice and truth to claim for demo- cratic control over the Internet. The self-corrective mecha- nisms of the public sphere are however not only dependent on agency, i.e., on the possibilities for the mobilization of critical voice. The public sphere also provides for a system-internal control mechanism in the form of justificatory constraints un- der which any form of public authority needs to operate. As such, the communicative power of the public sphere is not just external to the system, i.e., attributable to the actors of civil society. It is already inscribed in the operations of the sys- tem and the structures of language through which any exer- cise of authority over others can claim public legitimacy. The diagnosis of post-democracy must therefore be related back to the constraining force of public discourse that establishes the "realm of justifications" within which the legitimation of political order seems possible (Habermas, 1996, ch. 8).

The presence of such self-corrective mechanisms in the digi- tal public sphere is not meant as a rescue of democracy which continues to be challenged and undermined through the use of digital media technologies (Habermas, 2022). In a post- democratic constellation, where agency is flawed and demo- cratic institutions are non-responsive (for instance, in the case of distorted elections), the malfunctions of the democratic process point to the possibility of a new digital structural transformation of the public sphere (Seeliger and Sevignani, 2022). Such a structural transformation towards a post- democratic public sphere can only be understood in terms of a possible de-coupling of the power structures of society from the language of normative criticism that program the self- legitimation of the democratic process. The self-corrective mechanisms of the public sphere can then be approached as the dynamic interplay between the de-coupling and the recou- pling of public authority with various forms of societal reso- nance (as measured, for instance, in shifting attention cycles, in mediated demands for justification or in political mobiliza- tion) (Eder and Trenz, 2006). Communicative power provides for another form of responsiveness that operates through the normative substrate of the public sphere, its underlying cul- tural and discursive predispositions and the type of justifica- tory constraints and demands for legitimation generated by it. As such, it is not measured in the form of direct influence by strategic actors, but rather unfolds as a form of collective learning through the formation of public opinion and the pro- motion of critical discourse.

My reading of public sphere resilience accounts for the interchanging relationship between agency and structures of discourse in the disruption and reconstitution of contempo- rary democracy. For this purpose, I have identified three broad fields of contemporary public sphere struggles and re- lated them to the digital transformations of the public sphere and the media: the rebalancing between privacy and publicity, the information value and the truth orientation of public debates and the collective representation of the people in de- mocracy. In all these three fields, we can observe how funda- mental challenges of democracy are identified by new critical

movements giving rise to forms of political mobilization. Critique as the machinery of the modern public sphere and so- ciety (Eder and Trenz, 2006) can at times slow down, and at other times accelerate. In the so-called post-democratic con- stellation, there is no shortage of critical discourse. The public sphere and democracy switch from the routine mode into a crisis mode. Critique of the digital transformations of the pub- lic sphere keeps democratic society in a permanent state of alert, and confronts it with its own insufficiencies (Eder, 2013). This idea of the modern public sphere as an "unfinished project" (Habermas, 1990) is closely related to such a communicative undertaking of critique that is not only carried by intellectuals or elites, but always involves, and also addresses, the general public.

If modernity, through its capacities for critical self- observation, unfolds as an unfinished project that nevertheless gives collective orientation and drives collective practices, the distinction between democracy and post-democracy falls apart. The diagnosis of an epochal change of democracy rather adds to the existing accounts of public sphere criticism. As such, it can hardly be sustained by quantifiable empirical data, but needs to be made *publicly relevant*. There is, there- fore, no diagnosis of disrupted public sphere that does not en- gage in a discussion of these normative questions of media's role in democracy and does not, at the same time, intervene in democracy. This would mean that post-democracies would still be exposed to and also generate new forms of critical dis- course. The very term post-democracy is indicative of such a critical intent, which most of the critical thinkers who diag- nose the post-democratic constellation seem to share. They are not apologists for a post-democratic order, but rather critical voices in defense of liberal democracy. If this assump- tion holds true, the diagnosis of post-democracy becomes, in itself, a form of democratic practice. We can only make sense of post-democracy by continuing to write the theory of de-mocracy and the public sphere and engage as media and pub- lic sphere scholars in critical debates which renew the utopia of the public sphere and the validity of its underlying principles.

By following this line of thought, the debate about the fu- ture of democracy can be de-dramatized. Democracies do transform, they are conflictual and they might also be disor- dered or disrupted. They are drama, for sure, but they are not a tragedy. Digital publics, more than ever, do not speak in one language to one people in support of democratic self- government. The challenge for future research is to look be-yond these symptoms of post-democracy and understand how the utopia of democracy remains, at the same time, inscribed in digital media use and practices facilitating the continuous (re)constitution of critical publics. New digital technologies and their use cannot be made responsible for ei- ther fostering democratic decay or allowing for democratic renewal, as this is often put in the debate between cyber- optimists and cyber-pessimists. The fate of the digital public sphere remains rather bound to the dynamic interplay be-tween dystopia and utopia that is manifested in the articula- tion of critical discourse in the defense of truth, the search for a rebalanced relationship between privacy and publicity and the claims for political (democratic) representation.

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