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The theory of the public sphere as a cognitive theory of modern society

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Abstract
The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere is a key contribution to political philosophy, media history, democratic theory and political economy – published almost 60 years ago – that left a deep imprint on the process of democratic consolidation of the Federal Republic of Germany. At the same time, the Habermasian model of the public sphere was used to test out the possibilities of democratisation beyond the nation-state. The theory of the public sphere was, however, mainly discussed as a contribution to normative political theory and, as such, the applicability of its normative standards remained contested. In this article, I focus instead on a second sociological reading of Habermas' theory of the public sphere as an exploration of the cognitive foundations of modern society. The relevance of this approach can be shown in an exemplary way by discussing the functioning of publicity, which, by creating social visibility and facilitating public opinion formation, on the one hand, provides the knowledge base of a shared social world and, on the other hand, becomes the main driver of social change through critical self-reflection. The article goes on to take a look at recent public sphere transformations in the context of digitalisation and globalisation, and argues that public sphere principles are both undermined and gain new relevance when facing the challenges of new and digital media.

Keywords
communication, public sphere, publicity, democracy, Habermas

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Cognition and public criticism: The history of the concept of the public sphere

The notion of the public sphere is deeply rooted in German ideological thought. Looking back at 60 years of Habermas' Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, one cannot help but notice how the critical reading of the public sphere by scholars from different disciplines has always been closely related to the history of democratisation of the Federal Republic of Germany, its critical distance to the past and its future orientation as a democratic nation-state within a united Europe.[1] Still in the spirit of 'critical theory', Habermas' starting assumption in his habilitation thesis was the colonisation of the bourgeois public sphere, which he saw as growing into the realm of consumption, thus becoming apolitical, in order to simultaneously disseminate ideology and suppress public reasoning.[2] Such a Marxist critique of media capitalism and consumption was *en vogue* in the sixties and seventies. It explained how the media and its products took commodity form, which in turn had an ideological impact on 'false consciousness', and how such processes were controlled by the culture industries in close cooperation with the ruling classes. Accordingly, the culture-consuming public sphere was described no longer as opinion-forming but as consciousness-altering. It aimed not at the formation of the individual as a self-determining political subject, but at mass consumption.[3] Modern mass media publicity, the critique argues, is characterised by the monopoly of producers, the passivity of audiences and the commodification of content for private profit. In this early work, as Habermas himself acknowledges in a new preface to the 1990 reissue, the influence of Adorno and Horkheimer's theory of mass culture was still evident.[4] As early as 1962, however, Habermas also recognised the potential for emancipation of the democratic public sphere.[5] In a thoroughly forward-looking way, Habermas directs his attention to the transformation of the liberal constitutional state into a social constitutional state, and thus to the need for broader social involvement of organised actors and associations, that is, to the expansion of civil society structures.[6] Here, the possibility of redemocratising the public sphere of domination ('vermachtete Öffentlichkeit') was indicated, which was actually triggered by the social mobilisations of civil society in the late sixties and seventies.

In the reading of this epoch-making work, both system-critical and emancipatory strands of interpretation remain closely interwoven: a critical-Marxist tradition of analysing the ideology and political economy of the public sphere of markets,[7] as well as an institutionalist tradition of assessing the performance of plural, representative, participatory or discursive public spheres, their infrastructures, institutions and procedures in the context of democratic opinion-formation.[8] In his later work, Jürgen Habermas contributed in particular to the further development of the emancipatory model of the democratic public sphere. Exemplary for this are his considerations of the conditions of discourse driven social learning processes through which the rational potential of the Enlightenment unfolds and democratisation continues.[9] The counter-model of a commodified mass-media public sphere, in turn, underwent an important correction in the way alternative market structures were taken into account and, above all, the role of the audience was revalued.[10] In recent media and communication research, audience response is no longer

operationalised as a dependent variable; instead, the audience is once again assigned the active role it has played since the Enlightenment.[11] Political economy approaches of a commodified public sphere and institutional or cultural-theoretical approaches to a critically reflexive public sphere should, therefore, not be seen as mutually exclusive. Mutually dependent, they inspire each other and thrive off critical exchange.

Finally, the model of Habermas' public sphere has been applied to the explanation of the potential of democratisation beyond the national.[12] Here, again, Habermas provides major intellectual input. In his contribution to sociology of law 'Between Facts and Norms' published in 1992, Habermas points to the possible detachment of the concepts of public sphere and civil society from their fixation on the state. Such an embedding of the public sphere in the state was still tacitly assumed in an encyclopedia article published in 1964: "We speak of a political public sphere, in contrast, for instance, to the literary one, when public discussions deal with objects connected to the activity of the state. Although state authority is, so to speak, the executor of the public sphere, it is not part of it (…)".[13]

In this early formulation, the public sphere was conceptualised as a mediator between 'society and the state'. Its democratic control function applies to state activities. Accordingly, opinion-formation processes were seen as being bound by the state, so that the 'public of the citizens of the state' can represent the nation and exercise its task of controlling 'state-organised rule'.[14]

By contrast, in 'Between Facts and Norms', the public sphere is more generally described as a sounding board for problems that need to be dealt with politically.[15] Such political signalling effects that speak to shared problems in need of collective solutions can then also unfold in a context in which the public authority to resolve such problems is still insufficiently established, or must first be constituted. Civil society, in particular, becomes active where the state is ineffective or state intervention is undesirable. This opens up possibilities for reconstituting statehood or governing beyond the state, witnessed by its increasing relevance in the European unification process.[16] Consequently, the public sphere is no longer based on state structures, but appears first and foremost as a loose and non-binding 'network for the communication of content and opinions'. It is a 'shared social space of communicative actions' that is constituted through its own operations thus not pre-established.[17] The audience, too, is no longer a state audience, or a legally defined electorate, but rather the generalised addressee to put to the test the persuasive power of communicative actions.[18]

This nation-state detached definition of the public sphere is all the more interesting because it is receptive to a procedural understanding of the generation of political legitimacy that is applicable to international relations, traditionally conceived of as the realm of anarchy.[19] It can be surmised that Habermas was already concerned at this point with the problem of the democratic deficit in the European Union and the constitutionalisation of a new cosmopolitan world order; all topics that appeared prominent in his political writings in the Nineties and early 2000s.[20] Shared worlds of understanding may often be condensed into nation-states, but the relations of mutual observation reach beyond such state-bound and culturally confined spaces, and relate to a world audience as the principal addressee of public reason and claims of generalised validity. Precisely because physical presence is becoming less and less necessary in a mass-mediated public

sphere, audiences, readers or viewers can detach themselves from existing social or political spaces and are even encouraged to do so by the global culture industry. Topic-specific opinion formation, in particular, is increasingly taking place in a complex network 'that branches out spatially into a multitude of overlapping international, national, regional, communal, subcultural arenas'.[21] Such multi-level public spheres are often functionally differentiated and organise around thematic or policy areas, thus also offering themselves as control instances of governance beyond the nation-state.[22]

Finally, Habermas points out that political public spheres (like civil society) have empirical reference points and are not merely normative postulates.[23] These factual relations facilitated by national and global communications, and the opinions that crystallise through these communicative exchanges as well as their effects on political legitimacy are to be uncovered by political science and media studies, but they also pose a macrosociological challenge in the assumption of an interrelation between the public sphere and social change. The process of legitimation and the permanent democratisation facilitated by the communicative infrastructures of the public sphere do not only impact on decision-making procedures, but also account for the integration of complex and anonymous societies. Therefore, public sphere theory cannot be reduced to democratic theory, but must ultimately be formulated as theory of society. In this way, the long-term institutionalised processes of democratic legitimation can be related to the evolution of modern society. The normative validity of the public sphere becomes 'factual' in the way it shapes institutions, law and last but not least the attitudes and practices of democratically minded citizens.

In summary, public sphere theory has been interpreted primarily as a contribution to normative political theory and tested for its validity in changing political constellations (Fraser 2007). The normative question of how the public sphere contributes to democracy was thus highlighted over the sociological question of how the public sphere constitutes modern society. This latter aspect of a sociology of the public sphere as a cognitive theory of modern society will be elaborated and evaluated in the following section.

Public sphere as a building block of a theory of modern society

Public sphere theory should not only be understood as a contribution to the normative theory of democracy, but always remains tied back to social theory. This linkage between public sphere theory and sociological theory was already at the core of Habermas' 'Structural Transformation'. In order to be able to speak of a structural transformation of the public sphere, we must acknowledge the structuring effects of communication in relation to social change. This is not simply a matter of redeeming democratic legitimacy through the structures of the political public sphere, that is, the public sphere as a template for democratic practice. It is also about elaborating an understanding of the constitutive dynamics of public discourse, which at the same time establish social order and drive social change. Democratisation and societal rationalisation cannot be reduced to the will of political actors; they are also evolutionary, institutionally and sociostructurally embedded, and thus need to be understood as the 'laws of the social' that account for the dynamic unfolding of modern society.[24]

The most elaborate chapter in Habermas' Structural Transformation on the topic of the social-constitutive dynamics of the public sphere are his remarks in paragraph 13 on Immanuel Kant.[25] Historically, the public sphere comes into play as a context for justifying social order. According to Kant, however, these are not solely moral-philosophical justifications, such as those cited in Hobbes' Leviathan. Rather, publicity unfolds in the individual and social practices of the public use of reason. This is the 'method of enlightenment' understood not only as the yardstick for the legitimacy of state order, but also as the regulator of interpersonal relations. Kant is sociologically reinterpreted here in terms of a theory of the rationalisation of social order and its moral foundations. The public use of reason is no longer the province of scholars alone, but becomes a social mandate: "The public sphere within which philosophers practice their critical craft is, however, notwithstanding its academic centre, not a merely academic one. Just as philosophers' discussions take place in the face of government, (…) so, too, do they before the audience of 'the people,' to instruct them to make use of their own reason."[26]

As Habermas further elaborates, the position of this audience is ambiguous; on the one hand, it is immature, since it is not yet enlightened, while on the other hand, it constitutes itself in the public use of reason to claim its maturity. The public sphere thus simultaneously enables the emancipation of society and creates social order by enabling individuals, in the Kantian sense, to relate to the rules of morality. Public sphere theory here becomes the theory of integration of modern society: 'The deliberating audience of "men" constitutes itself into that of "citizens," whereby it comes to an understanding about the affairs of the "common being."'[27] For Kant/Habermas, civic society unfolds through discourse that makes public use of reason, and can legitimise itself on its own terms to provide for the common good without having to build on transcendental premises or pre-political foundations. Society can exist because it can rationally justify itself, relying on no authorities outside the social. A politically functioning public sphere generates social order, more specifically, a democratically constituted order.

In order to pursue this programme further, a theory of society based on the use of language is needed. This theory must satisfy the demands of being able to explain a social-integrative dynamic inherent in public communication, and to derive its structuration effect. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Jürgen Habermas turned to an action- and communication-theoretical foundation of sociology in his next major project. Habermas' theory of communicative action can be understood as a translation of Kant's socio-evolutionary reflections on the unfolding of public reason into a neo-Kantian communication theory of society.[28] Anticipating the later development of a sociology of practice, the theory of communicative action is explicitly based on a shift from the transcendence of social order, often presupposed in classical sociological theories, to the communicative practices of everyday life. By following this pragmatic understanding, the participants in societal communications do not only constantly (re)produce the meaning structures of modern society; they also critically validate them and reflect on the desirability or undesirability of their observed effects. The operations of a critical analysis *of* society are, so to speak, taken up and continued by the participants *in* society. This capacity to engage in public discourse develops over the course of societal rationalisation, which at the same time promotes reflexivity, that is, the ability to critically self-observe in order to make the

initially opaque structures of meaning of the lifeworld transparent for the participants, to enable them to justify their choices and preferences and, at the same time, to translate them into collective reasoning that guides future action.

To be able to reconstruct the evolution of modern society as a collectively practiced critique of reason, Habermas draws on the symbolic interactionism of Mead and Schütz to demonstrate how the collective understandings that crystallise in the public flow of communication also constitute meaningfully structured life contexts, or shared life-worlds.[29] The lifeworld then generally becomes the 'space of reason'[30] and overlaps in a peculiar way with the public sphere, which is often described as the 'universe of discourse' or the 'universe of public reason'.[31] Communicative action takes place in the exchange of reasons, and thus has a structuring effect. The actors and institutions involved in everyday exchanges of reasons move in the public sphere and make use of its in-frastructures. The public reasoning, however, also goes beyond the coordination of everyday action, enabling the coupling of the lifeworld and the system world, where power- and market-driven relations meet the demands for societal rationalisation. Here, too, the coupling of the different system levels presupposes the infrastructures of the public sphere, which allows for market- and power-regulating interventions. The public sphere, however, cannot be confined, as is sometimes erroneously argued, as a special case of consensus-building through the mechanism of public deliberation.[32] If the de-liberative exchange of arguments is merely understood as a mechanism for the fabrication of consensus, such a technocratic reading of the public sphere would miss the binding forces of public discourse that do not derive from its achieved outcomes, but from the shared commitment to reason in an open and principally inconclusive debate that connects participants, if necessary also across cultures and languages. This is also why the public sphere, as well as modern society on which it is built, cannot be reduced to existing language communities, for instance, in the emphatic sense of an ethnic or cultural na-tion.[33] In classical sociology, the social bonds that distinguished modern anonymous society from community were identified early, for instance, in the discussion of the establishment of solidarity relations among strangers. Solidarity in modern societies differs precisely in the way mutual obligations and responsibilities are discussed and can claim validity between individuals who have no kinship relations and often face each other only as abstract subjects.[34]

To develop a sociological understanding of the binding force of public discourse in relation to the socio-integrative dynamics of modern society, it is further necessary to reconsider the spatial dimension of the public sphere. As is well known, the public sphere is 'sphere' or 'network', not space, which is why translations commonly used in English and French, such as public space or espace publique, are misleading.[35] Nevertheless, public sphere unfolds in social space through the exercise of centrifugal and centripetal forces. Both are closely related to the functional performances of the public sphere and mass media. Public sphere disperses communication and attentions while transcending boundaries. It creates a Babylon of languages through the multiplication of content in terms of what can be said in public and how it can be interpreted. The public sphere can often be very noisy and diffuse. At the same time, it also condenses communication, filters opinions and crystallises the noise it generates into language and understanding. The

exciting thing is that the public sphere always does both, and thus expands the universe of understanding accessible through language, putting what can be said into new forms and making it accessible to ever-wider audiences.

The society-shaping force of the public sphere is also often discussed in terms of the 'impact of public opinion', whereby 'impact' in empirical media studies is generally studied in causal terms. Habermas himself rather speaks of a 'mentality-shaping impact' of public opinion.[36] But what exactly constitutes public opinion is not so easy to grasp; the 'published opinion' in the media and the 'surveyed opinion' of polls are rarely congruent, and are often subject to tension. What is said and what is thought can be far apart; and in particular, in our times, it has become popular to diagnose a discrepancy between the published opinion in newspapers and public opinion.[37] However, the precise measurement of public opinion is not what matters at all; rather, public opinion research should be concerned with processes of opinion formation and not with the possible 'correct' interpretation of an artifact that can always be observed from different angles. Moreover, the public sphere is not simply the mirror of public opinion. Its performance stretches well beyond the processes of opinion formation to include the possibility of reflexivity in the mode of second-order observation, whereby the available options for the constitution of 'legitimate' social and political order themselves become the meta-theme of public debates and exchange.[38] The media infrastructures provided via the public sphere make it possible to critically assess and question the 'glimpses' of opinion that crystallise in the mirror of the public sphere: 'People can comment again on what they perceive as public opinion'. Reflexivity thus means: one can also argue about and against public opinion and does so with regularity.[39] These reflexive performances, then, create a second-order observation of public opinion. Society not only sees itself in the mirror of the public, but also describes what it sees and puts it into a narrative form of self-description, with the underlying norms of enlightenment providing guidance. In this sense, value conflicts are typical manifestations of the narrations of society made possible via the public sphere.[40]

In Habermas' latest writings, the public sphere refers to the special case of political communication for the purpose of opinion-forming and collective decision-making.[41] This implies not simply the exchange of reasons in free and open debate, but also some sort of political efficacy that relates to the collective of political decision-making (Fraser 2007). The public sphere is based on argumentative exchanges, but it is not 'cheap talk', as public opinion needs to be translated into a collective will that allows democratic self-government. Accordingly, the public sphere refers to the procedures of applying, critically reviewing and selecting reasons. In other words, the public sphere exists in the democratic process.

However, it is precisely this performance, that is, a procedural narrowing of 'good reasons', that is at stake, not only in processes of political decision-making, but also in the process of the self-constitution of society. The self-constituting society is also a political society, precisely because it confronts the demands to justify the validity of its collective decisions, and, moreover, needs publicity for its operations in order to ensure the visibility of its collective decisions and also of the 'collective' that underlies such decisions.[42]

The point of Habermas' democratic and, consequently, also of his social theory is now the dissolution of the collective of those who are affected by collective decisions. Since

such a collective can hardly materialise, it can only become a subject of public communication. The collective only exists in the restricted sense that it is talked about in the public exchange of reasons. It is a reflection of public discourse, and, as such, is also facilitated by the 'reflexivity' of second-order observation that involves the participants of discourse and all their actual and potential audiences. Precisely because society cannot be founded on the authentic will of a nation (popular sovereignty in the narrower sense), and is nevertheless always more than a merely random gathering of individuals, it is formed through the identification, discussion and resolution of shared problems. This is precisely what democracy means, which thus provides the mechanisms and procedures for societal self-constitution in the form self-government of matters of shared concern.

Kantian-Habermasian social theory thus points to a political society, but not in the narrow sense of a politically or state-preconstituted society, but rather to an open horizon that is approached by individuals who engage in a discourse about their shared understanding of the public good, constantly in the face of new problems that are in need of common resolution. In this process of the self-constitution of a political society, the public sphere has a visibility-generating function, in the sense of generating attention for shared problems and their possible solutions, but also in making the collective that engages in such a conversation visible. This adds to the classical definition of the principle of publicity in important ways: Society publicises itself, so to speak; it not only creates transparency of its own operations, but also makes itself visible for self-recognition by its own members (searching for an ethical self-understanding or the formulation of a collective identity), and for recognition by others. In public sphere parlance, we could also conclude that society becomes addressable, both by its own members and by others, as a collective with ascribed properties and responsibilities. Yet, there never is a fixed meaning of society as collective ethos or aggregated interests of a collection of individuals (which could be described by cultural 'thick description' or statistically calculated). Society is realised only in the collective search for solutions to problems, precisely because the recognition of a 'shared problem' includes the naming of those affected and the distribution of responsibilities. In the pragmatic sense of John Dewey, society is made up of people affected by a common reference to a problem, but a public sphere is needed to create such a reference to a problem, to make it transparent (visible) and to initiate a process of problem-solving.[43] In modern societies, all these processes run through democratic procedures and the institutions and collective actors (such as 'electorates') assigned to them. In this sense, the democratic process is ascribed not only a legitimacy-generating force, but also a constituting force for the social. The democratic process of opinion and will formation is then not solely about legitimate state and government, but about the visibility of society as a formula for the inclusion of those affected.

Habermas speaks at one point of the 'self-referential reproduction of the public sphere'.[44] Legitimation is also a form of reflexivity by allowing for the critical self-observation of the political society through the public sphere, to keep its own norms and objectives constantly present and apply them to new thematic areas. Popular sovereignty becomes a permanent procedure because the place of the body of the people, like that of the body of the king before, is vacated. There remains only the permanent 'public talk' to take its place, which is, at the same time, more than just 'talk' since it is tied back to the

validity of reasons embedded in the life world and the institutions and legal procedures that sustain them.

According to this reading, the discourse theory of democracy, or public sphere theory, contributes to general sociology or, more specifically, the sociology of the cognitive order of modern society.[45] This closes a circle of argumentation that is hinted at in the chapter on Immanuel Kant in 'Structural Transformation' as the possibility of a pragmatic theory of society, then systematically elaborated in the theory of Communicative Action into a theory of language, and finally anchored in a procedural theory of democracy presented in 'Between Facts and Norms'.

Public sphere theory as a social theory, however, is capable of more than merely explaining the effects of publicity on the imagination of the collective of democracy; it also provides an understanding of social change as rationalisation. This, too, is already inherent in Kant's socioevolutionary reflections on the unfolding of public reasons, and is translated by Habermas into a theory of collective learning. Learning in the public sphere is an unfinished process of critique whereby the politically constituted society reflects on its own problem-solving insufficiencies and the inadequacies of the legitimate use of power, which is confronted with ever new challenges and reasons. Problems are never sufficiently described and solutions only insufficiently established, which is why the process of justification must be kept going, a process through which society nonetheless acts on itself, filters out patterns of justification, and thus forms structures of consciousness that can have a stabilising effect on the social order.

Accordingly, the public sphere facilitates knowledge of the social world, and at the same time generates applied knowledge about the self and its positioning within society. As can be seen from the effects of publicity on the creation of societal visibility and its translation into opinion- and will-formation processes, the public sphere simultaneously constitutes social order, and triggers social change that is driven by the normative criticism of that 'existing order'. In the political public sphere, society legitimises and constitutes itself, not only as 'civil society' in the narrow sense, but also as the society of all the participants who can legitimately claim to be involved in shared problem formulation and solution. The rationalising power of the public sphere can never be limited to the national community of belonging; as such a limitation would always be the object of criticism for being irrational, arbitrary or non-democratic. The space for the exchange of meaning that is open by the public sphere cannot be territorially and culturally delimited, even if there are some groups within the public sphere who try to establish such limitations. It is constituted instead as an open, and in this sense, 'public' sphere. Society, in turn, denotes this space of meaningful exchange of reason whereby 'meaning refers to all content that can be discursively interconnected'. Habermas points out that such a universal space for the exchange of reason is by no means utopian, but actually trivial and routine, perhaps just as trivial as Luhmann's world society, which, after all, derives from similar considerations of the scope and connectivity of communication (in Habermas, however, conceived in terms of 'communicative understanding'). For sociology, society, therefore, does not need any social and cultural prerequisites, and actually only relates to the assumption of ongoing argumentative exchanges that allow participants to construct

shared meaning, socialise as individuals and collectives, and become visible for themselves and for others in the mirror of the public sphere.

Public sphere in crisis? Disruptions and resilience of democratic communication processes

Finally, the question arises as to how such an interrelation of the modern public sphere and democracy can be upheld in the context of digitalisation and globalisation. The contemporary digital transformation of the public sphere poses a challenge to public opinion and will formation as filtered through the mass media. However, the evidence of dysfunctions of media communications in no way implies that the digital society is incompatible with the structures and functions of the public sphere.[46] On the contrary, the concept of the public sphere seems to have gained in relevance for the sociological analysis of the digital transformations of society, and the enhanced social and normative struggles that accompany technological change.

Public spheres, according to Habermas, are a 'demanding and therefore improbable evolutionary achievement of modern Western societies'.[47] I would add to this that the dissolution of public spheres is also an unlikely event. Once the interplay between the modern public sphere, media and society has been established, the actors involved in it cannot simply decide to limit publicity or to suspend reason This can be well illustrated by the dilemma that populist parties, or new authoritarian governments, confront when, on the one hand, they can run targeted campaigns, for example, via social media, to manipulate reasons, but, on the other hand, they cannot escape the critical eye of the public which demands justification and holds them accountable. It is, therefore, no coincidence that populists are often masters of media language. Their statements are meant to contribute to public reasons and justification, for instance, in the form of criticism of elites, or of the dominant interpretation of scientific facts. The extent to which these forms of populist criticism are manipulative interventions, or even violations of procedures for the fair exchange of arguments can, in turn, be diagnosed and, if necessary, sanctioned through the engagement of critical publics and the monitoring by media and journalists.

Similarly, we lack the imagination to think of a society without a public sphere. Modern society stands and falls with the public sphere, and even though securing its existence is a perpetual challenge and its performance is always deficient, there are no alternatives to this fragile constellation. Nevertheless, the complexity and thus also the fragility of the public sphere has increased to an alarming degree, which has created considerable uncertainties and tensions under current conditions of digitalisation and transnationalisation of the media.[48] Habermas himself seems rather distrustful of the digital public sphere. Already in his 2009 statement, he joined the chorus of cyberpessimists and emphasised the risks of a dispersion of attention and fragmentation of the 'mass public', where debates were still centred around the same questions of relevance.[49] The Internet, he argues, has a primarily centrifugal effect, and fails to synthesise public opinion. This skepticism was expressed still at pre-social media times before Facebook, Twitter and others shattered political communication and democracy. Looking at the dramatic changes in online communication over the last decade, the last hopes that

so-called interactive media could also support democratic deliberation have evaporated.[50] Habermas' early intuition is confirmed in empirical analyses of online political communication. Personal opinions are exchanged at breakneck speed in digital news spaces, but often without bundling and condensing into public opinion. Much is spoken, even less is understood. In addition to this centrifugalisation of the public sphere via communication in spatially unbounded networks,[51] the development of social media into the primary mass medium of our time has also unfolded a potential for the focalisation of attention and mass mobilisation that Habermas did not foresee. Social media can indeed be occupied by political forces for targeted campaigns with highly transformative impact on the direction of democratic politics, as illustrated by the Brexit referendum.[52]

In the wake of the transformation of digital and globalised media worlds, the discourse of the public sphere is registering a shift from 'critique' to 'crisis', which radically calls into question the functional conditions of the democratic public sphere, and heralds a social upheaval in the direction of post-democratic orders. Often overlooked, however, is the fact that the 'crisis' itself can only be meaningfully interpreted and experienced through the public debates and mobilisations it triggered. Such debates are always to be understood as a search for collective responses, to test out the possibilities of reform, correction or renewal. The public sphere and its normative claims of validity could thus prove resilient, precisely in times of crisis. Not only does public sphere research operate in the mode of diagnosis and critique of the unfulfilled promise of democracy, equality and freedom from domination.[53] My thesis, derived from the preceding considerations on the society-constitutive dynamics of the political public sphere, is that these conflicts about the conditions of democracy in the digital and global age can only be understood under the assumption that the normative template of the modern public sphere is still held valid and applicable. Modern society in this sense persists in our 'crisis-ridden' present, and is perpetuated in the way it confronts the digital in a way to critically reflect its inherent contradictions and inadequacies. According to these considerations, the diagnosis of the crisis of the public sphere always remains tied back to criticism and is experienced as such, not only by experts in public sphere research, but also by those involved in the communication process themselves. Such experiences of the crisis of the public sphere can certainly be surveyed empirically, for example, in studies of media use, or of the loss of trust in the media and democratic institutions and procedures.[54] Crucial to my argument, however, is that these experiences again become a driver of public criticism continually raising new claims to normative validity, for example, in the agenda of the reform of media infrastructures, in the debate about the truth content of news, or in measures to improve the discursive quality of social media debates. By transforming the diagnosis of the crisis of the public sphere into critique, the normative template of the modern public sphere is, at the same time, renewed, translated into political programmes and applied to the challenges of the digital transformation of society.

In this context, a programme for sociological public sphere research would consist of observing how societies change from a routine into a crisis mode, critically facing the challenges of transnationalisation and digitalisation, and how the discourse of a 'crisis of the public sphere' in turn triggers public resonance and translates into social mobilisations. The diagnosis of a dystopian disruption of the media only gains relevance by

linking it back to the utopia of the democratic public sphere that continues to inform critical discourse. This is not meant as the rehabilitation of the Habermasian model of the public sphere, but simply as an indication that its normative template still applies for the critical self-assessment of the transnational and digital society with regard to its own shortcomings and potential. Dystopia (the diagnosis of the deficient presence) and utopia (the prognosis of possible futures) remain strongly interrelated in the emerging transnational and digital society that tests out its own horizon of possibilities and limits for the constitution of legitimate order.

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Notes

1. Habermas 1990 [1962]. For the purpose of this article, where no English translation is quoted, I provide my own translations from original Habermas publications in German.
2. Ebd., 248f.
3. Habermas 1990 [1962], 252.
4. Ebd., 29.
5. Müller-Doohm 2014, 151–154.
6. Habermas 1990 [1962], 338.
7. Negt and Kluge 1972; Steinert 1998 See also Hans Magnus Enzensberger's essays on the consciousness industry (Enzensberger 1962), published at the same time as Habermas' structural transformation.
8. Gerhards and Neidhardt 1991; Peters 1994.
9. A theory of discourse-driven social learning processes is elaborated in the Theory of Communicative Action, Habermas 1981; Eder 1985; Jasso 2015.
10. On this point, see the three revisions to the structural transformation of the public sphere that Habermas (1990 [1962], 21–33) elaborates in his new preface: the overcoming of the separation of state and society, the valorisation of private autonomy and thus of the public's capacity for self-determination, and the pluralisation of political culture and media.
11. Neidhardt 1994; Splichal 2012; Warner 2002. In this context, the interpretive capacities of the audience have been highlighted in cultural studies, such as Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model of the reception of communication.
12. Eder 2013; Fraser 2007; Salvatore, Schmidtke, and Trenz 2013.
13. Habermas 1974, 49.
14. ibid., 220f.
15. Habermas 1992, S. 435.
16. Eder, Hellmann, and Trenz 1998.
17. Habermas 1992, 436, emphasis in the original.
18. Ebd., S. 440.
19. World audience is by no means only a projection surface of philosophical discourse. Ferdinand Tönnies already elaborated the fundamental world orientation of journalism, which processes 'world events' for a 'world audience' (Tönnies 2013 [1922], p. 85). Through its intrinsic

reference to globality, journalism is therefore never fully integrated in the nation-state, but always reaches beyond the state in its operations and interpretations (Habermas 1992, p. 504ff.). For Habermas, this reference to the world is redeemed by the efficacy of universal claims to validity as a point of reference for critical publicity.

20. Habermas 1995; Habermas 2004; Habermas 2011.
21. Habermas 1992, 452.
22. Eder, Hellmann, and Trenz 1998.
23. Habermas 1992, S. 451.
24. See also Gaus 2009, 140–148.
25. According to Habermas' introductory remarks in the 1962 edition of the Structural Trans-formation (Habermas 1990 [1962], 53).
26. Habermas 1990 [1962], 181.
27. Ibid. 183.
28. Habermas 2009, 27.
29. Habermas 1981, volume 1, 126–140, 174–188.
30. Habermas 2012, 19.
31. Grosse-Kracht 2009; Volkmer 2014.
32. Peters 2002.
33. Siehe bspw. Gerhards 1997.
34. Bohman 1998; 2007.
35. Calhoun 1992.
36. Habermas 2009a, 118.
37. Manow 2020.
38. Trenz 2005, 91.
39. Habermas 2009, 119, emphasis in the original.
40. Eigmüller and Trenz 2020.
41. Habermas 2009.
42. Nassehi 2002.
43. Dewey 1927.
44. Habermas 1992, 626.
45. Gaus 2009; O'Mahony 2013.
46. Bennett and Pfetsch 2018.
47. Habermas 2009a, 135.
48. Bennett and Pfetsch 2018.
49. Habermas 2009a, 110f.
50. Dahlgren 2013.
51. van Dijk 2005; McNair 2006.
52. Bossetta, Segesten, and Trenz 2017; Brändle, Galpin, and Trenz 2021; Galpin and Trenz 2019.
53. Aytac 2022.
54. Trenz 2021.

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