

Public sphere and platform society

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Abstract. The subject of this article is the transformation of the public sphere in the age of digital platforms and the implications this has for democratic life. Building on Habermas' recent considerations of this change, the political implications and contradictions of the nexus between a normative, hopefully functioning public sphere for democracy, with reason at its center, and a digital public sphere marked by the decline of political life and the difficulty of fragmented networked debate marked by the fading distinction between public and private are analyzed. Risks are also highlighted, such as algorithmic secrecy and the potential of platforms.

Keywords: Habermas, algorithmic secrecy, digital society, platform society, public sphere.

Riassunto. Il tema di questo articolo è la trasformazione della sfera pubblica nell'era delle piattaforme digitali e le sue implicazioni per la vita democratica. Partendo dalle recenti considerazioni di Habermas su questo cambiamento, si analizzano le implicazioni politiche e le contraddizioni del nesso tra una sfera pubblica normativa e auspicabilmente funzionante per la democrazia, con la ragione al centro, e una sfera pubblica digitale segnata dal declino della vita politica e dalla difficoltà di un dibattito frammentato in rete, caratterizzato dal venir meno della distinzione tra pubblico e privato. Vengono anche evidenziati da una parte i rischi, come la segretezza algoritmica e dall'altra le potenzialità delle piattaforme.

Parole chiave: Habermas, platform society, segretezza algoritmica, sfera pubblica, società digitale.

Public sphere and platform society

The concept of the public sphere, as Habermas formulated it (Habermas, 1962)- at the interface between civil society and the political system in today's complex and differentiated societies- has fully entered the public and scholarly debate. In fact, it has become a privileged perspective for understanding democratic integration, participation and multipolarity. The bursting of pervasive changes in the political and democratic scene due to the digital transformation stimulates theoretical reflection to rethink the concept of public sphere and focus on the nexus of democracy and the platform society (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

From this perspective, engaging the Habermasian conception of the public sphere is crucial for understanding the political implications and contradictions of the relation between a normative public sphere, hopefully functioning for democracy, with reason at its center, and a digital public sphere marked by the decline of political life and the difficulty of a fragmented, networked debate premised on the fading distinction between public and private. Between these two spheres, already for Habermas, there was no clear distinction, but instead a continuous flow of argument in different communicational spheres (Habermas, 1992). In his recent book released in Germany, Habermas, (2022) referring to the degradation of the mass media-dominated society, which was assumed in the 1962 work, raises the question whether the platform society leads to a real restructuring of the public sphere characterized by traditional media. While he was already considering the contradictions and risks within the democratic public sphere in 1962, in the first part of the book released last year

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Habermas questions the structural depth of the changes under way. He wonders whether the new media are changing the model of communication that has prevailed in the public sphere so far and thus whether the paradigm of the public sphere has changed radically. His idea is that the perception of the political public sphere is being warped by communication on platforms and thus the very formation of opinions and political will is in danger. This article analyzes the risks and potentials of the platform society in a diachronic view, addressing the issue of secrecy and regulation.

Platforms: Polyvalence and Ambiguity.

Based on Habermas's question and considerations of the current digital public sphere, on which many other scholars and observers of social change have already reflected (Van Dijck et al 2018), it is important to begin by revisiting the definition and constitutive ambiguity of platforms and with them of digital capitalism.

Long gone are the days when the network, a technological juncture of social transformations, could be included among the mythical tools for telling a story of the future. On the contrary, today we are addicted to the narrative of a public sphere disfigured (Urbinati, 2017) and uninformed enough to suggest coining the term post-public sphere (Schlesinger, 2020).

The emancipatory potential (Allmer, 2015) of networked communication has turned into problematic deregulation within a few decades. The techno utopian narrative has given way to the techno dystopian one, but both do not help us understand reality in its problematic and complex articulation. The demand for democracy, which stemmed from the dream of electronic democracy, has been disregarded, but the need for participation has certainly not diminished and is no less pressing and urgent today.

The opening to infinity of the potential of the net has given way to fragmentation, informational disorder, lack of shared knowledge, disinformation and manipulation. This involution of the public sphere has deeply affected communicative patterns in a finegrained way, but also the representation of reality, the structuring of knowledge, and the symbolic material related to it have not remained unaffected. Therefore, while social media give citizenship and voice to all participants who, in principle, equally become authors *in* and *for* the network regardless of socioeconomic status, the perverse effect of this phenomenon is the emptying and deskilling of the journalistic profession in favor of the disintermediation of communication and information. Indeed, already in the past Habermas warned of the crisis in journalism and called for public intervention to ensure the quality of information. And, still pointing to 2002 as the year of the crisis in advertising revenue, he argued in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* that listeners and viewers are not only consumers – that is, subjects who are part of the market – but at the same time they are citizens who have the right to cultural enjoyment, observation of political events, participation and opinion formation. This is exactly the theme that is reiterated today with respect to growing disinformation and the citizen's right not to be misinformed (Nicita, 2022).

In fact, in the realm of social media, all users, who come together as "in principle equal and self-responsible participants," could spontaneously assume the role of authors. However, this would threaten professional journalism and communication (Castells, 2009) insofar as platforms would become self-referential within closed bubbles (Bruns, 2019; Möller, J. 2021) that deform the perception of the public sphere.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that Habermas (2022) speaks of a dogmatic compartmentalization in a fragmented public sphere where the monopoly of platforms reigns unchallenged and thus he warns

of the decline of political life and the public sphere in the dimension of exchange on the network. Unlike in the past, it is therefore not possible to ignore today the monopolistic concentration of the power of platforms analyzed by Habermas by placing it within a general trend of the capitalist system where the old traditional media already played a central role. The quality of information and the formation of public opinion today is deforming, uniform and even flattened, thus disfavoring a free exchange of ideas. Habermas was credited with emphasizing the importance of public opinion formation for the formation of political will in a democracy. His is a broader sociological concept than the ones used in the past and has fully entered the political and cultural lexicon. The public sphere, understood as deliberation, is the practice of problem solving by a collective power of judgment, which also pursues an intent of social criticism. Indeed, the infrastructure of the public sphere makes it possible to critically observe a given society. In this sense, the processual nature of democracy calls for additional attention to the public sphere in the platform society, in order to safeguard society from the erosion of constitutional guarantees. This is hardly new: already in *Between Facts and Norms* Habermas argued that basic constitutional provisions alone cannot preserve the public sphere and civil society from deformation (Habermas, 1996)

It is no coincidence that in this context we have begun to speak of the "platform society" with a negative connotation, if compared to the concepts of information society or "network society" (Sorice, 2020). As José van Dijck, Thomas Poell, and Martijn de Waal have aptly pointed out, platforms have created a profound shift in society by making it more autonomous from traditional institutional agencies, more connected and integrated. Over time, although they were not born with this intent, platforms have gained a central role in shaping the public sphere and public opinion, articulating their values and enabling their activities.

The actors in this new reality of platforms are mainly three: large hi-tech companies, governments, and civil society. Ostensibly constructed to be neutral, in reality platforms are not neutral at all. They have values inscribed in their structures and have enormous agenda-setting power. Algorithmic mechanisms shape behavior and values through big data management, business strategies, and user behavior. The rise of the platform society has occurred concomitantly with the loss of credibility and social incisiveness of the various social and political institutions that have lost traction and contact with citizens and are no longer able to serve as a filter or fully function as intermediary entities. Traditional socializing agencies have now to deal with an informational chaos that needs to be managed and regulated.

The characteristics of the Net – collaboration, diffuse intelligence, interconnectedness, and an equal and democratic relational space that reversed the relationship between center and periphery, – were extolled by early visionaries, but from 2016 to the present the perception of an emptying, if not zeroing out, of the positive potential of the Net has prevailed. In fact, today we study the reasons for the radicalization and polarization (Boccia Artieri et al., 2021) of online groups, virality, and artfully created fake-news-sharing by politicians and others.

Social media thus become a kind of scapegoat without, however, the identification of the social actor who is the protagonist and interpreter of the changes taking place and without a sense of the role of politics as a regulatory power. While there are undoubtedly social and political implications related to the medium per se, a primary role is also played by the actors in the field, the platforms in the front row, who are not neutral intermediaries and by the regulators. If, therefore, democratic states, in spite of constitutional guarantees, are not necessarily able to preserve the public sphere from degeneration (Habermas, 1992), citizens – one of the key players in the network where possible – can choose from time to time what role to play.

New challenges for democracy

Any of our actions and information on the network is transformed into a huge amount of data for platforms, the basis for advertising profiling, while every activity, emotion, initiative or idea is then commoditized through sale to third parties. The electronic cage is the feature of postmodernity with which we must constantly measure ourselves, as in modernity the Weberian iron cage was. Respect for the freedom and dignity of the individual is often violated for the use of data to be incorporated into the analysis of global markets. So, from social control in the small village we have moved on to electronic control in the globalized society. It is certainly not an Orwellian control, but profiling (Rodotà, 2004) – an electronic network keeps our personal data stored for many years in databases. And the more this network is centralized, the more the possibility of control increases, a process amplified by the network understood as a huge marketplace where sensitive data become an asset to be used for the expansion of the market segment. And this mechanism finds a disturbing application in spyware, spy software that gives information about the spied computer.

From these developments came the web data mining industry. Every web page not protected by firewalls is explored and cross-referencing work with other databases reconstructs and adds value to the data already acquired. This is one of the most privacy-damaging processes. Faced with the explosion, therefore, of this issue of the invasion and violation of sensitive data, the emergence of a *habeas data* (Rodotà, 2004) understood precisely as a new dimension of personal freedom has been invoked alongside *habeas corpus*. The most disturbing aspect of the control of personal data is that it often happens with the lack of awareness of the users, and is accepted by individual web users who due to lack of time, superficiality, simple carelessness or ignorance of the processes at work end up in the gear of the "network machine." This is the background that has fostered the development of platforms and disinformation.

However, in this context, an interest in digital communication on platforms that prescind from the ubiquitous issue of online disinformation seems to have disappeared from the horizon of research and public discourse: there seems to be under way a real cultural shift, a paradigm and methodology shift. Even in popular newspapers, one can find articles about the overwhelming power of platforms and political hate speech, and even the attention of journalism for a long time has focused on election campaigns distorted by fake news and manipulation especially on Facebook, Twitter and other platforms. The concern has been so general and pervasive that there has been talk of real moral panic over the irrationality of citizens' behavior due to blatant manipulation on the platforms. As if the suffocating rationality of the Weberian iron cage had given way to irrationality within the meshes of the digital lattice. The centrality of diffuse interest also compels interrogation on the symbolic dimension and its significance for the communication ecosystem. The focus was not generally directed against a particular group of people or some very specific subjectivity, as Stanley Cohen observed to be characteristic of the first phase of the construction of a moral panic, but turns out to be a generalized indictment of the entire system of platforms and communication. We are immersed in big data, continually monitored and algorithmatized, and the complexity of the system makes politics appear to be floundering in relation to the speed of social and technological change. The narrative that makes the Net the great culprit of the current predicament of democracy risks plunging us into techno-panic. Technological big brother is not devoid of subjectivity, it is not an abstract entity; in fact, the real danger to democracy (Levitsky, Daniel, 2018) lies not so much in the technology itself but in its use and especially in the social actors who have aimed directly at an attack on liberal and democratic society, (Hanson, Kopstein, 2022) as several scholars have warned. Not

surprisingly, platforms attempted to reconcile their business with democracy and with forms of control aimed at mitigating if not preventing the degeneration of the mediatized public sphere.

The medium itself contained problematic issues that early critics had already glimpsed even in the utopian climate in which they were writing. The attack on democracy thus occurred not through the militarization of society, the repression of civil liberties or the censorship of journalism but as an attack on the very function of communication and information. The emptying of the public sphere and its delegitimization were the result of this virtual attack. Because of their deep ambivalence in their relationship with citizens and the public sphere, platforms in fact are potentially and at the same time a source of empowerment and epistemic aphasia. Digital media have enabled mass self-communication (Castells, 2007), a horizontality and openness of communication to new audiences and a resetting of barriers of access to the public sphere. However, the hybridization of networked communication makes it difficult to identify the quality and reliability of news. Disintermediation has emptied the classical paradigms of journalistic communication, creating at the same time a loss of epistemic editing (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga, 2020: 710) and the opportunity for citizen empowerment in the public sphere. (cf. Habermas in Czingon et al., 2020: 32; Mouffe 2005). The public sphere and platforms have reorganized themselves (Sevignani, 2022) in this new horizon dominated by the economic exploitation of data and communicative activity (Zuboff, 2019)

In this context, it is not easy to find ways to foster a learning of citizens' democratic skills, but a cultivation of democratic attitudes remains the only way forward. The regulatory turn that the European Union with the *Digital Service Act* is taking in relation to platforms could bring about changes in the public sphere. At a time of profound transformations in the world's communication and its underlying organization, of waves of disinformation, the possibilities of intervention and action or, on the contrary, the powerlessness of citizens determine the very idea of the public sphere, of its change and transformation. Concern about attempts to undermine democratic electoral processes and the protection of citizens' epistemic well-being have fostered this turn toward platform regulation. Freedom in and of platforms, as in the past for freedom of the press, has delineated a clear boundary between democratic and non-democratic countries. The current regulatory need must be placed in the international context of profound changes in global geopolitics, and of a general techlash (Farooq, 2018) toward large proprietary platforms, a natural technopath as a response to the global power of platforms. The real cultural crux is to understand the new power structuring in such an asymmetrical context as that dominated by platforms and its implications at the political, cultural, and economic levels.

Academic reflection has long (Moore, Tambini, 2018) highlighted the inadequacy of existing normative and intellectual frameworks for understanding the gigantic accumulation of power on the part of Big Tech. The regulatory shift reflects the need for new rules for democracy and the need to limit the political and social economic impact of Google, Amazon, Facebook, Apple, and Microsoft.

Certainly, regulatory interventions need to be tuned with political and cultural defense strategies. The Russian attack and influence on Trump's election and Brexit, the Cambridge Analytica scandal have led to characterize the new disinformation war as a Cold War climate (Schlesinger, 2020).

In this climate, the vision of Silicon Valley's tech pioneers is widely questioned. Their cultural vision certainly favored an open and free Internet, and not just for technological reasons. But it does not collide with the spread of hateful misinformation, viruses, transmission of sensitive data and gigantic economic interests. Even if the European model of regulation is having some cultural influence the conundrum of reconciling regulation and free speech remains the real challenge for post-public-sphere democracies.

Platforms and secrecy

The wide availability of data on the net would lead us to think that we have gained greater transparency and more widespread access to information, which allows us to be less surveilled.

In reality, algorithms have increased secrecy to the point that once they are set in place it is no longer even possible to decode them. If Stefano Rodotà (2004) had defined the information society as the society of cataloging, far removed from the Orwellian metaphor of control and surveillance, today after a long time we certainly cannot say that that cataloging is transparent and available. Thus, if we are not exactly in the Orwellian society, as Rodotà argued, certainly the combination of secrecy and digital media corresponds to a criterion of direct proportionality. And it is paradoxical that technoutopian rhetoric has extolled transparency given the inscrutability of the algorithms to which we are subjected. The examples are many, from how insurance companies select customers to job interviews whose first computer screening does not favor blacks or women (Chun, 2013), and the list would be long indeed if we wanted to analyze the discriminatory and obscure use of data in the platform society. In fact, the protocols and transformation of computerized data are certainly not transparent. Paradoxically, the more complex the platform society becomes, and the more it frustrates the demands for readability of algorithm rules, the more the rhetoric of transparency and its expectations serve as compensation. It is no coincidence that the black box metaphor has been used for the platform society (Pasquale, 2015). If we citizen users, consumers and volunteer network workers are increasingly transparent and share even pieces of our private lives, companies remain increasingly obscure in the way they use our data and select us for job interviews or for any other relevant aspect of our lives. The platform society enhances this asymmetry of secrecy and privacy and thus necessarily leads to an imbalance of power. Platforms are thus a powerful tool of obfuscation and opacity.

Three different types of secrecy can be distinguished (Pasquale, 2015): real secrecy, legal secrecy, and obfuscation. In all areas there is a violation of the data collected, especially when data are insufficiently protected, as shown by the case of financial data in the United States where algorithms with extremely complex mathematical formulas are used. Just think of rating algorithms and their critical aspects or medical algorithms with their sensitive implications. The very promise of leveling and greater equality in the face of the supposedly neutral tool that a platform is has in fact created a knowledge and therefore a power gap between those who possess the data and those who do not, between those who can read the data and those who cannot. In addition, data are controlled and can also be leaked out or be deliberately sold. In fact, the issue of control is one of the major problems of the platform society. The very success of platforms does not allow intermediate stages to be analyzed and makes the whole process opaque. Efficiency points to the outcome and not to the functioning of platforms in all its articulations. Understanding platforms and their social implications requires deconstructing these black boxes and their internal complexity.

Conclusions

The platform society, or the gig economy as it has also been called, is certainly a source of profound innovation, both for collective mentalities and for everyday life, work, leisure, and for politics and the world of information. Platforms produce social structuring (Couldry, Hepp, 2018) and redefine social modes, times, and spaces. The relevance of platforms is, therefore, beyond question: the open question is how much their dominance negatively affects public goods, politics, and democratic processes. Indeed, platforms establish a specific form of domination, accompanied by social inequalities and problematic effects on social integration.

Classical social organization shifts to an organization of platforms that shape every aspect of social life, thus becoming a structural factor with a strong impact on the economy. The consequences for digital capitalism are very strong and are based on a dilemma between "decentralization" on the one hand and "concentration" on the other (Marciano et al.). Not surprisingly, Habermas revisited the central elements of the bourgeois public sphere in order to conduct an illuminating and thought-provoking analysis of the current digitalized public sphere. The outcomes of this process are complicated and will be most likely expanded with the new technological leap of Artificial Intelligence. Indeed, the impact of AI made available to private users remains to be assessed along with the even deeper challenges to democratic processes posed by the rise of artificial intelligence.

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