

Jürgen Habermas, **A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2023, 128 pp., \$45.00 (hardback).

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A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics by Jürgen Habermas updates and revivifies his views of the public sphere since he first theorized the concept over 60 years ago with the original publication in German of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962. As a Kantian pragmatist (Bernstein, 2018) and critical theorist, Habermas was prompted to revisit the topic in light of the new structural transformation of the public sphere in the digital age.

The book is organized into three chapters, and the first updates key concepts about the current transformation of the public sphere. This chapter is followed by two others on deliberative democracy that clarify the concept and address persistent misunderstandings. Written for a general audience, scholars of media, communication, deliberative democracy, and political science will find utility in Habermas's recommitment to his original thesis (Habermas, 1989) as well as his linkages to earlier works, particularly *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1996), but also *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas, 1987) and related works published throughout a long academic and intellectual life.

Building on recent reflections that update his thesis to date, the first chapter sees Habermas reassert the view that the legitimacy of the democratic project is anchored in the inherited right of representative democracies to formalize space for public citizens to exercise their own reason (Seeliger & Sevignani, 2022). Starting with an exploration of the foundational first principles passed down from one generation to the next through acculturation as well as political socialization and education (p. 22), Habermas argues that the "normative blueprints" (p. 10) inherited from the revolutions of the 18th century are now essential processes of democratic opinion and will formation in democratic societies (p. 10). Habermas then provides detail about the media's role in the processes and flow of the political public sphere (p. 15) as it mediates between an engaged and inclusive civil society and a political party system consisting of competing political views. Habermas makes clear that as gatekeepers of the political public sphere, the media system is only effective in satisfying the standards of deliberative politics if they act in good faith to process the competing views of opinion makers and bring them to the attention of broad democratic publics (p. 30; see also Habermas, 2022a, p. 157). Only when that condition is satisfied will the media be able to contribute to a public intelligence that feeds into election results that are regarded as legitimate.

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But, as Habermas takes care to point out, engagement with the political public sphere for the citizen is an indirect power. Direct power, he argues, derives from the inclusive right to vote in free and fair elections. One acts in concert with the other, as Habermas states, and it is the media's role to ensure that the voting public has the public intelligence to make decisions at the ballot box in their own interests guided by principles of fairness (p. 73). As he clarifies in his views about deliberative politics, intersubjectivity is necessary for the preservation of democracy, and the book provides interesting new insights into the role of an active citizenry in reestablishing the integrity of the flow of information (pp. 22–24).

But we might ask, as Fraser (1990) has previously, whether this is how existing democracies actually work. After articulating these fundamental principles, Habermas argues that a decline of rational debate since roughly the turn of the millennium has led to "political regression" in "almost all Western democracies" (p. 19). Given the clear signs of dysfunction before the digital age, his view is that it remains an "open question" (p. 32) whether digital media has affected the deliberative quality of public debate. In this sense, Habermas's view reflects current thinking that social media exacerbates a division that already exists, amplifies it, and brings with it broader, more acute implications for the media's pivotal role in preserving democratic politics.

For Habermas, new media is transformative because it has led to an expansion of a democratic public sphere beyond the strict geographical confines of national territories (p. 35). But, he argues, the "great emancipatory promise" (p. 37) of new media is drowned out by Silicon Valley, "radical right-wing networks" (p. 38), and the empowerment of actors lacking professional standards, filters, and practices who are "profoundly altering the character of public communication itself" (p. 36). Using concepts about pathologies that can arise when fragmentation robs people of the "power to synthesize" (Habermas, 1987, p. 355), readers familiar with Habermas's previous work will recognize that this book contains multitudes, particularly when he reiterates his warning about "fragmented, self-enclosed echo chambers" (p. 37) degenerating into a "battleground of competing publics" (p. 56).

The second chapter on deliberative politics is an abridged version of a previous interview (Habermas, 2018) that clarifies his views on this growing branch of democratic theory. In this short chapter, Habermas updates his views about the importance of communicative standards in deliberative bodies and, among other important clarifications and assertions, addresses a persistent misunderstanding about his views that the ideal speech situation is an achievable goal as long as the "unforced force of the better argument" is allowed to prevail (p. 61).

The third chapter, an adaptation of a recent contribution to an edited book (Habermas, 2022b), addresses arguments that deliberative democracy is "excessively idealistic" (p. 97) with Habermas asking, "What happens to democracies in which the political public sphere disintegrates and the interplay between political parties and public opinion wanes?" (p. 98). For Habermas, the increasing complexity of our polities, communicative spaces, and political practices only underscores the importance of fighting for the integrity of the political public sphere. In his view, it should always be possible to translate the complexity of modern life today into discourses nonexperts can engage with.

In the final analysis, all readers can gain awareness of the myriad challenges the media face in the digital age, and scholars will recognize the updates, clarifications, and connections Habermas makes to his previous work. What all democratic citizens should appreciate after reading this book is the danger of continuing to allow new media platforms to further exacerbate already fragmented democratic publics. Although there may be valid reasons people are drawn to new media platforms, and although "voices of protest" can be an "early-warning system for politics" (p. 72), the problem we face today is of a different order of magnitude because new technology represents a new form of power (Zuboff, 2019). If unregulated platforms are allowed to continue current practices unabated, it will further weaken the press, erode journalistic practices (p. 49), and lead toward the development of a "post-truth democracy" (p. 43).

Beyond calls for regulation and alignment with traditional media's journalistic standards and practices (p. 58), for Habermas it is not too late to prevent becoming "paralyzed by the defeatism nurtured by systems theory" (p. 97). There is still time to preserve and protect hard-won normative principles of civic engagement and voting rights through cultural and political education of the role of the public sphere and deliberative politics (p. 22). As Habermas reminds us often throughout this book, only a discursive theory that revolves around the legitimacy of the individual alongside the universalism of equal rights for all "can do justice to this idea" (p. 11).

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