IJoC European Public Sphere

Toward a European Public Sphere?
The Promise and Perils of Modern Democracy
in the Age of Digital and Social Media

Introduction

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This article first surveys current research within the context of the public sphere, particularly in Europe. Then, the article seeks to examine theoretical and empirical mechanisms by which information and communication technologies (ICTs) may contribute to seeding that public sphere. Finally, and more specifically, it establishes a conciliatory argument between the proliferation and sustainability of a public sphere by means of citizens' use of digital and social media. The study concludes by advocating for a more contemporaneous understanding of what a public sphere is, and how digital and social media, under certain circumstances, may elicit an inclusive, discursive, and deliberative path to political participation.

Keywords: public sphere, democracy, political participation, ICTs, digital media, social media

Since the establishment of the European Union (EU), researchers have explored several mechanisms that facilitate the democratic process between citizens and member states—states that are politically, culturally, and economically distinct (Pierson, 1996). Consensus in the academic community suggests that certain characteristics are central for the democratic advancement of the European Union.

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Social identity features (Eder, 2009; Sassatelli, 2002), cultural traits (Egeberg, 2004; Friedman & Thiel, 2013), sociopolitical elements (Müller-Peters, 1998), and most importantly, a strong and deliberative public sphere (Fishkin, Luskin & Siu, 2014) have all been offered as ways to produce a healthier, more cohesive, and more participatory EU. Yet, how Europeans get involved in the political process is often indirect. In particular, the role of media in building a European public sphere has been somewhat overlooked (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Gil de Zúñiga, 2012). That is, the ways in which European citizens engage in civic and political activities today greatly depend on both mass and social media, as do the means through which citizens discuss important public issues. This highlights the need to better understand how people discuss relevant issues for public life, and whether media are helping to generate an integrated European public sphere.

This special section was conceived in order to better understand what it means to be a citizen in Europe today. In particular, it addresses the question of how citizens of the European Union use both traditional and social media to debate, discuss, and engage in politics. The contributions to this section address this call in important and unique ways. In doing so, the articles in the following pages help shed new theoretical light on the existence of a mediated European public sphere. What these articles make clear is that mass and social media may not formulate a true public sphere in the Habermasian sense. Instead, the findings highlight the depth and complexity of activity in what might be called a European public sphere today. To introduce this special section of the *International Journal of Communication*, I briefly discuss the notion of the public sphere. Accordingly, the articles contained in this section each address the degree to which the contemporary media environment creates an idealized outlet for political debate, as well as whether new media encourage a deliberative, engaged European citizenry.

A New Public Sphere in the Social Media Era?

As the Internet has grown more prominent in people's lives, there have been a number of scholarly debates about whether media constitute a new public sphere that allows citizens to engage in, and deliberate about, political affairs (see, e.g., Dahlgren, 2005; Papacharissi, 2010). While there has been little consensus on this matter, the question of whether the Internet, including social media, work with traditional media to facilitate a public sphere is admittedly a moving target. Initial work on how the Internet could shape the public sphere rightfully highlighted limited accessibility to the Internet as a barrier to an online public sphere (Gimmler, 2001). However, recent statistics indicate that the number of individuals who have access to the Internet and use social networking sites continues to grow rapidly worldwide (Xenos, Vromen, & Loader, 2014), with widespread adoption in the democracies of Western Europe and North America (Pew, 2014; Valenzuela, Valdimarsson, Egbunike, Fraser, et al., 2014). Many of these citizens are using social media not only to connect with friends and family, but also to get news and political information, and eventually to engage in politics (e.g., Bode, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga, Molyneux, & Zheng, 2014). The growing use of social media and digital technologies for political purposes suggests that it is important to revisit the question of whether the contemporary media environment, and social media in particular, generates a public sphere. It may well be that social media today, even compared to just a few years ago, represent something closer to Habermas' idealized notion of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989).

Social media have been lauded for their potential to affect democratic outcomes by providing easy access to information, lowering the bar to political participation, providing a platform for individuals to express their political opinions, and allowing networks of politically minded citizens to connect with one another and organize, despite geographical or cultural barriers (e.g., Bennett & Segerberg, 2012)—all of which are necessary conditions to develop, nurture, and strengthen a healthy public sphere.

Despite the potential benefits social media and information technologies may offer the democratic process, some have questioned whether they create the ideal public sphere as envisioned by Habermas (e.g., Hindman, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010). According to Habermas (1989), in the public sphere, citizens engage in critical and rational discourse around matters important to the public at large. The Habermasian public sphere is ideally inclusive of all literate citizens. Further, the purpose of this discourse is to appeal to some form of reasoned public consensus, which could then spur political action, and counter more autocratic forms of decision making (Calhoun, 1992). Thus, the notion that the Internet (or social media) constitutes a public sphere has been criticized on many fronts.

For example, Papacharissi (2010) argues that the Internet has little in common with Habermas' public sphere. In particular, the author contends that, though the Internet may increase access to information and facilitate political discussion, engagement, and participation, the digital media environment cannot be considered a public sphere, because the technology does not encourage rational deliberation. At times, the Internet simply enhances or compliments existing offline behaviors and disparities. In addition, the Internet is often used in a self-serving manner that is at odds with a deliberative public sphere. Others have critiqued the ability of the Internet to serve as a public sphere in similar ways. Dahlgren (2005) notes that most interactions online are non-political or oriented toward entertainment, which may limit the deliberative potential of the channel. And even when individuals talk, discuss, and debate political issues on social media, the conversation may often be dominated by political elites (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013).

Other issues further prevent the development of a public sphere. Some argue that the Internet is too commercialized, and therefore lacks sufficient two-way communication between politicians and the public (Hindman, 2009; Papacharissi, 2010). Habermas himself suggests that the idealized public sphere may not be possible in an environment where political elites have better access to media, are able to control their messages, and exert power over ordinary citizens (Habermas, 2006). Or at the very least, as the Internet broadens the scope of the potential public sphere, the legitimatization of citizens' decisions has become much more difficult to grasp in the context of digital and social media (Rasmussen, 2013).

The conclusion from these critiques is that the notion of the public sphere is simply utopian in today's Internet-dominated media environment. They argue that the Internet does not create enough of the type of rational, deliberative debate between citizens and political actors to be considered a public sphere. What has emerged instead is a "public space" that allows people access to information and offers an outlet to discuss and engage in public affairs, but falls far short of fulfilling the democratic objectives of the public sphere (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013; Papacharissi, 2010).

However, critiques that communication technologies do not facilitate a public sphere may be unnecessarily pessimistic. A true public sphere in the Habermasian sense is unrealistic and unattainable. We should instead employ the concept for its theoretical value. The Enlightenment public sphere was a historical counterpart to the entrenched power structures of a particular time. By appealing to a public sense of reason, public debate included a much larger portion of the population than was possible in previous epochs. In this sense, we do not need to make specific comparisons between the Internet on one hand, and on the other hand, an incomplete account of history that is now more than 50 years old. Instead, we should accept that there will always be a middle ground between a normative vision of public inquiry and the open soap box of public discussion. The Internet and social media, in tandem with traditional media outlets, occupy this middle ground. Articles in this special section suggest that the media environment in Europe today may be characterized as more than just a public space, but not quite an ideal public sphere. In other words, traditional news media, the Internet, and social media may facilitate a hybrid of both a public space and a public sphere. These technologies provide an outlet for citizens to learn about, engage in, and deliberate politics. The extent to which they offer an alternative mode of public interaction resembles aspects of Habermas' public sphere in many ways.

It is the duty of future research to fully clarify the instances in which online activity transcends the realm of mere political discussion. Although still insufficient, some initial steps have been taken to this end. For instance, Rojas (2008) shows that people's orientations towards political conversation matter when fostering a public sphere. Those who attempt to reach an "understanding" seem to be more involved in the political process. Similarly, Valenzuela, Kim, and Gil de Zúñiga (2012) also provide empirical evidence for how different attributes of political discussion (i.e., agreement, disagreement, reasoning), along with discussion ties (i.e., weak ties versus strong ties), may influence a more engaged, participatory public sphere online.

This special section continues to close this gap. Articles in this section point to three common attributes of the European media environment that support the notion of a hybrid public space/public sphere. First, the Internet and social media, in conjunction with traditional media, provide citizens with an opportunity to freely discuss and debate political affairs. Whether spurred through traditional news use, Facebook comments, pictures on Instagram, or conversations on Twitter, citizens are now able to easily engage one another and deliberate about important political matters. Second, as the articles here illustrate, discussing politics or using social media may motivate citizens to get more involved in politics. By exchanging ideas, talking about politics, simply expressing their opinions about political issues and public affairs, or by exposing themselves to political information via the media, people may be encouraged to take political action, which moves the public space closer to the public sphere. Finally, engagement with media, as well as other individuals, may help citizens of the diverse EU member states reach common political ground, or possibly form some consensus on key political matters. Although true deliberative consensus is unlikely in the form of an ideal public sphere, media today may still facilitate some level of agreement among citizens of the EU. Such consensus is more characteristic of a public sphere than a public space. Several findings embodied in the special section provide evidence for this hybrid model of the public space/sphere, and each of these is explored in detail.

Free and Open Political Discussion

Several of the articles in this special section illustrate how media in Europe are facilitating open and free discussion about political issues. These selections also further explore the consequences of those discussions. For instance, using survey data and media content analyses from 21 EU member states, Desmet, Van Spanje, and de Vreese highlight the importance of building a public sphere through the efforts of various actors, including both citizens and the media. They note how influential interpersonal discussions are on citizens' views of democratic performance of the EU. These perceptions can be affected by the nature of the discussions; more positive discussions reinforced positive perceptions for less politically sophisticated individuals, while negative conversations had a strong effect on more sophisticated citizens. This suggests that conversation is one factor that can enhance the public sphere. Yet discussion is not the only contributor here, as media coverage can also affect whether the public views EU performance in a positive or negative light. Their results lend support to the notion that discussion and media coverage can simultaneously contribute to the public sphere. If one goal of EU institutions is to facilitate the flow of communication among citizens, the results of this study would suggest that these institutions would benefit from more positive frames of debate. Accordingly, more positive coverage of EU activity would encourage more positive discussions, as well as improved estimations of EU performance.

A similar approach is taken by Saldaña, McGregor, and Gil de Zúñiga. They compare political social media use by citizens in the United Kingdom and the United States. They argue for the importance of free and open political discussion in creating informed public opinion, which is a benchmark of the public sphere. They further suggest that the Internet and social media offer a "marketplace" of ideas that encourages political discussion—and ultimately, political mobilization. In particular, these digital technologies provide citizens exposure to diverse networks of people, which simultaneously offer new and complimentary ways to become informed and discuss politics. The comparison of UK and U.S. citizens' political uses of social media suggests that these Western democracies exhibit more similarities than differences. Although some differences emerge in terms of knowledge about politics and overall news consumption, UK and U.S. citizens engage in politics online to the same degree. These technologies seem to encourage a more discursive, information-based society, perhaps fostering the normative foundation for citizens' decisions, as a Habermasian public sphere would endorse. These results indicate that social media may offer more than simply a public space, but rather, the potential to foster a public sphere.

Muñiz, Alvídrez, and Téllez explore how the framing of media coverage may shape political debate about important political issues. They examine the relationship between the media's framing of political issues and the subsequent framing of public discourse on those issues. Their findings show a complex relationship between the media and the public; at times, the public's online discussions are consistent with the media's frames, while at other times, they are independent from the media's influence. Although the media does affect the nature of online political discussions, the public still retains autonomy in the way they debate politics. As noted earlier, some have questioned the existence of a public sphere in a media environment controlled by elites, but this study may help quell some of those concerns. Instead, citizens contribute to the dialogic conversations that take place in digital media, which better resembles a public sphere. The media may set the tone for the nature of the debate, but by no means do they have a monopoly over it.

Facilitating Political Action

A true public sphere requires that debates and discussions about political affairs contribute to political participation. That is, democratic public discourse means little if it does not mobilize citizens to take action. This point is most notably revealed in Groshek and Al-Rawi's article examining how online, social, and mobile media use relates to offline political protest activity in the EU. They find that increased adoption of emerging technologies enhances offline protest behaviors. The authors also examine the nature of discussion on Twitter related to the Euro crisis and austerity measures. This study provides a clear example of how discussions in an online political space may facilitate the emergence of a more engaged public sphere by facilitating political participation. Here, citizens are not simply using digital technologies to superficially discuss political affairs, but rather, taking advantage of their features to mobilize and take action in offline social movements.

Although the public sphere requires both political deliberation and participation, Atkinson's cross-cultural study on the predictors of support for corporate justice extends the notion of the public sphere beyond these two behaviors. In particular, the study illustrates the roles that social values and trust in institutions play in establishing a public sphere. Atkinson explores how various factors contribute to perceptions of corporate justice, which is considered a dimension of sustainable citizenship, and includes beliefs about fair and equitable taxes for corporations and better regulation of companies operating in the EU. The study also explores the role media play in fostering support for a more egalitarian society within a capitalist system. Taken together, this study suggests that not only media, but also institutional trust and pro-social values are elements of forming a public sphere. A public sphere that seeks true deliberation and consensus may also require that people both want to improve society and have faith in their institutions to carry out their political will.

Reaching Common Ground and Consensus

The final component of the hybrid public space/public sphere relates to the need for citizens to reach some form of political consensus through their deliberations. In reality, this aspect of the hybrid public space/public sphere may be the most utopian, and therefore the most difficult to achieve. As Heinderyckx argues, efforts to integrate the unique cultures and political systems into a larger European public sphere have been met with resistance. The goal of the EU, he writes, was to form a European public through a European media sphere. The problem, however, is that media in each of the member states form their own public spheres that tend to focus on local, regional, and national issues, rather than issues that speak to the EU as a whole. As a result, the notion of a larger, transnational EU public sphere has not emerged. Heinderyckx suggests that an EU public sphere would require these smaller, more nationalistic public spheres to be more permeable and interconnected. It is therefore necessary for media to focus more on common matters that affect the whole EU, rather than regional issues. The resulting public sphere, he argues, would be more responsive to EU citizens' needs, and would thus facilitate understanding and consensus among the diverse member states.

This argument profoundly resonates with Beyer and Matthes' addition to this volume. In this case, however, what may foster a public sphere is a reinvigorated permeability of people's mobility within

Europe. With data collected in Norway, France, and the United States, the authors showcase how commercial broadcasting television may be hindering more nuanced, and ultimately more beneficial, attitudes toward mobility and immigration in Europe and United States. The European public broadcasting system doesn't seem to help develop positive perceptions about immigration, either. If a strong European public sphere is to exist, cross-border discussions need to include efforts to cover these issues about Europe as a whole, including immigration (see also Fishkin et al., 2014).

Building on the work of Heinderyckx, as well as on the Beyer and Matthes piece, suggestions for a more dynamic and inclusive EU public sphere play out in the paper by Mourao et al. This paper integrates social media use to learn about EU politics with the political issues that are important to all Europeans. In particular, they examine how various types of information online contribute to numerous dimensions of public attitudes towards the EU. They find that when individuals use social media for news, citizens feel more efficacious and are less fearful toward the EU. This would suggest that social media provide the public space necessary to discuss transnational public issues. In addition, social media may help to overcome some issues endemic in larger media systems that often focus more on issues relevant to each member state, as opposed to a more EU-focused media system, as offered by Heinderyckx. But more than that, if not a form of pan-European deliberation, this paper also illustrates that social media may help the culturally and politically diverse citizens in the EU reach some form of consensus. That is, the more they interact on social media, the more they collectively believe the EU is beneficial for Europe.

In conclusion, this selection of studies offers evidence of the complex, symbiotic relationship between media and interpersonal discussion. We see how cutting-edge research furthers our understanding of what a European public sphere might look like in the age of digital and social media. Further, we see that the line between the "public space" and a proper public sphere is not always clear. This volume offers several examples of how new media is opening fissures for citizens to interact with one another and participate in governance in unique ways. In this sense, the public space of the Internet becomes a sphere of interaction, where new media technologies provide alternative channels for popular engagement. In a broad and more contemporaneous sense, this is all the public sphere is meant to be in today's digital and social media context: the elevation of an inclusive, discursive, and deliberative path to political participation.

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