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Book Review

Habermas, J. (2023). A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics (C. Cronin. Trans)

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This book provides Jürgen Habermas's most recent and extensive accounts of how the digitalization of media have affected public communication and democratic politics around the world. In one long feature essay and two briefer pieces, he reviews the basic principles of his deliberative theory of democracy and clarifies several of its main ideas. Over the course of his reflections, he alludes to recent global crises such as climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic, the ascendancy of neoliberal capitalism, increasing social inequality, the cultural pressures of immigration, the rise of post-truth right-wing populism, and the widespread erosion of trust in news and science. Most of his examples are drawn from U.S. and European political communication, but his theoretical reflections could be applied to any modern democracy.

The book's feature essay, "Reflections and Conjectures on a New Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere," originally appeared in a 2021 special issue of the German social science journal *Leviathan*, along with several essays commenting on it. An earlier version of this English translation by Ciaran Cronin appeared in a 2022 special issue of *Theory, Culture, & Society*. This essay revisits and updates several themes of Habermas's influential 1962 book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. One of that book's lasting theoretical contributions was to define the public sphere as a communication forum that mediates between citizens' informal everyday interactions and the formalized debates and decision-making of the government, particularly the national-level government.

Even though Habermas in this book is attempting to assess a "new" structural transformation, he continues to view the public sphere as playing an essential but limited role in democratic politics. It is essential, he claims, because it enables a two-way communication process between citizens and their elected representatives and leaders. Within the public sphere, citizens can learn about, call attention to, and

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discuss social issues and problems that might require government action. Such discussions can inform political leaders about the needs of their constituents. They can also influence government officials to enact laws and policies that take care of those needs. However, he notes that the public sphere plays only a limited role in this process because the agreements and decisions that people make in it do not have the same binding power as the decisions that are officially ratified by the government.

Habermas also continues to emphasize that public sphere communication in large societies needs the professional mass media, particularly journalists, to perform gatekeeping services. Specifically, they need to highlight topics that are relevant to the general public and to provide accurate information about them. One of the main themes in "Reflections and Conjectures" is how the mass media's ability to provide these services has been affected by the digitalization of communication. His thoughts on this issue constitute the new material in this book that is most likely to interest communication researchers.

Particularly since the early 1990s, Habermas has reconsidered his public sphere theory various times. For example, in Chapter 8 of *Between Facts and Norms* (Habermas, 1992/1996), he developed a less pessimistic version of it by acknowledging the potential for ordinary members of civil society to generate social changes and reforms by means of the "communicative power" of protests, civil disobedience, and other types of public opinion expression. Over a decade later, in his address to the International Communication Association, "Political Communication in Media Society" (Habermas, 2006), he began to acknowledge the contributions that the Internet might make to public communication. However, in the mid-2000s his comments on the Internet were brief and almost dismissive. By comparison, his recent "Reflections and Conjectures" essay provides a much more considered discussion of how digital and social media fit into his theories of public communication.

The theme that links these pieces from 2006 and 2021 is Habermas's effort to assess whether the intersection of digital technology with the imperatives of capitalism might be deteriorating the deliberative quality of public communication. He has not changed his view that professional gatekeeping is necessary for preventing that deterioration. Many commentaries on this book have noted his bold claim that the emergence of the Internet and the digitalization of communication are developments in the history of communication technology that are equally as momentous as the introduction of the printing press. Just as the printing press eventually created a near-universal public of readers, digital communication promises to create a global public of authors.

Like other defenders of professionalized gatekeeping, Habermas views this democratization of authorship with ambivalence. It is positive to the extent that the Internet and social media have expanded users' networking opportunities and provided them with a greater diversity of information and culture. However, he laments that the emancipatory promises of the Internet and social media have been co-opted by corporate capitalism: "... the lava of this at once anti-authoritarian and egalitarian potential, which was still discernible in the Californian founding spirit of the early years, soon solidified in Silicon Valley into the libertarian grimace of world-dominating digital corporations" (Habermas, 2022/2023, p. 38). As in his earlier critique of the mass culture industry (Habermas, 1962/1989), he worries that corporate-controlled digitalization may corrupt the quality of public communication. He issues three warnings about the recent transition from professionally curated mass media to more open and unregulated digital platforms.

First, he warns that digital media platforms and their corporate owners tend to avoid taking legal or moral responsibility for the potentially

deceptive and harmful content that they can so easily disseminate. Unlike traditional print and broadcast journalism, platforms such as Facebook and YouTube are blank slates on which almost any content can appear. Even though Habermas is fully aware of the shortcomings of the mass media, he argues that their economic need to attract a large general audience at least obligates them to provide "professionally produced and editorially filtered communicative contents" (Habermas, 2022/2023, p. 36). He believes that print journalism is still the best available means for informing people about issues that are socially relevant, and for providing truthful and accurate information about them. But he also acknowledges that print journalism seems to be dying.

Second, Habermas warns that the new authorship role afforded by digital media brings with it responsibilities that most Internet users have not yet learned. If the print revolution took several hundred years to produce a near-universal public of readers, the digital revolution has only begun the movement toward universal competent authorship. In the age of mass media, there emerged a clear distinction between the producers, editors, and authors on one hand and audiences on the other. This paradigm had its own problems, including the "refeudalization" — the transformation of public communication into a one-way monologue from powerful elites to passive audiences — that Habermas discussed in the second half of *Structural Transformation*. On the Internet and social media, by contrast, users "encounter each other as participants who are in principle equal and self-responsible" (Habermas, 2022/2023, p. 37). This situation may lead to greater reciprocity between Internet users who now have more opportunities to communicate directly with one another. However, it also leads to the easier proliferation of unregulated and potentially deceptive content.

Third, he reiterates the now familiar cautionary tale—famously expressed by Cass Sunstein (2009), Eli Pariser (2011), and others—about how social media may threaten social cohesion by reinforcing our cognitive and social biases. One part of this tale is that, when we use social media, we tend to place ourselves into ideological echo chambers. These are media environments that reinforce our tendencies to associate and communicate with like-minded people, and to consume media that confirms our existing beliefs. The other part of this tale is that digital media companies encourage these tendencies by providing us with content that matches our personal interests and tastes, and that they do so because it is the most effective way to increase their advertising revenue. Pariser applied the label "filter bubbles" to these echo chambers that are created not by our own deliberate choices but rather by the algorithms of social media and content streaming services.

Habermas breathes new life into this familiar tale by integrating it into his deliberative theory of democracy. Throughout this book, he reiterates and updates his normative theories about why democratic communication needs to aim for the ideals of universal inclusion and concern for the common good. One way he does this is by characterizing echo chambers and filter bubbles as "semi-public spheres." This concept bears affinities with other concepts from recent communication research that try to capture the hybrid interpersonal and mass communication features of digital communication, for example "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009) and "masspersonal communication" (O'Sullivan & Carr, 2018). In Habermas's conception, semi-public spheres combine some features of private correspondence among people who know one another with some features of public communication among a large and diffuse population. But unlike the normative ideal of the public sphere, semi-public spheres do not aim for universal inclusiveness and concern for the common good. Instead, Habermas argues, the mass media—despite their imperfections—remain the best available communication systems

in which those aims can be served: "The inclusive public communication dominated by mass media is the only place in the democracies of large-scale territorial states in which this process of jointly striking a balance between self-interest and the orientation towards the common good can occur" (Habermas, 2022/2023, p. 89).

By contrast, within echo chambers and other semi-public spheres, discussions tend to be exclusionary and sectarian. Participants in semi-public spheres do not aim to arrive at a consensus about what truth claims are best for everyone to believe, or what actions are best for everyone to do, promote, or support. Instead, they aim to defend a "*limited, identity-preserving* horizon of supposed, yet professionally unfiltered, 'knowledge'" (Habermas, 2022/2023, p. 55). To the people inside an echo chamber, that horizon of knowledge has complete validity. Their internally directed communication not only guards their beliefs from criticism but also obviates any need to justify them to fellow citizens who have different views. Opposing beliefs are just the arbitrary views of rival groups with competing interests. One example of this dynamic that Habermas mentions is the right-wing populist strategy of spreading fake news stories while accusing professional journalists of doing the same thing. This discussion of semi-public spheres echoes the problem that he wrestled with six decades ago in *Structural Transformation*, where he highlighted the difficulty of creating public consensus about a shared common good out of "the unresolved plurality of competing interests" (Habermas, 1962/1989, p. 234). The Internet has not made this problem any easier to solve.

The main essay concludes with Habermas's discussions of some recent long-term studies of media use in Germany and the European Union. Based on their findings, he offers some tentative diagnoses of three other public communication problems that need to be monitored and further studied. First, we need to verify whether and how much citizens' intellectual abilities to process information and news, including fake news and conspiracy theories, have declined. Second, we need to continue investigating the other side of this issue and identify specific ways in which traditional political journalism is being transformed by the attention-based economy of digital platforms. Third, not only governments but Internet users need to figure out how to make digital platforms more responsible for controlling the spread of deceptive and harmful content.

Habermas is careful to note that his assessments of the social effects of digital echo chambers are just educated guesses. He also realizes that we do not yet have sufficient proof that those effects are caused by the platform nature of digital media. A variety of recent studies have begun to accumulate evidence on these issues (for overview, see González-Bailón & Lelkes, 2023). Some findings challenge the cautionary tale about social fragmentation. For example, several studies indicate that even the homophilous communication networks formed on social media do not seal their members off from ideologically dissimilar opinions. Such findings remain tentative, but they do at least challenge what has become the conventional wisdom about confirmation bias, echo chambers, group polarization, and social fragmentation.

The two shorter pieces in this book explain other components of Habermas's deliberative theory of democracy. In "Deliberative Democracy: An Interview," he clarifies his often-misunderstood notions of the ideal speech situation and rational consensus. He also addresses the issue of cultural pluralism, and whether standards of deliberation need to be adjusted from one culture to another. In "What Is Meant by 'Deliberative Democracy'? Objections and Misunderstandings," he discusses how his deliberative theory accounts for the tension in democracies between protecting one's private interests and maintaining a concern for the common good. In both pieces, the COVID-19 pandemic plays a prominent role as an example of a contemporary communication crisis in

which the values of solidarity and concern for the common good were seriously tested, and why the U.S. in particular failed that test.

Throughout all three essays, Habermas defends his theory of deliberative democracy against various criticisms. One common criticism is that he places too much emphasis on an idealized consensus, and that he conceives democratic politics to be "something like a convivial university seminar" (Habermas, 2022/2023, p. 17). In answer to such charges, probably most famously expressed by Chantal Mouffe (2000), he explains that his theory acknowledges the important role of informal and sometimes antagonistic communication such as protests in calling attention to publicly relevant issues and generating a vibrant competition of opinions. By contrast, "An orientation to consensus is functionally required only in the deliberations of those institutions in which legally binding decisions are made" (Habermas, 2022/2023, p. 71). A related criticism is that his theory is too naive and idealistic, and that it does not adequately acknowledge the roles of power in public communication. He answers that charge by explaining that the empiricist conception of power as the ability to impose one's will on others provides an incomplete account of how collective decision-making works.

Habermas's main purpose in this book is to identify the potential new threats that digital media pose to social cohesion and to the maintenance of truth and civility in public communication. Ultimately, he raises more questions about these threats than solutions for them. But that is because he recognizes the limits of our knowledge about the social and political effects of the Internet. His diagnosis of our current communication environment is necessarily conjectural. Nevertheless, this book shows that his theory of deliberative democracy continues to provide a well-reasoned normative perspective for evaluating the roles that traditional and new media play in public communication. It could serve as a concise and up-to-date introduction to Habermas's deliberative theory of democracy for those who have only secondhand or cursory knowledge of his work. It should probably not be used in introductory undergraduate courses because it assumes a lot of prior knowledge of social theory and communication theory, and because Habermas's prose continues to be stylistically dense. However, this book would be of interest to any communication ethicists, critical and cultural scholars, and empirical researchers who study the social and political effects of communications media. It would be especially informative to readers who are concerned about phenomena such as social fragmentation and the proliferation of deceptive and harmful media content, yet who need a coherent theoretical account of why those phenomena are social problems that need to be solved.

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