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PUBLIC SPHERES AND MEDIATED SOCIAL NETWORKS IN THE WESTERN CONTEXT AND BEYOND

PETROS IOSIFIDIS & MARK WHEELER

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Public Spheres and Mediated Social Networks in the Western Context and Beyond

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Foreword

Over the past two decades since the emergence and spread of the Internet, a consensus of sorts has emerged: while there were at first some dismissive voices who contended that it would have little impact on the political world, today most observers concur that, especially in regard to social media, modern communication technologies have impacted profoundly on politics and participation. The problem is that there is still no overarching agreement in terms of how and to what extent this impact takes place, and what significance it has for democratic politics. It has become commonplace to identify 'optimists' and 'pessimists' among the participants in these debates, and while such labels are to some extent valid, they do not, per se, provide us with much analytic insight. All too often in the past, the questions themselves were formulated in a totalising way: *either* the web, with its social media and many affordances, is good for the democracy and the public sphere, *or* it is detrimental—with expectations set on a once-and-for-all answer.

In recent years we have happily seen more nuanced approaches to the web and democracy. These underscore the variegated character of democratic systems and politics; for example, the issue of governance is increasingly added to the more familiar question of the inclusion/exclusion of citizens' communicative participation. Furthermore, public spheres are highlighted as multiplex and historically specific phenomena. Their contingencies cannot be reduced to media technologies, but rather comprise social and cultural dimensions as well, including of course how citizens—and various institutional actors, such as political and economic elites, professional journalists (and increasingly, citizen journalists)—make use of them. Thus, in terms of normatively evaluating the 'success' of any given public sphere

phenomenon, one must look beyond, for instance, the extent to which participants follow suitable forms of online deliberation; while important, it is imperative to also take into account a broad array of societal factors.

A key thematic in this regard, present in Habermas' original formulation—and central to what we might in shorthand call the critical tradition—is the question of power relations in regard to public spheres. With all the possible vectors involved, this is by no means an easily specified dimension, and though it has largely not been ignored, it has often been simplified. Here too, more recent research is widening its perspective: the role of the web in public spheres is seen as shaped by features having to do with its political economy, its technical attributes, its social usages and habitus—and how all of these aspects intersect with broader societal dynamics of power.

This growth of insight into what the analysis of public spheres and media technologies actually entails—this cumulative awareness of what is involved on this terrain—is manifested most impressively in this book by Petros Iosifidis and Mark Wheeler. Using an ambitious and innovative conceptual frame, they ask difficult questions regarding public spheres and social media—about governance, hierarchical power relationships and civic participation. The authors explore wider patterns of political communication among citizens, organisations and institutionalised actors, not least the recent rise in populist discourses. They probe the status of journalism and the capacities of power elites to shape online political communication. On a deeper level, there is an investigation of the communicative dynamics between knowledge and ignorance, and what they mean for democratic ideals and civic practices.

To answer these questions, Iosifidis and Wheeler take an approach that is both unusual in this research field and highly laudable: after their initial frame-establishing conceptual discussions, they turn to a comparative analysis, examining materials deriving from both Western liberal democracies and the so-called BRICS countries—which represent an array of both struggling democracies and authoritarian regimes. The mutually illuminated set of findings and conclusions are highly gratifying. Iosifidis and Wheeler are probably indifferent to whether they are called pessimists or optimists; instead they have provided us with a truly fine contribution, a major leap forward in our knowledge and understanding. I am sure the authors would not claim that it offers once-and-for-all answers, but what they have written will no doubt elicit much appreciation—and considerable agreement.

Lund University Peter Dahlgren
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

There has been widespread discussion about the political and economic potential of online media and social networks, their contribution to changes in working and living practices, and growth rates, alongside their enhancement of democratic practices, public sphere and civic cultures, and citizen responsibility and participation. In particular, Web 2.0—the second generation of the World Wide Web, focused on the public collaboration and sharing of information online—has facilitated computer-mediated tools that allow for the creation and exchange of ideas across virtual communities. This emergence of so-called social media has provided the technological and ideological foundation for the production of user-generated content.

These changes have gone hand in hand with the rise of an era in modern politics which has been described as either post-democracy or late modernity. Several political sociologists have defined the period as one characterised by major transformations in democratic values (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Lash 1990). Henrik Bang (2004) has argued a discursive form of political activism in which solidarity exists but is not tied to any notion of the common good or of a particular ideology. Bang contends that new types of representation have emerged outside the mainstream political institutions, as citizens have only minimal interest in party politics. Rather than aspire to the duties of citizenship, these virtuous 'everyday makers' want to feel 'involved' in their communities and are taking part

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