

Networked Public Spheres

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Abstract

The concept of networked public spheres constitutes a paradigm shift within democratic and public sphere theory, as well as within empirical political communication research. It emphasises the multiplicity of interconnected public spheres instead of a singular, unified public sphere. This concept emerged in debates on the roles of marginalised groups and the new challenges posed by digital media that challenge traditional concepts of national borders and mass media as central arenas for public communication. This entry traces the evolution of networked public spheres, from Habermas's influential work on the public sphere to valid critiques from feminist, anti-capitalist theorists and Internet researchers. It discusses the central concerns and potential benefits arising from the breakdown and fragmentation of public debate, addressing issues such as echo chambers, selective exposure, polarisation, and the exploitation of technology. Lastly, we point out concerns in the context of the ongoing controversy between normative and descriptive theory.

The concept of networked public spheres marks a paradigm shift within democratic and public sphere theory, as well as within empirical political communication research, drawing attention to a diversity of plural public *spheres*, instead of one unifying public sphere. The most essential defining feature of this concept is its *network structure* and the underlying idea of more or less public communication between nodes or entities (e.g., actors) tied together through communicative relations. This entry defines the concept, distinguishes it from conventional conceptions of 'the' public sphere, and outlines its implications for our understanding of public communication and opinion formation processes.

Central to this concept is its understanding of public spheres as *networks*. If the network nodes are defined as actors (e.g., citizens, politicians, media outlets), the connecting edges normally represent the presence and/or quality of communicative actions (e.g., the questioning of a position). The nodes can also be understood as specific elements of the communicative content (e.g., factual claims) in a (e.g., supporting or attacking) relationship to other elements (e.g., positions). A second defining feature is the *plurality of networked public spheres*, contrasting with the singularity of 'the' public sphere, which traditionally has been defined within national borders with domestic mass media providing central arenas for public debate (e.g., Fraser, 2007). More recently, public communication has been reimagined as a *network of networks*, with horizontal interconnections within individual networks and vertical connections spanning between different networks (see e.g., Bruns, 2023 for an overview), thus allowing for broader cross-network and cross-border diffusion of information. Another quality of the concept is its implied *dynamic nature*, in the sense that entities and relations change over time and influence each other (e.g., Friemel & Neuberger, 2023). This dynamic nature also implies the presence of partly observable and partly invisible social and communicative mechanisms (e.g., trust, norms, reciprocity) that drive change within and between networks (e.g., Esau, 2022).

These defining features of the concept of networked public spheres emerged over time and across different areas of scholarly discourse concerned with public communication. Although there are some differences, the metaphor of a singular public sphere as network has long been the dominant notion. This was most influentially popularised by Habermas (1992), who defined the public sphere as “a network for the communication of content and positions” which are “filtered and synthesised to topically organised public opinions” (p. 436, our translation). Refined theorising of the network metaphor of a public sphere accelerated with the emergence of the Internet as a mass medium. Several authors proposed other theoretical building blocks, introducing concepts like “the network society” (Castells, 1996), “the networked public sphere” (e.g., Friedland et al., 2006), and more recently “the public sphere as a dynamic network” (Friemel & Neuberger, 2023). The overall long-term agenda of this work is to re-conceptualise the public sphere while incorporating established and emerging approaches from social network theory and analysis.

Beyond a Singular Public Sphere

Scepticism towards the concept of a single comprehensive public sphere can be traced back to authors at the intersection of feminist, anti-capitalist, and critical social theory. It is rooted in the argument that existing concepts, as presented by Habermas, fail to consider the empirical realities of *all* humans, and instead describe the realities of people who tend to be white, affluent, western, and male. Authors in this critical tradition rejected simplifying normative dichotomies in theoretical thought that reproduce existing power structures, like ‘public’ versus ‘private’ (e.g., Fraser, 1990; Landes, 1988) and ‘rational’ versus ‘emotional’ (e.g., Bickford, 2011; Young, 2002). Consequently, the new theoretical project was to analyse the multiplicity of competing and complementing *publics* (e.g., Simone, 2010), *arenas* (e.g., Esau et al., 2021) or *public spheres* (e.g., Hartley & McKee, 2000; Dahlgren, 2005). Against this background, other authors focussed on relationships between the multiple publics and actors within them. For example, Mouffe (2013) argues that conflict is an essential element of political affairs, with antagonistic and agonistic relationships being the reality of different voices speaking publicly.

Recognising the empirical reality brought about by the digital transformation of media and society since the late 1990s, Internet researchers, in particular, have proposed new concepts to understand this multiplicity of public spheres. For example, boyd (2008) introduced “networked publics” to describe how communities form around social network sites like MySpace and Facebook; Bruns (2023) built on this and related ideas more recently to examine the concept of a “network of publics”. This shift towards the theorisation of networked public spheres, seen as an extension of or replacement for conventional public sphere theory, correlates with the growing prominence of digital media over traditional print and broadcast formats. Other scholars, such as Papacharissi (2014), have introduced the idea of “affective publics”, focussing on the emotional dimensions of online public; similarly, Wright et al. (2016) have explored the concept of “third spaces” in the digital realm. Additionally, Papacharissi (2010) and others have also highlighted the dissolving boundary between ‘public’ and ‘private’, identifying liminal spaces “that are both *privately public* and *publicly private*” (2010, p. 142; emphasis in original) and thus developing the concept of the “private sphere”. These conceptual and empirical advances are also driven by key technological and societal changes, which have enabled new modes of political participation and made digital trace data available for the study of communicative practices at scale. The rapid evolution of social media has significantly amplified and diversified public communication, offering greater visibility to non-elite actors, and validating some of the early predictions for the transformative potential of the Internet while continuously posing new questions and challenges for theorists and empirical researchers.

Implications of a Networked Structure

The consequences of such transformations of the structure of the overall media landscape as a result of the advent of digital and social media have been mixed. While the centrality of mass media as the dominant arenas of public debate and opinion formation has declined, and the diversity of smaller-scale arenas for debate within

and across issue and interest publics has increased accordingly, the discursive quality of such fora is highly variable, and the diversification of public discourse across communicative spaces and platforms has necessarily led to a greater fragmentation of public debate. This has also led to moral panics about the possible emergence of ‘echo chambers’ or ‘filter bubbles’ (e.g., Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2017), as individuals may engage only in those publics that accord with their personal worldviews and therefore no longer encounter opposing viewpoints; however, there is no robust empirical evidence for such problematic tendencies: while individuals naturally attach themselves preferentially to publics and communities that address their personal and political interests, this tendency does not produce an equal and opposite trend towards the selective avoidance of content and publics that disagree with them (Garrett, 2009).

Of greater concern should be the problem that the transition towards plural networked public spheres enables the rapid formation of issue, interest, and ideological publics whose internal dynamics may elevate the loudest, most committed, and most extreme voices within these communities, and that such publics may position themselves aggressively in opposition to their perceived enemies. In this view, the affordances, and logics of algorithmically facilitated public communication, especially through social media, privilege and promote antagonistic clashes between rival issue and interest publics that embrace opposing worldviews, rather than respectful agonistic debate that aims to develop mutual tolerance and understanding. In line with the “reinforcing spirals model” outlined by Slater et al. (2015), for instance, repeated exposure to racist, misogynistic, antisemitic, or otherwise extreme content posted by the most active members of online communities may lead less central members of these communities to believe that in order to be accepted by their peers they must display similarly extreme views, which through repeated use gradually become internalised. Arguably, this pattern can be observed as interested participants are being drawn deeper into the QAnon conspiracy theorist community, leading them even to openly support violent acts such as the 6 January 2021 attack on the United States Capitol.

Further, following the processes outlined by Mouffe (2013), multiple publics involved in contentious disputes on both sides of public dialogues can coalesce into discursive alliances, leading to the deepening of more fundamental fault lines of polarisation in a given society as, for instance, various publics with broadly progressive or conservative perspectives on different issues align to form larger ideological blocs. The by now well established tendency in the United States to parse any societal issue through the lens of Republican vs. Democrat party politics provides an obvious if extreme example for such dynamics.: In recent years, environmental policies, once a domain of bipartisan co-operation (see e.g., Clean Air Act in 1970 and 1990), have become highly polarised in U.S. politics. For example, initiatives for renewable energy and climate change mitigation, which received support across the political spectrum in the past, are now often subject to party-aligned viewpoints. As a result, a strong endorsement of such initiatives by one party lead to strong opposition from the other.

Bad-Faith Exploitation and Pro-Social Engagement

Where such tendencies exist, they may also be exploited by bad-faith actors, including ideological, commercial, and state entities. By inflaming the rhetoric of public debate through propaganda, undermining meaningful debate with mis- and disinformation, utilising inauthentic practices such as Sockpuppeting (the operation of a fleet of centrally controlled accounts to create the impression of widespread support) and Astroturfing (the coordinated flooding of communicative spaces with messages in support of the same view), or drawing on other tools in the contemporary arsenal of influence operations, such actors encourage the radicalisation of issue and interest publics and thereby increase communicative incivility and deepen public disunity. For example, the debate around public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in hostility and mistrust, often fuelled by mis- and disinformation. The diversified, decentralised, and dynamic structure of networked public spheres complicates the development of effective responses to such phenomena: the policy-making, policy implementation, and policing of problematic communicative activities lag behind the evolution of the activities themselves, often by a considerable margin, and any effective response also depends on the cooperation of the operators of the communication platforms where such publics assemble – platforms which are often not

covered by conventional media legislation, and may be located outside the jurisdiction of national legislators at any rate.

While attention to these problems is certainly warranted, the same diversified, decentralised, and dynamic structure of networked public spheres has also enabled considerably more pro-social discursive and democratic engagement. Major world-wide movements for change, including the Me Too movement opposing sexual harassment and abuse, the Black Lives Matter movement against racism and racial inequality, and the Fridays for Future movement for meaningful action in the anthropogenic climate crisis, emerged initially as *ad hoc* issue publics, often as grassroots responses to specific societal crises and events, and evolved and diversified into a range of mass-participation activities that produced prominent new societal and political leaders; the same is true for similar phenomena at national and local levels. Importantly, networked public spheres and the online and social media communication platforms they centrally employ enable the rapid assembly of publics around breaking news events, political crises, natural and human-made disasters, emerging societal issues, and other topics, and such publics can serve as engine rooms for thematic news curation, public debate, opinion formation, and political activism without intermediation by conventional journalistic or political actors (e.g., Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013). While this potential can be abused by anti-democratic groups, it is also utilised by a large number of pro-social, previously marginalised communities to combat contemporary societal challenges including misogyny, racism, homophobia, or transphobia. Any critique of plural networked public spheres that laments the loss of ‘the’ singular public sphere dominated by conventional mainstream media must therefore also address the criticism that, at least implicitly, it longs for the lost hegemony of a privileged group over the rest of society.

In conclusion, then, the shift from a singular public sphere to a multitude of networked publics presents both new opportunities and future challenges. One of the major controversies in this evolving field is yet again the dichotomy between normative and descriptive theory. While normative theory harks back to the concept of a unified public sphere, descriptive theory builds on empirical observations of online and offline communication practices. Given the complex communicative landscape, it is crucial to exercise caution when adopting normative theories and their inherent assumptions about human nature and social structures. At the same time, labelling normative theories as ‘orthodox’ can overlook the nuances and heterogeneity of communication practices in our digitally networked era. Many authors who offer predominantly descriptive models of the public sphere’s functions fail to acknowledge their own normative assumptions. As we continue to explore the terrain of networked public spheres, a careful and balanced approach is crucial, considering both normative and descriptive perspectives, along with a rigorous analysis of evolving empirical realities.

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