

A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics

By Jürgen Habermas

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Since its publication in 1962, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has generated a serious academic corpus. In this work, Jürgen Habermas introduced the concept of the public sphere — a space where citizens discuss shared concerns and participate in democratic decision-making processes.

Through the sphere, citizens can directly or indirectly influence the formation of legal norms and regulations. A society-wide communication system is crucial for such a mechanism and the formation of public opinion. However, over the six decades, political, economic, cultural, and technological transformations have reshaped this sphere. Aware of these changes, Habermas revisited and revised his work under a new title, *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics*, in 2023.

The study analyses the new structural transformation of the public sphere and deliberative politics in the digital age. It consists of three chapters. Habermas firstly deals with the spread of the internet and social media, the shift away from traditional media and journalism, and the transformation of the public sphere. He emphasizes the legitimacy of the democratic project, the importance of deliberative politics, and the necessity of creating a public sphere where citizens use rational reasoning and justifications. Then, Habermas

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addresses studies on deliberative democracy and conceptual misunderstandings in the literature.

Habermas challenges the standard distinction between normative and empirical theory. He does not accept the assumption that the former is context-independent while the

latter is situated and empirically accessible. According to him, the normative structure of the public sphere has deep roots in Western societies. In other words, the normative tendency and universal principles inherited from the 18th century revolutions within the framework of the Enlightenment have been passed down from generation to generation through political socialization and education and have now become the basic processes of democratic societies. This has led to an expectation among citizens that public debate will impact political decision-making processes. The will of citizens should be reflected in the political system through elections and other forms of participation. There is such a normative commitment in modern democracies. Habermas argues that the U.S. Capitol riots in January 2021 would not have happened if the political system and elites had been able to fulfill the legitimate and constitutional expectations of their citizens.

According to Habermas, constitutional rights reduce social fragmentation in heterogeneous

societies where people have different identities and living conditions. Constitutions determine not only individual or public rights but also procedural processes that help to expand these rights through deliberation. Nevertheless, Habermas underlines that constitutional rights and rational debates for the common good have lost their appeal in Western democracies for a long time. Neoliberal policies have caused the weakening of welfare states and increased social inequalities. Moreover, the neglect of economically disadvantaged groups has led to a decline in trust in political parties and institutions. In addition, the public sphere's role in bringing the views of marginalized groups to the center has been limited. In this way, the principle of inclusion of all those who will be affected by the deliberation process has been crippled. This process, combined with the climate crisis and the immigration problem, has exacerbated social polarization and instability. Then, the governance capacity of democracies has been severely challenged. Likewise, this fragmentation has destroyed the belief that democratic participation can solve structural social and economic inequalities and establish social justice. Consequently, voter turnout rates have fallen significantly in most of the Western countries, and anti-systemic authoritarian and populist movements have gained strength.

Throughout the book, Habermas asserts that the deterioration in the public sphere and deliberative politics cannot be evaluated without considering the digitalization of the media. The use of new media has changed the functioning of public sphere. Habermas draws attention to two main problems arising from the digitalization of the public sphere: declining quality of content and decreasing inclusiveness. The Internet age has enabled users to make their voices heard more. In

this age, they have become both producers and consumers of content. Habermas mentions the emancipatory and egalitarian role of this development. Yet, new media is problematic in accessing the right information. It also lacks the editorial filter to decide what is newsworthy. Meanwhile, social media has led to a narcissistic personalization of the content or, in Habermas' terms, its singularization. The lack of proper filters and justification mechanisms has blurred the line between private and public issues. Put differently, the gatekeeper role of traditional media for the formation of public opinion and will has been lost in new media.

The rise of new media has also decreased the inclusive aspect of the public sphere. Social media is fragmented and self-closed due to its algorithmic structure. This situation often leads to a convergence of similar ideas and creates self-sustaining echo chambers. This discursive fragmentation reduces the possibility and willingness to engage with counter-arguments. Then, the deliberative quality of public debates decreases. With the polarization in new media, the public sphere turns into a semi-public sphere.

In the meantime, due to frequent fake news, the distinction between true and false news has been blurred. According to Habermas, this has led to the infiltration of conspiracy theories into the public sphere and the disturbing normalization of post-truth democracy. Thus, he argues that social divisions may become more chronic if unregulated social media platforms continue their practices without accountability. With the fragmentation of the public sphere, deliberative politics may be challenged more. At this point, Habermas points out that the great emancipatory promise of the new media has not been realized. He attributes this to neoliberal

policies, global far-right networks, the commodification of political information, the disappearance of journalistic responsibility, and the lack of professional standards in public communication.

Habermas also clarifies his views on deliberative standards. He also addresses claims that the ideal speech situation ignores power relations in the public sphere and is an unachievable goal. At this point, Habermas emphasizes the importance of having different and critical arguments on the one hand and the necessity of truth-seeking for the common good within the framework of rational reasoning and universal norms and values on the other. In this way, better arguments supported with better information and justifications can be presented to the public and come to the fore in deliberation processes.

Furthermore, Habermas argues against deliberative politics as excessively idealistic and underscores the importance of providing rational justification. He highlights that democracy and constitutional rights do not fall from the sky. The citizens construct and advance them in a spirit of solidarity through normative principles. Accordingly, Habermas sees the preservation of the problem-solving capacity of democracies in the face of the complexity, inequality, and fragmentation of modern life only in increasing the inclusiveness of our communicative spheres and in transforming existing problems into discourses that can be understood by non-experts. In this way, growing social inequalities that threaten the stability of democracies can be reduced, and far-right populism can be stopped. As Habermas frequently reminds

us throughout the book, this is possible only through an egalitarian-individualistic universalist understanding and transforming such a political consciousness into rational rules of law within the framework of communicative deliberation.

In today's world, amidst multiple deep crises, it is essential to comprehend the concept of the public sphere. In this sense, Habermas recent work appeals to a general readership. It can also open wide horizons to academic studies on communicative action, discourse ethics, and deliberative democracy. The accelerated development of technology and the increasing digitalization of the media has triggered new conceptual and theoretical debates in political science, sociology, philosophy, and media studies.

This book is also valuable from an intellectual point of view. Nonetheless, it is interesting that Habermas does not sufficiently explain the contradiction between the mechanisms of capitalism and the public sphere regarding social and political fragmentation. The micro-trends of new media platforms can be examined better considering the macro-level economic policies of neoliberalism. Additionally, the inequalities and injustices caused by the capitalist system are further intensified in the contexts of race, ethnicity, language, religion, and gender. Besides, the political, sociological, cultural, and psychological dynamics behind far-right authoritarian populism could have been considered. Oppressive and discriminatory political movements existed before the Internet age. New media might only be bringing deep-rooted dynamics to the surface.