Digital Lifeworld and Communicative Interaction: Conceptualizing the Transformative Potentials of Social Networking in the Public Sphere

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Abstract

To understand how digital social media influences the reconceptualization of the Habermasian notion of the public sphere, I use "digital lifeworld" to describe people's networking through digital affordances in the public sphere. Regarding how communicative interactions in the digital lifeworld contribute to the transformational potentials in the public sphere, I investigate three paradigms in conceptualizing the communicative interaction: connectivity (how to network), collectivity (what networking entails), and cooperativity (how to sustain networks and networking). Networking is the core to the conceptualization of this framework because networking constitutes the key component in the formation of the lifeworld and accounts for the interactive potentials in challenging the dominant interest in the public sphere. Thus, the influence of networking in the lifeworld where public opinions collide makes the public sphere a transformative structure, and this theoretical framework can help locate the emergent networks that encompass stronger tendencies to influence the public sphere.

Keywords: public sphere, communication rationality, digital lifeworld, connectivity, collectivity, cooperativity, social theory, networking

1. Introduction

In Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas asks when and how the public sphere (or öffentlichkeit in German), as a site for social change, enables public opinions to propel political actions (Calhoun, 2011; Habermas, 1999; Habermas et al., 1974). Although the historical context that Habermas originally examined in eighteenth-century Europe has changed over time, the discussion on the public sphere is still relevant to today's development of democracy (Rauchfleisch & Kovic, 2016; Santos et al., 2019; Srnicek & De Sutter, 2017). In a democratic society, the role of the public sphere is fundamental to centering societal communication in discussing problems of general concerns and exchanging diverse opinions from multiple groups of people within a political structure (Dahlberg, 2018; Goode, 2005; Habermas, 1996, 1999, 2011b, 2011a; Habermas et al., 2004). Following the Habermasian normative framework of the

public sphere, I will explore how digital social media contributes to the reconceptualization of the public sphere and what characterizes the social networking component on digital platforms that engender political actions. Instead of examining the quality of discussion in the public sphere, this paper concentrates on investigating networking dynamics during the communicative interaction on digital social media platforms.

As Habermas noted in his early conceptualization of the public sphere, mass media supports public civic engagement by providing access and resources for the bourgeois group to share their opinions (Garnham, 2011; Habermas, 1999; Habermas et al., 1974). Although the problem of representation in the mediative format of the mass media system limits the membership of participants who can afford to address their group interests, the developing relationship between the media and politics is integral to political structure and process (Garnham, 2011, p. 361). This mediated mass communication also challenges the existing economic system in which the state economic configuration of the market elaborated by "money and power" has increasingly become incorporated into "communicative interaction" (Elder-Vass, 2018, p. 227). In Habermas's framework of the public sphere, the structure and the development of these communicative interactions constitute a lifeworld economy: "the horizon within which communicative actions are 'always already' moving" (Habermas, 1985, p. 95). In other words, the concept of lifeworld, according to Habermas (1986), synthesizes the robust and nuanced dynamics that involve various levels of communicative interactions in the public sphere (Harrington, 2006). Thus, I use "digital lifeworld" as a term to describe digital technology-based social media communication in examining people's networking possibilities and communicative interaction in the public sphere.

Since the communicative interaction is central to the Habermasian notion of the public sphere and essentially empowers the structural transformation in democratic development, transformative potentials are embedded in the conceptualization of the public sphere (Johnson, 2001, 2006; Stewart & Hartmann, 2020; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2019). Identifying these transformative potentials is key to acknowledging the power of the public sphere

in democratic development. The structural configurations that the public sphere entails also introduce the public expectation that the public sphere functions as a transformational structure (O'Mahony, 2021; Rauchfleisch & Kovic, 2016; Singh, 2012). Thus, this paper explores how communicative interactions in the digital lifeworld contribute to the transformational potentials in the public sphere through the lens of social networking and further discusses the incorporation of both normative and descriptive analyses in reconceptualizing the notion of the public sphere.

2. Communicative Interaction in the Public Sphere

The Habermasian notion of the public sphere explores the possibilities of communicative action and interaction provided by the public platform where public opinions are represented as collective powers that could challenge political structure and process (Gilbert, 2020; Habermas, 1985, 1999, 2011, 2015). This platform-based understanding of how the public sphere allows public opinions to be visible through democratic engagement also includes the discussion on who is participating in public discussion (identity) and whose interests are considered in the public participation (ideology) (Bennett, 2012; Blasio & Viviani, 2020; Graham & Smith, 2016; Parks, 2011). Platform, identity, and ideology are three main constituents that outline the dynamics among communicative interactions in the public sphere.

2.1 Platform-Based Communicative Interaction

Platforms create opportunities for the formation of the public sphere. The "public" of the public sphere represents the idea that people gather together and engage in discussions in a non-private setting. Instead of acting as private citizens, people are in public roles by means of "speaking in public and discussing issues of relevance to the wider public, issues of governance" (Poor, 2005, para. 7). Meanwhile, the "sphere" of the public sphere indicates a space mixed with democratic agencies, including formal and informal institutions and organizations (Poor, 2005, para. 7). Similar to Habermas's (1999) demonstration of the rising bourgeois class developing its social power through open conversations in coffee houses and other informal public meeting places, technical infrastructure, though not as visible in the same way as digital content, functions with

significant public interests' implications by supplying materials to create public places in the digital lifeworld (DeNardis & Hackl, 2015, p. 761). In other words, platforms are birthplaces for the emergence of "organizational opportunity" for the development of new forms of public interest (Blasio & Viviani, 2020, p. 16). Thus, identifying these possible platforms provides communicative opportunities for people to enter the public sphere.

Platform-based communication is essential for civic engagement. Although these communicative platforms are not rare, access to these places is not always easy. For example, not everyone can afford time, money, and other resources to participate in these public discussions, while their interests could be among the most urgent and significant ones to address in the public sphere. These barriers that potentially discourage people's access to the public can also reflect class interests among social dynamics. As Nancy Fraser (1990) pointed out, the relation between the "bourgeois public and other publics were always conflictual" (p. 61). Since the Habermasian notion of the public sphere serves as a "conceptual resource" that can help overcome problems in representative publicness through the medium of talk (Fraser, 1990, p. 57), the practice of civic engagement not only happens during communicative interactions but also becomes present when marginalized class and people are combating challenges against their access to the public sphere.

Platform-based communicative interaction is open-ended. Merely the existence of a platform could not make social change possible, and that's why public opinions are central to the function of the public sphere. These public opinions are also often contested during communicative interactions because of conflictual relationships among different social groups (Dahlgren, 2005; Fuchs, 2014). Since the conflictual relationship is associated with visibility of issues addressed by various individuals, groups, and institutions, communicative interaction that affords people to "see and to be seen (or hear and to be heard)" becomes a shared practice in the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2018, p. 36). In the digital world, social media platforms not only play similar roles to coffee houses for informal conversations but also navigate the public attention to discuss these issues by providing ventures for

developing communicative interaction.

2.2 Identity-Driven Communicative Actions

If the public sphere as a platform provides opportunities for civic engagement, knowledge of who is competing for and benefiting from these opportunities is important to navigate communicative actions in democratic development. Although identity is fluid during the process of civic engagement and subject to social relations that may reflect conflictual interests between individuals and public institutions, the recognition of identity as a factor in contributing to communicative actions in the public sphere is key to representational and interactional democratic societies (Dahlgren, 2005; Parker & Bozeman, 2018). For example, counterpublics are communicative actions in response to normalized discourse that maintains what constitutes the public interest (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Kavada & Poell, 2021; Kruse et al., 2018). With the affordance of social media platforms, Bennett (2012) described how individuals could manage to transition between various identities when addressing the same social-political issue:

> The group-based "identity politics" of the "new social movements" that arose after the 1960s still exist, but the recent period has seen more diverse mobilizations in which individuals are mobilized around personal lifestyle values to engage with multiple causes such as economic justice (fair trade, inequality, and development policies), environmental protection, and worker and human rights. (p. 20)

When individuals, groups, and institutions participate in the public sphere, identity becomes the currency in producing possible sources for the interactive social power of mobilization. Compared to Habermas's (1999) goal of fostering a rational-critical debate as a common good in civic engagement, using identity to justify the idea of rationality constitutes an essential resource for legitimizing each communicative action in the public sphere. Although the controversiality of the Habermasian notion of communicative rationality (Habermas, 1985), later known as "critical-rational debate" in Habermas's (1999) *Structural Transformation*, remains, one consistent theme of Habermasian understanding of rationality consists not so much in possession of particular knowledge, but rather in "how

speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge" (Habermas, 1999). Similarly, an "agonistic" democratic approach requires such a sense of rationality for public opinions to acknowledge the fact that "difference allows us to constitute unity and totality" even within a conflictual relationship (Mouffe, 1999, p. 757). Without the introduction and development of rationality during communicative action and interaction, events such as the 2001 September 11 attacks and the 2021 United States Capitol attack may eventually become more common in the public sphere.

Identities are practical interfaces in the public sphere. On the one hand, identity as a form of rational-critical debate is responsive to the inclusion and exclusion of the public sphere because identity directly speaks to the question of who is allowed to enter the public sphere (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2014; Brantner et al., 2021; Dahlberg, 2014; Korstenbroek, 2021). Thus, the public sphere is arguably a "small" public sphere regarding qualification for civic engagement. For example, in Habermas's depiction of eighteenth-century European society, the public sphere primarily belongs to the bourgeois group (Habermas et al., 2004). On the other hand, reconstruction of identity involves the critical-rational debate and questions what constitutes specific identities in the public sphere. In the digital lifeworld, activists could use technical strategies to overcome the barriers historically set by social-economic hierarchies by renegotiating "the visibility of the public sphere through protest and media networking" to reconstruct their identities via communicative interaction. (Nanabhay & Farmanfarmaian, 2011).

2.3 Ideology-Oriented Communicative Interest

The liberal model of the public sphere, as Habermas (1974) demonstrated, is a political public sphere in which the principle of public discussion is a means of transforming the nature of the power between different groups (p. 53). In other words, the public sphere is a marketplace that circulates the influx of general interests represented by diverse groups of people. Whoever dominates the public sphere also dominates the public interest; such an interest often reflects the main ideology from the group that dominates the public sphere (Ausserhofer & Maireder, 2013; Batorski & Grzywińska, 2018; Bohman, 2004). Although the public sphere is a tool for exclusion primarily based on ideologies

reflected upon partisanship, class, race, gender, ethnicity, etc., the dualistic view of thinking about the public, namely public vs. counterpublics, can be problematic as not all the counterpublics are entirely excluded from the public sphere (Thorsen & Sreedharan, 2019; Tucker et al., 2017). Without counter ideologies coexisting in the public sphere, the domination of ideology-oriented communicative interest would not be possible. This interdependent relationship between the public and counterpublics characterizes the potentiality of the digital lifeworld in which ideologically oriented communicative interactions are inexhaustible. According to Kavada & Poell (2021), the ideology-critical approach that focuses on the public interests of the dominant group mirrors the representative publicness when mapping the power differentials in the public sphere. Kavada & Poell (2021) regard publicness as a continuous unit that transforms the private into the public domain:

> [Shifting the focus from public to publicness] allows for less static and rigid analysis of public contestation that does not restrict it to something occurring in a specific "place" and revolving around a particular "public," which is more-or-less stable through time… This helps us to trace the dynamic process of emergence, crystallization and dissolution of contentious publics that spans both social media platforms and physical spaces of communication. (p. 193)

Although the methods of communication interactions can change from physical spaces to social media platforms, the goal of advocating ideologies from diverse groups is evident in the public sphere regardless of communication formats. The central role of ideology in representing publicness also illustrates "how a fragmentized structure of the public sphere has been integrated into the power game process of achieving consensus" (Shao & Wang, 2017). For example, Lee et al. (2018) examine the function of social media in addressing marginalized partisan ideologies and find that social media, as a means of communicative interaction in the digital lifeworld, "provide a subaltern public sphere for those excluded from the dominant public sphere, thus extending the public sphere to accommodate multiple opinions and perspectives" (p. 1949).

These empirical cases provide an

interdependent perspective of exploring ideology-oriented networking activities as part of civic engagement both in and beyond the digital lifeworld. These ideology-oriented communicative interests exhibited through networking activities not only discursively trace the power transformation in the public discussion but also contribute to the discussion of communicative rationality in the process of networking. To inquire what factors influence the quality of such deliberative networking in the digital lifeworld, I provide a framework that incorporates normative and empirical aspects, focusing on connectivity (the process of networking), collectivity (the effect of networking), and cooperativity (the possible outcome of networking) to address the importance of studying the networking dynamics in the public sphere.

3. Networking in the Digital Lifeworld

The idea of networking as a social norm is no stranger to the conceptualization of the public sphere (boyd, 2010; Fenton & Barassi, 2011; Iosifidis & Wheeler, 2015; Jensen, 2015). Habermas described the notion of network as an essential value in his theorization of the public sphere where "the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized" through networks so that they "coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions" (Habermas, 1996, p. 360):

> At the periphery of the political system [regarding mass communicative interaction], the public sphere is rooted in networks for wild flows of messages—news, reports, commentaries, talks, scenes and images, and shows and movies with informative, polemical, educational, or entertaining content. (Habermas, 2006, p. 415)

Networking as an interactive process also constitutes the "liveliness" of the lifeworld in empirical studies. As danah boyd pointed out, social network sites are publics, namely networked publics, and such networked publics' affordances based on digital technologies could potentially reconfigure the environment (digital lifeworld) in a way that influences participants' engagement (boyd, 2010, p. 39). Consequently, the rapid development of networking technologies and growth in usage of social networking sites calls for a "reconsideration of the meaning of mediated political participation"

in the public sphere (Fenton & Barassi, 2011, p. 179). In response to such a call for reconsideration of the interactive process between individuals, groups, institutions in the digital lifeworld, I regard networking as a communication model when disentangling relationships between political participants in the public sphere.

3.1 Connectivity: How to Network

Connectivity reveals in what manner people network and how affordances from social, cultural, technical, and other aspects influence the experience of such networking processes. The underlying claim in conceptualizing the function of connectivity addresses the idea that networking is an act of civic engagement. For example, the possibilities of counterpublics emerging from social network sites depend on both the quantity of advocates and the specific strategies of networking. Stewart & Hartmann (2020) summarized the connections brought by technological affordances on the social media platforms as liberatory tools for civic engagement:

> [T]he connections that networked individualism affords allow for the proliferation of multiple publics and more direct routes to access those publics through rapidly distributed content. Where once mass messaging in the public sphere required a great deal of resources to print or distribute material, to "join the administered conversation" using Habermas's terms, technology and dense individual networks now lower the barriers to communication with others and access the public sphere through the quick sharing and reproduction of content. (p. 175)

If affordances enable various forms of connections and engender civic engagement, connectivity also indicates the interactive potential for structural transformation regarding the domination of the public sphere. For example, connectivity reclaims the basic unit of networking on social media sites. Social media technologies such as Twitter are recognized as enabling new forms of communicative actions, in which "political movements coalesce and mobilize around hashtags, memes, and personalized action frames" (Pond & Lewis, 2019, p. 213). These possibilities of conceptualizing connectivity in the digital lifeworld essentially increase the accessibility

and encourage creativity in challenging the ongoing conflictual dynamics during the process of civic engagement, especially regarding identity-driven communicative actions.

3.2 Collectivity: What Networking Entails

Examining the practice and impact of networking is necessary for understanding the meaning of collectivity generated by networking events in the public sphere. Although normative and empirical analyses have different orientations when investigating the influence of collectivity among social networks, both perspectives agree on the power of collectivity in developing social changes and transforming power differentials in the public sphere. In Habermas's (2006) recasting of the epistemic dimension of the communication model of deliberative politics, he considers possible references to empirical research and identifies the "dynamics" of mass communication as "powerful interventions" in civic engagement (p. 415). Thus, collectivity as a key component in these communicative dynamics responds to struggles in the conflictual relationships among diverse groups and constitutes a new force for marginalized groups to challenge the ideological domination in the public sphere.

In the realm of the digital lifeworld, collectivity entails the process of developmental organization in response to communicative rationality. "Potent collectivity," as a term coined by Jeremy Gilbert (2020), offers a possible interpretation that credits the potentiality for digital technology like social media platforms to enable new forms of democratic mobilization (p. 154). However, the optimistic view of considering networking as a form of empowerment in the digital lifeworld does not automatically deny the fact that adverse effects may happen simultaneously. For example, collective identities developed from a neutral understating of collectivity may lead to a "vicious cycle of extremism" (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019, p. 241). These undesired outcomes of collectivity in the public sphere question the reflexivity of networking.

3.3 Cooperativity: How to Sustain Networks and Networking

The notion of cooperativity involves the interplay between sustainability and reflexivity of networking in pursuit of the collective goals in democratic societies. These collective goals expand the interactive potentials built on

connectivity that signifies the power of the networking activities and include the process of reflexivity to overcome challenges decentralizing units that are dependent on the contingent connectivity. Thus, the conceptualization of cooperability is a process of critical reasoning that resonates with Habermas's idea of communicative rationality. The Habermasian concept of communicative rationality sets the tone of intentionality in the public discussion: cooperative behavior succeeds insofar as the inherently reasonable consensus holds (Habermas, 1985, 1996, 2006, 2015). Accordingly, regarding collective extremism, the fundamental expectation from Habermas's communicative rationality posits that the public sphere serves for the transformative nature of developing democratic wills for deliberative civic engagement, and hence being a place for reconstruction rather than destruction.

However, the operational manner in establishing such cooperative behaviors is not exclusive only to an agreement. According to Chantal Mouffe (1999), the rationalistic framework should not be universal by considering the conditions of ideal discourse but deliberately open-ended because recognizing and discussing the conflictual relation is legitimate democratic participation. Therefore, rationality is grounded in networks publicly represented by diverse individuals, groups, and institutions and is collaboratively associated with cooperativity among networked discussions. In other words, the purpose of rationalization is not to reach a unanimous decision but to encourage people to disagree with others for the public good. In the account of rationality represented by the practice of networking, Iosifidis & Wheeler (2015) described some examples of how cooperative behavior functions through "many-to-many" forms of communication in the digital lifeworld:

> For many Internet advocates, social media provides an electronic agora to allow for alternative issues to be raised, framed, and effectively debated. It is contended that citizens may enjoy real-time interactive access to transmit ideas, bypass authorities, challenge autocracies and affect more significant forms of expression against state power. Thus, the social media allows for many-to-many or point-to-point forms of communication. Most especially, online social networks such as Facebook, LinkedIn,

and Twitter, have facilitated opportunities for grassroots communication, deliberation and discussion. (p. 2)

The awareness of cooperativity effectively navigates the collective efforts toward goals of deliberation in the public sphere. New affordances enabled by digital technologies provide alternative ways of communicative interactions to the public sphere and drive deliberative forms of mobilization through networking. The purpose of proposing an analytical framework that includes the discussion of connectivity, collectivity, and cooperativity as well as the relationships between these conceptualizations, is to contribute to the understanding of the process of communicative interaction and its impact on the democratic society. Networking is the core to the conceptualization of this framework because networking as a public event constitutes the key component in the formation of the lifeworld and accounts for the interactive potentials in challenging the dominant interest in the public sphere. Thus, the influence of networking in the lifeworld where public opinions collide makes the public sphere a transformative structure.

4. Conclusion

The framework of networking provides a perspective for investigating the dynamics of communicative interaction in the public sphere. Even though digital technologies such as social media offer new networking opportunities, the notion of networking is not the benchmark that distinguishes two spheres between the digital public sphere and the physical public sphere (Bimber & Gil de Zúñiga, 2020; Breese, 2011; Brenne, 2016; Butsch, 2007; Nanabhay & Farmanfarmaian, 2011). Instead, because the lifeworld indicates the communicative dynamics in the public sphere, the digital lifeworld becomes a proper term to describe people's networking through digital affordances in the public sphere.

The analysis of networking from the paradigms of connectivity, collectivity, and cooperativity also problematizes notions of the "small" public sphere in the Habermasian understanding of the domination of the public sphere, which only admits people with specific qualifications such as money, time, and critical-rational skills (Boucher, 2021; Crossley, 2004; Habermas, 2006). Although the public sphere serves as the platform for civic engagement, communicating

actions do not have to be "entering" (from a non-public sphere to a public sphere) but open to "networking" (public spheres emerge from networks) to remain relevant to the public discussion. Thus, this framework can also help locate the emergent networks that encompass stronger tendencies to influence the public sphere.

Additionally, the reconceptualization of the public sphere updates the notion of communicative rationality in relation to the development of democratic societies. Since the public sphere is a place for ideologically oriented discussion, it is necessary to be "cautious" that the public sphere, especially in the digital lifeworld, is likely to be "a breeding ground for nationalist and populist discourses" (Dong et al., 2017, p. 726). Thus, it is urgent to explore solutions to balance the conflictual dynamics that could sustain the running of the public sphere.

5. Future Research

Since the democratic will is designed within the conceptualization of the public sphere, balancing tensions between competing publics with conflictual interest becomes a main topic in the public discussion. Smith & Niker (2021) point out the importance of recognizing and developing a reciprocal relationship between individual agents in public participation, which brings out the expectation of public "duties" as causing no "undue harm" (p. 6). The introduction of such an agreement and how to implement these "duties" are primary concerns for the future of the public sphere. Meanwhile, the task of informing or even educating the public on their public participation is rather challenging considering the ambiguity of rationality in the public sphere. On the one hand, a moralistic approach to regulating public speech eliminates the living dynamics in the lifeworld through a high degree of censorship. On the other hand, a lack of shared interest in discussing rationality in communicative interaction in the public sphere can lead to violent events.

Another direction for future research focuses on analyzing the role of corporate ideologies behind social media networking in affecting the conflictual dynamics in the public sphere (Collins et al., 2020; Johannessen et al., 2016; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; Mylonas, 2017). Considering the digital tools that facilitate

public discussion are often owned by companies who have their own corporate ideologies to address in the public sphere (Walker, 2015), the domination of such a corporate ideology in the digital world, as Lincoln Dahlberg (2005) terms "corporate colonization," sets barriers in the frontier of networking for public participation. Issues associated with such technology corporations, digital infrastructure, technical affordance, and other aspects in the digital lifeworld that endanger the efficacy of the public sphere require scrutiny to understand and advance the role of the public sphere in promoting democratic development.

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