A New "Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere"? Seven Theses against the Widespread Assumption of an All-Powerful Internet

Keynote to the "Futures of the Media" Conference, Xiamen University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 21 January 2022 (online)

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Introduction

Sixty years ago, the famous German philosopher Jürgen Habermas proclaimed in his most successful book that Europe and North America had gone through what he called "the structural transformation of the public sphere" (1991, Orig. 1962). In a process beginning in the 18th century, an increasingly self-conscious capitalist middle class, assisted by a well-organized working class, defined the terms of democratic states whereby basic human rights were protected, public spheres could be established and the ground rules of press freedom and freedom of opinion were installed. Such transformations were not a sign of Western cultural genius, but of sheer necessity: Cambridge historian Peter Frankopan in his recent history of Euro-Asian relations made it clear that after the Thirty Years' War and the virtual destruction of Europe it was only on that continent that a political philosophy like Thomas Hobbes', which claimed that the human being was basically an evil creature in need of a social contract, could emerge (2015). While in Asia wars had also been a frequent phenomenon – just think of the Persians, Mongols or Islamic imperialism – , it went through long phases of peace and stability. In Europe, however, colonialism and religious wars were closely connected to extreme forms of militarism and industrial warfare. Democracy evolved out of sheer necessity, out of near destruction. It was enabled by enlightened thought, scientific developments and other positive values. However, it was also a paradoxical historical process – the 1st amendment of the US constitution was established in times of colonial warfare, and the public spheres of the 20th century were formed out of the ashes of genocide. This historical paradox offers some hope for other parts of the world. In a number of so-called "waves of democracy", East Asian, Latin American, Eastern European and a number of other African and Asian countries including South Africa, Ghana, Indonesia, to name a few, have followed the universal path towards democracy. With respect to the Middle East this author has argued in the book "Radicalism and Political Reform in the Islamic and Western Worlds", which was published a year before the Arab Spring, that that region could follow suit (Hafez 2010).

Habermas was always skeptical about the role of classical mass media as enablers of the public sphere, because they tend to "colonize" it. Large private owners or flawed state institutions and regulations seem to limit real pluralism. To this date, most media systems in Asia, Africa and Latin America are a far from the full participation of their countries' populations.Even though we should not be too critical of positive developments in many countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America, it is also realistic to see that many of the young post-colonial political systems are flawed democracies, hybrid states or simply new autocracies, with severe limitations to the freedom of the press and of public opinion. In this

situation, the idea of a new structural transformation of communication has gained prominence all over the world. The digital turn of the Internet would seem to correct all illnesses of previous developments by opening roads to more inclusive participation of the individual and of civil society, and for powerful social movements in environmental, anti-war and pro-democracy policies. High hopes exist for more globalization through digitalization, a better world, in which we are all connected now (Anderson 1993).

Unfortunately, there are a number of counter arguments to the idea of a new structural transformation. Firstly, most waves of democratization had occurred before the Internet became a mass technology, in the 1980s and 1990s. Secondly, the current era of the Internet is also a time of democratic backlashes, fascist challenges to political systems in the US, Europe, digital authoritarianism in other parts of the world and imperfect globalization – including a European Union at the brink of desintegration and the permanent threat of a new Cold War between the superpowers. Donald Trump, Capitol Hill, not to speak of neo-racism and neo-fundamentalism in the West as well as in the East, old stereotypes in new disguise, including anti-Asian resentment in times of Covid: How can we possibly understand the Internet as a technology of freedom and not of the polar opposite – a tool for the self-destruction of global democracy?

Interestingly enough, grandmaster Jürgen Habermas is rather skeptical of the idea of a new structural transformation. In a recent article which he contributed to a huge anniversary project dedicated to his original work "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" , the 92 year old philosopher king complains about the stagnation or even retardation found within less and less inclusive political systems, of neoliberalism, hyper- capitalism, the stagnation of the European Union project and of the deficits of Global Governance (Habermas 2021). In the public sphere, he argues, the integration of the private and the public through digital media has led to a growing fragmentation rather than increased participation in any real political sense of the word. While he *does* confess that technical digitalization must be interpreted as a revolutionary process, it remains unclear to him whether the real quality of political online deliberation in today's Internet is proof of a more mature political culture. Habermas sees the potential to overcome the limitations of former audiences so that they can become "prod-users", but today's virtual reality, it seems to him, is a rather fragmented multiplicity of unrelated and polarized, antagonistic echo chambers without any ultimate emancipatory character. Habermas also complains about the paralysis of the public sphere through the "libertarian grimace of digital companies ruling the world" (ibid., p. 488), without any meaningful regulation whatsoever. In his view, the public sphere, which has always been fragile and vulnerable, ends up in some type of digital cacophony and ultimate irrationality or at least unpredictability, which lends itself both to Belarusian liberation movements and fascist revolts. At the same time, the market-liberal platformization of Google et al. destroys the very basis of journalism as a moderator of political communication and reinforces the tabloidization of news. This erosion of traditional gatekeeping, he ends his argument, urges us to start learning to use the new digital tools for the direly needed structural transformation of the public sphere in order to save the planet's future.

This author more or less agrees with Habermas' critical view of the Internet and of Social Media. Even though one has to be aware of the high hopes particularly the younger generation places on the Internet – many students really do embrace these technologies – it seems hard to see the Internet as the all-powerful game changer in the transformation towards post-modern democracy and globalization.Like Habermas, this author believes that for the real structural change that is connected to new political systems and social formations, we are at best at the beginning of a learning process – quite comparable to the development of literacy after the introduction of the industrial printing press in early modernity. The following contribution seeks to share some some refelections and hypotheses on the relationship between the Internet and political communication, which are based on almost 30 years of research and academic teaching in the field.

Technical media convergence is not structural transformation

We should avoid technophilia in academia. Many of the apparent structural changes in media production and consumption are in fact only old wine in new bottles. Data of media systems around world show that around 70% of populations still use classical media as a main source of information (Höllig/Hasebrink 2018). Television is still king, even though the print sector is shrinking. The remaining 30% who use the Internet as a main source of information often tend towards classical media in a digital form: online journalism is still among the opinion leaders. It is true that trust in traditional media has decreased, but trust is much higher in richer and more democratic countries. In Germany, for example, two thirds of the population mistrust social media as a source of news, while only one third mistrusts classical media. The smart phone is interfering in our lives, but has it really changed the fundamental rules of the information society?

Journalism is not yet dead, and even Donald Trump is not so much a creature of Twitter, which only became big after he was made president, but of mainstream, classical TV networks, which pushed his candidacy, sometimes unwillingly, when covering his election campaign much more than any of the other 15 or so candidates (Hafez 2019). Why do you think Trump was known for watching TV all day long: because he thought social media were his major pillars of power? It was only after the voters turned their back on him in 2020 and voted for Joe Biden and even Fox News distanced itself from him that his political career was about to end. Old mechanisms of one-to-many journalism are still alive, even though platforming and social media are a real challenge.

There is no linear process of growing political participation through the Internet

We are certainly in need of new arenas of the public sphere, but how do we avoid fragmentation and radical polarization? We are witnesses of growing hate speech and online activism, while the bulk of people does not even actively engage in online political articulation, but uses the new technologies for entertainment and delusion. Some theoreticians like Chantal Mouffe have argued for a move away from consensus-oriented public spheres, which always excluded the less articulate (2000). The idea of smaller agoras

of communication is certainly a charming one, if it does not end up in ideological echo chambers. We see heightened radical polarization in many countries of the world, including many fragile states constantly at the brink of civil war – and this does not only concern Afghanistan or Ethiopia. The United States is certainly not a fragile state in the fullest sense of the definition, but the proliferation of arms and the growing number of paramilitary forces, including many of those who stormed Congress on January 6, 2021, is a very dangerous development. The bulk of fragile states lies in Africa and the Middle East due to their colonial legacies, but hate communication can also destabilize more traditional, established democracies in the West.

Radical polarization is a situation in which groups not only create their own agendas, but do not recognize the very existence of other viewpoints. Is the Internet helping to transport voices from the peripheries to the center? Maybe, but in destabilized societies there might be no political center left over once those voices arrive there. It is definitely much too simple to define the Internet as a power-free zone. And it is certainly also premature to understand it as a life-world oriented version of the public sphere. There is no such thing as a digital rebirth of life-worlds that were and are colonized by political and media systems. Life world communication is based on complex media ecologies that consist of all forms of mediated and non-mediated, direct, face-to-face forms of communication – and digital communication might not even be the most important part of it.

Political representation is as questionable today as it was before the Internet

Even proponents of the idea of a new structural change - 2.0 are often skeptical about dreams of grass-roots oriented post-democracies (Schulze 2012). Representative democracy, most of them say, is here to stay – and this authors certainly agrees. One of the widespread assumptions of the early days of the Internet was that in the digital era political decision-making would become more transparent: Twittering politicians, the leaking of internal documents, whistleblowers informing the public. The reality, however, is that political backstages have never vanished. Terms like digital Public Diplomacy or digital Public Policy are completely erroneous, because the art of politics or of diplomacy has not substantially altered. We often tend to conflate myth and reality, because what is called Public Diplomacy is really PR or propaganda, and that has been executed since antiquity, only with letters printed in stone rather than with digital codes.

The average rational quality of online political deliberation is limited

There have been numerous studies analyzing online political deliberations, and many of them have revealed disappointing results (Stromer-Galley/Wichowski 2013). Not only that many people abstain from such communication or remain "lurkers" within groups and communities. The real quality of many contributions is often based more on opinion that on facts. Fake news and conspiracy theories existed before the Internet, but nowadays they tend to reach larger parts of societies without any form of real gatekeeping. Inter-media

agenda setting is a valid approach to analyzing how social media fabrications can even reach classical news media and endanger established checks and balances (Valenzuela et al. 2017).

And this is not only true for journalism. Fast-handed and easily accessible Google-wisdoms sometimes seem to interfere with academic teaching and research, when students forget how to read books and think that Wikipedia is a godness. Swarm intelligence is a fascinating idea, the realization of which is, however, once more a long-term project. Former founding fathers of the Internet like Jaron Lanier are now highly skeptical of the theoretical consistency of online discourses (2010). They criticize the thin ideologies of the digital world and the dangers of an opiniated *Zeitgeist* generating hasty answers to poorly defined questions and favoring opinion over facts and theories. What is more, Wikipedia for now is an amazingly Eurocentric project, dominated by large Western and small groups of non-Western moderators who are somehow perpetuating Western cultural imperialism (Hafez/Grüne 2021, pp. 251ff.). There are more Wiki-entries on Pokemon and other forms of entertainment than there are on sub-Saharan countries.

The new media are creating new affection economies

There is a new brand of scholarship dealing with the so-called affective or emotional economies created through the Internet (Mühlhoff et al. 2019). The relationship between rationality and emotions in the public sphere is a complex one, and Habermas has been frequently criticized, for example by feminist authors, for limiting the public sphere to rational argumentation, ignoring all other forms of affective self-representation (Fraser 1990). Even though one must subscribe to the idea of multifunctional public spheres, I am still confused as to whether self-representation is really empowerment of the life-world. Are influencers really more than new types of commercial popular culture? Maybe so, but I am not convinced.

Rather than offering more real political participation and representation digital authoritarianism is on the rise

Is such too critical to be true? Most of today's university students, including those from so-called developing countries, are the greatest fans of the Internet and of social media. So how can one possibly question its emancipatory power? No doubt, the Internet has opened new avenues for articulation of previously silenced majorities in authoritarian countries. Political uprisings in Indonesia way back in 1998, in Iran 2009, during the Arab Spring since 2010 or during the #EndSARS-protests in Nigeria in 2020 all profited from the new digital tools. But this is also where the problem begins. The SARS-laws were abolished due to the protests, but new measures were introduced by the government. A recently circulated questionnaire among the youth of Nigeria showed that many of the former participants of the protests now regret their engagement.[1] Moreover, the Arab Spring revolutions have been suffocated

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[1] Results of an MA thesis at MA programme „Global Communuication: Politics & Society", University of Erfurt, Germany.

by recovering autocratic regimes. In a great speech after the Egyptian revolution, its leading and most well-known Internet activist, Wael Ghonim, stated that his original idea of toppling regimes through the Internet was mistaken.[2] "I was wrong", that's what he said, because the reliance of the revolutionary movement on the Internet created a fragmentation of protesters into various camps and created no sustainable opposition, but helped the old regime to regain power while doing away with the young Egyptian democracy.

Recent studies of Stanford University have made it clear that in the Middle East digital authoritarianism is on the rise (Digital Activism 2021). The autocratic state has learned to cope with the challenges of the Internet and to use it for its own ends. What looks like a form of empowerment – the impressive digital discourse – is systematically undermined by cyber authoritarianism. Trolls, spyware and deep packet inspections are installed, often with the help of Israeli, Chinese or German corporations. While the Internet looks like a liberation technology, the state is in fact increasingly absorbing protest energies. As a result, contentious politics and transformations with the Internet are no more likely than without.

More than this: If you believe the largest NGO watchdogs like Freedom House, democracy is currently in recession. We must be afraid of more control of the opposition on the Internet, and digital protest mobilization might be fascinating, but it hardly ever leads to successful transformations. On the contrary, regimes track activists and use the Internet as a controlling device. The idea of liquid opposition networks of movements that have no real hierarchies and can therefore not be defeated is a real myth that is more than useful for anti-democratic forces, because it dilutes oppositional energies away from real political alternatives. RAND Corporation found out that many oppositional forces are not using the Internet any more, and rather escape control through fax machines or face-to-face underground political meetings (Burkhart/Older 2003). The idea of pure digital rebellions is a delusion. What is really needed is a dialogic turn, stronger tie political organizations and realistic visions of online-offline political dynamics, without which the deep structural transformations of society and politics cannot be achieved.

The Internet is rather a local than a global medium

The Internet has enabled some astounding international networks, thereby helping to create new online communities, networks and transnational social movements. Nevertheless, multiple digital, social and political gaps do exist. Only small minorities in the countries of the world communicate across borders. For most people, the Internet is, in fact, rather a local than a global medium, used to intensify all sorts of local communication processes in the fields of general information, entertainment, shopping and local chats (Hafez/Grüne 2021, pp. 225ff.). Special social systems like science, politics and business might be better connected on a world-wide scale, but the real challenge is to network the life-worlds of people in a meaningful interactive and community-creating way beyond the existing diasporic bubbles. The rise of populism in so many countries around the world was enabled,

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[2] Wael Ghonim, Let's Design Social Media that Drives Real Change, Ted Talks Geneva, December 2015 (https://www.ted.com/talks/wael_ghonim_let_s_design_social_media_that_drives_real_change).

because nationally confined public spheres and media have survived all efforts of digital transnationalization. Most media circulate pre-fabricated, stereotypical and often one-sided news about the world – and this holds true also for all major information platforms and social media exchanges on the Internet.

Several observers have meanwhile realized that despite all high hopes the dominant mode of communication on the Internet is not intercultural dialogue, but more of the same one-to many prejudices deliberation or even hate communication. Ethan Zuckerman from MIT, to mention but one the most well-known academic think tanks in the field, agrees (2013). A world growing together economically without any real idea of intercultural communication is a place of heightening rather than diminishing conflicts. Essentialist and racist views of a clash of civilizations or of the ultimate incompatibility of cultures will not be overcome by technical visions. The medium is *not* the message, as Marshall McLuhan once argued (1964). It is the underlying individual, communal and systemic structures, it is our basic understanding of nations, religions and identities that need to be altered, if we want to live in a more united, cosmopolitan world.

Conclusion

In essence, it seems to me that the new digital structural transformation of the public sphere that seems to occur is questionable on all levels. If we really want to understand the Internet, we need to leave the comfort zone of common-sense assumptions and capitalist technological mythology of an all-powerful medium and enter a real debate. Let us no longer stare at digital surface structures but let us start digging for the social and political deep structures related to online communication.

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