

Application Of The Principles Of Public Sphere In Modern Mass Media

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Introduction

“The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” by Jurgen Habermas is an immensely influential and rich book that has greatly impacted various disciplines in the field of social sciences (Kellner, 2000). The book has also led to very detailed and constructive discussions on liberal democracy, public life, and civil society. For Habermas, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the public sphere of the bourgeois was a platform to criticize the policies of the authorities and hold them responsible for their political actions (Garnham, 2007). This platform was established on the principle of publicness, which allowed individuals to share their personal opinions, which would later evolve into public opinions after the public debate (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994).

However, there is enough criticism of Habermas’s ideas of the public sphere, which some socialists have regarded as an idealization. But as noted by Livingstone and Lunt (1994), Habermas, an account of the public sphere, is very important in addressing the failure of Marxist critical theory in differentiating the state and societal forums, which led to the hegemonic and coercive role of the state in regulating broadcasting (Verstraeten, 1996). Moreover, as we will discuss, Habermas’ concepts of the public sphere are of great importance in today’s modern media.

The new tools and mediums of mass communication have introduced new dimensions to public spheres, and consequently, their scope is now being discussed by philosophers, political thinkers, and sociologists. For example, going beyond the primary definition of Habermas, Kellner, (2000), conceived the public sphere as a place of political struggle, discussion, information, contestation, organizations of broadcasting media, cyberspaces, and physical interactions. He further stated that the new multimedia technologies require further improvement of the existing ideas about the public sphere and notions of the critical and public intellectual. In this regard, the following essay critically analyses the specific elements of the public sphere that can be applied to modern mass media, along with certain factors that resist the effective application of these concepts.

Public Sphere and Modern Mass Media

Principles of Public Sphere

One of the major concepts of the public sphere is a vital analytical tool to analyze the relationship

between media and free society in this modern world. Habermas, in his book, has described a historical account of the public sphere, mentioning a new class of bourgeoisie that created a public body and established new conditions of reason-based public opinion in contrast to the state and church (Iosifidis, 2011). This new class further led to the creation of several institutions and the launch of many newspapers that provided a means for private thoughts to become public. Similarly, the universities and libraries became the platforms for public debate and publishing organizations' primary means to criticize the government. This new form of the public sphere was protected by both the state and church and was accessible to all individuals in society (Iosifidis, 2011).

According to Habermas, the public sphere is a platform in which private persons of the society can debate on public matters to influence the authorities by creating a consensus that leads to public opinion and makes the state accountable (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox, 1974). He further stated, "By 'the public sphere', we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox, 1974). This way, he argued the existence of the public sphere as a promise.

However, Habermas later mentioned that the expansion of the state and the development of monopoly capitalism damaged this space of universalistic and rational politics. Similarly, advertising agencies and public relations made numerous deals with the state without involving the public, replacing the rational public debate with power politics. In this way, the independent press of the 19th century has given rise to rational public decision-making and public debate on judicial and public matters and has become a functional tool to control public opinion and an effective platform for public relations and advertising (Iosifidis, 2011).

It is also important to note that Habermas categorizes modern life according to four separate domains, which are further divided into two dimensions (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). These domains include public and private, system integration based on strategic calculations, and social integration based on moral values and norms. To elaborate further on this concept, they stated that material reproduction and the modern administrative state are both systems integrated while the economy and state are part of the private and public domains, respectively. The modern mass media, which is primarily concerned with symbolic reproduction, a function of socially integrated institutions, addresses both the public sphere and family having strong relations with the state and economy.

Role of Mass Media

Mass media are a medium of communication, talk, and potential consensus, including newspapers, radio, television, magazines, and social media. Previously, the state and private corporations created a system of control that did not allow critics and oppositions to raise their voices against the dominant ideas, policies, and rules in the world. However, the advent of television and guerilla radio provided

platforms for critical intellectuals to intervene in the system's authoritative system. Similarly, the internet further expanded the realm of democratic involvement and political intervention.

According to Kellner (2000), the new broadcasting media and information and communication technologies have created new public spheres to upsurge the propagation of progressive and critical ideas along with bringing new ways for the social control, manipulation, and stabilization of conventional positions. Therefore, he urged critical intellectuals to acquire the necessary digital and technological skills that all these new mediums of communication and debate, which he referred to as cyberspace, require. Reviewing the impact of the mass media, Habermas has observed a major shift from the debating public to the consuming public (Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox, 1974).

Another prominent aspect of the mass media that Habermas has noted is the participation of state officials in discussion programs, while his initial definition of the public sphere includes participants as private citizens. Moreover, since these state officials have their presence in these programs in public relations capacity, it does not influence the decision-making, which is, according to Habermas, very important to sustain the critical potential of the public sphere and prevent the public from becoming the state itself.

To analyze the role of mass media in public life Livingstone and Lunt (1994), discussed two approaches. The first approach aligns with Habermas' concepts of the public sphere being a platform that provides equal rights to all the members of society to access the forums and publicly discuss, criticize or promote ideas. This approach limits the control of bureaucracy in everyday life and supports the development of public opinion. According to this approach, modern mass media can be analyzed based on whether it offers an institutional forum through its access and participation programs to promote critical discussions and the development of consensus between disputed parties (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994).

The other approach highlights the role of media in facilitating the expression of diverse social and political interests to promote working cooperation amongst disintegrated parties (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Although both models prioritize access and voice, the working models of argumentation, critical debate and negotiation and underlying elements of dialogue, consensus and compromise are different for both models. Therefore, access and participation programmes, according to the second approach, will be evaluated in terms of their effectiveness in promoting diversity and challenging established power.

Resisting Elements of Mass Media

The internet and online media have provided new spaces for debate and thereby have initiated new discussions in the field (Betancourt Higareda, 2013). However, it has also become an effective tool for manipulating the masses and controlling the public, as highlighted by Iosifidis (2011). In this regard, manipulation of the mass media and party politics are the primary sources that resist the application of public sphere concepts in mass media. They headed to the re-feudalization of the public sphere in

which rational debate has become a secondary factor against the dominant concepts of appearances and representations. This has transformed the rational-critical public into a huge public that is controlled by influential authorities, making the public sphere biased in terms of admission. Consequently, this re-feudalization has turned institutional meeting places into a theatre where leaders and parties always look for acclamatory assent of a depoliticized public. Habermas, Lennox, and Lennox (1974) quoted that, "Large organizations strive for political compromises with the state and with each other, excluding the public sphere whenever possible. But at the same time, the large organizations must assure themselves of at least plebiscitary support from the mass of the population through an apparent display of openness."

Moreover, as political communication channels themselves work through commercial media, they prioritize individuals as private consumers rather than as public citizens. Although social commentators, viewers, and viewer organizations urge to promote rational public debate, the opposition between commercial and public broadcasting is linked to elite forms of democracy that provide justifications for commercial conditions in mass media. Commercial interest utilizes this emancipatory rhetoric to offer an illusion of involvement as compared to public broadcasting, and thus, both models of broadcasting fail to create a public sphere. The market or commercial model considers viewers as consumers and not citizens, while the public model reduces the population to mass opinion.

The market model has also transformed the media into a non-participatory and unrepresentative system that is made up of centralized monopolies that offer a narrow and uniform cultural and ideological meaning. Therefore, as argued by Livingstone and Lunt (1994), this market model of broadcasting is partly influenced by the criticism of the elite fractions of the society and integral components of the public service ethic, which requires public service ethic to present a more emancipatory conception against the fundamental arguments of the market-led broadcasting system.

Moreover, as noted by Livingstone and Lunt (1994), certain interest groups, together with political parties arising from the private sphere and public sphere, respectively, can use the modern media to control the general population by obtaining their affirmation through altered facts and misinformation. Similarly, associations can become more focused on their representative who represents their members in the public sphere, making it a court to display public prestige rather than carry on the critical debate. The originality of the public sphere is thus compromised, which makes accountability less authentic based on public relations.

Furthermore, certain issues hinder the materialistic conversion of modern electronic networks into the public sphere (Iosifidis, 2011). First is the possibility of chaotic interactions due to open participation on the internet that leads to unstructured conversations. Inclusiveness is the second problem in this regard, which limits participation to only those sections of the society which can afford new media technologies. Similarly, censorship is also a potential concern that impacts public involvement in criticizing government policies and directions. This has already happened in many countries, such as China, North Korea, and Cuba, where certain websites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are

banned. Similarly, extensive dialogue and critical discussions are not available on such platforms due to their many inherent features. For example, Twitter allows the exchange of short messages only.

Furthermore, although the Internet is an effective medium for political discussion, especially in developing and underdeveloped countries where people do not have direct access to the mainstream media because of repressive policies, Iosifidis (2011) showed that such regimes are now monitoring the Internet more closely. Furthermore, the individuals who often share their thoughts on the internet lack sincere efforts to initiate and promote public debate, which ultimately fails to enhance political awareness and engage citizens politically. This indicates that the public sphere generates and disseminates culture and does not just serve as the information exchange depot. However, this creation of a strong culture, as discussed above, becomes extremely difficult as the imbalance of power between the state, large media companies, and civil society makes it hard to achieve the values and determination of people.

Another factor that resists the application of the principles of the public sphere in modern mass media as noted by Iosifidis (2011) is its partial nature. For example, there are numerous blog websites available on the internet where one can share his thoughts independently and invite public discussion online, but these blogs are mostly sponsored by certain organizations, parties, and agencies to deviate from the public in several ways. Consequently, it becomes very difficult to find credible blogs online.

He further argued that if, by any means, debate happens on social media or the internet, it remains highly ineffective due to the non-participatory attitude of individuals and the lack of listening to others. This way, the internet especially fails to accomplish the balance of power, which plays a critical role in achieving consensus and deliberation, respect for differences of opinion, and the effective role of deliberative groups having the same agenda (Iosifidis, 2011). Therefore, the ability of the internet to create a public sphere depends entirely on how the internet is used. However, it is important to remember that new media technologies and the internet are effective tools for creating an online public sphere, but they cannot achieve this on their own and can only serve as a vehicle to create a healthier public sphere.

Conclusion

The contemporary era of technological revolution, globalization, and advanced information and communication technology has challenged Habermas' notion of the public sphere, which distinguishes the production and communication to interpret societies. Therefore, it is important to expand the critical theory of society to incorporate new technological trends and restructuring of social and economic systems. However, Habermas' work still holds great significance as an indispensable component of any new critical theory to expand the public sphere in the light of digitalization and globalization and address the challenges towards the creation of a free society.

However, certain elements resist the application of those principles of the public sphere that Habermas highlighted. Addressing those factors, Kellner (2000) argued that democratic politics must ensure that the new computer technologies and modern media are used to oblige the interests of the public and not of corporate elites. Their focus must be on enlightening the individuals in society and not on manipulating them for personal gains. There is a further need to teach, train and provide equal opportunities to all the members of society to share their information publicly, promote democratic debate and raise their voices effectively using these new platforms of mass media to integrate diversity and freedom.

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