Bernard Enjolras, Kari Steen-Johnsen

5 The Digital Transformation of the Political Public Sphere: a Sociological Perspective

If the idea of the public sphere is central to the modern conception of democracy, contemporary political theorists have disagreed about both the nature of the public sphere and the assessment of its performance in complex societies. In this essay, we develop an institutional perspective on the contemporary political public sphere through the specific lens of transformations that are spurred by digitalization and in particular by the development of social networking sites (SNSs) and show how this perspective is applicable to ongoing changes in the Norwegian public sphere. We argue that the development and increasing usage and popularity of SNSs enabling decentralized and low-cost access to information production, interactive communication centred on a social graph and information propagation through a digitally empowered social network has transformed *the social organization*, the *symbolic structure* and the *functions* of the public sphere (Peters, 2008a, b).

In our argument, the media is conceived as the most important institutional communicative infrastructure of the public sphere. The media in complex differentiated societies may be conceived as 'a negotiator of public consent' (Hjarvard, 2013, p. 55) via continuous discursive negotiation in the public sphere both when it comes to motivating the need for political action and to legitimizing political decisions. For Hjarvard, the media serves the three functions of constituting 'a realm of shared experiences', 'an interface in the relations within and between institutions' and of institutionalizing a political public sphere (2013, p. 37). From this viewpoint, the media contributes to the cohesion of society by linking its differentiated parts together on a symbolic level. The media may be considered to produce 'the symbolic patterns that create the invisible tissue of society on the cultural level' (Alexander, 1981:18). While these roles have traditionally been assigned to mass media, there is a need to explore whether, how and on what premises new digital media fulfil the same or other functions.

The traditional Norwegian media model is often described in terms of the Northern European democratic corporatist model (Hallin & Mancini, 2004). Based on a development of this scheme, Syvertsen et al. (2014) have coined the term the 'Nordic media welfare states', which share four commonalities: universal services; editorial freedom; distinct cultural policies for the media and political solutions that enjoy a high degree of legitimacy among public and private actors (2014, p. 2). The Norwegian media has effectively been characterized by high levels of public legitimacy and comparatively high readership levels (Larsen & Ihlebæk, 2014). In later years, however, the business model of Norwegian traditional media has been challenged by the impact of digitalization, and cut-backs and processes of restructuration have been common among national, regional and local media organizations. Concurrently, the use of social media for social, entertainment and political purposes has soared, and

Norway is ranked high in terms of Internet and social media penetration (Enjolras et al., 2013).

In this chapter, we explore the impact of digitalization on the current Norwegian public sphere. As pointed out by Rasmussen (2013, p. 97), the democratization of access to media in the wake of the development of the Internet means 'that the Habermasian line of theorizing the public sphere needs revisions, particularly when applied to Internet-based media. The contemporary public sphere tends towards a more dispersed structure than its 19th- and 20th-century versions critically analysed by Jürgen Habermas'. In analysing how this structure develops, it is crucial, in our view, to take into account how the network aspects and the affordances of SNSs influence the development of the public sphere. Far from being a purely technology-driven perspective, however, we acknowledge that these aspects of the digital communication structure interact with and are combined with other social, cultural and political developments, such as the restructuring of traditional media and media politics.

In our analysis, we emphasize the institutional conditions embedded in digital media and the implication of these conditions for the social organization and the symbolic structure of the public sphere. In the first part of the chapter, we develop a sociological perspective of the public sphere, as distinct from normative perspectives. We then go on to outline the core structural features of digital media – network structures and affordances – that are crucial to understand the types of institutional change that they may lead to. In the main bulk of the chapter, we explore the types of changes that are visible in the Norwegian public sphere, in its social organization and its symbolic structure. This analysis is based on a series of empirical studies carried out between 2011 and 2015. We end with a discussion of how the digital public sphere fulfils the assumed functions of a public sphere in relation to deliberation, the forming of opinions and mobilization. We also point out some central challenges for the future.

5.1 A Sociological Perspective of the Public Sphere

As argued by Benson (2009), there is a need to move beyond normative models of the public sphere to develop theoretical and conceptual approaches that enable empirical researchers to analyse ongoing changes (2009, p. 175). Benson argues for an institutional approach that emphasizes the structural features of media systems and the role of the state in regulating journalistic practices (cf. Hallin & Mancini, 2004). While we do not disagree regarding the importance of state policy and changes within media structures in shaping and changing the public sphere, the point of departure for our argument lies elsewhere. We need to conceptualize the specific institutional conditions produced by new media through their technical design and the modes of communication they enable in order to fully grasp how the public sphere is changing.

A sociological conception of the public sphere does not ask what the ideal qualities of the public sphere should be, who should participate and what forms the ideal discourses should have. On the contrary, it enables looking at the public sphere as a social phenomenon and provides the conceptual tools for explaining how digitalization transforms the structural and institutional basis of the public sphere and how these changes impact the participants, discourses and symbolic structures of the public sphere.

For our purposes, the public sphere can be defined as comprising the institutional communicative spaces that facilitate public discussion and the formation of public opinion. The public sphere is not unitary but consists of a manifold of communicative spaces. These spheres are not equal in terms of political impact, and it is usual to distinguish between mainstream vs. counterpublic spheres. In addition, if ideally access to the public sphere is universal, many exclusionary mechanisms inhibit equal access to and participation in the public sphere, such as mechanisms based on class, ethnicity or gender.

A sociological perspective of the public sphere needs to differentiate its cultural, institutional and structural layers. The public sphere is a cultural phenomenon; it is not only discursive but is shaped by and filled with institutions, organizations of communication and regulation. In such a conceptual scheme, 'public opinion, which is the sea inside of which civil society swims' is 'the middle ground between the generalities of high-flow discourse and the ongoing, concrete events of everyday life' (Alexander, 2006, p. 4). Following Alexander (2006), we consider the communicative institutions of civil society as being composed of the communication media, public opinion polls and civic associations[7]. Media institutions not only respond to opinion but also structure and change it. Institutional and structural changes affecting the media also transform the types of interaction and discourse taking place in the public sphere. In complex and differentiated democratic societies, civil society and the public sphere have to be conceived analytically, as functionally separated spheres independent from the other social spheres (economic, political, religious, family). At the same time, in a concrete sense, the public sphere is deeply interpenetrated with the rest of society and connected to activities in other spheres (Alexander, 2006, pp. 193–194).

Viewed from such a perspective, 'politics is a discursive struggle' (Alexander, 2006, p. 233). The stakes of the communicative interactions taking place in the public sphere – through the media, in public forums and civic associations – are different conceptions of justice, of the 'good life', of the promises of universalizing solidarity. The public sphere is the space where struggles for realizing the promises of universalizing freedom, equality and solidarity – entailing redistribution, recognition and

---

[7] As mentioned above, public opinion polls are also part of the communicative institutions of the civil sphere in Alexander's conceptualization. We have chosen to omit this element here.

incorporation or inclusion – take place. But the public sphere is not only an institutional realm. It is also a cultural realm constituted of networks of meaning that are built upon distinctive symbolic codes. This symbolic dimension is critical in constituting the sense of belonging to and participating in a democratic society (Alexander, 2006). In what follows, we will point out core features of digital media that might lead to changes in how the public sphere functions as an institutional and cultural realm.

5.2 Institutional Change and Digitalization

Changes in communication media have profound implications for the historical development of social institutions and human values (Innis, 2008). This has been the case both for the invention of printed media and of audio and visual media in the past. Communication technologies impact social institutions and values by structuring time and space. Space-biased media in the form of digital communications entail a democratization of access to information and to the means of information production, undermining the cultural monopoly of knowledge and information that has been predominant with previous communication technology (print and electronic mass media). Such a transformation of the technological infrastructure of communication is not without far-reaching consequences in terms of the institutional structure and functions of the public sphere.

The rise of a 'networked information economy' (Benkler, 2006) has revolutionized the media political economy. The emergence of digital interactive media has been enabled by the rise of the networked and computer-mediated mode of communication that has radically transformed the ways information is produced and consumed. Whereas mass media communication required centralized means of information production and large investments in physical capital, networked media are based on decentralized and relatively cheap personal computers interconnected through the Internet. In contrast to mass media production of information, which required high levels of capital concentration, networked media are synonymous with the decentralization and democratization of the means of production and distribution of information, knowledge and culture. The networked information economy improves the capacities of individuals to produce information, to cooperate with others in loose non-hierarchical networked communities and to cooperate in formal organizations outside the market sphere. Decentralization and network connections have also opened possibilities for nonmarket production and consumption of information and large-scale cooperative efforts exemplified by initiatives such as Wikipedia.

Taking advantage of the networked information economy, SNSs have experienced tremendous development during the past few years. Two features of SNSs are crucial to understand how they instigate institutional and cultural change: their *affordances* and their *network structure*. SNSs usually provide a digital architecture for interactive

communication along three types of integrated 'affordances' (Boyd, 2011): profiles, lists of friends and communication tools. *Profiles* constitute the space where gathering and conversation take place. To some extent, social media users control their profile by regulating who can have access to it. Profiles may be public (as is the case with Twitter) or semi-public (Facebook). *Friend lists* materialize and publicly display the social graph and the audience of the social media user. They have a social and strategic function; in choosing who to confirm as a friend, social media users consider both the costs and benefits of rejecting a person. Friend lists are the 'imagined audience' or 'public' of the social media user. *Communication tools* allow generally public, semi-public and private forms of communication. Public and semi-public communication tools (such as comments on a person's Facebook wall or addressing a tweet to a given user) enable mediated public encounters. In addition, these communication tools enable combinations of communicative patterns ranging from one-to-one to many-to-many.

The concept of affordance allows conceptualizing the relationship between media technology and social interaction, avoiding the Scylla of technological determinism and the Charybdis of radical constructionism. The concept of affordance captures the complex relationship between media and technology on the one hand and social interactions on the other hand. Whereas media and technology are social and cultural products, technological artefacts set limits on the potential usages of media and technology allowing for a variety of practices in response to these affordances. Each form of media embodying a set of technologies is characterized by a set of affordances that enable, limit and structure communication practices without predetermining them.

The second fundamental characteristic of SNSs is to link people within a digital network. Social networks are important because individuals and groups derive benefits from their underlying social structure. One of the powerful functions fulfilled by networks is to bridge the local and the global, allowing local phenomena to be spread across the entire network and to produce global effects. However, this bridging ability is dependent upon the structural characteristics of the network. One structural characteristic is the degree to which the social network mixes strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). Digital social networks combine two types of structural network effects that at the same time constrain and enable social processes: small-world effects and rich-get-richer effects. *Small-world effects* are the result of the small-world structure of social media where individuals are linked to clusters of friends and the clusters are linked to each other through a few individuals or links (Watts, 1999). *Rich-get-richer effects* result from the combination of the specific network structure of the Internet due to the hierarchy of pages' popularity and the way search engine algorithms work.

The World Wide Web's structure is characterized by a scale-free network (Barrabàsi, 2003; Lewis, 2009; Newman et al., 2006) that is typically associated with a 'power law' distribution of the nodes of a network according to their degree (the number of links attached to a node). The rich-get-richer phenomenon, expressed by the 'power

law' distribution of popularity (of web sites) in digital networks, is due to the extreme imbalances characterizing the phenomenon of popularity: whereas few of us achieve fame, most of us remain anonymous. Social media, as a result of small-world and rich-get-richer effects, consists of highly connected networks and highly hierarchized networks where everybody is connected to everybody through weak ties and people bridging structural holes but where few are very popular and visible (in terms of friends and links) and most are not very popular and consequently not very visible.

When people are connected by a network, they may influence each other's behaviour and decisions, giving rise to social processes where individual behaviours are aggregated through the network to produce collective outcomes. *Information cascades* are one of those social processes occurring when people make decisions sequentially, are able to observe others' decisions in order to draw rational inferences from those decisions and imitate those decisions based on their inferences. Many social phenomena, such as fashion, the popularity of celebrities and bestsellers and the spread of technological choices and news, are characterized by information cascades. The small-world network structure of social media is conducive to information cascades because users can easily observe what their connections do and make inferences and decisions based on those observations, which in turn are propagated further along the network.

In line with the theoretical perspectives outlined above, we examine the impact of digitalization on the public sphere along a set of dimensions. Our point of departure is Peters' (2008a, b) conceptualization of the public sphere as consisting of a given *social organization*, a *symbolic structure* and a set of *functions*. In order to analyse the social organization of the public sphere under the condition of digitalization, we use Alexander's (2006) conception of the civil sphere as a conceptual tool and look at changes in communication media and civic associations. We also discuss changes in citizens' participation and changes in social and organizational hierarchies. We then look at changes to the symbolic structure of the public sphere, with an emphasis on how the new public diversity enabled by digital media might impact the construction of shared or disruptive meanings and symbols within the Norwegian public sphere. The question about how changes in organization and in symbolic structures are related to changes in the functions of the public sphere is treated in the conclusion of the chapter.

5.3 Changes to the Social Organization of the Public Sphere

Analysing the social organization of the public sphere implies looking at the central institutions that serve as channels for expressing opinions, at the participation by different types of groups and citizens and at the hierarchies that are established between institutions and citizens and among institutions. Traditionally, the mass media has

been the main institutional vehicle for regulating and enabling expression within society. In a broader perspective, as pointed out by Alexander, both civic associations and opinion polls form channels for citizens to express opinions. With the rise of digital media, a change in the role and relationship between these three channels of expression – mass media, civic associations and opinion polls – is imminent.

In this chapter, we draw together a set of analyses based on several large-scale empirical studies from the Norwegian context in order to examine changes in the social organization of the public sphere as they are visible in the Norwegian case. The studies comprise a series of population- representative surveys on social media use and civic and political participation carried out in 2011, 2012 and 2014[8], each time with 5,000 respondents. We also make use of data from two surveys on free speech that were carried out in 2013 and 2014, with samples drawn from the ethnic majority and the ethnic minority populations, as well as of a survey of journalists[9]. The Free Speech project also comprised several qualitative components, such as a qualitative interview study among highly active discussants with an ethnic minority background and an interview study among Norwegian editors and debate editors. Finally, we draw on a content study of Twitter during the 2013 parliamentary election campaign. Taken together, these studies provide a unique opportunity to analyse the impact of digitalization on the Norwegian public sphere.

5.3.1 Changes in Communication Media

In modern democracies, edited news media have played a crucial role as gatekeepers of the public sphere and have to a large extent regulated access by different groups, actors and institutions. With digitalization comes a transformation of the role of the media that has been characterized in terms of an evolution from 'gatekeeping' to 'gatewatching' (Bruns, 2009). Whereas gatekeeping designates the control exercised by media professionals (journalists, editors, owners) over the production process of information and consequently over what is published and made available to the public, gatewatching implies a weakening in the importance of such moderation and an increasing reliance on the public as selectors and filters of content. The emergence of gatewatching is visible in the emergence of arenas of expression outside of edited media where individuals may freely express themselves either with some moderation, such as on collaborative sites (e.g. Wikipedia), or without any moderation, such as on

---

8 Within the project *Social media and the new public sphere. Consequences for democracy and citizenship*, funded by RCN – VERDIKT.

9 Within the project *Status of Free Speech in Norway*, funded by the Free Speech foundation. More information on the project can be found at www.ytringsfrihet.no. For a more thorough description of the data, see Enjolras, Rasmussen and Steen-Johnsen (2014).
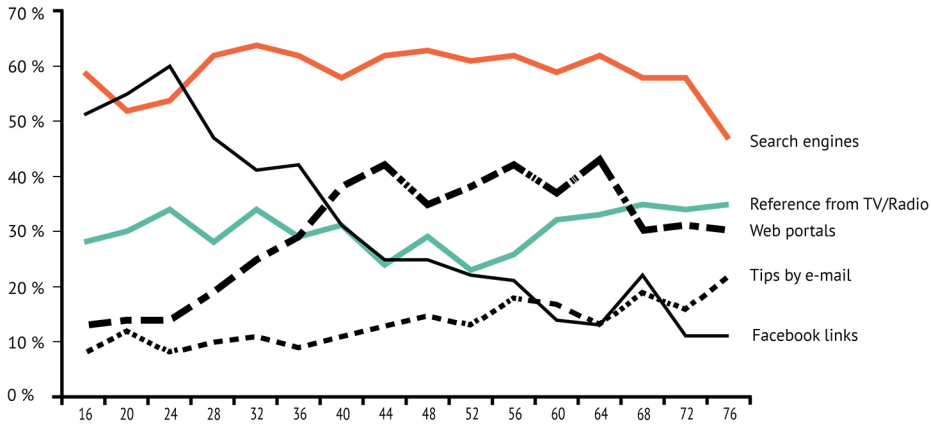
Figure 1: The three most important channels for accessing online news, by age. 2011
Note: Of those who consume online news, the figure shows the percentage who mark each channel as one of the three most important channels for accessing news. Not shown in the figure: those who access online newspapers directly (90%), those who access Twitter for news (5%), those who access blogs for news (4%), those who access organizational web pages for news (10%) and those who access RSS feeds for news (4%).

SNSs (e.g. Twitter). Classical journalism has traditionally had a normative self-understanding where impartial renderings of reality and information as service to the public were considered as basic values. Digital media challenges this traditional conception of journalism because journalism's position within people's ensemble of information sources loses its importance. At the same time, the features of digital media open the possibility for everybody to act as a journalist. The audiences of journalism are becoming more fragmented as people have the ability to choose and customize their media consumption. Audiences are more mobile, able to make individual choices and possess capacities enabling them to actively produce or transform information.

Data from Norway do indeed demonstrate a displacement in the monopolist role of the media in bringing news and information to citizens. As Figure 1 shows, as early as 2011 Facebook was already prominent among the young generation when it came to accessing news.

This development poses a double challenge to traditional media; on the one hand, the role of the media in agenda setting and gatekeeping is weakened. On the other hand, the displacement of readership from offline to online platforms, ushered in by third party channels, seriously weakens the potential for generating income from advertising. As Figure 2 shows, the percentage of the population that reads a newspaper on a daily basis has been remarkably stable for the last 15 years. However, the current challenge in Norway, as in most of the Western world, has been the declining readership of print media and the concomitant increase in online publications.
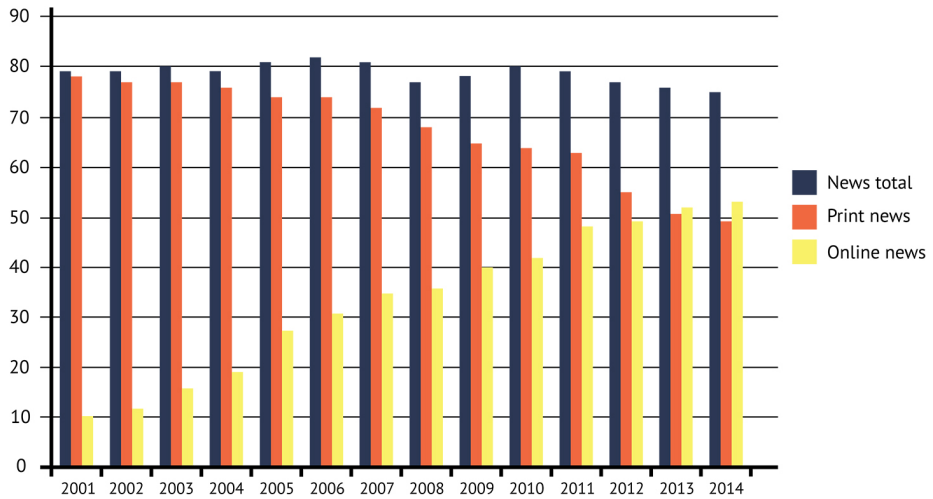
Figure 2: Readership of print and online newspapers on an average day in the years 2001–2014 (aged 9–79). percent

Note: Statistics downloaded from Norwegian Media Barometer and SSB/medienorge.uib.no. The categories are not mutually exclusive, and readers of print newspapers may also have read online newspapers.

Most importantly, young readers are abandoning print papers faster. Among the 16–44 age group, print readership declined 30 percent from 2002 to 2012, while online news reading increased by 40 percent (SSB/medienorge.uib.no). This rapid loss of young readers is causing widespread concern in the newspaper industry. Economically, the press has largely relied on a mix of subscriptions, advertising and subsidies. However, online newspapers generate income instead through advertising, and until recently access to content was free for readers. Free access has been blamed for the crisis in the industry, which is desperately trying to find viable digital revenue models (Omdahl, 2013; Ottosen & Krumsvik, 2012). Between 2013 and 2016, several national and regional newspapers have moved towards paid access to news articles.

The agenda-setting function of the traditional media is also partially challenged, as the agenda of the public is no longer necessarily mediated by the agenda of the media. Likewise, politicians and political organizations have direct access to the public through SNSs without needing to influence the media agenda. Empirical evidence (Enjolras et al., 2014) shows a complex relationship between an SNS like Twitter and the traditional news media. On the one hand, the political use of Twitter in election campaigns appears to be highly correlated with news media events (such as TV debates), and a significant proportion of political tweets link to news. On the other hand, both individuals and political parties appear to have been able to generate cascades of information on Twitter that diverge from the agenda of the mainstream media. Political communication on SNSs seems to reinforce the two-step flow

of communication (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Enjolras et al., 2013) when interpersonal communication is no longer synonymous with face-to-face interaction.

The interview study from the Free Speech project about how Norwegian news media conceived of and strategically handled digitalization showed that both editors and journalists took an ambiguous attitude towards digitalization and its concomitant change processes (Larsen & Ihlebæk, 2014). On the one hand, digitalization triggers innovation, new ways of researching news stories and communicating with the public, as well as new ways of targeting content. On the other hand, digitalization challenges quality journalism by eroding established business models and by introducing new, more quantitative measures of quality, thus threatening the role and function of the media.

The outcome of these change processes is yet uncertain. The traditional media is in a period of transition and in need of viable new economic models but still possesses institutional resources and communication skills. As pointed out by Hallin and Mancini (2004), national media systems also differ in terms of media policies, political integration, economic models and the status of journalism as a profession, all of which are factors that might influence change processes related to digitalization. In their conclusions regarding eventual changes to the Nordic Media Welfare State, Syvertsen et al. (2014) concluded that in terms of its main tenets, the model remains largely intact. An interesting point, however, is whether cultural representations of the ongoing change processes may have an impact on the outcome of digitalization processes. Alexander et al. (2016) argue that the cultural representations that are forged by the media crisis in various contexts will strongly influence the future trajectories of classical journalism.

5.3.2 Changes in the Role of Civic Associations and in the Expression of Public Opinion

Digital media also facilitate new forms of democratic participation and engagement by rendering large-scale collaborative democracy easy and costless through 'wiki tools' or SNSs. As put by Noveck: 'in a web 2.0 world ordinary people can collaborate with one another to do extraordinary things' (2009, p. 37). Digital media enable a new era of *collaborative democracy* that is not limited to the confrontation of different viewpoints but seeks to impact decision making. In this sense, mobilization through digital media may function as a new form of opinion poll, which serves to make the opinions of citizens visible to the political system. Collaborative democracy may have a democratizing effect by giving ordinary citizens – collaborating online and affecting political decision making – an influence that traditionally has been reserved for organized lobbies, interest groups and civil society organizations. The combination of affordances and effects giving way to modular, flexible, mobile and decentralized forms of communication and interaction allows people to coordinate their actions that

cohere and aggregate via the play of information cascades across digital networks into mass mobilization or protest that manifest both online and in the real world. Many examples of such cascades and mobilizations have been observed locally, nationally and even globally in recent years.

Our series of Norwegian surveys on people's use of social media have demonstrated that social media is an important channel for mobilizing citizens to various political campaigns and demonstrations, particularly the young (Enjolras et al., 2012; Enjolras et al., 2013). In our 2012 survey, one out of four people under 26 had participated in at least one national protest group on Facebook (as compared to 11 percent in the rest of the population), and almost as many had participated in local or international protest groups (2013, p. 95). In the same study, Facebook emerged as the most important information channel related to offline demonstrations for all participants under 54 years of age, on a par with mass media in the population as a whole (2013, p. 101). Another interesting finding was that civil society organizations and Facebook networks were equally important in mobilizing citizens to offline demonstrations. This shows that while civil society organizations are still important in mobilizing citizens to demonstrations and activism, Facebook represents a powerful alternative information structure that mobilizes new subsets of the population, that is, the young and those with a lower education level.

In Norway, mobilizations that have been initiated and spurred through social media include such different examples as mobilizations for peace marches in support of Gaza, protests against particular asylum decisions and the very encompassing mobilization in the aftermath of the terror attacks against the governmental quarters and on Utøya in 2011. These are fundamentally conditioned by the affordances and networks embedded in digital media. While one might argue that this development has enhanced the capacity of the ordinary citizen to express his or her political opinion, it raises questions about the future of civil society organizations and about their future role as channels for engagement and giving voice. Rightly used, however, digital tools may also enhance the capacity of civil society organizations to create engagement and to mobilize voice (Steen-Johnsen & Enjolras, 2014). Still, there is a more fundamental question about how channels for raising voice that do not in themselves include a representative element might impinge on democracy as a whole.

5.3.3 Changes in Participation and in Social Hierarchies

The digital media has contributed to a process of democratization of access to the public sphere, reinforcing individualized forms of political and civic participation. 'The new social operating system' (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) is one of networked individualism where individuals may meet their social, emotional and economic needs through their involvement in sparsely knit networks of diversified social relationships rather than through belonging to a few densely connected communal groups. This

tendency is accentuated and partly driven by the transformation affecting the communication and media system. In its most basic sense, this question concerns whether civil society is undergoing a fundamental change from *collective* to *connective* action (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012), implying a move towards the individualization of civic engagement. A traditional logic of collective action is associated with the modern social order of hierarchical institutions and membership groups in which a common collective identity in the group is essential. In late modern societies, formal collective action organizations are losing their influence over individuals, and group ties are being replaced by large-scale, fluid social networks (Bennet & Segerberg, 2012).

The study of participation in public debate via digital media in Norway indeed shows that many use it to express themselves and to participate in debates. In a survey on freedom of speech in Norway, 50 percent stated that they sometimes express their opinion through social media (Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2014b, p. 171). If the question is more narrowly defined as debating political and societal issues, 35 percent of the population claims to have participated using digital platforms (Enjolras et al., 2013, p. 120). The main contribution of digital media as compared to offline debate is to enable participation by groups with lower income and less education (2013, p. 125). Still, there are social differences between social media platforms; for example, Twitter has an overrepresentation of younger men with higher education. Moreover, a clear gender divide persists. With the exception of political debate on Facebook, women are underrepresented in debates on all social media platforms. The Freedom of Speech survey underpinned this fact by showing that women were more prone to self-censorship in expressing their opinions compared to men (Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2014a, p. 46).

The interplay between the process of democratization of access to the public sphere and the dynamics of information propagation characterizing digital networks mediated by the affordances of SNSs thus also impacts the *social hierarchy* of the public sphere. If influence in the public sphere is still the result of factors such as prominence (public visibility) and authority or prestige conferred by skills, status and credibility, new mechanisms influence the degree of influence obtained by different actors in the digitally enabled public sphere. These changes may have an important impact on the role of traditional news media as gatekeepers of public debate and thus on their power. In her interview study with editors in the news media, Ihlebæk (2014) demonstrates that the facilitation of public debate has become an area of great strategic importance for news media in the digital age and that use of the Internet and social media has become imperative for spreading content and finding new voices. She also shows how new dilemmas concerning implementing the appropriate level of editorial control have arisen. Ihlebæk points out that the digital transformation has been positive for the freedom of speech and the plurality of voices in the public. At the same time, the influx of new voices and the nature of online debate puts more pressure on debate editors in terms of making difficult decisions quickly regarding the limits of free speech and how offensive utterances should be handled. Editors

have become more dependent on being attentive to the public and on using them as gatewatchers and distributors of content.

The combination of network effects and the working of algorithms such as PageRank (used by search engines to measure the popularity of a digital site) or EdgeRank (used by Facebook for inferring the degree of visibility of a given post in a user's feed based on, among other things, the user's social network) generates a new social structure within the digitized public sphere driven by the rich-get-richer effect that reinforces the prominence of visible or popular sites or users. The digitized public sphere therefore constitutes a social space where new forms of power relations develop and where new digital elites (bloggers, digital personalities) have acquired influence and status. The hallmark of digital influence is that it is not necessarily grounded in traditional resources (such as organizational, symbolic and economic resources) but relies to a larger extent on digitized social capital and communication skills. A study of the use of Twitter in the 2013 parliamentary election campaign in Norway indicated a parallel reinforcement and a levelling out of established power structures. While those who gained the most attention on Twitter were the two leading political parties, some of the smaller parties were able to attract more attention for their political postings than might have been expected (Enjolras et al., 2014). Studies have also shown the importance of new types of opinion leaders (cf. Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) – young, politically interested people with broad digital networks and a high level of activity in social media. These people play an intermediary role between politicians and citizens by propagating political messages (Enjolras et al., 2013).

Digitized communication thus enables new modes of social organization within the public sphere, both in terms of who participates and how and in terms of changing the roles and power of established institutions – first and foremost the role of the media and the political parties. While the developments described here indicate democratization both in terms of presentation and representation (Rasmussen, 2008), the development is still complex and contradictory.

5.3.4 Changing Symbolic Structures in the Public Sphere

Digitalization also contributes to changing the symbolic boundaries and the symbolic forms that dominate within the political public sphere. This is both a question of what types of participants are included in public debate and what types of arguments, forms and values are accepted. Above, we pointed out that the emergence of digital media in Norway has opened a space for public expression for a large number of ordinary citizens and that people do make use of this option. One might therefore conclude that the boundaries of the public sphere in Norway have been widened. However, the Free Speech study (Enjolras et al., 2014) indicated some mechanisms related to self-censorship and to responses to experiences of harassment and threats as part of online debate might lead to less participation among some groups. In par-

ticular, ethnic minorities reported that they have become more cautious about participating in public debate after having experienced online harassment (Staksrud et al., 201, p. 21). Even though this group did not receive more harassing comments than the rest of the population, the comments they did receive were to a much greater degree related to their identity – their ethnicity, religion, nationality and skin colour.

Along with Honneth (1995), one might argue that society is to an increasing extent characterized by struggles for recognition, where universal democratic values are put up against the value of particular cultures or identities. The findings of the Norwegian Free Speech study do indeed indicate identity-based struggles and the demarcation of boundaries based on ethnicity, religion or gender. On the one hand, this phenomenon can be attributed to the ongoing pluralization of Norwegian society from the 1980s on due to immigration. On the other hand, the particular form that these kinds of struggle take may be attributed to specific characteristics of social media venues, in particular the forms of expression that they allow and their inherent capacity to blur boundaries.

Concerning *form,* a new form of literacy – between orality and literacy – is emerging as a result of SNSs' affordances and the practices they have generated. As shown by Ong (2002), the oral and written forms of expression and thought differ in many respects, having far-reaching consequences for consciousness, experiences and society. Speech is considered to be more performance-oriented and less informational than writing, and speech presupposes the co-presence of an audience, whereas writing involves a 'fictional' or 'imagined' audience. Digitally mediated communication occurring on SNSs may be thought of as promoting the development of a culture of 'oral writing' where the audience is at the same time potentially interactive and co-present but also imagined and the message is more reminiscent of the performativity of the speech act than of informative script, even if the written medium is used. The result of a streaming media radically oriented to the 'now', relating to a plurality of media and promoting the emergence of a culture of written orality is a form of communication that in many cases is more reminiscent of an aesthetic performance and experience (a work of art) than of a rational deliberation. For example, the political use of Twitter is not only informative and based on rational arguments but is often ironic, a public performance with 140 characters conveying an opinion via the play of metaphors and paradox often tainted with humour and linking to more informative or illustrative (photo, videos) content (Enjolras et al., 2014).

Concerning *boundaries,* digital media provokes a displacement and a blurring of the boundaries of the two main dimensions of the public/private distinction (Weintraub (1997), *visibility* and *collectivity*. The line delineating the public and the private can be defined based on a *spatial* or a *political* understanding of the *public*. The spatial understanding of the public is connoted by the *visible*: the public (the street for example) is visible to all, whereas the private (the home) is not visible. In contrast, the political understanding of the public emphasizes the dimension of *general (public) interest*. From this viewpoint, the public is what is of interest for the public

and is what requires *publicity*. Traditionally, these two dimensions of visibility and publicity have been linked. With digital communication – because gatekeepers who made visible what they considered of general interest no longer have the same importance – a decoupling between visibility and publicity occurs: what is visible is not necessarily of public interest. What is private in the sense of personal and was traditionally hidden becomes public, visible, exposed in public. In addition, private and intimate concerns and experiences, such as those relating to family life, gender and sexual preferences, increasingly take on a public and political meaning.

Thus far, the larger cultural consequences of these changes in the forms and boundaries of the public sphere remain unclear. On the one hand, there is a pluralization of the voices, forms and identities that are included in the public sphere, and the potential for the ordinary citizen to express emotions, feelings and viewpoints has increased. On the other hand, there is the question of whether the emergence of these less rationalized and stylized forms of discourse have decreased the potential for solving identity-based struggles and the potential for collective learning. A central part of this question is whether we see a fragmented or an integrated public sphere across sub-spheres. In our concluding section, we address the question of how digitalization leads to potential changes in the functions of the public sphere and the potential dilemmas that ensue.

5.4 Conclusion: the Functions and Dilemmas of the Digital Public Sphere

According to Peters (2008a, b) the public sphere may be described through its functions, its social organization and its symbolic structure. In this chapter, we looked into the two latter dimensions and pointed out a set of institutional and cultural changes in the Norwegian public sphere linked to the emergence of digital media as a communication channel. Overall, digital media and particularly SNSs have generated a process of democratization of access to the political public sphere. The gatekeeper function of journalists and media editors is weakened; many more are able to publish different types of content, to express their opinions and to experience in practice their freedom of speech (Enjolras & Steen-Johnsen, 2014b). New forms of mobilizations and participation are also being developed through the use of digital media (Enjolras et al. 2013). This process of democratization has also provoked a displacement of the power structure underlying the public sphere, whereby new gatewatchers have emerged and the agenda-setting function is no longer the monopoly of the media. At the same time, the boundaries between the public and the private spheres have become increasingly blurred, and the symbolic structure of the public sphere – its content, form and style of communication – has evolved towards new communicative practices we have labelled the 'culture of written orality' that is

more performative than informative and more expressive than rational and that may include major struggles over identities and practices.

These analyses paint a complex picture of the functions of the new public sphere in allowing for deliberation, the forming of opinion and the mobilization of citizens' voices (Peters, 2008a, b). On the one hand, one might argue that given the increased participation by many, the potential for collective and collaborative processes may have enhanced both deliberation and voice. On the other hand, there is the question of the forming of new types of hierarchies outside of established institutions and of the emergence of cultures of deliberation that might lead to conflict, spirals of silence and withdrawal by some groups. We would like to point out two problems that might pose particular challenges for the public sphere as an arena for deliberation, voice and the formation of shared meaning (Alexander, 2006) – the problems of fragmentation and of representative democracy.

The problem of fragmentation. While the digitalization of the public sphere has led to pluralization and an increase in *representation* in the sense that more participants, topics and styles are present in public discussion, the impact on *presentation*, that is, the shared deliberation over common issues (Rasmussen, 2008), is less clear. The emergence of social media entails a diversification of communication, which is partly linked to anonymity, quasi orality, diversity of communication platforms and the diversity of inter-textual connections between forums (2008, p. 77). A crucial question linked to the normative evaluation of the digital transformation of the public sphere is whether the possibilities for self-selection, personalization, individualization and expression of identities embedded in the affordances of digital media end up creating a fragmented and polarized landscape of political discussion or whether the network effects described earlier will entail the emergence of shared discourses across sites and guarantee the unity of an encompassing political public sphere.

The problem of representative democracy. Another question linked to the normative assessment of the digital transformation of the public sphere is its impact on the functioning of the representative institutions of democracy. The decline of broadcast journalism allows a direct form of communication between politicians and the electorate by bypassing the gatekeepers, one where new political celebrities are able to set the agenda. To what extent this form of democratization of access to the public will contribute to the reinforcement of the trend towards 'audience democracy' (Manin, 1997) or to the initiation of new forms of relationships between representatives and citizens in moving towards a more participatory democracy is yet unclear. For Manin (1997), audience democracy is characterized by the personalization of the relationship between politicians and citizens. The function of mediation exercised by political parties has been replaced by broadcast media, and whereas voters' loyalty used to be the result of affiliation with political parties based on socio-economic and cultural characteristics, in audience democracy the support of the electorate is shifting constantly and is increasingly dependent upon the image of candidates in broadcast media. The enlargement of the participatory public space through the lowering of

barriers to access and the possibility of direct interaction with elected representatives enabled by digital media may result in new forms of direct political participation. However, new forms of impression management and self-presentation are made available through digital media's affordances that are mobilized in the service of political communication and may reinforce the working of audience democracy.

The digital transformation of the public sphere has had a profound impact on the ways ideas are disseminated and debated, how opinions are formed and how identities are expressed in modern societies. It has also affected the exercise of citizenship and the functioning of our democratic institutions. By conceptualizing this transformation in terms of institutional change impacting both the social and symbolic structures of the public sphere, we have identified some of the fundamental ongoing trends characterizing the digital public sphere. The directions and lasting effects of these changes are ambiguous, as these transformations still embody the potentiality of positive and negative developments for democracy and citizenship.

References

Alexander, J.C., (1981). "The mass-media in systemic, historical, and comparative perspective", in Katz, E. & Szecskö, T., (Eds.) *Mass Media and Social Change*, Sage Studies in International Sociology, 22, London: Sage, 17–51.

Alexander, J.C. (2006). *The civil sphere*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Alexander, J.C., Breese, E.B. & Luengo, M. (2016) *The Crisis of Journalism Reconsidered. Democratic Culture, Professional Codes, Digital Future*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arendt, H. (1958). *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Arendt, H. (2006). *Between past and future*. London: Penguin Books.

Barrabási, A.L. (2003). *Linked*. New York: Penguin.

Baym, N.K. (2010). *Personal connections in the digital age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Benkler, Y. (2006)., *The wealth of networks*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Benson, R. (2009). Shaping the Public Sphere: Habermas and Beyond, American Sociologist, 40,175–197, DOI 10.1007/s12108–009–9071–4.

Bennett, W.L., Segerberg, A. (2012). The logic of connective action. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739–768.

Berry, D.M. (2014). *Critical theory and the digital*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Boyd, D. (2011) Social network sites as networked publics. Affordances, dynamics and implications. In Papacharissi, Z. (Ed.) *A networked self. Identity, community and culture on social network sites*. New York: Routledge.

Bruns, A.,(2009). *Gatewatching. Collaborative online news production*. New York: Peter Lang.

Dewey, J. ([1927] 1954). *The public and its problems*. Athens: Ohio University Press.

Enjolras, B., Steen-Johnsen, K., & Karlsen, R. (2014). *Valgkampen 2013 på Twitter. Sosiale medier som kritisk offentlighet*. Oslo: Institutt for Samfunnsforskning, Rapport 2014:03.

Enjolras, B., Steen-Johnsen, K., Karlsen, R., & Wollebæk, D. (2013). *Liker, Liker ikke. Sosiale medier, samfunnsengasjement og offentlighet*. Oslo: Cappelen Damm.

Enjolras, B., Steen-Johnsen, K, & Wollebæk, D. (2013). Social media and mobilization to offline demonstrations – transcending participatory divides? *New Media & Society*, 15:6, 890–908.

Enjolras, B. & Steen-Johnsen, K. (2014b). Ytringsfrihet og sosiale medier. In Enjolras, B., Rasmussen, T. & Steen-Johnsen, K. (Eds.). *Status for ytringsfriheten i Norge. Hovedrapport fra prosjektet.* Oslo: Fritt Ord, ISF, IMK, FAFO.

Ihlebæk, K.A. (2014). *Balansekunst. Publikumsdeltakelse og tilnærminger til redaksjonell kontroll.* PhD.-dissertation. Oslo: University of Oslo.

Innis, H.A.. ([1951] 2008). *The bias of communication.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Jacobs, R.N, & Townsley, E. (2011). *The space of opinion.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Granovetter, M. (1973). The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology, 78,*1360–1380.

Hallin, D.C., & Mancini, P. (2004). *Comparing Media Systems. Three Models of Media and Politics.* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.

Hjarvard, S. (2013). *The mediatization of culture and society.* London: Routledge.

Kant, I. ([1784] 1991). An answer to the question: what is Enlightenment? In Reiss, H.S. (Ed.) *Kant Political writings.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Khon, M. (2000). Language, power, and persuasion: towards a critique of deliberative democracy. *Constellations*, 7(3), 408–429.

Larsen, A.G. & Ihlebæk, K.A. (2014). Journalistikk i en digital tidsalder. In Enjolras, B., Rasmussen, T. & Steen-Johnsen, K. (Eds.). *Status for ytringsfriheten i Norge. Hovedrapport fra prosjektet.* Oslo: Fritt Ord, ISF, IMK, FAFO.

Latour, B. (2005). From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik or how to make things public. In Latour, B. & Weibel, P. (Eds.), *Making things public. Atmospheres of democracy.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 14–44.

Latour, B. & Weibel, P., (Eds.) (2005). *Making things public. Atmospheres of democracy.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Lazarsfeld, P.F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1944). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Lewis, T.G. (2009). *Network science.* Hoboken: Wiley.

Lipman, W. ([1925] 2005). *The phantom public.* New York: Transaction Publishers.

Lyotard, J.F. (1979). *The postmodern condition: a report on knowledge.* Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press.

Manin B. (1997). *The Principles of Representative Government*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox.* London: Verso.

Newman, M., Barabàsi, A.L., & Watts, D.J. (2006). *The structure and dynamics of networks.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Noveck, B.S. (2009). *Wiki government.* Washington: Brookings Institution Press.

Omdahl, S.E. (2013). Digitaliseringens dilemmaer. In S.E. Omdahl (Ed.)*Journalistikk og demokrati. Hvor går mediene? Hva kan gjøres?* Oslo: Fritt Ord.

Ong, W.J. ([1982] 2002). *Orality and literacy. The technologizing of the word.* London: Routledge.

Ottosen, R. & Krumsvik, A..H. (2012). Digital Challenges on the Norwegian Media Scene. *Nordicom Review* 33(2), 43–55.

Peters, B. (2008a). The meaning of the public sphere. In Wessler, H. (Ed.) *Public deliberation and public culture. The writings of Bernhard Peters, 1993–2005.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan., 33–67.

Peters, B. (2008b), On public deliberation and public culture. In Wessler, H. (Ed.) *Public deliberation and public culture. The writings of Bernhard Peters, 1993–2005.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan., 68–118.

Rainie, L. & Wellman, B. (2012). *Networked. The new operating system.* Cambridge: MIT Press.

Rasmussen, T. (2008). The Internet and Differentiation in the Political Public Sphere. *Nordicom Review* 29(2), 73–84.

Rasmussen, T. (2013). Internet-based media, Europe and the political public sphere. *Media, Culture & Society,* 31:1, 97–104.

Syvertsen, T., Enli G., Mjøs, O.J. & Moe H. (2014). *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Villa, D.R. (1996). *Arendt and Heidegger. The fate of the political.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Watts, D.J. (1999). *Small worlds. The dynamics of networks between order and randomness.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Weintraub, J. (1997). The theory and politics of the public/private distinction. In Weintraub, J. & Kumar, K. (Eds.). *Public and private in thought and practice.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.