

# Social Media, Civic Engagement and Public Spheres

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## **Abstract:**

In the era of information superhighway, the development and expansion of social media has led to major changes in field of communication, society and democracy. The social media has created a worldwide forum for dialogue and has generated informed citizenry. Human beings are social creatures hence, are dedicated to creating and participating in “social networks” in order to express and share their ideas. With the rise of the internet, people began satisfying this natural necessity in online communities such as internet forums. The evolution of these social forums resulted in today’s global social networking. Social media with the following characteristics makes it even more interesting mass media: participation in social media encourages contributions and feedback. It blurs the line between media and audience. Openness- most social media services are open to feedback and participation. SNSs encourage voting, comments and the sharing of information. There are rarely any barriers to accessing and making use of content. Conversation whereas traditional media is about “broadcast” (content transmitted or distributed to an audience) social media is better seen as a two-way conversation. Community social media allows communities to form quickly and communicate effectively. Thus, social media offers cheap, decentralized, two-way communication. social media not only encourage public discourse, but it also allows individuals to actively participate in civic activities.

**Keywords:** social media, public sphere, civic forums

## **Introduction**

In the age of information superhighway digital media has immense impact on personal communication. Media promotes and fosters informed citizenry. According to Thomas Jefferson a well-informed citizenry is the best defence against tyranny. An informed citizenry is at the heart of dynamic democracy. ICT has not only changed interpersonal interaction but has also revolutionised public and discussion and discourse. social media has emerged as popular tool of political communication too.

## **Meaning of Public Sphere**

The term ‘public’ connotes ideas of citizenship, commonality, and things not private, but accessible and observable by all. Habermas stresses that if something is public it is “open to all”. Habermas argues that the concept of the public is related to the notion of the common that is associated with ideas like Gemeinschaft (German), community, the common use of resources like a marketplace or a fountain, and communal organization. When thinking of the public, one envisions open exchanges of political thoughts and ideas, such as those that took place in ancient Greek agoras or colonial-era town halls. The idea of ‘the public’ is closely tied to democratic ideals that call for citizen participation in public affairs.

Dewey (1927) insisted that inquiry and communication are the basis for a democratic society and highlighted the merits of group deliberation over the decisions of a single authority. He argued for a communitarian democracy, where individuals came together to create and preserve a good life in common.

Jones (1997) argued that cyberspace is promoted as a ‘new public space’ made by people and ‘conjoining traditional mythic narratives of progress with strong modern impulses toward self-fulfillment and personal development’. It should be clarified that a new public space is not synonymous with a new public sphere. As public space, the internet provides yet another forum for political deliberation. As public sphere, the internet could facilitate discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas and opinions. A virtual space enhances discussion; a virtual sphere enhances democracy. This article examines not only the political discussion online, but the contribution of that discussion to a democratic society.

### **Habermas’s Concept of the Public Sphere**

Public sphere in the modern societies is the site in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. It is space in which citizenry participate and deliberate about their common affairs. Public sphere is the institutionalized arena of discursive and dialogic interaction. This contrasts distinctly from the state. In fact, it can be compared to a buzzing street. Public sphere is a site for the production and circulation of critical discourses against the centralized power of the state, corporate or the resource-owners. Habermas developed the concept of ‘public sphere’ in his seminal book, “The Structural transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into Category of Bourgeoisie Society” (1962) updated the concept recently.

Habermas characterizes some important dimensions of the public sphere:

- Formation of public opinion.
- All citizens have access.
- Conference in unrestricted fashion (freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom to expression and publication of opinions) about matters of general interest.
- Debate over the general rules governing relations.

The realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed ...citizen behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion that is, with freedom to express and publish their opinion about matter of general interest.

Habermas has stressed in many of his works that it is a kind of interface and intermediate sphere mediating between the economy, the state, and the realm of the family and intimacy. The “public sphere is a warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive throughout society”.

Benkler stresses the emergence of a networked public sphere: “The easy possibility of communicating effectively into the public sphere allows individuals to reorient themselves from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in a conversation. “The network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes.” (Benkler 2006,)

Zizi Papacharissi describes the emergence of a “virtual sphere 2.0”, in which citizen consumers participate and express “dissent with a public agenda by expressing political opinion on blogs, viewing or posting content on YouTube, or posting a comment in an online discussion group” (Papacharissi 2009).

**Papacharissi (2010)** has advanced an approach that argues that political activities that were in former times “activities pursued in the public realm” are today practiced in the private realm “with greater

autonomy, flexibility, and potential for expression”. Social media like Twitter would make the private sphere “a sphere of connection and not isolation, as it serves primarily to connect the personal to the political and the self to the polity and society” (Papacharissi 2010).

New forms of politics would include tweeting, “participating in a MoveOn.org online protest, expressing political opinion on blogs, viewing or posting content on YouTube, or posting a comment in an online discussion group” Such online activities would constitute “an expression of dissent with a public agenda. These potentially powerful acts of dissent emanate from a private sphere of interaction, meaning that the citizen engages and is enabled politically through a private media environment located within the individual’s personal and private space”.

Papacharissi presumes that social media have resulted in a collapse of the boundaries between the private sphere and the political public sphere so that the private sphere becomes the realm of the political. She believes co-presence and physicality also matter in a networked world. A huge mass of people gathering in physical places is a visible threat to those in power and it can have material effects (like blocking streets, occupying squares and buildings, etc.). It is no surprise that the main protests during the new global capitalist crisis have been associated with physical spaces: Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt; Syntagma Square in Athens, Greece; Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Spain; Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain; Zuccotti Park (Liberty Plaza Park) in New York, USA. Physical spaces allow an agglomeration of individuals that gives them a visibility that those in power likely perceive as a threat. They also provide opportunities for building and maintaining interpersonal relations that involve eye contact, communication of an emotional aura, and bonding activities (like drinking a beer or coffee together) that are important for the cohesion of a political movement and can hardly be communicated over the Internet.

Papacharissi reduces collective action to individual action and the public sphere to the private sphere. She ignores the materiality of protest action. Her approach is individualistic, reductionist and philosophically idealistic. Papacharissi idealizes private individuals’ political use of social media as new forms of the public sphere, Boyd generalizes the notion of the public from a political context to the whole realm of social media so that the notion of the public (sphere) loses any critical dimension. The notion of the networked public is not only an apolitical concept; it is at the same time one that idealizes corporate social media: the notions of being public and being networked create a purely positive image of human activity without conceptualizing potential problems. Consequently, the concept of social media as “networked publics” predominantly creates positive associations; it lacks any critical dimension that addresses power asymmetries, the exploitation of digital labour, asymmetric visibility, commercial culture and targeted advertising, corporate and state surveillance and other problems that manifest themselves on dominant social media platforms.

Manuel Castells stresses the novelty of this sphere: “The construction of the new public sphere in the network society proceeds by building protocols of communication between different communication processes”.

Online activism can cause material and symbolic harm and be a threat to the powerful, as the hacking activities of the Anonymous group (e.g. blocking of the sites of Amazon, MasterCard, PostFinance, PayPal and Visa as revenge for the companies’ blocking of payments to WikiLeaks, blocking of government websites in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria in solidarity with the Arab Spring, the hacking of sites by Koch Industries that supported anti-union groups as part of the 2011 Wisconsin protests) show, but a lot of “online politics” is harmless (writing a blog, posting a tweet or YouTube video, signing an online petition, joining a Facebook group, etc.) and can simply be ignored by the powerful.

Danah Boyd defines a networked public as “(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice”. Expressions in networked publics would be persistent (recorded, archived), replicable, scalable and searchable. Audiences in these publics would often be invisible, social contexts collapsed and the boundary between public and private would often blur. For Boyd, Facebook and Twitter are prototypes of networked publics. Whereas the Internet contributes to the public sphere. There are literally thousands of web sites having to do with the political realm at the local, national, and global levels; some are partisan, most are not. We can find discussion groups, chat rooms, alternative journalism, civic organizations, NGOs, grass roots issue-advocacy sites (**Berman & Mulligan, 2003; Bennett, 2003b**), and voter education sites (**Levine, 2003**). One can see an expansion in terms of available communicative spaces for politics, as well as ideological breadth, compared to the mass media. Structurally, this pluralization not only extends but also disperses the relatively clustered public sphere of the mass media.

The internet will open the door to a cultural and political renaissance. McChesney (1995) Utopian perspectives on the internet speculate that computer-mediated political communication will facilitate grassroots democracy and bring people all across the world closer together. Geographic boundaries can be overcome and ‘diasporic utopias’ can flourish (Pavlik, 1994). Anonymity online assists one to overcome identity boundaries and communicate more freely and openly, thus promoting a more enlightened exchange of ideas. For example, the Indian newsgroup soc.culture.india is one of many online groups that foster critical political discourse among participants that might not even meet in real space and time. For several years, this group has harbored lively political discussion on issues pertinent to the political future of India (Mitra, 1997).

If the Internet facilitates an impressive communicative heterogeneity, the negative side of this development is of course fragmentation, with public spheres turned toward disparate islands of political communication, as **Galston (2003)** had argued. Here opens yet another important research theme, one that must encompass an overarching systemic perspective. That various groups may feel they must first coalesce internally before they venture out into the larger public sphere is understandable; however, cyber ghettos threaten to undercut a shared public culture and the integrative societal function of the public sphere, and they may well even help foster intolerance where such communities have little contact with or understanding of one another. Fragmentation also derives simply from the mushrooming of advocacy groups and the array of issues available.

While traditional online party politics and forms of e-government may serve as centripetal forces to such fragmentation, the trend is clearly in the direction of increasing dispersion.

The question of multi-public spheres glides readily into the issue of the links between the different spheres to the centers of decision making. The public sphere per se is no guarantee for democracy: There can be all kinds of political information and debate in circulation, but there must be structural connections formalized institutional procedures between these communicative spaces and the processes of decision making, as **Sparks (2001)** argued. There can obviously be no automatic, lock-step connection here, not without degeneration into a chaotic populism. Yet, there must be some semblance of impact, some indication that the political talk of citizens has consequences, or else disengagement and cynicism can set in as is precisely what many observers claim has been a pattern for a decade or so in the mainstream, mass mediated systems of political communication of the Western liberal democracies.

Today the most notable gap between communication in the public sphere and institutional structures for binding decisions is found in the global arena. Transnational forums, global networking, and opinion mobilization are very much evident on the net, yet the mechanisms for transforming opinion at the global level into decisions and policies are highly limited. There are simply few established mechanisms for democratically based and binding transnational decision making. While one might see the embryonic outlines of a global civil society (**Keane, 2003**), its full realization is not on the horizon, even if the idea is a powerful and progressive element of the social imaginary.

In terms of the structural dimension, one can specify several different sectors of net-based public spheres, including:

1. Versions of e-government, usually with a top-down character, where government representatives interact with citizens and where information about governmental administration and services is made available. While interaction may be relatively constricted, it can still at times serve as a sector of the public sphere. This sector is sometimes distinguished from e-governance, which emphasizes horizontal civic communication and input for government policy (**Malina, 2003**).
2. The advocacy/activist domain, where discussion is framed by organizations with generally shared perceptions, values, and goals and geared for forms of political intervention. These include traditional parliamentary politics, established corporate and other organized interest group politics (e.g., unions), and the new politics of social movements and other activists.
3. The vast array of diverse civic forums, where views are exchanged among citizens and deliberation can take place. This is generally understood as the paradigmatic version of the public sphere on the net, but it would be quite erroneous to neglect the others.
4. The parapolitical domain, which airs social and cultural topics having to do with common interests and/or collective identities. Here politics is not explicit but always remains a potential. Clearly, there is no absolute way in which the boundary between the nonpolitical and the parapolitical can be drawn, since it is always in part discursively negotiated and changeable.
5. The journalism domain, which includes everything from major news organizations that have gone online (e.g., newspapers and CNN) to net-based news organizations (usually without much or any original reporting) such as Yahoo! News, alternative news organizations such as Indymedia and Mediachannel, as well as one-person weblog sites (also known as “bloggers”). Interestingly, the research literature has tended to focus mainly on deliberative interaction in terms of online public spheres and/or mass media journalism. We should not forget that the online journalism sector is a core element of the public sphere on the Internet.

This list can of course be made more elaborate; for example, one could divide civic forums into those which originate from journalistic initiatives and those with other origins. The point is simply to highlight a bit more specifically the sprawling character of the multisector online public sphere (**Peter Dahlgren, 2005**).

Policymakers and social media experts identified several issues surrounding the evolving role of social media in political contexts including: the challenge of understanding social media because there is simply too much data; the difficulty of effectively interpreting information communicated in social media platforms; the reality that social media is reshaping human language; the struggle with balancing the veracity of social media as a vehicle of public opinion with the anonymity and risk of false information communicated; the potential corporate influence in the dominant social media platforms; and the application of social media in both peace and conflict situations (**Schillinger, 2011**). While analyses of



social media's influence in politics have been emerging since the 2008 election of Barack Obama in the United States and underscored by the Arab Spring in 2010 where collective action was not only enabled by social media, but the world was able to watch citizens of some of the most restrictive regimes demand their voices be heard (**Metzgar et al, 2009**). Social media's influence on mass communication and journalism research and analysis not yet adequately addressed.

Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are widely recognized to disrupt old models and create a whole raft of new challenges for social equity, sovereignty and business development (**Cunliffe & Tizard, as cited in MED 2009**). They create new meanings for public interaction which takes place as everyone else is privy to it. The impact of social media, one should be analyzing and measuring the way that individuals and organizations effectively use social media as a form of engagement instead of a more traditional dissemination approach to measuring and analyzing mass communication. Thus, the measure of impact and influence is likely to favor messages that go viral (**Metzgar E, Maruggi A (2009)**) or effectively synchronize their messaging between traditional and new media (**Dennis, Fuller and Valachich, 2008**) because these seem to more accurately reflect the ways that people are actually using mass campaigns and articles (**Yang, Liu and Zhou (2012)**).

#### **Objective of the study:**

- **To study the social media as a discussion forum**
- **To study social media as a catalyst for reform**
- **To evaluate role of social media as an agent of enhancing the public participation of youth**

#### **Finding of the study: Analysis and discussion**

- The study found that female respondents are more favourable to access to social media for social and civic engagement opportunities compared to male counterparts of respondents,
- The study states that female respondents are more favourable with regard to social media as radically new medium of enhancers of Freedom.
- The study found out that female respondents are more favourable than the male respondents with regard to social media a facilitator of Prodemocracy.
- The study's finding state that the respondents show inclination to accept that social media as a means of increasing online participation to broaden and democratize the virtual sphere.
- The study states that the respondents approve that social media is playing a key role to creating political awareness among the youth.
- The study states that the respondents approve that social media is playing a key role to create political awareness among the youth
- The study found that the respondents approve that social media plays a significant role as a discussion forum on current events for youth
- The study found that the respondents approve that social media's access leads to enhanced political participation among the youth
- The study found that the respondents approve that social media's access leads to enhanced political participation among the youth
- The study states that the respondents are in agreement to approve the relevance of political communication sites/forums with in more general platforms among the youth

- The study states that the respondents approve that social media offers access to the online community among the youth
- The study states that the respondents are in agreement to reach to/to mobilize worldwide, among the youth. therefore, social media is creating the impact to reach to/to mobilize worldwide.
- The study found that the respondents are in total agreement that social media Influence the thinking among the youth
- The study found that the respondents are in total agreement that social media Influence the behavior among the youth
- The study found that the respondents are in agreement that social media Create lobbies among the youth.
- The study found that the respondents are in agreement that social media online discussions are valid among the youth.
- With regard to the gender 35.6 % of male and 37.5% of female respondents are in favor of the Narendra Modi as the most active politician on social media followed by 11.5% Rahul Gandhi, the responses are found to be non-significantly associated ( $p=0.000$   $CC=0.154$ ).
- The study found that the respondents are in agreement to approve that social media provides a platform for online activism and has become a catalyst for protests among the youth.
- The study state that the respondents are in agreement to approve that social media provides a platform for Organization/Mobilization programs among the youth. social media acts as a catalyst agent in the form of organization /mobilization programs
- The study found that that social media provides a platform for action/reaction among the youth
- The study state that the respondents are in agree to approve that the social media plays as an agent of enhancing the public participation of youth among the youth
- The study found that the respondents are in agreement to approve that the social media plays as a role as a catalyst for reform among the youth
- The study state that the respondents are in agreement/ to approve that the social media leads to participation in activities of social movements among the youth
- The study found that the respondents are in agreement to approve that the social media plays a significant role as a discussion forum on current events for youth
- The study found that social media leads to participation in activities of NGOS's and civil societies among youth. Social media succeeds to lead to participation in activities of NGOS's and civil societies among youth.
- The study found that the respondents are in agreement to approve that the social media leads to participation in activities relating to fund raising among youth. Social media fails to lead to participation in activities relating to fund raising
- The study found that the respondents are in agreement to approve that the social media helps in the process of lobbying among the youth social media helps in the process of lobbying.
- The study state that the respondents are in total agreement to approve that social media contributes towards the creation of opinion in public sphere among the youth.

this research throw light on the role of social media usage and its effects the youth in various social, economic, political spheres of life. This research has studied its ramifications which are wide and encompassing polity, economy and society.

The study evaluated the awareness level of usage of different social networking sites and examine the resultant impact on the youth's social interactions, public discourse and civic engagement. Social media help build a public sphere where people can exchange ideas without restrictions through meetings, debates, dialogues and discussions. With social media, individual citizens can now easily access and gain information on various political and social issues and become more informed and rational (Dahlberg, 2001). Thus, social media offers cheap, decentralized, two-way communication.

Social media not only promote public discourse, they can also actually involve individuals in civic activities. Social media helps in civic engagement, it encourages individuals to build connections with their communities it also includes any political or non-political activities that enhance the quality of life in a community.

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