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## VIRTUAL PUBLIC SPHERE AND INTERACTIVE PRACTICES OF MODERN SOCIAL MEDIA

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### *Abstract*

The article discusses the formation and development of “virtual public sphere”, the design of its theoretical image and the development prospects in the era of the spread of Internet technologies, as well as the threats to “virtual public sphere”. The development of technological processes at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century stimulated the comprehensive spread of communication practices through the Internet. This and a number of other factors eventually led to the transformation or deformation of many public practices of individuals' interactions, which led some scientists to think about transferring the idea of the public sphere concept of Jürgen Habermas to new emerging environment on the Internet. The article analyzes various concepts of mass media, their significant and structural similarities and differences are highlighted. The author concludes that the result of the long discussion regarding the future of the “virtual public sphere” is the understanding that the space of rational and fair discussions, about which J. Habermas speaks in his works, needs to find new forms of embodiment. At the same time, it is logical and quite possible to bring it to life within the framework of communication practices within the Internet space. At the same time, it is impossible to say that the issue of threats and boundaries of “virtual public sphere” will not appear during such attempts to transform it, therefore, together with this, society should also look for means of support and coordination of citizens when interacting in the new form of the “public space”.

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**Keywords:** Virtual sphere, J. Habermas, media theory, interactions, public space, rational discussion.



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## **1. Introduction**

At the beginning of the XXI century the development and global spread of interactive and communication technologies in modern political systems has led to the emergence of an independent virtual political communication space, which has its own principles of functioning and connotations. As a result, some features of the conceptual process and the virtual sphere of civic interactions of individuals associated with the development of Internet communication practices are beginning to appear actively.

Although there are no claims made on the Web for the truth and the existence of critical reason, it nevertheless gives birth to some self-organizing forms and public stage. In this article, we will try to continue our research on the conceptual principles of the virtual public sphere and find out what technologies or practices contribute to its formation and functioning.

It is necessary to note that researchers observed the tendency toward a shift in the center of public communications earlier, for example, at the end of the 20th century. Due to the increasing role of the media in public life, Dahlgren (1995) spoke about a change in understanding of the conceptual nature of the public sphere, which was proposed by Habermas, and its shift from spatial urban localization towards mass media, which had a much greater coverage and influence on the formation of public opinion.

In the same period, the theory of mass communication appeared, proposed by Denis Mcquail, who sees that mass media possess a new phenomenon of social life. Mcquail (2013) calls the main characteristic of the information society an unprecedented increase in the amount of information transmitted to a scale that is not possible for human comprehension and fixation.

At the same time, Habermas (2016) was aware of the degree of importance for the society of publicity that the media in general and newspapers in particular formed.

“The newspaper business, which arose from the private correspondence system and which lagged behind it for a long time, was initially organized in the form of craft enterprises. At this first stage, the calculations were based on the principle of maximizing profits then to this economic aspect a new, political (in the broad sense of the word) aspect was added, when the press moved from dry news to the defense of a certain views.” (p.17)

In this regard it is possible to trace a certain analogy in the path of development of broad journalism described by J. Habermas and how new media developed in the era of mass Internetization. In fact, they went through the same stages from private interpersonal communication to the commercialization of the environment and, finally, to the environment that forms this very public opinion.

## **2. Problem Statement**

Nowadays, with the development of information and communication technologies, there is the understanding that the concept of mass media has also undergone a number of changes and filled with a slightly different semantic meaning. The role of the World Wide Web as the most accessible source of information, as well as the lack of strict regulatory framework governing the activities of users in the Internet, turns it into a tempting alternative for traditional media. Nowadays it is more preferable to call it media communication, which includes the exchange and spread of information through various formats of communication practices when using various technical means of communication. Thus, the public sphere

becomes sensitive to changes in the means of interaction used within society, which, changing the ways of interactions between specific individuals, become catalysts for changing the degree and nature of the publicity of public processes.

Getting back to the topic of traditional media, we can say that they were conditionally divided into two types. First of all, it was public broadcast media with a wide audience, such as radio and television, and secondly, it was media that provided private communication between individuals such as, for example, telephone.

With the advent of social networks and their wide distribution in society, there has been a quantum leap in the ways of interpersonal communications. Facebook made the transition from public broadcasting and talk with an unlimited audience to the creation of groups where people can interact with each other. In recent years, messengers like WhatsApp and Viber allow exchanging not only private messages, but also making chats in which everyone can write to everyone. In Telegramm, for example, a newly added group member can see all the messages written earlier by other group members, which allows scaling sociality in some way, giving the new participant the opportunity to see the entire dialogue in the dynamics of events.

It is worth noting, that nevertheless, traditional media also influenced the formation of social networks, turning them from online platforms for interpersonal communication into the combination of media and communication.

During closer examination of the trends in the development of popular social networks, we can notice an increasing expansion of the user's public capabilities: a user can subscribe to open information channels, create public pages with limited or open access, organize mailings, fundraising etc. In such circumstances, opinion leaders find it easier to conduct their point of view to the public and organize interaction with them. Everything that was possible to do before only with enormous resources and support for media corporations today can be realized by registering on a popular platform, or by starting your own channel on video hosting. It is possible due to the turn from a consumer of informational occasions into creator of them. Thus, social media filled all the intermediate positions in the range between public and private means of communication.

Jürgen Habermas (2016) also mentioned this in his book “Structural Changes in Public Sphere”:

“a functional change in the principle of publicity is based on a change in the structure of public sphere, the most important institution of which - the press, is undergoing transformation. On the one hand, due to commercialization, the barrier between areas where goods circulate and public communicates disappears; in private space, the clear boundary between the public sphere and the private sphere is blurred.” (p.26)

He already noted trends that were increasingly rooted in our reality, where new media completely redrew the understanding of the boundaries of private and public, co-opting more into open public practices the privacy of an individual.

### 3. Research Questions

Winfried Schulz studied the issue of the research of the role of media in public structures. He singled out four characteristic features of mediation that change communication processes in society. Firstly, it is a feature associated with the expansion of the spatial-temporal boundaries of communication, that is, with the ability to maintain contact with a person who is outside the physical reach due to modern technical means. Secondly, it is a substitution, that is, the possibility of using analog systems of offline activities in online space, as an example of such activities, it is possible to name shopping, the provision of public services through a single portal or the possibility of paying for housing and communal services through special applications.

Thirdly, it is association, which is expressed in the combination of several types of activity on one platform at once, that is, social platforms that allow integrating communication functions, as well as entertaining and receiving information. Fourthly, it is a device, which implies the adjustment of many types of activities to the standards of media, which is socially acceptable to it. This principle is expressed, for example, in the requirements of various institutions for their employees, more precisely, in their activities on the network, the establishment of certain restrictions, or even the adoption of internal corporate documents governing this sphere of an employee's life that characterizes the image of a company itself (Schulz, 2004).

Another researcher, Stig Hjarvard (2008), based on the studies of Winfried Schulz, offers a slightly modified version of the theory of mediation. According to his opinion, Hjarvard (2008) introduced into this version two important details. He saw in the media the potential of constructing a public space through which public institutions have the opportunity to find social approval and considered mediation as a specific historical phenomenon that appeared as a result of Internetization in Western countries, but not a universal concept that describes various events and phenomena. Hjarvard (2008) unites under mediation a systemic phenomenon that characterizes the growing dependence of society on the media, which is mutating itself, while also modifying the public institutions in which it is placed. The author points out that digital media extremely quickly overcame the stages of their development and formation, turning into large influencers, spreading their influence over all spheres of social development. It is necessary to take into account that this influence is not always associated only with positive costs, but it can also act as a negative factor.

The original interpretation of the construction of public space in the changing conditions of media environment, which requires more and more sophisticated self-design of individuals in order to represent the image to the public, was proposed by the philosopher Boris Groys. In his book "Public Space from Void to Paradox" (Groys, 2014) he refers to public space as "vacuum, open and empty space" (Groys, 2014) inside which all kinds of material objects, such as buildings, objects of art and other architectural structures are quite logically located, and which is filled with socio-political propaganda, advertising, commerce and other similar phenomena of everyday public life.

Based on this understanding, the author logically gives the definition of private space - a sphere, in contrast to public, closed and constructed inside open public spaces. However, at the same time, Boris Groys in his work especially emphasizes the idea that not every urban space free from restrictions is a public space as not every crowd is a civil society. Public space must be purposefully constructed (Groys,

2014). The author proposes to subject engineering to nothing more than a public vacuum, free from all its deviant manifestations. All these aspects are necessary for the reformatting of society itself and its further development. Boris Groys (2014) does not propose the idea of creating public areas organizing the public sphere within the public space, but constructing precisely the public space itself “building the void itself, utopia inside privatized spaces of private interests”.

In his work, Groys (2014) refers to the ideas proposed by Heidegger and Zisselsberger (2008) in the essay “The Origin of the Work of Art”, where Heidegger talks about the need to construct a vacuum in the surrounding space, which will allow seeing the world in its entirety. Openness must be created purposefully, because initially in its natural form it does not exist.

Speaking about modern reality, Groys (2014) notes the fact of increasing mediatization of the public and attempts to design the very public space not in terms of a physically tangible world, but in terms of a new virtual spatiality.

Continuing the idea of designed self-presentation, Groys (2014) says that with the advent of the Internet and related technologies, the media requirements for an individual and the design of his presentation in public space have become more important for social environment. Self-design is now becoming a significant factor not only for politicians and other celebrities, but also for ordinary inhabitants. Their personal pages on social networks, forum profiles and avatars serve as public presentations of themselves. This fact, of course, is related primarily to the spread of technological means of access to the Internet and the general accessibility of gadgets. It makes it possible for everyone to create own content, and large social networks allow making this or that statement or even the user's position on any issues popular and visible due to “reposts”, “comments” and getting into “trends” of global platforms around the world, without being afraid to be censored by the government of a country.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

It is necessary to take into account that while the Internet and its associated digital technologies provide a “public space”, they do not necessarily provide the “public sphere” itself. Enhanced open access to information can not directly bring increased political participation, more active civic engagement or increased credibility in the political process, it may well provide the opportunity for civic activists to receive their data in a fairly short time.

#### **5. Research Methods**

Social media has become a part of our daily lives. Therefore, the study of them is now integrated into many disciplines. Philosophers, political scientists, anthropologists, specialists in the field of digital humanities, perform such kind of a study. Consequently, each of these disciplines recognizes that social media has many contexts and that every of them deserve attention.

If we want to understand how social media are interconnected with areas such as society and politics, we should pay attention to the essence of social media: how they were created and how will they be used in the future.

## 6. Findings

Therefore, techno-enthusiasts consider social media as a tool that can expand involvement in political life and democracy. However, it turned out that due to social media, authorities can also identify dissenters as quick and easy as possible. For example, in Iran, social media began to be used to suppress political protests. In China, the entire Internet was originally designed under the leadership of the government and is practically detached from the external Internet space. In other countries such as, for example, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Kyrgyzstan the most popular social networks during periods of instability within the country, when opposition activity and anti-government information is gaining popularity on various Internet resources are be switched off. After the decline in the peak of activity, all the problems in the functioning of platforms in the country quickly disappear.

Can social media become a new public sphere, which, in turn, can challenge more traditional and conservative spaces? We still have to find an answer to this question, but it is now clear that with the advent of each new major innovation, there have always been those who claimed that as a result we lost a part of our human being. The Greek philosopher Plato (2016) suggested that with the invention of writing, humanity lost the ability to use memory, which was an integral part of human being. Hannah Arendt (2000), in turn, said that a person's involvement in technology did not carry anything terrible in itself, but was the norm of things: "As a living being, a person remains attached to the living kingdom, although he gradually moves away from it in the direction of an artificial, organized world" (p.52).

Social media are just the latest technologies that cause such concerns. The idea that social media is evidence of the loss of human nature exists in many variants. For example, the assumption that we are shortening the period of concentration of attention or that we are now so focused on the screen that we have lost the ability to interact face-to-face. However, we sometimes hear opposing opinions. Humanity does not lose any essential qualities, but on the contrary, new technologies are seen as expanding our capabilities, due to which we become a super human or a post human. One way or another, these ideas emphasize changes in our human nature.

However, usually after some time, most people agree that at some point, new technologies become a part of ordinary life, taken for granted.

Thus, social media, along with other new digital technologies, expand the range of our capabilities both in relation to new forms of communication and in relation to the formation of a new space in which we live and communicate.

## 7. Conclusion

The Internet today is a qualitatively new communication space. This specificity is primarily due to multimedia, extraterritoriality, a high level of trust in horizontal communications and a high level of informatisation. The development of Internet technologies that allow constructing communication should not be considered as the development of connections alternative to the real community, understanding it as a loss of reality and its replacement with altered forms of consciousness or simulacra. Therefore, the development of information and communication technologies and their actualization is worth seeing as a logical continuation of offline activity, their transfer, embodiment and transformation.

To conclude with, it seems important in the context of the study of the origins of the virtual public sphere to mention that the development of interactive communication technologies is in strict correlation with the practice of creating new models of social structure. At the same time being the cause of social effects that were not previously observed in public sphere, in its traditional sense, it also has a close connection with the mobilization capabilities of social media within civil society, communicative interaction action between society and government and the formation of an organized struggle with political system.

The changes in the technologies of social communications in the Internet space have predetermined the emergence of wide opportunities for aggregation, transmission and exchange of information without a restrictive framework on the temporal and spatial characteristics of communication process. Taking into account, the fact that many researchers note the extremely high role of communications in the formation of the landscape of the political management system, it is also necessary to analyze the impact of Internet communication technologies on the process of modern public and political management in general.

Social media is changing the world right now right before our eyes, and we feel how much the line between the private and public spheres is blurring, the private sphere is becoming thinner and narrower while a special language of social media appears (sharing, scrolling, selfie, hype etc). We just have to comprehend further, what social media actually become for us.

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