

# The construction and challenges of the Internet public sphere: an analysis based on Habermasian theory

Zhaohua Chen

School of Media and Communication, University of Westminster, London, UK

## Abstract

**This paper applies Jürgen Habermas's theory of the "public sphere" to examine whether the internet can serve as a modern public sphere. It first outlines the core features of Habermas's concept—openness, freedom and independence, rational discourse, and reliance on mass media. The paper then analyzes how the internet, through its global reach, egalitarian access, anonymity, and immediacy, partially aligns with these characteristics and offers new possibilities for public communication beyond traditional media. However, significant limitations are also identified, including algorithm-driven "information cocoons" and the spread of disinformation and cyber violence, which undermine the openness and rationality essential to a true public sphere. The author concludes that while the internet is not yet a fully realized public sphere, it holds potential. Realizing this potential requires collaborative efforts from governments, platforms, media, technologists, and users through legal regulation, technical improvements, and public education, in order to gradually move closer to the ideal envisioned by Habermas.**

## Keywords

**Public Sphere, Internet, Rational Discourse.**

## 1. Introduction

In 18th century Europe, people enjoyed discussing public topics in places such as cafes and clubs. Here, people were free from political and social constraints and could freely express their views on social events. Based on this phenomenon, Habermas proposed the concept of "public sphere". In modern times, the Internet plays an important role in people's lives. It provides an unprecedented communication platform for global citizens. The Internet seems to constitute a new "public sphere". This paper analyses whether the Internet is really in line with Habermas's concept of "public sphere" through Habermas's concept of "public sphere". This paper firstly briefly introduces the concept of "public sphere" and the dilemma of its development. According to Habermas, the public sphere is characterised by openness, freedom and independence, rational expression and dependence on mass media. The development of the public sphere has been challenged by consumer culture and political exploitation at a time when newspapers have become the dominant mass medium. Secondly, the paper then turns its attention to the emergence of the contemporary Internet. The embodiment of the Internet as a new public sphere is analysed in the light of Habermas's definition of the public sphere and the characteristics of the Internet. The openness and breadth of the Internet is consistent with the openness of the public sphere. The equality and anonymity of the Internet meet the public sphere's demand for freedom and independence. The interactivity and immediacy of the Internet greatly satisfy the public sphere's demand for information dissemination. However, the Internet also has some limitations. The algorithmic technology of the Internet has led to an information cocoon. This impacts on the openness of the public sphere. In addition, the anonymity of the Internet leads to the proliferation of disinformation and cyber violence. This does not meet the public sphere's requirement for rational discussion. Therefore, at present,

the Internet cannot be a real public sphere. But compared to traditional media such as newspapers and television, the Internet is still an alternative to the new public sphere. It also requires the efforts of the government, Internet companies, media, technologists and Internet users to improve the limitations of the Internet. Only then can it fulfil the requirements to become a public sphere.

## **2. Overview of Habermas' "public sphere" theory**

### **2.1. The concept and origin of "public sphere"**

The "public sphere" is a sociological and philosophical concept developed by Jürgen Habermas. In his book *The Structural Transformation of Public Theory*, he refers to the "public sphere" as a space between the state and real society. It is a space in which people can freely discuss public topics and thus form public opinion. The "public sphere" is a place where citizens can freely discuss public affairs and participate in political activities. His inspiration for this theory came from 18th century European society. At that time, public spaces such as cafés, clubs and salons were places where people could discuss social issues. People of different classes and identities could speak freely about political, cultural and social issues in such places. According to Habermas's theory, the "public sphere" has the following four characteristics. Firstly, the public sphere is open. The public sphere is an open space where any citizen can enter to discuss. It does not matter what the person's status or identity is. Secondly, citizens are free and independent in the public sphere. People can express themselves freely here and are not constrained by power and society. Then, people are more rational in the public sphere. They are more inclined to focus on the public good rather than personal interests. This is the basis on which the public sphere can contribute to democracy and social progress. Finally, the public sphere entails the transmission of information and facilitation of communication through media such as newspapers, radio and television. Habermas sees the public sphere as the basis of democratic politics and a tool for social criticism.

### **2.2. The transformation dilemma of "public sphere" and mass media**

And traditional venues such as cafes and clubs have spatial limitations that prevent them from extending the reach of the public sphere. With the development of mass media, the spatial limitations of the public sphere were broken. Newspapers became the new public sphere. However, in the 20th century, this culture of critical debate was replaced by a growing consumer culture. After two industrial revolutions, the capitalist economy developed rapidly. People began to pursue consumption and enjoyment after harvesting wealth. For example, in the United States at that time, consumption was regarded as the purpose of life and the pursuit of life. During this period, newspapers began to publish a lot of news about entertainment, art and advertisements in order to cater to the consumer group. Those news about public affairs and social issues were marginalised [1]. In addition, mass media turned politics into a platform for propaganda of the rulers. Political topics are shifted from public discussion to the promotion of personal and institutional services. Political figures and events are packaged as entertainment news and processed by the media to attract attention. However, such news generally lacks substantial public significance. In the United States in the 20th century, politicians portrayed themselves through advertisements in order to win the support of voters. Some public issues that really need to be addressed are neglected. Therefore, Habermas's concept of "public sphere" is idealistic. He believes that the public sphere is a sufficiently open, inclusive, free and rational space. However, the mass media as a public sphere has limitations. It is easily affected by changes in the social environment. For example, the rise of consumer culture in the 20th century.

### **3. The Internet's acceptance and advantages of the "public sphere" function**

#### **3.1. The openness and globality of the Internet**

In modern times, with the advancement of technology, the Internet has gradually emerged. The status of mass media such as newspapers, radio and television has also been challenged by the Internet. Some features of the Internet also happen to meet Habermas's requirements for the public sphere. Firstly, the Internet is almost worldwide. It is open and widespread. The Internet is also an open and free space. Anyone can post and access information on the Internet. For example, on social media such as Twitter and Facebook, users are free to express their opinions and participate in discussions on various public topics. Compared with traditional media, the Internet breaks through geographical restrictions[2]. Information can be disseminated globally through the Internet. In addition, the Internet is more diversified. Users from different countries are also able to express opinions with different cultural stances on the Internet. For example, on TikTok, there are users from different countries commenting under a video work.

#### **3.2. Equality and decentralization of the Internet**

Second, the Internet is more egalitarian than traditional media. In traditional media, people need to participate in the discussion of public issues through intermediaries. For example, television news programmes allow people to express their views on the news through interviews. But not everyone can express their opinions in traditional media. Often only people with a certain degree of influence, such as government officials and intellectuals, can participate in discussions in these media. For example, the guests invited to talk shows on TV programmes are often professors, celebrities and officials of high status. And in the Internet, people can directly comment on social issues. For example, in the discussion forums of various topics on Twitter and Weibo, people can participate in the discussion just by clicking into it [3]. And the users here come from different industries and different classes. In addition, in the Internet, people are also able to become publishers of information and public and topics. For example, on YouTube or TikTok, users spread information in the form of posting works. Other users can comment under his work and repost the work. If the work gains a lot of attention, it becomes a new social topic. This also breaks the monopoly of traditional media on information dissemination to a certain extent.

#### **3.3. Anonymity and privacy protection of the Internet**

Then, the Internet has anonymity. On the Internet, each user is an individual. They participate in communication and activities anonymously or under a pseudonym. Users can freely express their views on the Internet without the constraints of their real identities. This anonymity also protects users' privacy to a certain extent. For example, nowadays people can fill in their nicknames or even birthdays as they like when they register their accounts on various online platforms. Major websites also provide users with corresponding privacy policies[4].

#### **3.4. Immediacy and interactivity of the Internet**

Finally, the immediacy and interactivity of the Internet platform are conducive to starting discussions on topics. The Internet not only has a large dissemination range, but also delivers information quickly. It breaks the boundaries of time and space. Internet users around the world can communicate in real time. This immediacy also facilitates interaction between users. Users send messages online and receive feedback in a very short time. This creates communication. In addition to this, this immediacy also facilitates users' attention to public events. Users can know the progress of events in real time on the Internet. For example, at the beginning of the New Crown epidemic [5]. The Internet facilitated people's attention to this public event by posting daily updates on the world epidemic. The immediacy and interactivity

of the Internet turned it into a giant "coffee shop". People from all over the world with different identities can communicate here without any barriers.

Therefore, the Internet makes up for the shortcomings of traditional media in terms of openness, equality, instantaneous information and interactivity. These characteristics are in line with Habermas' vision of the public sphere. The Internet seems to be the new "public sphere".

## **4. Limitations of the Internet "public sphere"**

### **4.1. Algorithm technology and "information cocoon"**

However, the Internet is not yet a "public sphere" in the true sense of the word. It also has some limitations. Firstly, the development of algorithmic technology has limited the flow of information on the Internet. Users can only access information that is similar to their own views. This will lead to the emergence of "information cocoon". Algorithmic technology was initially developed to enhance the user experience of the Internet [2]. Algorithms collect and analyse users' browsing history and time spent on a web page to summarise a database of users. Algorithms then push the content that users are interested in based on this data. Not only that, the algorithm will find groups similar to the user based on his interests[6]. For example, a certain user YouTube and TikTok and other video sites, repeatedly viewed and favoured the video of a certain film blogger. After that, the video site will recommend other videos of this blogger and other film blogger videos to this user. Algorithmic recommendation techniques allow users to immerse themselves in their own Internet world. However, it is difficult for users to be exposed to information that is different from what they think. This is damaging to the openness of the public sphere[7]. In addition, algorithms also undermine the basis of rational discussion to some extent. When users rely excessively on content recommended by algorithms, they may gradually lose the ability to independently acquire and filter information. In the discussion of public affairs, without the ability to think and analyse things independently, it is difficult to form valid opinions and rational discussions cannot be formed[8].

### **4.2. False information and cyber violence**

Secondly, the large number of users on the Internet expressing their views is irrational. Due to the openness and anonymity of the Internet, it is cheaper and unregulated for users to publish information. This can easily lead to the emergence of false information and cyber violence. The rise of the Internet has brought about the "traffic economy"[9]. In this context, some individual online media deliberately fabricate and disseminate false information in order to attract traffic and increase income. For example, in early 2024, a blogger on China's TikTok gained a large amount of traffic by publishing false information. She falsely claimed that she had found a Chinese primary school student's holiday workbook in Paris[10]. This attracted the attention of many Chinese users. This blogger gained a lot of income from this traffic. In addition to this, when users join online groups that have similar perceptions to their own. The ideas and emotions in the group will reinforce each other. This can cause individuals to become more and more extreme in their perceptions and will actively reject views that are different from their own. When they encounter content that opposes their own views, driven by the group's emotions, they will abuse it or even mob it as a group[11].

Therefore, the limitations of the Internet mainly stem from the information cocoon and anonymity caused by algorithmic technology. The information cocoon undermines the openness of the public sphere and people's ability to think independently. The "excessive freedom" caused by anonymity has led to the proliferation of disinformation and cyber-violence on the Internet. This has had a great impact on rational discussion in the public sphere.

## 5. Paths to promote the Internet to become a true "public sphere"

Thus, the Internet is not now the perfect public sphere. But it serves a purpose that traditional media cannot. The Internet is still more suitable to be used as a public sphere. The Internet needs to break through its limitations before it can become a public sphere in the true sense of the word. To improve the Internet's shortcomings, it requires the joint efforts of various fields such as the government, Internet companies, media, technicians and Internet users.

Firstly, the government should introduce relevant laws to ensure the healthy operation of the Internet. For example, the Chinese government has introduced the Regulations on the Governance of Information on Internet Violence in response to Internet cyber violence. This means that online violence is brought under regulation. Behaviour that causes harm to others on the Internet needs to be paid for. Secondly, network companies also need to improve the Internet information review mechanism to reduce the frequency of false information. Then, the media need to actively publicise the harms of cyber violence and advocate civilised surfing[12]. For technicians, they should work on improving the algorithm technology. For example, let the algorithm recommend more to the user that he does not understand the content. The user can also learn about the information that is different from his point of view. This is conducive to breaking down information barriers. Finally, Internet users need to take the initiative to learn more about different contents and get out of their information cocoon[13]. This is conducive to users to improve their ability to think independently. In addition, Internet users should also improve their moral quality. This may ensure rational discussion. Perhaps in the future, as the Internet continues to be optimised, Habermas's ideal of a "public sphere" may be realised.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, Habermas' concept of the "public sphere" envisages a space for open, free and rational discussion. The emergence of the Internet has provided a new carrier for the public sphere, and its openness, equality and anonymity have enabled users around the world to freely discuss public topics, and ordinary people can also become publishers of information. However, the Internet also has limitations, with algorithms leading to "information cocoons" that undermine openness and diversity, and anonymity leading to disinformation and cyber-violence that undermine the climate of rationality. To overcome these limitations, multiple efforts are needed. For example, the government should strengthen regulation, Internet companies should improve their vetting mechanisms, the media should guide rational discussions, technologists should improve their algorithms, and users should take the initiative to understand diversified information. Only in this way can the Internet truly become a public sphere and realise Habermas's vision.

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