

Title: Social Media and the Public Sphere: Authenticity, Democracy, Experimentation

Length: 1 Day (50 min)

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Problem Statement: Social Media has changed the relationship between the Public and the Private sphere by creating intermediate, public/private spaces. The norms of these new spaces, especially around authenticity, experimentation, and their relation to democratic practices, are in flux.

Learning Objectives:

Students will understand Habermas's accounts of public versus private spheres.

Students will understand how seemingly value-neutral technology could impact ethical criteria.

Students will understand the challenges social media brings to public discourse.

Students will critically think through the values of authenticity and experimentation and their relationship to democracy in the digital age.

Students will understand various views of ethical theories and apply them to the authenticity issue.

Description:

This module looks at the changes to democratic deliberation brought about by social media platforms. Topic 1 uses Habermas's view of the public and private spheres, and argument that social media creates intermediate, semi-public, semi-private spheres to ask what new challenges these platforms raise for democratic societies. Topic 2 looks at two demands made on citizens of democracies, to engage in public discussions in good faith and to be open to new ideas, and how these two values conflict when the public/private distinction is eroded by social media.

Opening Discussion Question?

What is the political role of online discussion in a democracy? Who are we when we take part in these online discussions? Is there a difference between public and private anymore?

Topic 1: Habermas on the Public and Private

The distinction between public and private spheres is central to the idea of representative democratic government, both for limiting the power and reach of government and for fostering the discussions that democratic government depends on. The public sphere is supposed to be the place of open discourse and exchange of ideas, especially ideas about government, policy proposals, and politics in general. The private sphere, on the other hand, is the sphere of the home, the market, and civil associations. As an ideal, the public sphere should be as inclusive of different ideas, voices, and proposals as possible to facilitate political discourse, and ultimately, democracy itself (though, of course, we will fall short of this ideal in concrete situations). The private sphere, on the other hand, is where people choose who to associate with and has no requirement to be maximally inclusive.

Social media has radically upset this distinction in many ways. Private conversations can be shared widely thereby becoming public unexpectedly, public content posted online is data mined for

advertising and other private business purposes, echo chambers offer ideas on politics and society but only from limited perspectives, and so on. Social media in general does not fit well within either public or private spheres, and so raises challenges for democracy both at the societal and individual level.

Habermas and Deliberation

“Deliberative politics... [is] an existential precondition in pluralistic societies of any democracy worthy of the name,” (Habermas, 2022). That is, discussion, especially open, rational, political discussion is necessary for any healthy democracy. Habermas takes this a step further to say that the more pluralistic a society is (that is, the less consensus that can be assumed on fundamental issues a society faces and the wider variety of lifestyles and beliefs within that society), the more important good deliberative practices are. And while it is possible in theory for consensus to be reached on some issues, the point of this ongoing deliberation within a society is that while not everyone comes to agree on everything, better ideas are produced through deliberation.

Finally, this deliberative society only works if people experience the impact of these deliberations on their life. In other words, if the discussions that take place in the public sphere do not somehow translate into government action, shape institutions, or get reflected in the effects of law, then such deliberation is empty, and one’s society is not really democratic (Habermas 2022).

We can then ask what is required for deliberation to be good? There are many answers to this: social norms for good, rational conversation, systems of news and education that keep citizens informed, the protection of civil rights, the inclusion of all citizens in deliberation, and so on. All of this, Habermas claims, requires the distinction between the public and private spheres, a distinction that he sees information technologies, especially social media, as eroding.

Changes with new media

In the new social media landscape, everyone is now potentially an author or publisher, private conversation is posted publicly, and much public conversation is facilitated by privately owned corporations. This can be seen as the “platformization of the public sphere,” where social media platforms give structure to the way in which public deliberation takes place. There are then questions both of how such platforms are run and how people should engage with social media platforms. Let’s look at the first question here, and the second question in topic 2 below.

Social media platforms facilitate semi-public conversations where people share ideas, news, art, cat pictures, etc., with fellow citizens and people from across the world. This makes social media particularly important to political deliberation, as can be seen by the role social media has played in many major political events of the last decade, including campaigns and protest organizing. However, these platforms are generally businesses and make profit based on advertising, which depends on people’s attention, reactions, what they click on, and so on. That means the platforms and the ways in which they facilitate conversations are structured by private incentives (i.e., profit).

An important example of these public/private conflicts is the rise of echo chambers. An echo chamber is a “social epistemic structure from which other relevant voices have been actively excluded and discredited,” (Nguyen, 2018). This means that echo chambers are social practices that filter out disagreement or dissenting opinions, views, and facts, to prevent those within the group from hearing or reading about them, or otherwise taking them seriously. Therefore, by definition, echo chambers are

opposed to the inclusive ideal of democratic discourse. Yet, because people are more likely to click on articles with headlines they agree with and to want to spend their time in online spaces with like-minded people, social media platforms are incentivized to create echo chambers. This has the potential to harm several necessary features of a democratic society, especially having a well-informed public and having spaces for inclusive deliberation.

Habermas argues that platforms should be liable for the news shared on them, even though they don't explicitly endorse or produce that news (U.S. law currently shields platforms from this responsibility). However, corporations are likely to avoid such responsibility. For example, despite being one of the central hubs of the internet for billions of users, Facebook has recently decided to massively lower the reach of news articles in order to pre-empt being held responsible as a news publishing organization by various governments.¹ This has radically reduced, in the short term at least, an enormous number of people's access to news, potentially damaging the democratic requirement of a well-informed public. This shows the power platforms have in shaping public discourse without even saying anything themselves.

Discussion 1:

What responsibilities do social media platforms have to protect deliberation? Should they be responsible for what is posted and shared on their platform?

If every citizen on social media is now in some sense a publisher and editor of content, what new responsibilities do citizens have? What new rights might need protecting?

Topic 2: Norms of the New Digital Public Sphere: Authenticity, Experimentation, Discourse

Above, we talked about various important features of the public sphere and what values, norms, and practices make it possible, focusing on the societal level. However, these in between, semi-public spheres that Habermas describes do not just change the function of the public sphere, but the private sphere as well. On the traditional distinction, one's experimenting with the type of person they will be, their faith, their lifestyle, what they buy, etc. are taken to be within the private sphere. This separation itself is taken to be good for the public sphere and for deliberation as well.

Deliberation requires good faith actors who engage in open discussion, air their views and beliefs, and, at least in principle, are open to having their views changed. However, this process is made more difficult by the structure of social media. Let's look at the good faith airing of one's views and beliefs under the idea of "authenticity" and the openness to changing one's views under "experimentation," and see how there are times the two values cannot be maintained together.

There are several ways to understand authenticity, and it is usually a combination of the ideas of being true to oneself and to take responsibility for the choices one has made. We generally see authenticity as an important value in that we think people should be true to themselves, and doing so in public deliberation is engaging with others in good faith. However, if the point of the public sphere is to discuss

¹ Kobie, Nicole. "Facebook Is Giving Up on News—Again." *Wired*. Sept. 11, 2023. <https://www.wired.com/story/facebook-is-giving-up-on-news-again/>.

ideas, policies, etc., then part of the point is to change one's mind and one's values. Such change rarely happens suddenly; it is usually gradual and happens when one communicates these views, reflects on them, performs actions in line with them, and so on.

Many thinkers of the early internet saw it as a space of experimentation that would allow people to play with and construct new identities, ideas, and social relations. Famously, Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* saw within the coming information technology revolution the possibility for radical new ways for people to shape, reject, fuse, split, and invent identities, and thereby, new ideas and ways of living. These new ways to connect with each other, break old boundaries between groups, and give us the power to control how we appear in digital spaces might even change how we think of ourselves, accepting that we are changing beings who may have multiple identities, identities that change in different contexts, etc., so the thought goes. Because deliberation thrives on the search for new and better ideas, this would be a profound good for democracy.

Yet today, most digital experimentations with one's self take place on or through social media, and this makes the relationship between authenticity and experimentation more difficult to navigate because it now happens in connection with the public sphere in complex ways. We see this in the rise of social media requiring the linking of one's online activity to their "real world" identity (for example, Facebook's real name policy). One could see this as a way of ensuring authenticity and good faith participation in public discourse. This seems to be founder and CEO of Facebook, Mark Zuckerberg's argument when he said "You have one identity...The days of you having a different image for your work friends or co-workers and for the other people you know are probably coming to an end pretty quickly...Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity."² Yet, we should also keep in mind that the advertising model that makes Facebook profitable depends on being able to track and identify users by their behavior (see Zuboff, 2019).

Because of demand for "integrity" of one's identity in semi-public/semi-private spaces, authenticity and experimentation clash. If one is expected to be authentic, then they are expected to be honest and upfront about their values, experiences, views, and knowledge. But in experimenting, one is looking for experiences that might change their values, views, and knowledge. One is, in short, potentially becoming someone new.

While not directly dealing with social media concerns, the philosophy L.A. Paul helps us understand this problem. She gives a theory of transformative experience where certain experiences potentially change both what we know and what we value, thereby transforming us in some important way. She goes so far as to say that some experiences change what it is like to be the person we are. If she is right, then authenticity and experimentation are sometimes in contradiction. Let's look at her account in detail to see why.

For Paul, a transformative experience happens when two types of change happen together: subjective and epistemic transformation. A subjective change is when we change what we value, what we care about, and how we go about the world. A subjective change is in some sense a change in who we are. Second, an epistemic transformation comes from an experience that gives us new knowledge *that we can only learn by going through that experience*. For example, one can only really know what it is like to

² Kirkpatrick, David. 2011. *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

be a parent once one becomes a parent. It is only by going through the experience that someone can have that knowledge. So transformative experiences then are experiences that both change what we value, and we cannot know ahead of time what it will be like to undergo and be changed by that experience.

Much of Paul's work on this topic deals with the question of how to rationally choose whether to undergo a transformative experience (this is difficult because we cannot decide whether our values before or after the change are the better values (subjective change), and because we know that there is knowledge that we don't have (epistemic change)). However, for our purposes, we can see how Paul's work raises a problem for authenticity as well. If authenticity is being true to and honest about yourself, and experimentation can lead to transformative experiences that change yourself, then you cannot both be authentic and experimental at the same time.

If one is supposed to be authentic and open to new experiences in semi-public spaces like social media, then we have a problem. If Paul is right, then there are many times where we cannot be both. Authenticity and experimentation are often directly opposed. How do we choose well? This helps us understand one of the problems of echo-chambers: if you are in the echo-chamber, you are a part of an in-group. If so, then to maintain the identity of the in-group, the echo-chamber must filter out any important information that might lead people to change their views. This sacrifices experimentation to preserve authenticity.

In other words, we end up favoring one of democracy's necessary requirements (good faith public engagement) at the expense of another (openness to new ideas and ways of life).

Discussion 2 Questions

Can you share some examples of experimentation on social media that actually changed you?

Can you think of some examples where, even with good faith, one would want to be inauthentic online? Are there harms to others caused by any of these reasons?

In a democracy, should we expect authenticity from people in online discussions (e.g., on Facebook)? Similarly, how open to changing their views and practices do people need to be in order to deliberate well?

Can one experiment with new ideas and practices while being true to themselves, or while maintaining their integrity?

Sources and Further Reading:

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