The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere 2.0? – Answers from Gerhard Schulze

The Internet has expanded the public sphere: anyone can express their opinion. But does the public sphere also have a different structure in the digital age than in the past? Some answers from Bamberg sociology professor Gerhard Schulze.

Professor Schulze, in his 1962 habilitation thesis "The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere", Jürgen Habermas noted that the bourgeois public sphere, previously a place of enlightenment and political discourse, had been negatively changed by the mass media. What was the diagnosis he put forward?

Habermas believed that the mass media were responsible for changing bourgeois society from a public sphere that argued rationally into one that merely consumed culture. In the early bourgeois public sphere of the eighteenth century, its members could still meet up with one another at salons, literary societies or evenings of music staged in the home. Later, this continued in the art and culture scenes.

According to Habermas, members of the public in the mass societies subsequently had increasingly little opportunity to make any sort of appearance in society. The individual newspaper reader or television viewer no longer had anyone with whom he could or wanted to talk and tended instead to yield to the temptation simply to absorb what was offered to him.

Added to this was the fact that the mass media increasingly had to be financed through advertising; this led to the depoliticization of the media and forced them to conform to the advertisers. Ultimately this meant that pure publicity soon acquired greater value than thoughts, ideas and arguments.

Anyone can become a medium

Nowadays the Internet is competing with the mass media, allowing individuals to take part in social discourse. How is this affecting the character of the public sphere?

Individuals can shape the information they consume in a much more active way than in the past. The information on offer has grown hugely. Furthermore, individuals have themselves become an information medium – and a potential participant in discourse. With some people this is expressed merely in the clicking of a Like button, which does not have any particularly deep discursive character. Others, however, make comments on politics and culture which are clearly thought-out and to be taken seriously.

When I compare the literary reviews published in the quality press with the reader reviews provided by Internet booksellers, I often prefer the opinions of readers. I see them as a gain as compared to the time when we readers – to put it in Habermas' terms – were pitted against the "all-powerful" media with its influential critics.

Internet as genuine fourth estate

Can one talk of a new structural transformation of the public sphere, a structural transformation 2.0?

That is definitely how it appears to me, and there is a certain amount of evidence to support this. Firstly, the emergence of the Internet itself is part of this structural transformation. This has provided traditional media – which will not become extinct as a result – with competition that they no longer exert between themselves. The press has become apostrophized as the fourth estate of democracy and needs also to satisfy the expectation of self-control. Although it fails to do so, the Internet has now taken over this task, at least to a certain extent.

A second component of the structural transformation is that the Internet once again allows members of the public sphere to be in contact with each other – rather like in the early bourgeois public sphere. By overcoming space and time, today's public sphere has the technical means at its disposal to reconstitute itself and make itself perceptible.

Thirdly, individuals in this public sphere have been given weight and value because they have opinions and can argue and counter-argue. That is precisely the point to which Habermas also referred: a rationally arguing public sphere is one made up of individuals who have their own opinions and can express them to others.

The fourth point concerns the capacity for organization. The shifts in the power structures in the North African countries have demonstrated the political significance of this. The public sphere can organize itself via the Internet and make a stand with enormous consequences. I believe that these four points, taken together, are sufficient to claim that we find ourselves, politically speaking, confronted with an entirely new situation: a public sphere 2.0.

Power-free discourse with abuse potential

Does the Internet really make possible a power-free and rational political discourse of the sort that Habermas describes as the fundamental prerequisite for a functional democracy?

The Internet makes possible such discourse, but does not necessitate it. It also entails the risk of a new perversion of this discourse as it offers huge possibilities for manipulation. For example, Twitter can be used to conjure up a following out of nothing, while companies and political organizations can abuse private data trails for their own ends – such as for advertising.

On the other hand, we must realize that we are undergoing a political learning process in which these distortions of the discourse are reflected upon and criticized – and that people are considering how best to salvage and strengthen the positive aspects of the current development. The matter is far from decided. I believe, however, that we have a good chance of actually realizing the potential offered by the Internet.

Representative democracy will remain

Which political role can and should the digital public sphere play?

I think it would be naive to believe that the digital public sphere will throw open the gates to grassroots democracy and that public debates of all matters will be held on the Internet. For good or for evil, we are inextricably linked to representative democracy.

The Internet can help, however, to make possible once again that which representative democracy promotes – that is to say rational citizens who participate critically in the political process shaped by those whom they have elected. And who, when it is time once again to elect the representatives of the people, have the competence to do so.

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