Introduction

The concept of the public sphere has for several decades represented one of the most powerful theoretical junctions between media studies and political sociology. It provides political media studies with a broader theoretical framework that connects the media to democracy and legitimacy of politics, and it specifies how democracy works or does not work in practice. From Jürgen Habermas’ first writings, it provided a theoretical horizon of lost opportunities in advanced capitalist societies. Subsequently it emerged as an intake to analyse the critical and democratic potential of the mass media – and then the new digital media (Habermas 1989, 1993).

The book confronts predominating political theory with actual changes followed by the web and social media facing the public sphere. It seeks to clarify to what extent political theory takes account of such changes, and vice versa, the book examines in what ways contemporary Internet development continues to carry further the values of openness and argument. The general idea in the following chapters is to mobilise political ideas that directly and indirectly address the nature and functions of our current amorphous and complex public sphere, with an emphasis on the implications of the Internet, including the web and social media. I will argue that the predominant normative concept of ‘the public sphere’ is unsuited to help us understand contemporary opinion-formation and legitimacy.

I cannot here go into the broader debate on the role of web and social media in everyday life and identity building. This was the topic for another book, Personal Media and Everyday Life (2014). Nor will I delve deeply into specifics of the various social media and platforms, or in how they differ in mediating political debate. Rather, the Internet is more generally addressed as a set of platforms for political communication, or simply as a political infrastructure. In two stages, this infrastructure is targeted by market and state power: On the one hand, the historical neutrality of the Internet accommodates the strongest corporate players in the market of Internet-based social interaction, due to the absence of market regulation. The background for this lies partly in the notion of the Internet as a ‘Cyberspace’ where information wants to be free, partly in American entrepreneurial lib-
eralism. On the other hand, after the era of the ‘electronic frontier’, the Internet is currently subject to state-driven interventions. In particular, protection of copyright, extensive surveillance and the struggle against cyber-crime motivate this interest in intervening in the Internet, which affects its function as political infrastructure in democratic societies.

How are we to understand the condition for political discourse in the age of communication titans, NSA surveillance and copyright policing? Does political theory account sufficiently for the nature of the Internet-based political discursive space we call the public sphere? Or does dominating political theory tend to divert our attention by producing unrealistic expectations? How can the public sphere in general, and its digital dimension in particular, be addressed less normatively and more realistically? These are questions I address in this book.

I discuss some aspects of positions that hold public reason to be not only a possibility, but the pivotal medium for, and outcome of, public discourse. Discussion itself, the deliberation-approach argues, tends to render the ultimate decision legitimate in the eyes of the participants. This subsequently reproduces solidarity and improves the implementation of the actual and coming decisions. When everyone’s views are open for discussion, it is argued, people would be more inclined to support decisions simply because they, or someone who speaks their opinions, feel that they have been involved.

Contestation- and conflict-oriented positions, on the other hand, argue that public discourses are battles for recognition and interests, battles with words: The point is to gain hegemony, to win or at least not lose without a fight. Contrary to a deliberative approach, conflict and contestation-inclined scholars argue that the longer and more involved in a discussion conflicts are, the more moralised and therefore deeper they become. Rather than becoming hostages to the debate and its outcome, divides may develop and conflicts escalate. Psycho-sociological mechanisms of rationalisation would tend to tie the individual to one of the parties of the conflict.

Having addressed some central points in normative perspectives on public reason and contestation, I discuss how the Internet takes part in structurally transforming the public sphere. I then draw on sociological and non-idealist insights in order to encircle a more realist view. I draw on such unlikely bedfellows as sociological systems theory (Niklas Luhmann) and political realism (Bernard Williams, Raymond Geuss and others). The purpose is not to construct a realist theory of the Internet-based public sphere, but rather to point out insights on which such a theory can build.
I should add here that I have reservations about the concept of Öffentlichkeit, particularly with its translations, such as ‘public sphere’ or ‘espace publique’. My impression is that such terms tend to institutionalise public debate to the degree that one ends up assuming such a normative space as a bottom-up pillar for democracy. They may cause unnecessary complications for an undogmatic theorisation on the relationship between political communication and political government. It seems to have become a favorite term for those who want to ‘solve’ problems of democracy. And yet the term is already inscribed with meaning and is at the center of all such debates to the degree that I have decided to stick with it here. My reservations concerning its dubious normativity should become clear all the same.

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The dominant positions in political theory and political philosophy from the 1980s on, notably those building on John Rawls’ and Jürgen Habermas’ political thought, brought political theory to a new level by integrating political efficiency with political public legitimacy in the concept of public reason. Particularly the emphasis on legitimacy as public discourse opened perspectives for seeing the role of the media. And yet these theories, united as they are in a Kantian tradition, trapped political theory in a moral and idealist dead end that inhibited it from addressing pressing political issues. Political visions were (re)constructed that had less to do with what politics is about than about what we, in another world, would like politics to be. In this fashion, it in fact served as ideology, since it presented expectations of politics as though politics were of a general moral nature. I argue for a political theory that views politics as a distinct form of communication and that needs to be judged on its own terms. On this background of political theory, I examine the political use of Internet-based media for two reasons: First, to examine political theory on the basis of specific changes in the public sphere, and second, because the Internet is the new symbolic object to which visions and dystopias are heavily attached. Terms like ‘netizens’ and ‘Cyberspace’ reflected an avant-garde notion about communication for a democratic society that was later proven to be of little help.

I argue that the Internet contributes to the diversity of views in the public sphere and to the broadening of participation, but also that it complicates observation of the political public sphere from the point of view of politics. In this, the Internet

1. In the beginning of the 1990s, Pierre Bourdieu called it a ‘detestable’ concept (Bourdieu 2014, 306).
seems to balance or reverse the effect of the mass media. A key question is however in what ways the Internet and mass media are connected in terms of circulation of news and debate. Generally, the public sphere should be seen as consisting of contradictory and contingent dimensions, oriented towards different participatory groups, styles and issues.

In addressing the political roles of the Internet, I will not go into the use of the Internet in election campaigns or the problem of the digital divide (see DiMaggio et al. 2001; Hargittai et al. 2008; Norris 2001; Schlozman et al. 2010). Nor will I discuss the role of the web and social media in the struggle for democracy in developing countries (e.g. Lynch 2012). Although relevant for the dynamics of the public sphere, these issues represent special cases of political communication discussed as topics in their own right. Also, research that connects the Internet with democracy and politics has differentiated into specialised branches, some of which have also developed new and advanced methods to harvest massive data from the online sources directly (Gentzkow and Shapiro 2010; Hindman 2008; Lawrence et al. 2010). I prefer to focus on the main (and seemingly contradictory) problems that have been addressed concerning the Internet as a political infrastructure.

Chapter 2 addresses the theory or perspective of deliberative democracy, particularly as it developed as a way out of the impossible position of Rousseau, on the background of new Kantian and communication-oriented frameworks. I address central points in the political writings of Rawls and Habermas, and various versions of the theory of deliberative democracy in the footsteps of the two distinguished scholars of the period, including the more critically inclined, such as Nancy Fraser and Seyla Benhabib. My approach here is to simply discuss its most central arguments that have been presented by the deliberative position on how a legitimate and an efficient foundation for rational decision-making can be reached. The arguments are, in short, that open and free deliberation can reconstruct consensus as a reachable aim in an analytical sense, if not always in practice. It is procedural in that it feeds back to its own conditions for a free debate among free persons. It makes a point about being public in that it restricts manipulation, and ties statements to their speakers. In particular, I critically examine the claim to impartiality that the theory of deliberative democracy defends. I conclude that the deliberative democracy approach is suffering from unrealistic political understanding and weak historical anchoring. As a construction, it tends to assume what it seeks to explain: rationality, public reason, consistency. As a normative theory of democracy, I argue that it presents a model of public communication that obscures the fundamental nature of disagreement in politics and the historical nature of discourse.
In Chapter 3 these points are pursued in a discussion of some vital aspects of the contestation or conflict approach in political theory. The chapter addresses how the critique of deliberative democracy derived from, and was attempted to develop into, an alternative contestation approach. This approach was prominent in the 1990s as a critique of Rawls in particular and as a position for feminist, racial and ethnic currents in society that were reclaiming the post-Marxist interest-perspective. The point of entering the public sphere was not consensus, but winning battles against the state concerning autonomy and recognition. These battles consist of rhetoric and strategy. I particularly refer to Chantal Mouffe’s notion of an ‘agonistic’ democracy. These thoughts about the nature of politics in a society of economic inequality sketched out the contours of a neo-democratic kind of politics. I suggest what kind of idea of public political communication is derived from the contestation approach to politics, and argue that it was too committed to temporary identity struggles that emerged from the free culture of the 1970s. While the contestation approach addressed important critical remarks against deliberative theory, it never developed a notion of public political discourse, and even less into a theory of political decision-making in a complex democracy.

Chapter 4 examines the notion of a political public sphere in general, and the role of the Internet in particular. I very briefly present Habermas’ idea in his early and well-known treatise and then go into his more recent writings on the subject, often linked to the European situation. I also discuss his view on the more wide-reaching concept of political communication. The purpose here is to clarify the role of the media in the theory of the public sphere as it appears in Habermas, and other scholars of the public sphere, such as Benjamin Barber and Michael Schudson. I argue that the notion of a public sphere is too normative and ideal in its structure, and cannot address properly the real challenges that contemporary politics is up against, in Europe or elsewhere. Consequently, the understanding of the media and the Internet is underdeveloped as it one-sidedly stresses their democratic potential and failure to fulfil such. Ideal models of the public sphere ignore questions of struggle and oppression that are taken more seriously in the contestation approach presented in the previous chapter.

Chapter 5 examines more closely the recent structural changes of the political public sphere. I present an overview of contemporary research on political participation through digital media, and the Internet as a recent structure for the public sphere. In particular, I examine Yochai Benkler’s theory of the networked public sphere as it was presented in his important book The Wealth of Networks from 2006. By bringing together network analysis, Internet optimism and liberalism, Benkler provided us with an important and highly stimulating exposition of tech-
ology and democracy. Benkler’s intriguing interweaving of public sphere theory and network analysis enabled him to understand the structural nature of the public sphere more closely. However, as he interpreted empirical findings in a distinctly normative (and optimistic) way, his conclusions hardly describe the current Internet. Rather, network analysis is a well-chosen analytic framework to explain absence of democratisation on the Internet caused by monopolisation by corporations like Apple, Facebook, Amazon and Google. Benkler presents a powerful theory of a phenomenon on the Internet that more and more stands out as a remarkable exception: Wikipedia.

In Chapter 6, I continue the discussion of the previous chapter by arguing that the public sphere develops gaps and divides. A key term here is differentiation, which refers to both social and technological change. A differentiated and partly Internet-based political public sphere constitutes challenges for a political system in its search for a public opinion. There exists, for example, no European public sphere apart from the counter-publics that reduce or undermine political legitimacy. Naturally, topics circulate and may provide some degree of stability and sense of justification. The never-ending circulation of communication simulates democratic discursive processes. The structural challenge today is dividing of public political communication and the increasing differentiation of groups, topics and styles that reduces its ability to provide political power with the legitimacy it needs to handle the serious challenges of our time. I argue that the Net seems to be characterised by a duality, possibly a dualism between the grass roots with their social media, and political elites with their social, as well as ‘big’ media. Based on extended research on the political use of the Internet, I suggest that the Internet in particular has yielded an internal differentiation in the shape of a main duality between a narrow, formal circulation of political topics, and a wide-ranging, informal underbrush of diffuse exchange of quasi-political expression. I argue that the connection between the two dimensions is vital for the view of the public sphere as a pillar for democracy.

Chapter 7 sketches out some thoughts about how a realist approach might view the public sphere. I begin with the critiques, presented in this book, of the deliberative approach, the conventional public sphere approach as well as of the contestation approach. Political realism in political theory replaces idealism and moralism for a more cool-eyed perspective on the political as a specific area of action and communication. It acknowledges political morality as a specific kind of morality and history as the context of all political action. It points out that public debate is a way to produce consent and legitimation for government and political decisions. The public sphere is in no command of any inherent normative leaning
towards democratic discourse. All political struggle is also a struggle for expressing oneself and being heard. I also warn against exaggerating the significance of the public sphere, since legitimation can be acquired through multiple institutions, such as courts and public administration.

Finally I conclude briefly (Chapter 8) by reminding the reader of the fact that commercialisation and monopolisation on the Internet have made it less suited as an instrument of democracy, compared to what was projected as recently as around the turn of the century. What is needed, I concur with Niklas Luhmann, is a ‘secular’, non-normative view of public communication as reflexive and complex circulations of topics. Similarly, I advocate a realist approach that does not measure the political participation on the Internet against moralist ideals, which it never can fulfil.

Working with this book, I have drawn on sections of some of my previously published articles. Here, they are reformulated and put into a different argument:

 ◗ Rasmussen, T. (2014) Internet and the Political Public Sphere. Sociology Compass Vol. 8(12) 1315–1329.

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