Rational Criticism, Ideological Sustainability and Intellectual Leadership in the Digital Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

This review postulates that today’s digital environments unveil an era of connectivity, in which digital communication devices exercise a general influence on social interactions and public deliberation. From this perspective, it argues that connective practices are likely to affect two main components of the normative public sphere, namely rational criticism and ideological sustainability. Drawing on the case of the 2011 Arab revolutions, in which social media proved to have a strategic function, this paper illustrates the ideological heterogeneity of social networks. Additionally, this article considers how issues of rational criticism and ideological sustainability could be improved by regulating online interactions and proposes that the digital divide could act as a natural process of regulation for today’s connective and transnational public sphere.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Connectivity, Cyber-Activism, Digital Divide, e-Democracy, Ideological Sustainability, Intellectual Leadership, Public Sphere, Rational Criticism

INTRODUCTION

With an eye to anticipating the effect of digital technologies on representative democracy, research in the fields of politics, development and public administration is examining how public infrastructures can be adapted to meet the needs of a participatory and collaborative culture. Indeed, the connective and collaborative patterns generated by the use of social media and interactive communication devices has significantly increased the power of individuals within their social environment. As such, it is likely to revolutionise the structure of representative democracies. Therefore, experts in the field of political sciences aim to anticipate the future evolution of public administrations by defining online interactions between citizens and their governments.

They explore all forms of online infrastructure that contribute to the establishment of an e-democracy, such as e-governance or local e-participation projects. By doing so, they intend to identify structural differences between online deliberation and traditional forms of representative democracy. Simultaneously, development studies underline the potential benefits of digital technologies in developing
countries and evaluate new ways of providing free access to information in regions facing a high level of digital divide. Alternative academic work in the field focuses on how to implement successful e-governance in democratising countries, which reduces the costs of public administration as well as the level of corruption, by providing direct communication flows between a government and its people.

Yet this research does not take into account the existing patterns of online deliberation that have already taken shape among the community of internet and social media users. Indeed, it is now necessary to understand the effect of digital and connective culture on representative democracy from a broader perspective. This requires investigating the internal structure of connective societies and identifying the factors that contribute to the elaboration of a rational and critical public opinion in the digital world. In this regard, social theorists have been discussing the sociological transformations that came with the emergence of connective and transnational networks. Opposing views have been expressed regarding the effect of such networks on neoliberal societies. Whereas some experts argue that transnational communication flows preserve the freedom of expression inherent to democracy, others claim that connective practices are determined by the commercial interest of web corporations and fail at promoting an impartial public opinion. To some extent, both views confirm Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, as they illustrate the process through which information can be liberalised, whether it is politically or economically. In order to contribute and build a macro theory about future participative democracies, this article reviews some of the studies that analyse online social interactions from a Habermassian perspective and identifies two major differences between cyberspace and the normative public sphere: rational criticism and ideological sustainability. Referring to the theories of Cardon (2010), Flichy (2010), and Dean (2003) this paper demonstrates how internet usage contrasts with the original project of the web pioneers who envisioned virtual space as an alternative to neoliberal society. It presents the argument that the mass of internet users failed in defending the libertarian values that inspired the web and did not manage to produce a sustainable and rational critique of the new transnational corporate hegemony. Secondly, this paper underlines some of the characteristics of online networks as specific social structures. As has been demonstrated by Bennett and Segerberg (2011), connective networks tend to be particularly flexible and versatile, which can affect the sustainability of their ideology. In other words, beyond a lack of criticism, digital communication weakens the stability of political agendas in the long run.

We might postulate that issues of rational criticism and ideological sustainability are caused by that fact that the online public debate is not subjected to any form of regulation (Frazer, 2005). By recalling the historical context in which Habermas (1962) sets the emergence of public opinion, this paper demonstrates that the bourgeois public sphere was initiated by intellectual elites, who exerted their intellectual leadership over public discourses. This process spontaneously regulated citizens’ deliberation and assured the rational criticism essential to the public sphere. Today, this theory appears to be particularly relevant and topical when it comes to interpreting the digital revolution as well as some of the recent political changes occurring in the Middle East and for which social media played a significant role. The function of digital media in the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions leads us to think that, ever since the eighteenth century, the liberalisation of information has reached a critical point, and now affects the way the public debate operates. New forms of public mobilisations not only bring us to rethink the normative public sphere but also to understand how democratising countries of the digital era fit the Habermassian model of the eighteenth century. Like the emergence of the press and bourgeois literature on the eve of the French revolution, access to digital media in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt stimulate a democratic and deliberative culture. For this reason, it is worth examining the digital and transnational public sphere under the light of the
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