5

SOCIAL MEDIA, ALIENATION, AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

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Introduction

Over the past 15 years, the term "social media" has become widely established. It generally functions as a collective term for social networking sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn, video platforms such as YouTube, photo-sharing platforms such as Instagram, blogs and microblogs such as Twitter and Weibo, messaging apps such as WhatsApp, livestreaming platforms, video apps, and wikis such as Wikipedia. It often remains in question what exactly qualifies as "social" in these media and, by implication, why more traditional information and communication media such as email, telephone, television, and books should not also be considered as social. The problem here seems to be that in sociology there are conflicting ideas and understandings about what is social, not just one (Fuchs, 2017, Chapter 2; Fuchs, 2021, Chapter 2).

Internet platforms such as Facebook and Google, which dominate the social media sector, are among the largest corporations in the world at present. Meanwhile, social media has become an indispensable part of politics and public communication. Right-wing politicians use various internet platforms and spread propaganda and false news through these media. The Arab Spring and the various Occupy movements have proven that social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are important in social movements. No politician, party, NGO, or social movement today does without profiles on social media. Therefore, the question arises as to the connection between social media and the public sphere. The chapter sheds light on this question.

The next section introduces a concept of the public sphere as a concept of critique. The third section uses the concept of the public sphere to critique capitalist internet platforms. The last section of the chapter deals with potentials of a public internet.

The Public Sphere as a Concept of Critique

The public sphere is a vital component of any political and social system. Habermas understands "public" to mean spaces and resources that are "open to all" (Habermas, 1989, p. 1). Hence, we speak, for example, of public service media, public opinion, public education, public parks, etc. The concept of the public has to do with the common good, with the idea that there are facilities that are not only used and owned by a privileged few but from which everyone enjoys benefits.

Public institutions and goods are often, but not necessarily, regulated and organised by the state. There may be certain requirements for access. For example, public service media in many countries are financed by a legally regulated broadcasting fee. Such access conditions should be affordable for everyone and there should not be any discrimination by class, income, origin, gender, etc. to access these public resources. Accordingly, a park to which only white people had access at the time of segregation in the United States or South Africa was not a public good.

The public sphere has to also do with public debate about society, interests, and decisions that are collectively and bindingly taken by all. It therefore has an inherently political character. The public sphere mediates between other spheres of society and functions as a kind of interface between economy, culture, politics, and private life. An ideal, typical public sphere is one in which "critical publicity" (Habermas, 1989, p. 178) and "critical discussion" (p. 95) take place. If criticism is being silenced or suppressed, there is no public sphere.

The public sphere is a sphere of public political communication which mediates between other subsystems of society, that is, the economy, politics, culture, and private life. The public sphere is a medium of political communication. The public sphere enables people to inform themselves about, discuss, and participate in politics.

The media system is part of the public sphere in modern society. Figure 5.1 illustrates a model of the role of the media in the modern public sphere (cf. Fuchs, 2016). Media organisations produce publicly available content in the media system. Such content is generally used to inform about news, educate, and entertain. Through public news, members of the political system inform themselves about important events in society and politics. News is a trigger of political communication. People talk about what is happening in politics and ideally participate in the decision-making processes themselves. In a capitalist society, different interest organisations such as employers' associations, workers' associations such as trade unions, lobby organisations, political parties, NGOs, private individuals, social movements, etc. try to have an influence on the media companies' reporting. Such lobbying happens, for example, through interviews, press releases, lobbying, advertising, public relations, the interlocking of organisations, etc. The media system interacts with the economy, politics, and culture.
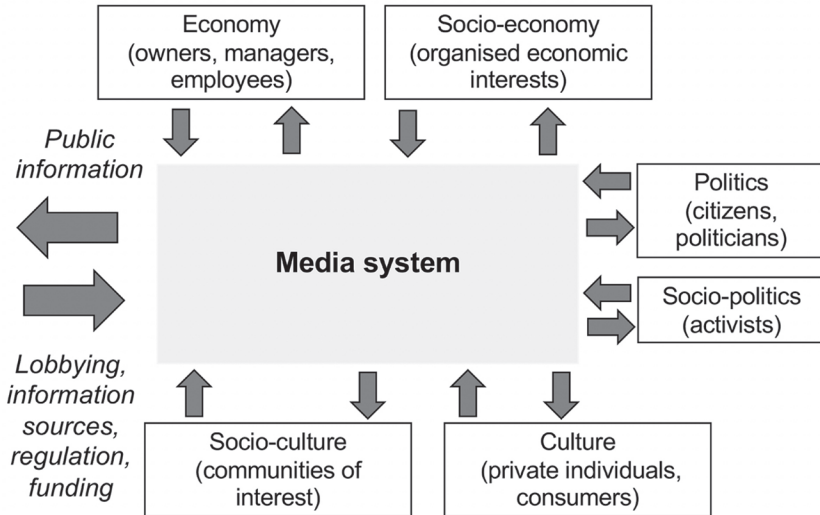
FIGURE 5.1   The media system as a part of the public sphere. Note: The figure is a further development of Figures 5.1 and 5.2 in Habermas, 2008.

The base of economic resources for the media to operate with is enabled by citizens (through purchase, broadcasting fee, subscriptions, etc.), the state (e.g., media funding), as well as business organisations (advertising). Politics regulates the framework conditions under which the media operate. Culture is a context of world views and ideologies that shape the climate of society and thus also have an influence on the media.

For Habermas, the public sphere is autonomous from capital and state power, that is, from economic and political power. "Laws of the market were suspended as were laws of the state" (Habermas, 1989, p. 36) in the public sphere. State censorship that interferes with the making of political opinion and private ownership of the means of production of public opinion is against the democratic character of the public sphere. For Marx, socialism is an alternative to the capitalist economy and the bourgeois state. Marx describes the Paris Commune, which existed from March to May 1871, as a socialist form of public sphere. It was an attempt to organise politics and the economy democratically:

> The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time. . . . Public functions ceased to be the private property of the

> tools of the Central Government. Not only municipal administration, but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the state was laid into the hands of the Commune.
>
> *(Marx, 2010a, p. 331)*

Marx was critical of the limited public sphere of capitalism at the same time: "The public sphere with which Marx saw himself confronted contradicted its own principle of universal accessibility – the public could no longer claim to be identical with the nation, civil society with all of society" (Habermas, 1989, p. 124). Liberal ideology postulates individual freedoms (freedom of speech, freedom of expression, freedom of association, freedom of assembly) as universal rights. The particularist and stratified character of capitalist class society undermines these universal rights. It breeds inequality and thereby unequal access to the public sphere. In bourgeois society, there is an antagonism between the freedom of private property and individual freedoms. There are two inherent limitations to the public sphere, as discussed by Habermas:

- The restriction of freedom of expression and public opinion: if people do not have the same level of formal education and material resources at their disposal, then this may constrain their access to the public sphere (cf. Habermas, 1989, p. 227).
- The restriction of freedom of assembly and association: powerful political and economic organisations "enjoy an oligopoly of the publicistically effective and politically relevant formation of assemblies and associations" (cf. Habermas, 1989, p. 228).

Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere is colonialised and feudalised as a result of these limitations. It is not a proper public sphere but rather a political space structured by class. The public sphere entails a concept of immanent critique that lends itself to the critique of the deficits and problems of modern society. Habermas does not claim that the public sphere exists everywhere but that it should exist. Immanent critique compares purported ideals with reality. If it finds that reality contradicts its own ideals, it reveals that there is a fundamental contradiction, and that reality must be changed to overcome this incongruity. The bourgeois public sphere creates its own limits and thus its own immanent critique.

Public spaces and publics exist not only in the West. It is a misguided claim that the public sphere is a Western-centric or Eurocentric concept. Such criticism also risks justifying undemocratic regimes that are anti-Western and promote authoritarianism under the guise of opposition to Western-centrism and Eurocentrism. The public teahouse is an ancient cultural practice and space that can be found in many parts of the world. Di Wang (2008) compares the Chinese teahouse of the early 20th century to British public houses. It is a public space that people from all classes and backgrounds would frequent for a variety

of reasons. The Chinese word for teahouse is 茶馆 (*cháguǎn*). Chengdu is the capital of the Sichuan province in southwest China. "Teahouses in Chengdu . . . were renowned for their multiclass orientation. One of the 'virtues' of Chengdu teahouses was their 'relatively (sic!) equality'" (He Manzi, *Wuzakan*, p. 192 as quoted in Wang, 2008, p. 420). Although women were excluded at first, they gained full access from about 1930 onwards. These teahouses served not only as cultural spaces but also as political meeting places where political debates took place and political plays were performed, attracting the interest of not only citizens but also government informers. Wang discusses the importance of teahouses in the 1911 railway protests in Chengdu. Public meeting places are spheres of citizen engagement that can become spheres of political communication and protest.

The various Occupy movements – which emerged after the global economic crisis that began in 2008 – were movements in which protests and the occupation of spaces converged. They generated self-managed publics for political communication. The creation of these publics did not take place only in the West but in many parts of the world in times of global capitalist and social crisis. A common aspect of these protests was that in many of them the tactic of transforming spaces into public and political spaces was used and that these protests took place in a general social crisis. Resistance is as old as class society. Publics have been created as resistant publics throughout the history of class societies, so the public sphere exists wherever people gather to organise collectively and express their anger and displeasure at exploitation and domination.

One of the connections between Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*[1] and his *Theory of Communicative Action*[2] is the way it points to the functioning of stratification processes in modern society. When Habermas (1989) speaks of the "refeudalization" of the public sphere in his earlier work (pp. 142, 158, 195, 231), he would refer to it as the concept of *colonialization of the public sphere* in his later work, which includes "monetarization and bureaucratization" (Habermas, 1987, pp. 321–325, 343, 364, 386, 403). According to Habermas (1987, p. 323), these two processes "instrumentalise" the lifeworld and thus the public sphere. In my own approach, I assume that there are not two but three ways how the exercise of power may colonialise and re-feudalise the public sphere (cf. Fuchs, 2008, 2011, 2015, 2020a):

- Through *commodification* and *class structuration*, the logics of money, capital, and the commodity form permeate people's everyday lives and lifeworlds.
- Through the *process of domination*, society is organised in such a way that particular interests prevail and a few people or groups or individuals obtain advantages at the expense of other people.
- Through *ideologisation*, partial interests, exploitation, and domination are rendered as natural and necessary by presenting reality in a distorted or manipulated way.

The commodity form, domination, and ideology are the three main forms of stratification in a capitalist society. The critical theory of the public sphere is a critique of the commodity form, a critique of domination, and a critique of ideology. A critical theory of the public sphere is therefore a critique of alienation. What was referred to by Horkheimer (2013) as "instrumental reason", "technological rationality"[3] by Marcuse (1982, p. 141), and "reification" by Lukács (1971, pp. 83–222), may assume three forms in capitalism:

- Class structuration and the commodity form instrumentalise people's labour power and people's needs in capitalist consumption.
- Political domination instrumentalises people's political agency in such a way that they do not make decisions themselves but leave them to dominant groups.
- Ideology tries to bend and instrumentalise people's consciousness and their subjective interests.

Karl Marx emphasised that the logic of accumulation shapes capitalism (cf. 2010b). This logic has its origin in the capitalist economy. But it also shapes modern politics and modern culture, which are about the accumulation of political and cultural power. The accumulation of power assumes the form of the accumulation of capital, decision-making power, and defining power. As a result of accumulation, there are asymmetries of power, namely class structures, structures of domination and ideology (see Table 5.1).

Alienation means that people are confronted with structures and conditions that they are unable to control and influence themselves. People do not have control over the economic, political, and cultural products that influence their lives and everyday life. Alienation means "*loss* of the object, his product" (Marx, 2010c, p. 273). Alienation means "vitality as a sacrifice of life, production of the object as loss of the object to an alien power, to an *alien* person" (Marx, 2010c, p. 281). Use values, collectively binding decisions, and collective meanings are social products of human practices. In the capitalist society, however, they are controlled only by a few, resulting in the existence of objectively alienated conditions.

TABLE 5.1 Antagonisms in three types of alienation

Types of Alienation	Dominant Subjects	Dominated Subjects
Economic alienation: exploitation	Ruling class, exploiters	Exploited class
Political alienation: domination	Dictator, dictatorial groups	Excluded individuals and groups
Cultural alienation: ideology that leads to disrespect	Ideologues	Disrespected individuals and groups

TABLE 5.2 Main actors in the alienated and the humanist society

	Alienated Society	*Humanist Society*
Economy	The exploiter	The socialist
Politics	The dictator	The democrat
Culture	The ideologue/demagogue	The solidary friend

Source: Based on Fuchs, 2020a, p. 140, Table 4.4.

Table 5.2 illustrates the antagonism between alienated and humanist society along the three social dimensions of economy, politics, and culture. In the alienated society, the main actors are the exploiter in economy, the dictator in politics, and the ideologue/demagogue in culture. Humanism is the alternative design to the alienated society. In a humanist society, the main actors are the socialist in economy, the democrat in politics, and the solidary friend in culture.

Capitalist Colonialisation of the Digital Public Sphere

In discussions about the internet and social media, it is fairly often stated that an *electronic democracy*, a *digital/virtual public sphere*, and a participatory culture are emerging through the possibilities of prosumption (i.e., the phenomenon that users on the internet consume and produce at the same time so that media consumers become producers of content) and user-generated content (UGC). These arguments are widespread in the academic debate as well.[4] A far-reaching democratisation of society, including the capitalist economy, is inferred from a technical change in society, although class antagonism, political antagonisms, and ideological lines of conflict continue to exist and have even deepened. Is today's internet and social media a new public sphere that expands democracy or a new form of colonialisation of the public sphere?

Users of today's internet and social media face ten problems[5]:

1. **Digital Capitalism/Digital Class Relations:** Digital capital exploits digital labor. It results in capitalist digital monopolies and contributes to the precarisation of life.
2. **Digital Individualism**: The logic of the capitalist internet encourages users to accumulate attention with and approval of individual profiles and postings on social media. Its logic is to treat people as mere competitors, undermining interpersonal solidarity.
3. **Digital Surveillance**: State institutions and capitalist corporations employ digital surveillance of people as part of the complex digital and surveillance industry.

4. **Antisocial Social Media**: Social media are unsocial and antisocial media. Edward Snowden's revelations and the Cambridge Analytica scandal have shown that capitalist social media are a danger to democracy. Right-wing ideologues and demagogues propagate digital authoritarianism on social media.

5. **Algorithmic Politics**: Social media are shaped by automated, algorithmic policies. Automated computer programs ("bots") replace human activity, post information, and generate "likes". This has made it more difficult to distinguish which information and which endorsement comes from a human or a machine.

6. **Filter Bubbles**: Fragmented online publics are organised as filter bubbles in which opinions are homogeneous and disagreements either do not exist or are avoided.

7. **Digital Tabloidisation**: The digital *culture industry* has organised social media as digital tabloids that are controlled by digital corporations. Online advertising and tabloid entertainment dominate the internet, displacing engagement with political and educational content.

8. **Influencer Capitalism**: On social media, the so-called influencers shape public opinion, creating power asymmetries in terms of online attention and visibility and living in a commodified online culture that paints the world as an endless shopping mile and a mall (see Fuchs, 2021, Chapter 7).

9. **Digital Acceleration**: Due to digital acceleration, our attention capacity is challenged by superficial information that comes at us at very high speed. There is too little time and too little space for conversation and debate on social media.

10. **False/Fake News**: Post-truth politics and fake news are spreading globally through social media. In the age of new nationalisms and authoritarianism, a culture has emerged in which false/fake news is spread online, many people distrust facts and experts, and there is an emotionalization of politics through which people do not rationally examine what is real and what is fiction but assume something is true if it suits their state of mind and ideology (cf. Fuchs, 2020a, 2018).

These ten tendencies have led to a digital public sphere that is both colonialised and feudalised by capital, state power, and ideology and characterised by economic, political, and cultural asymmetries of power. The internet certainly has potentials for socialising human activities in the form of communication, cooperative work, community building, and the creation of digital commons. However, class relations and structures of domination colonialise the humanistic potentials of the internet and society. In contemporary capitalism, people are confronted with an antagonism between precarity and austerity. The internet and social media are now defined by class structures and inequalities.

Social media today are not sufficiently social. They are dominated by capitalist corporations, demagogues, and ideologues, even though they carry potentials for a world and for forms of communication beyond capitalism. Digital alternatives such as Wikipedia, digital workers' cooperatives, alternative online media such as *Democracy Now!*, digital commons such as *Creative Commons*, or free software are the manifestation of a truly social and socialised internet. Within capitalism, however, such projects often remain precarious and can only challenge the power of the dominant corporations and actors (Google, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Amazon, etc.) in a very limited way. The history of alternative projects within capitalism is a history of resource scarcity and precarious, often unpaid and self-exploitative labour.

In Table 5.3, the ten problems of social media and the internet in digital capitalism which had already been elaborated are assigned to the three types of alienation. There are thus economic, political, and cultural types of digital alienation.

In Table 5.4, digital alienation is presented as three types of antagonisms: class antagonism, in which digital capital exploits digital labor; political antagonism between digital dictators and digital citizens; and the cultural antagonism between digital ideologues and digital people. Alienation is the instrumentalisation of

TABLE 5.3 Three types of digital alienation and ten forms of colonialisation of the digital public sphere

Economic Digital Alienation: digital exploitation	(1) Digital class relations, digital monopolies, (2) Digital individualism, digital accumulation, digital competition
Political Digital Alienation: digital domination	(3) Digital surveillance, (4) Antisocial social media, digital authoritarianism, (5) Algorithmic politics, (6) Online filter bubbles
Cultural Digital Alienation: digital ideology	(7) Digital boulevard, digital culture industry, (8) Influencer capitalism, (9) Digital acceleration, (10) Online false/fake news

TABLE 5.4 Three antagonisms of digital alienation

Type of Alienation	Dominant Subject	Dominated Subject
Economic alienation: exploitation	Digital capital	Digital labour
Political alienation: domination	Digital dictators	Digital citizens
Cultural alienation: ideology that leads to disrespect	Digital ideologues	Digital humans

human beings. In digital alienation, people are instrumentalised with the aid of digital technologies such as the internet, mobile phones, social media, apps, big data, Industry 4.0, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, etc.

For a detailed analysis of the digital antagonisms through which the public sphere is colonialised and feudalised in digital capitalism, turn to the literature provided later.[6] However, a few examples are mentioned here.

The world's largest internet corporations in 2020 were Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet/Google, Amazon, Alibaba, and Facebook. In the Forbes list of the 2,000 largest corporations in the world, they ranked ninth (Apple Inc.), thirteenth (Alphabet/Google), fifteenth (Microsoft Corp), twenty-second (Amazon.com Inc), thirty-first (Alibaba Group), and thirty-ninth (Facebook) in the same year. Digital goods sold by these corporations include hard–ware (Apple), software (Microsoft), online advertising (Google, Facebook), and digital services such as online shopping (Amazon, Alibaba). The over-all sales of these six corporations amounted to *US$1,012.8 billion* in 2020, which is altogether even more than the gross domestic product of the 30 least developed countries in the world, whose combined GDP in 2019 was *US$984.5 billion* (HDR, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Table 5.5 shows the world's poorest countries and their GDP as well as the world's richest internet corporations and their revenues.

TABLE 5.5 Comparison of the economic power of the six largest internet corporations and the world's 30 poorest countries

HDI Rank 2020	Country	GDP (in Billion US$, 2019)	Forbes 2000 Rank 2020	Internet Corporation	Revenues (2019, in Billion US$)
189	Niger	12,911.69	9	Apple	267.7
188	Central African Republic	2,220.31	13	Alphabet/ Google	166.3
187	Chad	11,314.95	15	Microsoft	138.6
185	Burundi	3,012.33	22	Amazon	296.3
185	South Sudan	11,997.80	31	Alibaba	70.6
184	Mali	17,279.57	39	Facebook	73.4
182	Burkina Faso	15,990.80			
182	Sierra Leone	4,121.73			
181	Mozambique	15,291.45			
180	Eritrea	2,065.00			
179	Yemen	22,581.08			
178	Guinea	12,296.67			
175	Democratic Republic of the Congo	50,400.75			

HDI Rank 2020	Country	GDP (in Billion US$, 2019)	Forbes 2000 Rank 2020	Internet Corporation	Revenues (2019, in Billion US$)
175	Guinea-Bissau	1,339.45			
175	Liberia	3,070.52			
174	Malawi	7,666.70			
173	Ethiopia	95,912.59			
172	Gambia	1,826.07			
170	Haiti	14,332.16			
170	Sudan	30,513.46			
169	Afghanistan	19,291.10			
168	Senegal	23,578.08			
167	Togo	5,490.27			
166	Djibouti	3,324.63			
165	Lesotho	2,376.33			
164	Madagascar	14,114.63			
163	Tanzania	63,177.07			
162	Cote d'Ivoire	58,539.42			
161	Nigeria	448,120.43			
160	Rwanda	10,354.42			
	Total (Billion US$):	**984.51146**		**Total (Billion US$):**	**1,012.9**

Data sources: Human Development Index Rank – HDR (2020); GDP in current US$ for various countries – World Bank (2020); in current US$ Forbes (2020)

Five digital corporations combined are more economically powerful than 22 states. And these corporations have monopolies in operating systems (Microsoft), search engines (Google), online shopping (Amazon and Alibaba), and social networking (Facebook). The internet economy is dominated by a few global corporations. Hence, we cannot assume that digital capitalism has led to an end of monopoly or to a plural economy. The concentration of capital is a tendency inherent to capitalism.

Table 5.6 provides data on the ten most-viewed YouTube videos in 2020. YouTube is the world's most-used internet platform after Google's search engine (cf. Alexa, 2021). In discussions about the digital public sphere, it is often claimed that UGC means that everyone has a voice on social media and that the public sphere has become pluralistic and participatory. On the internet, everyone is indeed able to produce and publish digital content easily – but there are asymmetries of visibility and attention. Entertainment dominates over education and politics. In terms of content, social media are primarily digital tabloid media. Online visibility and attention are dominated by multimedia corporations and celebrities. Nine of

TABLE 5.6 Top ten most-viewed YouTube videos of all time

Position	Title	Video Type	Owner	Views
1.	Luis Fonsi – Despacito	Music	Universal Music (Vivendi)	6.5 billion
2.	Ed Sheeran – Shape of You	Music	Warner Music	4.5 billion
3.	Wiz Khalifa – See You Again	Music	Warner Music	4.3 billion
4.	Masha and the Bear – Recipe for Disaster	Children's entertainment	Animaccord Animation Studio	4.1 billion
5.	Pinkfong Kids' Songs & Stories – Baby Shark Dance	Children's music	SmartStudy (Samsung Publishing)	4.1 billion
6.	Mark Ronson – Uptown Funk	Music	Sony Music	3.7 billion
7.	Psy – Gangnam Style	Music	YG Entertainment (distributed by Universal)	3.4 billion
8.	Justin Bieber – Sorry	Music	Universal Music (Vivendi)	3.2 billion
9.	Maroon 5 – Sugar	Music	Universal Music (Vivendi)	3.1 billion
10.	Katy Perry – Roar	Music	Universal Music (Vivendi)	2.9 billion

Source: Refer to Wikipedia, 2020.

the ten most-viewed YouTube videos are music videos. The copyright of five of these videos is controlled by Universal Music. Warner Music, Sony, and Samsung also have a major share in YouTube. This example shows that internet platforms have not created a participatory culture, but rather that attention and publicity on the internet is controlled by media corporations and celebrities.

The Cambridge Analytica scandal dominated the world news in the first half of 2018. Cambridge Analytica was a consulting firm founded in 2013 that was, among other things, active in the field of using big data. Steve Bannon, a former advisor of ex-president Donald Trump and known for extreme right-wing positions, used to be the vice president of this company. Cambridge Analytica bought access to personal data of around 90 million people collected on Facebook via a personality test. This data was collected from participants' Facebook profiles. Cambridge Analytica then used this data in Donald Trump's election campaign to spread personalised fake news. The Cambridge Analytica scandal is remarkable in several respects:

• It shows that right-wing extremists will resort to any means at their disposal to spread their ideology. This includes false/fake news and surveillance.

- It shows that Facebook accepts dangers to democracy to cash in on data. Facebook operates on the logic that ever-growing amounts of data processed and collected on the internet will turn out to be profitable for the corporation, which uses them to personalise advertising, that is, tailor it to individual user behavior and then sell it.
- It shows that the neoliberal deregulation of the economy has led to internet corporations being able to act as they wish.
- It shows the connection between digital fascism, digital capitalism, and digital neoliberalism, which poses a threat to democracy.

The three examples highlight individual dimensions of the ten forms of colonisation of the digital public sphere mentioned in Table 5.3. The first example shows the power of internet corporations and illustrates aspects of digital monopolies (aspect 1 of the ten problems of today's internet). The second example dealt with the digital attention economy on YouTube. This is an expression of the digital boulevard and the digital culture industry (Problem 7), where celebrities dominate attention and visibility (Problem 8). The Cambridge Analytica illustrates a combination of several of the ten problems, namely digital capitalism (Problem 1), digital surveillance (Problem 3), digital authoritarianism (Problem 5), and online false/fake news (Problem 10).

The three examples demonstrate that the assumption that the internet and social media are a democratic, digital public sphere is a myth and an ideology that trivialises the real power of internet corporations and phenomena such as online false/fake news and online fascism. But the question remains whether a democratic internet is possible. The next section deals with this question in the context of public service media.

Toward a Public Service Internet

The digital public sphere assumes the form of the colonialised and feudalised public sphere through the logic of accumulation, advertising, monopolisation, commercialisation, commodification, acceleration, individualism, fragmentation, automation of human activity, surveillance, and ideologisation. The internet and social media are dominated by commercial culture. Platforms are mostly owned by large profit-oriented corporations. Public service media operate on the basis of a different logic. However, the idea of a public service internet has not yet caught on and sounds strange to most people as there are hardly any alternatives to the commercial internet today.

Media have (a) a political–economic and (b) a cultural dimension: on the one hand, they need resources such as money, legal frameworks, staff, and organisational structures in order to exist. In this respect, they are economic organisations. However, they are special economic organisations that are also cultural organisations since they produce meanings of society that serve public information,

communication, and opinion-forming. Since opinion formation and communication also include political opinion formation and political communication, media organisations have implications for democracy and the political system. As cultural organisations, all media organisations are also public as they *publish* information. As business organisations, on the other hand, only certain media organisations are public while others assume a private-sector status, that is, they are organisations that have private owners and operate for profit. Public service media and civil society media are however not profit-oriented and are collectively owned by the state or a community. Table 5.1 illustrates these distinctions. Public media are public in the sense of the cultural public and the political–economic public. They publish information and are owned by the public.

Communication scholar Slavko Splichal provides a precise definition of public service media:

> In normative terms, public service media must be a service *of* the public, *by* the public, and *for* the public. It is a service *of* the public because it is financed by it and should be owned by it. It ought to be a service *by* the public – not only financed and controlled, but also produced by it. It must be a service *for* the public – but also for the government and other powers acting in the public sphere. In sum, public service media ought to become "a cornerstone of democracy".
>
> *(Splichal, 2007, p. 255, emphases in the original)*

The means of production of public service media are in public ownership. The production and circulation of content is based on a non-profit logic. Access is universal, as all citizens are given easy access to the content and technologies of public service media. In political terms, public service media offer diverse and inclusive content that promotes political understanding and discourse. In cultural terms, they offer educational content that contributes to the cultural development of individuals and society.

Due to the special qualities of public service media, they may also offer a particularly valuable democratic and educational contribution to a democratic online public sphere and digital democracy – if they are given the necessary material and legal opportunities.

Signed by more than 1,000 individuals, the Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto calls for the defence of the existence, funding and independence of public service media and the creation of a public service Internet (Fuchs & Unterberger, 2021). Among those who have signed the Manifesto, which was initiated by Christian Fuchs and Klaus Unterberger, are Jürgen Habermas, Noam Chomsky, the International Federation of Journalists, the European Federation of Journalists, the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), and the European Communication and Research Education Association (ECREA).

Two ideas to expand digital democracy and the creation of public service Internet platforms are the *public service YouTube* and *Club 2.0.*

The Public Service YouTube

Digital media change the traditional relationship between media production and media consumption. While in classical broadcasting these two aspects are separate, on the internet, consumers can become producers of information (so-called *prosumers*, i.e., producing consumers). UGC offers the possibility for the audience to become a producing audience. As a result, the educational and democratic mandate of public service broadcasting can be expanded in the form of a participatory mandate. Participation here means offering an online platform through which citizens can make user-generated audiovisual content publicly available.

YouTube *de facto* holds a monopoly in user-generated video distribution platforms. Public service media have the necessary experience and resources to develop, offer, and operate online video and online audio platforms. This could create real competition to YouTube's dominance. YouTube is often criticised for distributing false/fake news, hateful, terrorist and far-right content, and relatively little is done about it because video content is not screened by humans when uploaded. YouTube works based on the logic of "the more user-generated content, the better; the more advertising opportunities, the more profit". YouTube's advertising and profit orientation leads to blindness to the quality of the content. A public YouTube, on the other hand, could fulfil the public democratic mandate by not allowing videos on all topics ("anything goes") to be uploaded but by opening up certain politically and democratically relevant topics (e.g., as accompaniment to certain TV or radio programmes) for uploading at certain times and for a limited period of time.

For this purpose, it should be provided that all submitted contributions are published and archived and thus made accessible to the public without time limit, so that a user-generated democratic online public is created. However, the videos submitted should be checked by trained moderators before release to see if they contain racist, fascist, sexist, or otherwise discriminatory content. Such content should not be released.

The individualism of today's social media could be tackled by deliberately addressing and encouraging social, cultural, and civic contexts such as school classes, university seminars, adult education centers, workplace communities, civil society organisations, etc. to submit collectively produced videos.

Public service media have large archives with masses of self-produced content. These could be digitised and made available on a public service video and audio platform. The Creative Commons (CC) licence allows content to be reused. The CC-BY-NC licence allows content to be reproduced, redistributed, remixed, modified, processed, and used for *non-commercial* purposes, provided the original source is acknowledged.[7] The CC-BY-NC licence is very well suited for digitised

content from the archives of public service media that are made publicly available. In this way, the creativity of the users of public service audio and video platforms may be encouraged, as they are granted permission to generate and distribute new content with the help of archive material. This could allow the public service educational mandate to become a digital creativity mandate. There is also the possibility that at certain points in time, topics are specified, and users are given the opportunity to process certain archive material and upload their new creations with the help of this material. A selection of the content submitted in this way could be broadcast on television or radio on a regular basis or on specific occasions. All submitted contributions could be provided on the platform.

Public service video and audio platforms can be offered in individual countries (as BBCTube, PBSTube, ARDTube, ZDFTube, ORFTube, SRGTube, etc.). However, it might also make sense for public media broadcasters to cooperate and jointly offer such platforms or to technically standardise their individual platforms and connect them together. The fact that in the field of television there are collaborations, for example, between the channels France Télévisions, ARD, and ZDF for ARTE or between the ORF, ZDF, and STRG for 3sat, show that it is useful to collaborate similarly in the field of online platforms. A European public alternative to YouTube could rival the commercial YouTube in terms of popularity and interest and could be a real competitor to the Californian internet giant Google/Alphabet which owns YouTube. Concrete projects are often postponed or not initiated at all because of being too small and because they would have to start at a European level. If the legal conditions were being provided, it might be easier to start at the national level to then set an international example and, in a further step, embark on a European project.

A *public service* YouTube that aims at the user-generated production of democratic content promotes the political participation and cooperation of citizens as well as the concrete, active, and creative engagement with democratic content through digital production and cooperative production. Participatory democracy entails infrastructure, space, and time for democratic processes. A public service YouTube would offer the material possibility and infrastructure for practising digital democracy.

The Club 2.0

The journalists Kuno Knöbl and Franz Kreuzer designed the concept for the Club 2 on behalf of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF). Club 2 was a discussion programme that was usually broadcast on Tuesday and Thursday. Its basic concept was to broadcast a controversial live discussion on television with potentially unlimited airtime. It was first broadcast on 5 October 1976, and the last on 28 February 1995. About 1,400 programmes were broadcast on ORF.

The concept of Club 2 may sound rather odd to many people today, as we are so used to formats with short duration and high speed and a lack of time to

engage with media and feeling rushed in our everyday lives. Open, uncensored, controversial live discussions that engage their viewers differ from accelerated media in terms of space and time: Club 2 was a public space where guests met and discussed with each other in an atmosphere that offered unlimited time. Its airtime was a public experience during which a socially important topic was discussed. Club 2 allowed for democratic publicity in public service broadcasting.

Space and time are very important for the political economy of the public sphere. However, a social space that offers enough discussion time is no guarantee for an engaged, critical, and dialectical discussion that transcends one-dimensionality, delves into the depth of an issue, and points out the common ground and differences between different positions. The public sphere must be wisely organised and managed in terms of space and time so that suitable people will attend, the atmosphere will be suitable, adequate questions are being asked, and it needs to be provided that all guests have their say, listen to each other, and that the discussion can proceed undisturbed, and so on. An unrestricted space, a dialectically controversial and intellectually demanding space, and a clever organisation are three important aspects to create such a public sphere. They are preconditions of slow media, non-commercial media, decolonised media, and media of public interest.

Is a new version of the Club 2 possible today? How could it look and be designed? If we speak of a second version ("2.0"), it means that on the one hand the Club 2 should be revitalised in a new form in order to strengthen the public sphere in times of authoritarian capitalism. On the other hand, "Club 2.0" means that we must take into account that society does not stand still. Society has developed dynamically and thus new public communication realities such as the internet have emerged. A *Club 2.0* therefore relies on a somewhat updated concept that leaves the basic rules unchanged but at the same time expands the concept. Whether a *Club 2.0* will not just remain a possibility but will become a reality is thus not merely a technical question but also one of political economy. It is a political question because its implementation necessitates a break with the logic of commercial, entertainment-oriented television dominated by reality TV. *Club 2.0* is hence also a political choice in favour of public service media formats. Its implementation is moreover an economic matter as it requires a break with the logics of colonised media, such as its high speed, superficiality, scarcity, algorithmisation and automation of human communication, post-facticity, spectacle, etc. Plus, the implementation of a *Club 2.0* is a question of resources and changing power relations in the media system.

Figure 5.2 illustrates a possible concept for the *Club 2.0*. It relies on a simple idea and is open to change and development. Here are some of its crucial aspects:

- **Basic Rules of *Club 2.0***: *Club 2.0* uses and extends the traditional principles of Club 2. The television broadcast is based on the proven Club 2 rules, which are crucial to the quality of the format. *Club 2.0* broadcasts are open-ended, live, and uncensored.
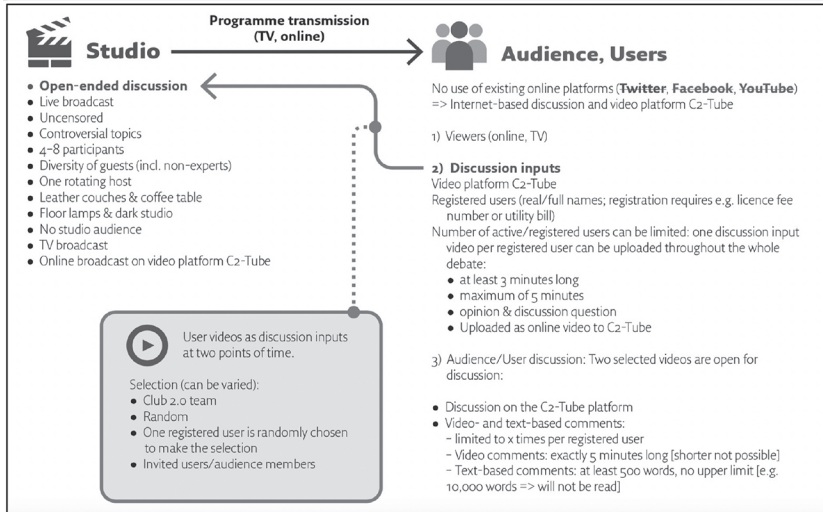
Programme transmission (TV, online)

Studio

- Open-ended discussion
- Live broadcast
- Uncensored
- Controversial topics
- 4–8 participants
- Diversity of guests (incl. non-experts)
- One rotating host
- Leather couches & coffee table
- Floor lamps & dark studio
- No studio audience
- TV broadcast
- Online broadcast on video platform C2-Tube

User videos as discussion inputs at two points of time.

Selection (can be varied):
- Club 2.0 team
- Random
- One registered user is randomly chosen to make the selection
- Invited users/audience members

Audience, Users

No use of existing online platforms (**Twitter**, **Facebook**, **YouTube**)
=> Internet-based discussion and video platform C2-Tube

1) Viewers (online, TV)

2) Discussion inputs
Video platform C2-Tube
Registered users (real/full names; registration requires e.g. licence fee number or utility bill)
Number of active/registered users can be limited: one discussion input video per registered user can be uploaded throughout the whole debate:
- at least 3 minutes long
- maximum of 5 minutes
- opinion & discussion question
- Uploaded as online video to C2-Tube

3) Audience/User discussion: Two selected videos are open for discussion:

- Discussion on the C2-Tube platform
- Video- and text-based comments:
  – limited to x times per registered user
  – Video comments: exactly 5 minutes long [shorter not possible]
  – Text-based comments: at least 500 words, no upper limit [e.g. 10,000 words => will not be read]

FIGURE 5.2   Concept of the *Club 2.0*

- **Cross–Medium**: *Club 2.0* is a cross-medium that combines live television and the internet and thereby transcends the boundary between these two means of communication.
- **Online Video**: Club 2.0 is broadcast live online via a video platform.
- **Autonomous Social Media, Not Traditional Social Media**: Existing commercial social media (YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) are not suitable because they are not based on the principles of slow media and public interest media. The use of YouTube would result in commercial breaks that would interrupt and ruin the discussion.
- **Autonomous Video Platform C2 Tube**: *Club 2.0* needs its own online video platform (C2-Tube). C2-Tube allows viewers to receive the debate online and via a range of technical devices.
- **Interactivity**: C2-Tube has also interactive possibilities that can be used to a certain degree.
- **User-Generated Discussion Inputs**: Users have the possibility of generating discussion inputs and actively contributing to the programme. This characteristic is linked to a non-anonymous registration of users on the platform. Anonymity encourages Godwin's Law, which states: "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler becomes more likely".[8] The number of registered and active users can be limited. The selection of active users could be random for example. Alternatively, all registered users could be invited to participate in the discussion. User-generated discussion inputs should preferably have a video format. The

number of user-generated discussion inputs uploaded onto the platform should be limited (ideally to one upload per active user). Since information overload hinders a proper discussion, it would make sense to set certain limits to make for a decelerated, relaxed culture of debate. Active users should be able to contribute to discussions on the platform.

- **Interface Between the Studio Discussion and the Video Platform**: At certain times during the live broadcast, a user-generated video is selected and shown as input for the studio discussion. Users could utter their opinion on the topic in such videos and they could contribute a discussion question. In a two- to three-hour discussion, about two of these user-generated inputs could be included. It is unavoidable that a selection mechanism is employed to decide which user-generated videos are suitable for the live broadcast. There are various ways to do this such as a random selection, selection by the production team, selection by a randomly determined registered user, selection by a special guest, etc.

- **Discussion Among Users**: *Club 2.0* allows users to discuss the topic of the programme. It could take place during and or after the live broadcast. The videos that were selected as discussion inputs could then be opened for discussion on C2 Tube. Comments should be allowed in video and written form. There should be a minimum length for written comments and possibly a maximum length for video comments. To implement the slow-media principles and avoid the Twitter effect of accelerated standstill, the number of comments per user per discussion should be limited.

- **The Forgetting of Data**: Video data are very storage-intensive. This begs the question of what should happen to all those videos that are uploaded to the platform but not broadcast and not opened for discussion. Since they are of less practical importance for public discussion, they could be deleted after a certain time. Users would need to be reminded that uploading a video in many cases entails forgetting the data eventually. Contemporary social media store all data and metadata forever. *Forgetting data* is therefore also a crucial counter-principle. Online discussions consisting of written and video comments can be either archived and kept or deleted after a certain period of time.

- **Privacy Protection**: Most social media monitor users for economic and political purposes, to achieve monetary profits through the sale of personalised advertising, and to establish a surveillance society that promises more security but undermines privacy and installs a regime of categorical suspicion of all citizens. *Club 2.0* should therefore be very privacy-friendly and store only a minimum of data and metadata necessary to run the platform. This is to ensure that user data is not sold and that exemplary data protection routines are used. Data protection should therefore be one of the design principles of *Club 2.0*. However, this does not mean that privacy protection should take the form of anonymous discussion, as anonymity can encourage

online bullying or hooliganism, especially on politically controversial issues. Data protection is therefore much more about the storage and use of data.

- **Social production**: Today's dominant social media are highly individualistic. In contrast, the production of user-generated videos for *Club 2.0* could take the form of cooperative social production which transcends individualism and creates truly social media, so that *Club 2.0* is integrated into educational institutions where people learn and create knowledge together by elaborating discussion inputs and collective positions and producing them in video form. This requires that the topics of certain *Club 2.0* programmes are known some time in advance. This could be achieved by publishing a thematic programme. Groups of users can prepare videos together, which they can upload to the platform on the evening of the relevant *Club 2.0* programme as soon as the upload option is activated.

All in all, *Club 2.0* is a concept to provide a democratic digital public sphere. It manifests a combination of elements of deliberative and participatory democracy. *Club 2.0* offers space and time for controversial political communication and enables citizens to participate collectively and individually in the discussion through videos and comments. The communicative aspect of deliberative democracy and the participatory idea of grassroots democracy are connected in the *Club 2.0* model.

Conclusions

Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is often portrayed by critics as too idealistic, idealising, Eurocentric, as well as anti-pluralistic. These critics fail to realise that Habermas's concept of the public sphere is, above all, an immanent concept of critique which allows to confront the prevalent state of society with its democratic possibilities.

In this chapter and many others, I have argued for an interpretation of Habermas based on Marx and Marx's theory of alienation. This distinguishes three forms of alienation that colonise and feudalise the public sphere: 1) economic alienation (commodification and class structuring), 2) political alienation (glorification), and 3) cultural alienation (ideologisation).

The critical theory of the public sphere is suitable as one of the foundations of a critical theory of the internet and social media, that is, of communicative action in the age of digital capitalism. A critical theory of the digital public sphere points out that the internet and social media do not constitute a democratic public sphere in digital capitalism. Humans are confronted with problems such as digital class relations, digital individualism, digital surveillance, digital authoritarianism, algorithmic politics, online filter bubbles, the digital culture industry, digital tabloids, influencer capitalism, digital acceleration, and online false/fake news in digital capitalism.

A critical theory of the digital public sphere should avoid digital defeatism and digital luddism. Digital technologies interact with society. Society's antagonisms are expressed in them. A digital public sphere is not just a democratisation of the internet but must go hand in hand with a reinforcement of democracy in the fields of economy, politics, and culture. There are already non-capitalist forms of economy today. In the field of media, public service media play an important role alongside progressive alternative media. This chapter has pointed out that the development of a public service internet is a democratic alternative to the capitalist internet and digital capitalism.

Right-wing and far-right forces have frequently attacked public broadcasting throughout the past years. In Switzerland, a referendum on the abolition of broadcasting fees was held in 2018 as a result of an initiative by the neoliberal party Jungfreisinnigen. In Austria, the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), when it was the governing party, wanted to replace broadcasting fees with tax funding for the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation (ORF), which would have caused it to lose its independence. In Britain, the right-wing government of Boris Johnson wants to decriminalise non-payment of licence fees, which could result in the end of the BBC. Johnson and his supporters have repeatedly criticised the BBC as being out of touch with the *interests of the people* and a manifestation of an urban liberal elite in London that has disregarded the majority will of the people after a Brexit. The Alternative for Germany's (AfD) media spokesperson Martin E. Renner formulates the same kind of criticism posed against the German TV channels ARD and ZDF as follows in an interview with Niemeyer (2018):

> The availability of information, broadcasts and programmes is in principle almost unlimited due to digitalisation. Conversely, everyone has the opportunity to freely disseminate information and opinions via social media or their own platforms. . . . By means of compulsory contributions guaranteed by the state, which add up to the unbelievable amount of around 8 billion euros per year, the state organises a market power in the media sector and thus interferes with competition and indirectly with the freedom of information. . . . In order to adapt the range of services offered by the existing public broadcasters to the wishes and needs of their users, all that is needed, therefore, is the complete abolition of compulsory licence fees. . . . Their intention is to casually re-educate people according to "political correctnes" which is defined by them. Currently it is all about propagating "diversity" and evoking a sense of love, peace, and harmony in a multicultural world.[9]

The AfD and other far-right actors make the case for a purely private, profit-oriented media system. The public democratic and educational mandate is dismissed as "political correctness". They want a private-sector, *völkisch* broadcasting, and a capitalist-*völkisch* internet, that is, an internet that is based on nationalist ideas.

These right-wing attacks on public service broadcasting have not yet succeeded. In the COVID crisis, public service media have reached a new heyday, as the population considers the public service combination of information, education, and entertainment to be immeasurable, especially in times of crisis. Before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic on 25 February 2020, the RTL soap opera *Gute Zeiten, schlechte Zeiten* was the most-watched TV programme among 14–49-year-olds in Germany with 1.5 million viewers and a market share of 20.2 percent (cf. DWDL, 2020a). On the 29th of March, the ARD Tagesschau (the most frequently watched news programme on German TV) reached viewing figures of 28.2 percent and a total of 3.2 million viewers among the same group (cf. 2020b). Among the total audience over three years of age, the Tagesschau even reached 11 million viewers and an audience share of 29.2 percent (cf. 2020b). Special broadcasts provided by the channels ARD and ZDF about the crisis were particularly popular. On the 25th of February, by comparison, just under 4.9 million people watched the news programme Tagesschau (cf. 2020a).

Independent, critical, non-commercial public service media are an embodiment of the democratic public sphere. A public service internet is a dimension of the democratisation of digitalisation.

Notes

1. Originally published in 1962.
2. Originally published in 1981, see Habermas, 1984, 1987 (English translations of the German original).
3. On the topicality of Marcuse's concept of technological rationality in digital capitalism, see Fuchs, 2019a.
4. For example, Jenkins, 2008. For a critique of this and similar approaches, see Fuchs 2017, Chapters 3, 5, and 8.
5. See Fuchs 2021, 2017, 2016.
6. See Fuchs, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2021.
7. For the Creative Commons licence, see https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/2.0/deed.de
8. Godwin, 1994.
9. Translated into English.

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