

NEW(S) PUBLICS IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Our discussion over the past chapters has documented that the second wave of citizen media has turned newssharing and news engagement via social media into a habitual practice for ordinary users, and has led to the establishment of a social media-supported ambient news network that enables serendipitous news discovery and transitions to focussed social news curation especially when acute breaking news events occur, or within dedicated longer-term networks of topic-focussed social news curators (cf. Lehmann *et al.* 2013: 864). We have also seen how individual journalists and their established and emerging news outlets have begun to respond to this changed environment, both by participating directly in the tertiary spaces of social media platforms and by introducing the liveblog as a particularly important new hybrid format that builds on social and alternative media content and practices but re-embeds them into the branded spaces of conventional news Websites. All of this has shown that the contemporary media ecology now supports an interplay between primary conventional news spaces, secondary alternative news and factual content spaces, and tertiary social media spaces serving as the intermediary channels that connect them; further, each of these spaces is itself subdivided into various sites, platforms, and channels, each with their own specific and idiosyncratic content formats, user populations, engagement

practices, and technological affordances. Given this complex, multi-layered, and highly dynamic environment, then, the question that we must address in the present chapter is whether and how such structures still enable the societal public debates that are widely regarded as a crucial prerequisite for functional democratic processes—and in particular, what role social media play in this context.

Unfortunately, discussions about the potential and actual role of social media in public debate are often foreshortened to a mere contest between utopian and dystopian perspectives: social (and more broadly, online) media are either glorified by their boosters as the solution to all the present problems that plague public debate, or condemned by their detractors as a chief source of those problems in the first place. But it is important to avoid such oversimplifications, even if current political contexts appear bleak: I write this in the year in which Britain voted to choose a path of slow self-destruction by exiting the European Union, and in which the United States elected Donald Trump on an explicitly neo-fascist platform, with social media platforms serving as instant scapegoats to explain the rise of the irrational and self-defeating voter behaviours that have become evident in these and other instances. The real picture is likely to be considerably more complex, however: neither are social media causing the fragmentation of societies into ‘red states’ and ‘blue states’, into ‘remainers’ and ‘leavers’, and nor are they a panacea that will fix the severe problems caused by the decline of the conventional news media as leading spaces for mainstream public debate.

Indeed, past years have revealed a number of contradictory tendencies in relation to the news. In most developed nations, the brands and imprints of the conventional news industry have declined considerably across most available metrics: their audience figures are shrinking, sometimes at alarming rates, as more news users turn to online and social media channels as their key (and sometimes primary) sources of news; for the most part, as we have seen, this is not simply a straight transition from offline to online formats within the same brand (e.g. from the BBC’s television news programmes to *BBC News Online*), but instead also a transition from comparatively routine, loyal readership and viewership towards a more serendipitous discovery of atomised news content, driven not least by word-of-mouth shares and recommendations in social media spaces. “Social recommendation is intensifying the trend towards the unbundling of editorial products” (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 822), so that “the platform itself on which the news is disseminated is becoming irrelevant to a certain degree” (Heinrich 2008: 13).

As a result, for many conventional news outlets subscription and advertising revenues have also declined precipitously, leading to cuts in staffing and reductions in quality and in turn affecting audience satisfaction with and trust in the news published by such outlets—which, in a vicious cycle, drives a further move of users away from these struggling outlets. At the same time, not least through newssharing in social media, audiences have never consumed a greater volume of news reports. Especially in language communities such as English or Spanish that span a very substantial number of countries, the ready availability of national and international news content online has further fuelled competitive pressures between these outlets; regional U.S. newspaper sites now compete with global U.K. brands such as *BBC News* or *The Guardian*, for instance.

It is therefore now difficult for conventional, mainstream media to still claim that they fulfil a role as providing a society-wide space for public debate within a unified national (or even international) public sphere. Rather, as Dahlgren puts it, the “impressive communicative heterogeneity” that the Internet has facilitated can also be seen to have resulted in considerable “fragmentation, with public spheres veering toward disparate islands of political communication”. At worst, he suggests, this could lead to the disintegration not only of ‘the’ public sphere, but even of society as such: “cyber ghettos threaten to undercut a shared public culture and the integrative societal function of the public sphere, and they may well even help foster intolerance where such communities have little contact with—or understanding of—one another” (Dahlgren 2005: 152).

The central concern here is that different communities, drawing on a tightly circumscribed set of sympathetic media sources, may develop their own ‘groupthink’ and establish clearly defined in-group identities, and look with disdain and animosity towards any other groups that do not share their ideals. Thus, as Friedman warned in 2002, in spite of the high hopes for the Internet as a tool for connection and networking, the “integration” of geographically dispersed individuals into such communities, “at this stage, is producing more anger than anything else” (2002: n.p.). Our discussion of news engagement patterns during the first wave of citizen media supports this perspective at least to some extent: the insular blogs and citizen journalism sites that dominated the alternative, second-tier news media landscape at the time served as rallying grounds for specific communities that were often defined by shared interests and worldviews, and in turn argued with their opponents in the mainstream media and in other alternative media sites in comment

threads and by publishing tit-for-tat blog posts; as Dahlgren has pointed out, such “online discussions do not always follow the high ideals set for deliberative democracy. Speech is not always so rational, tolerance toward those who hold opposing views is at times wanting, and the forms of interaction are not always so civil” (Dahlgren 2005: 156).

In line with this dystopian perspective, Keane has suggested that “although they typically have a networked, interconnected character, contemporary public spheres have a fractured quality which is not being overcome by some broader trend toward an integrated public sphere” (Keane 1995: 8). However, note that he writes this in 1995, and that Dahlgren’s similarly pessimistic perspective was stated in 2005: that is, before the widespread popular adoption of social media platforms such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*. More recent developments, some of which we have charted in this book, offer reasons to come to a somewhat more balanced assessment. Yes, in the current media ecology the news is atomised and covered by a range of outlets with differing levels of reliability:

social awareness streams unbundle a news story into its individual components. News is omnipresent in the form of unstructured data, coming in fragments of raw, unprocessed journalism from both professionals and the public. Contradictory reports, rumors, speculation, confirmation and verification circulate via social interaction in a compressed news cycle on Twitter. [However,] news and information is published, disseminated, confirmed or refuted in public through a process facilitated by social media. (Hermida 2012: 665)

and—through collective social news curation and/or with the help of social media curators in liveblogs and elsewhere—this process can be remarkably effective at debunking rumour, uncovering facts, amplifying important stories, and highlighting key eyewitnesses and other informative sources to be followed. “If this is true, rather than polarising the public sphere, [such] spaces may actually facilitate a broader range of information sharing and debate” (Wright 2012: 13).

Conventional news outlets still play an important role in this environment, and in particular the leading, most trusted news brands may not only do well here, but even attract new audiences. Focussing on the United Kingdom, for instance, Newman *et al.* report that

although newspaper circulation has fallen consistently and profit margins have plummeted, it is the websites of traditional print publishers and broadcasters that continue to dominate news online In fact, the strength of the national newspaper and

broadcaster brands in the UK, the competitiveness of the market, and the way they have embraced new media techniques like blogging has made it difficult for new players to emerge and capture a significant audience. (Newman *et al.* 2012: 10)

This is because the adoption of social media as a source of news by a growing number of users is not necessarily a zero-sum game (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 820): *Twitter* and *Facebook* may also point users in growing numbers towards the conventional news brands whose articles, however atomised and removed from their original contexts of publication, now circulate through social media channels. In this way, “social recommendation can benefit news organizations in extending their reach”, even if it also “further undermines established business models based on delivering large, aggregate audiences to advertisers” (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 821).

Yet it is also obvious that conventional, established news brands are facing increasing competition from new, born-digital outlets that range from major news operations to small citizen journalism outfits. “Citizen journalism is now an essential part of news gathering and delivery around the world. Indeed, we would be missing events both global and local without access to citizens willing to produce this content” (Wall 2015: 797), as we have seen throughout this book—but while this is a problem for the conventional news industry, in our present context it points simply to the fact that although traditional business models for producing news content may be in trouble, the news as such is not. As Revers puts it, “as means to publish thrive and public communication becomes participatory, news proliferates while professional journalists’ share of it dwindles” (Revers 2014: 809). We must not conflate the commercial difficulties facing the mainstream news industry with an inherent crisis of news and journalism as such, therefore.

But is such news from a much broader and more diverse range of sources—found through gatewatching, disseminated through newssharing, and organised through social news curation—a sufficient equivalent to the gatekept, edited, and published news of the mass media age? “Social sharing means that users bypass professional editors and instead receive news based on the recommendations of people they trust. However, there are unanswered questions as to whether networked audiences are exposed to news that is popular rather than important, and how far social recommendation limits exposure to a variety of news sources” (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 822). We can now state with some certainty that in aggregate, the news as circulated on social media is certainly more diverse and multiperspectival; it constitutes “an expansion in terms of

available communicative spaces for politics, as well as ideological breadth, compared to the mass media. Structurally, this pluralization not only extends but also disperses the relatively clustered public sphere of the mass media” (Dahlgren 2005: 152). Even the professional journalists interviewed by Parmelee accept this, with one of them stating that she sometimes sees “an angle or a viewpoint that you may not have thought about when you were reporting it. ... It’s that alternative view that I always like to include in as many stories as I can” (anonymous informant qtd. in Parmelee 2014: 443).

Social Media and Everyday Public Debate

The more important question, however, is whether individual social media users are also exposed to such overall source diversity—or whether their specific selections from the wide range of possible sources available to them in social media spaces continue to privilege only a handful of highly similar perspectives. This is a particularly heated debate at present, and we will return to it in more detail later in this chapter; for now, however, we might take some heart from observations that focus especially on indirect and involuntary exposure to news content through the newssharing activities of others in an individual social media user’s network. An *et al.* suggest that “there is a non-negligible amount of indirect media exposure, either through friends who follow particular media sources, or via retweeted messages. ... Indirect media exposure expands the political diversity of news to which users are exposed to a surprising extent, increasing the range by between 60 [and] 98%” (2011: 18); this means that “users receive information from six to ten times more media sources than from direct exposure alone” (19).

Even concerns about the emotional and sometimes angry nature of discussions and debates about news and politics in social media and related spaces should be relativised as we adopt this more balanced perspective. Any form of offensive, abusive, and threatening behaviour must be condemned here, of course—this is never justified, least of all when it is motivated by personal prejudices based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, or class. Merely emotional (yet non-offensive) forms of engagement with the news should not be similarly dismissed, however, even if in the “contemporary democratic theory of political participation, there is often a strong emphasis on rational deliberation as a normative ideal of how it should proceed”. As Dahlgren points out, an insistence on rationality “as the overall model of participatory

practices can become constrictive of expression and even excluding in terms of participation” (Dahlgren 2014: 193).

This is especially important because social media in their dual role as both personal and public means of communication and expression lend themselves particularly well to a more affective engagement with the news, producing what Papacharissi has termed “soft structures of feeling” (Papacharissi 2014: 116) that are nonetheless powerful facilitators of public debate and deliberation. The uses of social media for a wide range of idiosyncratic purposes, some of which may seem altogether unintelligible or at best banal to an inexperienced outside observer, should not fool us into thinking that such practices cannot also have an everyday political dimension: rather, “participation in broader social and cultural activities ... can always take a turn towards the political. What becomes decisive is not the particular terrain as such, but the character of the engagement: it always has to do in some way, however remote (or mediated), with power relations” (Dahlgren 2014: 193).

In such everyday engagement with the news, then, affect can be a force for good, leading us to participate more fully in the discussion and evaluation of the news, and thus in public debate and deliberation:

we respond affectively, we invest our emotion [in] these stories, and we contribute to developing narratives that emerge through our own affectively charged and digitally expressed endorsement, rejection, or views. Technologies network us but it is narratives that connect us to each other, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others. (Papacharissi 2014: 5)

Within social media, these narratives may be expressed, perpetuated, and critiqued using a repertoire of formats, styles, and registers of content and communication that departs markedly from the standardised and routinised templates used in conventional news coverage, but that is no less effective at telling the news story. The forms of expression included in this repertoire had been largely expunged from journalistic coverage by its (over)emphasis on rational debate; social media’s return to more affective modes, by contrast, “implies a shift in emphasis away from the rational and an acceptance (and valuing!) of broader forms of communication including emotions, humour, rhetoric and private (not just public) issues” (Wright 2012: 16).

This acceptance of the affective as part of news and political discussion does not suggest that all expressions of affect are to be unquestioningly welcomed. Papacharissi points out that the rationalist perspective “assumes that democracies are rationally based when, in fact, they are messy affairs that are

driven by aspirations of rationality, caught up in the daily *mise-en-scène* of ethos, pathos, and logos” (Papacharissi 2014: 26); this implies that it is this messy but healthy mixture of rationality and affect—neither coldly calculating nor heatedly emotional—that characterises constructive public deliberation. Even when we disagree with an opponent’s argument based on rational logic, the commitment to work towards a mutually acceptable consensus depends on an affective understanding of their concerns; even if affectively we dislike a particular course of action, we must remain open to persuasion on rational grounds. But as Papacharissi has also pointed out, “affect may ... dominate expression and distract from factuality, as is the case with the affective structures that support the growth of the Tea Party movement in the United States” (Papacharissi 2014: 120). Thus, if the affective understanding of the opponent is withdrawn, or if affect overwhelms our rational capacities, consensual public debate breaks down—and with it, in an extreme scenario that now, tragically, no longer feels so entirely impossible, may come the breakdown of democracy itself.

But again, the extremes of counterfactual emotionality and irrationality displayed by the ‘Tea Party’ and other movements should not lead us to dismiss the more balanced yet still partially affective forms of engagement with news and politics that are now readily observable as everyday practices in social media environments. Indeed, these questions are by no means limited to or inherently caused by the growing role of social media in society: populism—and its more extreme form, fascism—clearly predate the arrival of social media by decades if not centuries, after all, and have sometimes constituted a direct reaction to the primacy of rationality by those who, rightly or wrongly, have felt excluded by it. Rather, then, the more equitable balance between rational and affective elements in public debate that can be found in some (but not all) of the discursive spaces provided by social media could be seen as an important step towards modes of news engagement and political discussion that are more inclusive and thus better able to generate meaningful societal consensus.

As difficult as this may be to see in light of recent developments, therefore, in many developed nations current crises of politics and democracy may mask a broader underlying trend towards such consensus on a number of fronts; in spite of extremist arguments from both sides, for instance, opinion polls in many countries have consistently shown clear majority support for major initiatives such as the mitigation of anthropogenic climate change or the introduction of same-sex marriage. That such consensus has emerged in spite

of the agonistic coverage of ideological debates on these issues in the mainstream news media may point to the role of everyday low-level discussion of such issues in interpersonal networks, not least on social media; it should give us hope that overall, social media can help to moderate rather than inflame the ideological tensions expressed between different political camps. From this perspective, it is possible that “by making users feel connected to a community and increasing their knowledge of other members, [social media] can foster norms of reciprocity and trust and, therefore, create opportunities for civic and political engagement” (Gil de Zúñiga *et al.* 2012: 331). It is notable in this context that Dahlgren, whose pessimistic pre-social media perspectives we have already encountered above, has more recently revised his appraisal towards a more ambivalent view, at least: in 2014, he writes that “I am ... convinced that the new communication technologies do offer unprecedented possibilities for democratic (as well as undemocratic) intervention into the political arena” (2014: 192).

Social Media as Third Spaces in a Hybrid Media System

This picture of a complex interplay between existing and emerging communications platforms and spaces, between journalists, politicians, and the people formerly known as the audience, raises crucial questions about how we must now attempt to conceptualise the contemporary public sphere. As Poster pointed out as early as 1995,

for Habermas, the public sphere is a homogeneous space of embodied subjects in symmetrical relations, pursuing consensus through the critique of arguments and the presentation of validity claims. This model, I contend, is systematically denied in the arenas of electronic politics. We are advised then to abandon Habermas' concept of the public sphere in assessing the Internet as a political domain. (Poster 1995: n.p.)

Instead, Chadwick and others have described the emergence of a new, hybrid media system that “is built upon interactions among older and newer media logics—where logics are defined as bundles of technologies, genres, norms, behaviours, and organisational forms—in the reflexively connected social fields of media and politics” (Chadwick *et al.* 2016: 8): a system that is at present neither inherently failing nor flourishing, but still caught in a continuing process of emergence and evolution. As Chadwick *et al.* suggest, then, this hybrid

media system approach with its more “holistic” account of how information and communication platforms and processes intersect with politics shows how “older’ and ‘newer’ media” interconnect and interact (2016: 8), and, importantly, takes a view of these relationships as changeable and dynamic rather than fixed and static.

In this new, hybrid environment, the issue selection and framing power of journalists and news organisations is necessarily reduced; they no longer serve as the dominant institutions of the mediated public sphere. Indeed, even more broadly “the collapse of gatekeeping represents a direct attack on the elites—journalists, policy experts, public officials, academics, and the like—who have served as the arbiters of social and political meaning” (Williams and Delli Carpini 2000: 67); instead, such social and political meaning—and the news stories that serve as the raw materials from which it is built—are now returned to a more explicitly socially constructed state, and are therefore considerably more open to public challenge and reinterpretation. The discussions and debates through which such questioning occurs, in turn, take place in more or less public form in those spaces that enable broad engagement by ordinary citizens alongside conventional news workers and news makers—chiefly, therefore, in the tertiary spaces provided by social media.

Understood in this way, the tertiary news engagement spaces provided by social media, which connect the primary and secondary spaces respectively operated by mainstream and alternative journalism organisations and introduce a network logic into the interactions between these different nodes, also appear closely related to Ray Oldenburg’s concept of the ‘third place’, as Wright *et al.* explain: “a third place, for Oldenburg, is a public space beyond the home or workplace where people can meet and interact informally. As the name suggests, they are place based spaces; the common denominator is the location of the participants and that community can thrive” (2016: 79). Much like some of the tertiary spaces of social media, Oldenburg’s third places offer a neutral ground for engagement, discussion, and debate between diverse stakeholders as equals, irrespective of their social status and societal roles; similarly, too, although neutral with respect to the interactions between participants taking place in them these third places could nonetheless be proprietary and policed environments—Oldenburg uses the neighbourhood pub with its community of regulars as one example for such a third place.

Indeed, it is the existence of such community—and of the regular and structured interactions between individuals that the term implies—that turns an ordinary place into a third place matching Oldenburg’s definition. In many

other places, “there is no lively conversation ..., no suspension of the usual and typical, no joy of association. The ‘ingredients’ of third place are simply not there” (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982: 269). Arguably, the same is true also of the specific spaces available in social media platforms: not all of these spaces exhibit the same traits of engagement and community, for instance. For instance, the *Facebook* page operated by a news outlet may be heavily moderated and therefore fail to offer an opportunity for meaningful discussion, while its articles may be discussed vigorously and constructively elsewhere on *Facebook*; the generic hashtags promoted by a news organisation in its news updates may fail to attract a group of followers that is able to engage in effective social news curation, while the more specific topical hashtags used in re-sharing the same articles may introduce the same content into long-standing discursive publics on *Twitter*.

If Oldenburg’s concept of third places—necessarily conceived in the 1970s and 1980s as describing distinct *physical* locations where participants gather habitually, and where “political talk emerges ... through everyday conversation” (Wright *et al.* 2016: 80)—can be translated as third *spaces* to the non-physical environments of social media, then, they are likely again to privilege spaces that emerge organically, from the ground up, as gathering points for a group of social media habitués, rather than being artificially created by news organisations as they seek to stake out a space (a *Facebook* page, a *Twitter* hashtag, a liveblog) that is dedicated exclusively to their own news products. “Third places exist outside the home and beyond the ‘work lots’ of modern economic production. They are places where people gather *primarily* to enjoy each other’s company” (Oldenburg and Brissett 1982: 269); third spaces, in social media, are similarly likely to be found where ordinary and not-so-ordinary social media users are forming networks of connection and regular engagement, developing longer-term social structures.

It is important to note here that such third spaces are most likely to emerge at the level of longer-term networks within social media: in the overlapping personal publics of regularly interacting friends gathered around each *Facebook* account, and in the densely interconnected clusters of mutual *Twitter* followers that emerge around shared interests and identities. These meet some of the requirements for online third spaces that Wright has established: they are “online discussion spaces with a primarily non-political focus, but where political talk emerges within conversations” (Wright 2012: 8); as we have already seen, in these networks between users an attention to news and politics may not be the dominant theme, but content relevant to these topics

is present through the habitual newssharing activities of everyday users, and will occasionally emerge to greater prominence. “However, such content cannot dominate the space” (Wright 2012: 12): Oldenburg’s third places as well as Wright’s third spaces are not primarily political environments; “people do not visit them to discuss politics and in this sense it can be hypothesised that they will be politically inclusive spaces” (Wright 2012: 12–13).

In considering the role of social media as third spaces—and indeed in the discussion of the emergent public sphere structures throughout this chapter—we must therefore move beyond a treatment of social media merely as social media (and similarly of mainstream media simply as mainstream media), which would imply that these media forms are internally undifferentiated. Rather, just as there are many different outlets, operational philosophies, formats, and practices in the mainstream news media, there is also a variety of “constellations of public, private, and potentially third spaces within social media. Put simply, the question is not whether social media platforms represent a third space, but whether there are specific areas (pages, profiles, and hashtags) that constitute a third space” (Wright *et al.* 2016: 81). At the same time, we must also understand that during the course of their everyday engagement with social media, users will move through a variety of such spaces on multiple social media platforms, and must therefore “study the interactions on *and* between these platforms in hybrid forms” (82).

Beyond ‘the’ Public Sphere

This, then, necessarily also addresses the question of what shape we must understand the public sphere to take, given the context of the contemporary media ecology. Jürgen Habermas’s concept of the public sphere, first outlined comprehensively more than 50 years ago in his book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (1962), retains a significant amount of influence over conceptualisations of public communication and deliberation processes, in online as well as offline contexts. Key to Habermas’s model is the *Strukturwandel*, or structural transformation, which the rational-critical public sphere of eighteenth-century civic societies and coffeehouses underwent as it became the mediated public sphere of the early and mid-twentieth century. In the process, the opportunities for *direct* participation by the general public in political and societal deliberation diminished, while new civic, state, and commercial institutions emerged to represent diverse societal groups in *mediated* public debate.

Influenced in no small way by the communicative environment of his time, Habermas's vision of this "virtual stage of mediated communication" (2006: 415) upon which the debates of the day are enacted by players representing the key societal groups and institutions presupposes the willing participation of socially and societally responsible media organisations, a strong public broadcasting sector, and a politically interested, rationally deliberating public if this system of interactions and interdependencies is to function as a public sphere. Crucially, the modern public sphere as Habermas describes it represents a structural model best suited to the age of strong mass media institutions (print, radio, television): to a media ecology in which societal debate will mainly consist of "mediated political communication ... carried [out] by an elite" (Habermas 2006: 416).

Like his description of the critical public sphere of the pre-mass media age, this then-contemporary mediated public sphere can be seen as an "explicitly *idealist* concept" (Webster 2013: 25), which at a high level of abstraction must necessarily fail to capture the full nuances of public communication. A growing number of scholars have suggested that the idea of "the' public sphere is a convenient fantasy" (Hartley and Green 2006: 346–47), idealising what is really a far more complex space of information flows, and a re-evaluation of Habermas's model under present-day conditions therefore seems appropriate. As Keane puts it, "the ideal of a unified public sphere and its corresponding vision of a territorially bounded republic of citizens striving to live up to their definition of the public good are obsolete" (Keane 1995: 8).

Even more importantly, however, the very idea of *Strukturwandel* which leads from the critical public sphere of the coffeehouses to the mediatised public sphere of mass media also implies that such structural transformation might continue *beyond* that point, towards yet another reconfiguration of public communication. The substantial institutional, economic, social, and technological changes which have been associated with the mass adoption especially of Internet and mobile media forms since the final decades of the twentieth century—that is, since Hallin's period of "high modernism" in the historical evolution of journalism (1992: 16)—provide a strong argument that such further structural transformation has by now taken place. What remains to be seen, however, is whether this transformation may be able to be accommodated in further adjustments to the Habermasian concept of the public sphere, or whether we are indeed "reaching a time when we need ... to consider abandoning the concept" (Webster 2013: 25) because the continued revision of public sphere theory in response to changing communicative

dynamics has moved the term well beyond its intended meaning. A more dynamic and multifaceted vision of public communication than that provided by Habermas's 'public sphere' in its orthodox interpretation may be required to understand the contemporary post-mass media environment; as a result of this, "the conventional notion of a single, unified public sphere is likely to disappear in favour of a more segmented, pluralist model" (Boeder 2005: n.p.).

The idea of a unified, national mediatised public sphere must be contextualised to its time and space. In 1960s Germany, where public service television's prime-time news bulletin *Tagesschau* would regularly attract more than 50% of the total television audience (Launer 1981: 288) and where leading newspapers would similarly receive substantial nationwide circulation, it was possible to envisage these media spaces as the backbone of a truly universal, all-encompassing public sphere. However, the growing commercialisation, diversification, and subsequently also digitisation of the mass media, as well as the rise of an increasing number of commercial, public service, and community-driven niche media spaces have inevitably led to a gradual fragmentation of this central public sphere into a succession of ever more diverse publics which may or may not overlap with each other. Especially online it has become evident "that beyond the mass-mediated public sphere there have already been 'small', specialised publics that were created by media with limited reach" and take the form of "spontaneously emerging encounter publics" gathering around issues of shared interest and concern (Neuberger *et al.* 2010: 14; my translation). Habermas himself recognised this in a 2006 update to public sphere theory, which acknowledges that public "attitudes are influenced by everyday talk in the informal settings or episodic publics of everyday society at least as much as they are by paying attention to print or electronic media" (2006: 416).

This gradual recognition of individual *publics*, operating under their own rules and conditions, alongside what remains of 'the' public sphere opens the door to a more comprehensive reconsideration of the model of a mass-mediated public sphere. A number of major alternative perspectives have been proposed in recent years. First, some approaches seek to distinguish a subset of 'the' public sphere by highlighting the technological means of communication upon which that subset is built. From this perspective, it becomes possible to speak of print or television public spheres, as well as of the "networked public sphere" of Internet-based communication platforms (Benkler 2006: 177). The prominent role of the Internet as a backbone for traditionally separate media forms and formats—as a delivery mechanism for streamed

television content or as a space for the publication of online newspapers, for instance—makes this distinction difficult to maintain in practice, however: with the continuing digitisation of traditionally non-digital media forms, the networked public sphere is in danger of coming to encompass almost all of ‘the’ public sphere in its conventional definition once again.

A more promising approach to distinguishing specific configurations of public communication within the public sphere as such is to highlight not their technological underpinnings, but their domain focus. A distinction of specific formations including the “political public sphere” (Dahlgren 2009; Webster 2013) or the “cultural public sphere” (Hartley and Green 2006) recognises that such domain sectors are never limited only to one media channel or communication technology, but operate across broadcast, print, online publishing and social media platforms. The contemporary political public sphere, for example, would encompass politically relevant content as it is exchanged through conventional mass media, online, mobile and social media, and face-to-face communication; specific messages within it are likely to transition through various channels over time as television news content is commented upon in newspapers, whose articles are shared via social media and become topics for watercooler conversations in the office. From this perspective, then, what used to be idealised as a unified, mass-mediated public sphere “thus can be seen as comprised of a vast array of interactional constellations, some relatively more permanent, others more fleeting” (Dahlgren 2009: 74). Necessarily, there are definitional challenges here, too—what constitutes ‘political’ communication, for example, is itself difficult to delimit—, but the existence of fuzzy boundaries for these constructs does not in itself negate the existence of such domain-specific public spheres.

A further variation on and extension of this model recognises a subset of “public sphericules” or, more properly, spherules (Gitlin 1998; Cunningham 2001; Bruns 2008), centring around more narrowly defined themes, beyond these broad domain-based public spheres. As part of the overall political public sphere, a public spherule might focus only on a specific area of policy, for example; this implies a further specialisation of participants and therefore a substantially smaller subset even of the superior domain-based public sphere which is itself already a subset of ‘the’ public sphere. Public spherules, therefore, can be seen as “social fragments that do not have critical mass [but] share many of the characteristics of the classically conceived public sphere” (Cunningham 2001: 134–35)—indeed, their smaller size and better thematic focus

may enable more effective processes of public debate and deliberation than is possible within more generic, multifaceted domain-based public spheres.

The concept of public spherules, in turn, is closely aligned with the idea of “issue publics”, a concept introduced by Habermas himself (e.g. 2006: 422). One way to distinguish such issue publics from public spherules is to think of them as even more specific formations of public communication and debate: beyond domain-based public spheres, and beyond public spherules that focus on specific themes within these spheres, issue publics centre around individual topics associated with those themes. This would also imply that such issue publics are more changeable and potentially short-lived than these larger formations of which they are subsets: what results is “a more dynamic picture of specific issue-publics, that emerge, exist for varying durations, and then eventually dissolve” (Dahlgren 2009: 74).

While the concepts introduced so far have been centred on themes, topics, and issues in public debate, however, the growth in what Castells has defined as “mass self-publication” (2007) since the turn of the millennium—especially following the emergence of the current generation of social media platforms—offers yet further alternatives for identifying quasi-public spaces within the overall public sphere. These spaces, however, are defined not by their overarching theme but by their organisation around central individuals as what Schmidt (2009, 2014) has described as “personal publics”. In social media spaces this results in a series of overlapping publics that are each defined by and centred around a pivotal account through which the user is able to communicate with a more or less vaguely understood public of ‘friends’ or ‘followers’. Each user’s circle of social media contacts is different to some extent from those of their followers, yet often they also overlap to a considerable degree, so that in combination a larger shared, networked public is constituted from these individual personal publics. However, personal publics extend beyond any one platform or medium, of course; to fully understand their reach we must also consider the central individual’s circles of connections as they exist in other online as well as offline spaces. In combination, these form the individual’s complete personal public.

Highlighting especially the role of social media in this process, Papacharissi (2010) similarly describes an emerging “private sphere” and suggests that the liminal, transitional, negotiated, “privately public” activity taking place here is empowering by providing a more controllable, less risky form of participation in public communication than fully *public* activity: “operating from a civically *privé* environment, the citizen enters the public spectrum by nego-

tiating aspects of his/her privacy as necessary, depending on the urgency and relevance of particular situations” (2010: 132). This, then, signals a further challenge to the concept of the *public* sphere in a communicative environment where the line between public and private communication is increasingly harder to determine. Social media users’ actions in engaging, privately public, with the network of contacts contained in their personal public may not be intended to be visible to others who are not—the term seems appropriate in this context—privity to this circle of friends, yet the technological basis of leading social media platforms provides the potential for such ‘personal’ communication to be distributed well beyond its initially intended circle of recipients. The same is true in different ways for other forms of personal communication—from face-to-face chat to email exchanges—even if transgressions against the written or unwritten rules of privacy tend to be policed more closely in such contexts.

Personal and even private communication can make its contribution to the public sphere, therefore, and communication within many personal publics in social media spaces almost certainly does. Thus, “the unitary character of the public sphere is transforming into an amalgam of different ‘sub’-spheres: The distinction between public and private spheres is blurring” (Boeder 2005: n.p.). Indeed, Habermas himself notes the importance of such communication at the outer edges of ‘the’ public sphere (in its narrow definition) as a constituent element of public debate and deliberation: in his view, “the public sphere is rooted in networks for the wild flows of messages—news, reports, commentaries, talks, scenes and images” (2006: 415).

Towards Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers?

The explosion of the idealised, unified, and seemingly stable mass-mediated public sphere of Habermas’s original conception into an abundance of intersecting, overlapping domain-based public spheres, thematic public spherules, topical issue publics, and networked personal publics appears to signal an irreversible breakup of ‘the’ public sphere into individual fragments. Several scholars have taken this as a sign that we are entering a dystopian era where society is fragmenting into a series of diverse “filter bubbles” (Pariser 2012) and “echo chambers” (Sunstein 2009) that are each subject to their own internal ‘groupthink’, and no longer find the common communicative ground to sustain broader public debate and deliberation. In many well-established democ-

racies, the recent rise of neo-fascist and related extremist groups that appear resistant to the widely circulated facts and arguments debunking their views has been seen as confirming these perspectives, and online and social media usually receive a substantial share of the blame. As Friedman put it as early as 2002, “just when you might have thought you were all alone with your extreme views, the Internet puts you together with a community of people from around the world who hate all the things and people you do” (2002: n.p.).

From this perspective, social media enable interested users both to connect with ideologically aligned fellow travellers to the exclusion of all others—establishing networks that are characterised by a high degree of homophily between individual members—, and thereby to avoid exposure to any mainstream and alternative news content that would challenge their political worldviews. This serves to reinforce and amplify their political perspectives:

an echo chamber is created when individuals seek to find information and sources that support their viewpoints and filter out countervailing information. As they find added support for their views repeated online via such mechanisms as emails, blog posts, retweets, social media posts or links, possibly in a more extreme form, they become even more set in their views and less likely to seek countervailing opinions. The fear is that people tend to read others who share their political opinions, and without the mass media’s diversity and explicit attempt at balance, selective exposure will produce more set and extreme opinions. (Newman *et al.* 2012: 7)

And yet those same online and social media that are being seen as harbingers of the fragmentation of society have also enabled the networking of broad coalitions that seek to counteract such extremism, and are responsible for engendering a greater level of news circulation and consumption than has perhaps been observed ever before in human history. Thus, it appears that “if the dispersion of public spheres generally is contributing to the already destabilized political communication system, specific counter public spheres on the Internet are also allowing engaged citizens to play a role in the development of new democratic politics” (Dahlgren 2005: 160). In reality, what we are witnessing today is therefore most likely the comprehensive structural *transformation* of an established system of mediated democratic participation, rather than simply the wholesale *destruction* of democracy itself, and we would do well not to adopt the rhetoric of filter bubbles and echo chambers without considering the empirical evidence before us. As Wright points out, “there is a danger that the cyber-polarisation literature a) adopts an idealised, golden-age view of what existed before the advent of the Internet and b) applies an

outdated understanding of how people consume news and talk politics online” (2012: 13). Proponents of the ‘filter bubble’ theory, often worried about the post-factual nature of social media-supported politics, must ensure that their own hypothesis does not itself become resistant to the facts that challenge it.

As we have seen throughout this book, after all, user engagement with the news is in robust health—especially in the interactive spaces provided by social media. “Once passive, users now filter news and discuss what media publish. Moreover, they propagate interesting stories further into the social network at unprecedented scale and frequency” (An *et al.* 2011: 18). It is of course possible in principle that all of these habitual acts of newsharing are directed only at like-minded others within these users’ personal publics—even though, as we have seen in Chapter 4, there is considerable uncertainty amongst users about the actual audience that they address when they post their content (Litt and Hargittai 2016). But in reality it is much more likely that such shared news reaches a much more diverse and random range of recipients—and it is this more probabilistic dissemination that makes the serendipitous news discovery we have already observed possible in the first place. The 2015 *Digital News Report’s* nationally representative surveys across a dozen countries support this view:

the growth of search and social media as gateways to news has ... raised concerns over the potential for online ‘filter bubbles’, but our research suggests that they may help audiences find more diverse forms of news. Three-quarters of social media users (76%) and search users (73%) said they sometimes or frequently accessed different sources—leading them to brands they would not otherwise use. (Newman *et al.* 2015: 16)

Even in the context of the 2016 U.S. presidential election—which has been widely regarded as one of the most polarised such votes in recent memory, has revealed a deeply divided nation, and has therefore also fuelled a new round of discussion about the apparent echo chambers that exist around committed Republican and Democrat voters—there appears to be remarkably little evidence for the existence of such solipsistic partisan spaces beyond the extreme fringes of partisan politics. A nationally representative Pew Research Center study released just weeks before election day shows that the majority of social media users in the United States are frustrated with and “worn out” by the tone and volume of the political content they encounter on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, but importantly such frustrations result from the very fact that they *do* encounter substantial amounts of material that challenges their own worldviews

(Duggan and Smith 2016: 2). Similarly, “27% have blocked or unfriended someone” from their network because they posted offensive political content (4)—but the fact that they are encountering such content also implies that their social network and personal public was heterophilous to begin with:

for many users, friend networks that encompass a range of political beliefs are the norm. Roughly half of Facebook users (53%) and more than one-third of Twitter users (39%) say that there is a mix of political views among the people in their networks. And an additional 5% of Facebook users and 6% of Twitter users indicate that most of the people they associate with in these spaces hold different political beliefs from their own. (Duggan and Smith 2016: 9)

(In addition, another 19% of *Facebook* users and 37% of *Twitter* users say they are fundamentally unsure about their connections’ political views.) The report also casts doubt on claims that social media activities may lead to a hardening of political viewpoints as they are reinforced and amplified by consistent exposure to groupthink: while this may be true for the most ideological of activists and extremists, “roughly one-in-five social media users have changed their minds about a political candidate, or a social issue, because of material they encountered on social media” (Duggan and Smith 2016: 10).

If these patterns can be readily observed even in the United States, whose political system has been thoroughly dysfunctional for some years, and in the context of as belligerent an election as that of 2016, then this alone should be sufficient reason to treat the emphatic pronouncements that have been made about social media’s filter bubbles and echo chambers with extreme caution. As Wright has pointed out, much of the material on these matters originates from the United States—whose often absurdly reductionist ‘red vs. blue’ partisanship thankfully does not translate well to most other established democracies—and tends to address only the most extreme cases of polarisation: unfortunately, “the theoretical and empirical cyber-polarisation literature focuses on explicitly political discussion spaces” (2012: 12). Yet as we have seen, the Habermasian ‘wild flows of messages’ that occur (not least through habitual gatewatching and newssharing) in everyday social media practice within the diverse personal publics of ordinary users, and that account for the vast majority of social media activity in any given society, do not take place in such extreme (and sometimes extremist) discussion spaces, and levels of political polarisation, ideological filtering, and homophilous networking are therefore likely to be considerably lower. In such more ordinary, quotidian public communication. In describing these outer edges of the public sphere as a match-

ing private sphere, Papacharissi suggests that “social network sites expand the number and range of individuals who may enter the privately public space of the private sphere” (2010: 140), therefore.

In these everyday spaces of newssharing, where personal networks are crucial in facilitation news and political discussion, “hierarchical relationships between mass media consumers and producers of media content are being further unravelled. Social networking sites represent an evolution of the public sphere, where the dynamics of publication and distribution of news are being reshaped by networked publics” (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 816). Fears of societal fragmentation as a result of the rise of social media may therefore be countered by an observation of the very interrelatedness and interdependence of these networked public formations at their various scales of duration and size. As Habermas notes, as “a larger number of people tend to take an interest in a larger number of issues, the overlap of issue publics may even serve to counter trends of fragmentation” (2006: 422)—individual issue publics may intersect with each other as well as with their overarching domain-based public spheres and thematic public spherules, while the less topically focussed personal publics could be seen as providing the glue which connects different thematic areas if the individual at the centre of the personal public engages, visible to their personal network, in multiple such areas. The lower barriers to entry into the semi-private spaces of personal publics especially on social media platforms, compared to participation in public debates in a more conventional sense, might then even serve to once again extend the contributor base of ‘the’ public sphere, following its temporary constricture when the mass-mediated public sphere of the mid-twentieth century replaced the critical civic public sphere of earlier times. In this way, the Internet “creates the technical preconditions for an *integrated public sphere* that combines different levels of publics in one medium” (Neuberger *et al.* 2010: 14; my translation).

This forcefully contradicts the ‘filter bubble’ and ‘echo chamber’ thesis, and it is therefore important to further examine the emerging structures of interconnection and overlap between the various forms of publics that may now be readily observed in online and social media (and that in doing so also serve as pointers to less immediately observable offline publics). “As modern society’s dominating structure, networks are quintessential to the future of the public sphere” (Boeder 2005: n.p.); we should therefore understand the totality of these publics—with their vastly divergent spatial and temporal dimensions and dynamics—as a network of discursive spaces that collectively constitute (or, from a different point of view, have replaced) ‘the’ public sphere. Impor-

tantly, of course, both by having their materials shared by the participants in such networks, and by actively participating themselves, the representatives of the conventional, mass-mediated public sphere also remain part of these networks, but no longer serve as an especially privileged elite; instead, “the ability the Internet affords individuals to network within and beyond various institutional arenas in ways that can enhance and reinforce the ‘communicative power’ of ‘networked individuals’ is key” (Dutton 2007: 6), as it enables the establishment and communicative activities of a diverse range of publics.

Understanding Social Media Publics

Hinting at the idea of issue and even personal publics, Habermas writes in 1974 that “a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (1974: 49). But how do we understand such publics—indeed, “what is a public? It is a curiously obscure question, considering that few things have been more important in the development of modernity. Publics have become an essential fact of the social landscape, and yet it would tax our understanding to say exactly what they are” (Warner 2002: 49).

First, as Warner points out, “people do not always distinguish between *the* public and *a* public, although in some contexts this difference can matter a great deal” (Warner 2002: 49). Our following discussion focusses squarely on the latter concept—reflecting the idea that there are a broad range of distinct publics of varying shapes, sizes, and durations, which only in combination and with considerable abstraction from actual day-to-day communicative practice add up to what could be understood as *the* public, or ‘the’ public sphere. A public, by contrast, represents a considerably more tangible formation:

a concrete audience, a crowd witnessing itself in visible space, as with a theatrical public. Such a public also has a sense of totality, bounded by the event or by the shared physical space. A performer on stage knows where her public is, how big it is, where its boundaries are, and what the time of its common existence is. A crowd at a sports event, a concert, or a riot might be a bit blurrier around the edges, but still knows itself by knowing where and when it is assembled in common visibility and common action. (Warner 2002: 50)

Although Warner’s examples here are of physically co-present publics, several decades of research into computer-mediated communication practices have shown that a similar sense of self-witnessing, or conscious co-presence, and of

bounded commonality is also typical for various forms of public online community: today, in particular, “social networking sites provide environments where people can gather publicly through mediating technology” (Hermida *et al.* 2012: 816). In such technologically mediated, physically dispersed contexts a further aspect described by Warner gains particular prominence, in fact: “the kind of public that comes into being only in relation to texts and their circulation—like the public of this essay” (Warner 2002: 50). The publics of social media necessarily emerge in this way: they are constituted around information and communication feeds addressing shared events, topics, interests, and identities. Such publics, then, “exist only when they are addressed as such, that is, ... publics are temporally and discursively constituted by constant attention [to] and circulation of discourse about specific issues” (Lury 2012: 193).

Indeed, it is this continuing attention and engagement, as well as the heightened sense of co-presence (even if ‘only’ in non-physical form), that distinguishes such publics from mere audiences for individual texts:

no single text can create a public. Nor can a single voice, a single genre, or even a single medium. All are insufficient to create the kind of reflexivity that we call a public, since a public is understood to be an ongoing space of encounter for discourse. It is not texts themselves that create publics, but the concatenation of texts through time. Only when a previously existing discourse can be supposed, and a responding discourse be postulated, can a text address a public. (Warner 2002: 62)

Such processes can take place in many mediated forms, as well as in direct interpersonal interaction; social media, however, facilitate them especially effectively. Indeed, a number of the affordances of social media—from standard *Facebook* comment threads to the user-initiated groups addressing a vast range of topics, and from @reply discussions on *Twitter* to the user innovation of hashtags as a means of constituting a discursive public *ad hoc*, immediately—seem explicitly designed to support the formation of publics around the circulation over time of a stream of shared texts.

Thus, “if it is the act of information sharing that presences actors, then this act can be read as an act of agency and we can begin to understand networked publics as publics defined by the sharing of information” (Papacharissi 2014: 126)—as Papacharissi further puts it, in a social media context publics “discursively materialize through the organizational logic of online platforms” (Papacharissi 2014: 126). Depending on the specific platforms used, but also on the internal requirements of particular publics, then, such publics

may work to very different rhythms and at very different scales: small interest groups comprising a handful of members may generate only a few posts per week, while large collectives of social news curators may form within minutes around the hashtags addressing major breaking news developments; regular online meet-ups may impose a certain periodicity on the circulation and discussion of content, while developments in the world outside of social media may generate a more reactive ebbing and flowing of engagement. “Not all circulation happens at the same rate, ... and this accounts for the dramatic differences among publics in their relation to possible scenes of activity. A public can only act within the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence” (Warner 2002: 68).

The sharing and discussion of news content is clearly central to many such publics, especially in social media spaces. In the first place, as Chapter 3 has demonstrated, many of the most active and visible publics are fundamentally brought into being by breaking news stories—as acute events unfold, a range of discursive formations including one or multiple *Twitter* hashtags, *Facebook* pages and groups, and liveblogs will almost certainly emerge in rapid progression, and many of these will continue to track these events through to their eventual conclusion. Gatewatching, newssharing, and news curation are self-evidently crucial to these publics, whose very purpose it is to track and evaluate the news about these acute events as it comes to hand. Further, such individual publics do not exist in isolation from each other, of course: they often share participants, who facilitate the circulation of information and commentary not only within, but also *across* these publics (which may also mean across platforms) by reposting and crossposting content. Engagement by journalists, experts, and other authorities also means that these social media publics are connected with online and offline institutional and media spaces and thereby influence and are influenced by a variety of other discussions on the same events. And finally, many of these spaces are inherently permeable to casual users who are not attentive enough to unfolding events and discussion to be considered full members of these publics, but who nonetheless help to disseminate some of the public’s texts further through their own networks, within and beyond the spaces of social media.

In addition to such explicitly event-related publics, it has long been recognised that “the Internet is a perfect playing field for communities of interest, in that the new web-based communication tools allow for coordination and collaboration independently of location” (Dolata and Schrape 2016: 8). The publics encompassing such communities have generally tended to emerge

more autochthonously, driven by their own internal dynamics rather than by external factors, and they continue to pay attention to their core topics even when they are not subject to major media attention at the moment. Gatewatching, newssharing, and news curation are crucial here, too—indeed, these communities can be understood as dedicated social news curation communities on specialist topics from infrastructure policy to model railroading and beyond. Their often more measured pace and longer timeframes of existence also provide them with an opportunity for more complex structuration:

communities of interest and social movements have three main features that distinguish them from volatile non-organized collectives and that raise them into the ranks of empowered collective actors: (1) institutionalization dynamics, which allow for, structure and stabilize collective action on the basis of their own, primarily informal, rules, norms and organizational patterns; (2) the building of a collective identity that orients the group's vision and actions and that defines its activities to the outside; (3) internal differentiation processes that, over time, spawn the emergence of organizing cores and opinion-leading activists, alongside their respective networks and support bases. (Dolata and Schrape 2016: 9)

We should not assume that theme-specific publics are necessarily internally homogenous, therefore: “even like-minded people who belong in the same groups will have varied opinions and perspectives such that within-group discussions can lead to debate and a diversity of views” (Yardi and boyd 2010: 326).

In addition to these event-driven and theme-specific publics, finally, a third important type of public also exists. For instance, “while the Twittersphere itself is open-ended, the way people experience it is individually structured. The content of a user's ‘window’ into the Twittersphere is based on tweets from accounts the user chooses to follow, and is thus bound to the individual networks he/she chooses to maintain” (Ausserhofer and Maireder 2013: 293), and that network can similarly be understood as a public; it is a public defined not by immediate temporal dynamics or by distinct shared interests (other than in the very broad sense in which our various personal interests also contribute to the persona we portray to others, and which might make those others want to connect with us), but by interpersonal connections. Such personal publics, then, represent “a new kind of publicness which consists of information selected and presented according to personal relevance, shared with an (intended) audience of articulated social ties in a conversational mode” (Schmidt 2014: 11). These ties may be motivated variously by familial and friendship connections, professional relationships,

shared geographic location, political orientation, or fandom, amongst many other factors, and personal publics are therefore likely to exhibit considerable degrees of heterophily; thus, “while people might have similarity in background, it is more likely that [users] will inadvertently ... come across people with divergent political views as social boundaries appear to be weakened online” (Wright *et al.* 2016: 83).

News content plays a role in these personal publics insofar as gatewatching, newssharing, and news curation have become habitual for ordinary social media users engaging in their everyday practices, outside any participation in event-driven or theme-specific publics. Even when they do not seek to intentionally contribute to those publics, many social media users now share news and other content that they feel may be of interest to their imagined audience of followers, as we have seen in Chapter 4; such activities are significant in their own right within the immediate personal public surrounding the central account, but might also generate greater effects as the news being shared is passed on horizontally from one personal public to another. These, then, may in aggregate add up to much more visible and meaningful consequences than each of the individual acts of sharing and engagement within a specific personal public would have been able to achieve; “in many individual cases ... it has by now become evident that in digitally networked environments thematic careers rapidly develop from individual acts of articulation, transporting a position expressed in a supposedly ‘minor’ conversation into a wider context” (Katzenbach 2016: 15; my translation).

Individually and in their interplay with each other, these three key forms of social media publics—event publics, thematic publics, and personal publics—demonstrate the transformative power of social media. As Dahlgren points out, “publics, according to Habermas and Dewey, exist as discursive interactional processes; atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes, do not comprise a public” (Dahlgren 2005: 149). Social media, by providing the means for individuals to form networks of personal publics and to engage in event-driven and theme-specific publics, offer a means for news consumers to reconnect and form networks of interaction that can exert considerable influence on other forms of public debate. Their collective activity can help selected information and topics ‘go viral’, forcing a response from mainstream news media and other societal actors and thereby influencing the further news agenda, or provide an important counterpoint to the interpretation and framing preferred by other commentators, challenging them to justify their views. As Heinrich puts it, therefore, “within [the] evolving global news sphere, in-

formation flows are in fact multidirectional. A ‘network’ character of communication is taking shape based on a ‘network’ structure of journalism in which decentralization and nonlinearity are the key parameters defining news flows at the beginning of the twenty-first century” (2008: 2). Following Keane’s description of the disruptions caused by earlier online media, we might therefore understand social media’s publics, too, as “laboratories ... in which the elements of everyday life are mixed, remixed, developed, and tested” (Keane 1995: 10)—and news updates and stories continue to constitute one crucial such element.

Studying the Interplay of Publics

Overall, thus, “publics on Twitter are ... to be understood as complex communicative constellations whose structures appear different depending on the observer’s perspective” (Maireder and Schlögl 2015: 136; my translation), and the same is true for other forms of offline and online publics. Within the spaces of social media, for instance, we may participate centrally in *Twitter* hashtags and *Facebook* pages, and thereby come to experience these as stratified groups of users interacting according to well-established if unspoken communal rules and values; or we may encounter them only casually and serendipitously, experiencing only a fraction of the rich networks of interpersonal connections, power relations, and information flows that occur within them. These differing levels of engagement with the many communicative spaces available to us determine whether we truly come to be members of a given public, or simply observe its interactions from the sidelines—and most likely our engagement can and does also change markedly over time, due to a variety of internal and external factors. As a result,

most people in the developed world—and probably elsewhere—participate in multiple social networks rather than one group. They move among these networks and sometimes carry information between them. If communication in one network becomes too vacuous or too onerous, they can shift their attention to others. (Gruzd and Wellman 2014: 1252)

It would therefore be a mistake to think of social media simply as unified spaces with consistent patterns of user participation, any more than society itself represents a homogenous population: “extremely popular social media like Facebook and Twitter are not homogeneous groups of users, but contain an

extremely diverse range of online communities” (McKelvey *et al.* 2014: 438). Information travels across these communities (or more appropriately in our present context, publics) with more or less difficulty, depending on the degree to which they are interconnected: this is determined by the extent to which different publics share the same personnel; to which the cross-sharing of outside information is encouraged or discouraged by the public’s unwritten rules; and to which existing technological frameworks help or hinder such exchanges. Crucial in this context are not only the specific event or issue publics that might form from time to time and often dissolve just as quickly—“temporary and barely regulated discussions about virally crystallized or medially introduced topics on Twitter, social networking platforms or the general blogosphere” (Dolata and Schrape 2016: 5)—, but especially also the longer-term structures of interconnectivity and overlap between personal publics, where habitual newssharing contributes considerably to the flow of information across the network. Such “open, transparent, and low-threshold exchange of information and ideas”, on *Twitter* and elsewhere, “shows great promise for a reconfiguration of the structure of political discourses towards a broadening of public debate by facilitating social connectivity” (Maireder and Ausserhofer 2014: 306).

In this complex environment of multiply networked publics across diverse communicative spaces and platforms in the online and offline world, we are all inevitably “part of diverse publics that we observe with different levels of intensity and in which we participate with different levels of activity” (Maireder and Schlögl 2015: 118; my translation). Although in their analysis of social media networks Smith *et al.* point especially to a particular set of participants who “have links across group boundaries—... called ‘bridges’”—and who “play the important role of passing information from one group to another” (2014: 7), the truth is that from a more holistic perspective almost all of us act to a certain extent as bridges between different publics, because to be a part of multiple publics is a fundamental aspect of life in contemporary, complex, mediatised society. (Conversely, to disconnect oneself from the many offline and online familial, friendship, professional, and interest publics now available to the ordinary person is increasingly seen as an indicator of a social disorder.) We are all bridges now, and our habitual newssharing—in our own personal publics on *Facebook* and *Twitter*, in more clearly defined event- and theme-specific publics, and within and between our various online and offline networks—has emerged as a powerful driver of information dissemination in society and across societies. In this sense, Gruzd *et al.* suggest, a platform like

“Twitter turns out to be an implementation of the cross-cutting connectivity between social circles that 19th-century sociologist Émile Durkheim ... argued was the key to modern solidarity” (2011: 1314).

In this constellation, then, “multiple, intertwined content flows make up an individual’s communication experience. Exposure to any given message (or, in aggregate terms, the types and frequencies of exposure) therefore depends on a person’s position within the multiplicity of intertwined message flows” (Thorson and Wells 2015: 31). Online, this positioning is partly deliberate, partly serendipitous, as users have a choice to follow or friend particular peers, but have no inherent control over the day-to-day newsharing actions carried out by these peers; the considerable tendency towards context collapse—as “increasingly mainstream social media technologies ... collapse multiple contexts and bring together commonly distinct audiences” (Marwick and boyd 2011: 115)—, which occurs particularly within the personal publics of individual users, further ensures that the information being disseminated through social media platforms is diverse and often unpredictable.

Although social media spaces necessarily constitute only one technologically delimited slice of the overall public sphere and its various associated communicative formations, it is nonetheless possible to utilise the evidence of communicative patterns which may be observed in such spaces to investigate the existence of the various extensions and alterations of the central public sphere concept as we have encountered them above. Especially in offering what has become known as ‘big data’ on the communicative activities of their very large, often global user communities, the current generation of leading social media platforms—chiefly including *Facebook* and *Twitter*—serve as unique ‘living labs’ where large-scale communicative patterns may be observed *in situ* and non-invasively (that is, without establishing artificial experimental conditions, and without interfering actively with the users’ communication processes themselves). Although such ‘big social data’ research is not without its own challenges—see e.g. boyd and Crawford (2012) for a valuable critique of ‘big data’ research in the humanities—, provided that the inherent limitations of social media-related data sources are recognised and understood it becomes possible to use them effectively for our present purposes.

There is thus a considerable need for more in-depth and comprehensive, multi-layered social network analysis of user activities on contemporary social media platforms in order to develop a more sophisticated, evidence-based understanding of how information dissemination and engagement practices unfold in these spaces; current work largely addresses only selected observable

aspects of a greater whole. Such work variously focusses only on specific social media platforms—most often, due to the relatively greater accessibility of its data, *Twitter* (cf. Burgess and Bruns 2015); often generates only aggregate, bird's-eye perspectives of selected networks, even though “social media networks have an overall structure while the individual people within them have a local network structure based on their direct connections and the connections among their connections”, as Smith *et al.* (2014: 7) warn; and usually tends to privilege active and observable acts of communication rather than also taking into account less evident acts of reception—Huberman *et al.*, for instance, erroneously claim that “the social network that matters” consists of “those people who actually communicate through direct messages with each other, as opposed to the network created by the declared followers and followees” (2009: n.p.), even though such *listening* (Crawford 2009) to the social media voices of others plays just as crucial a role in information dissemination processes.

A promising approach in this context is the “friend repertoires” perspective proposed by Schmidt, which examines “the composition of the set of accounts a user (or a group of users) is following” and enables us to “understand not only shared patterns and practices of information management ... , but also how public communication is changing in the age of social media” (Schmidt 2016: n.p.). At the level of personal publics, this asks the question “who is receiving information from whom?” (Schmidt 2016: n.p.), and in combination with studies of the observable information dissemination activities by individual users and within the particular collective spaces provided by different social media platforms can offer new and more valuable insights into how the various observable publics across social media platforms intersect and interact with each other, and how news and information flows across them.

This must, of course, also take into account the various connective and communicative affordances that the different platforms offer: they “inform users about the variety of choices before them, while also providing cues regarding how their peers have acted in similar situations with similar choices” (Klinger and Svensson 2016: 33), but ‘friending’ on *Facebook* has a considerably different valence from ‘following’ on *Twitter*, for instance; posting, liking, sharing, and retweeting are used for distinct and divergent purposes, and the understanding of these purposes may even differ between specific groups of users; and the two platforms also operate significantly different algorithms for suggesting new connections between users and for surfacing content from a user’s network to greater visibility. Social media users’ activities therefore

“originate and evolve not, as it appears, without any conditions, but rather in the presence of social and technical infrastructures that allow for the emergence of similarly oriented individual actions and the resulting collective behavior and that coordinate, guide, monitor, and, to a certain degree, control those collective activities” (Dolata and Schrape 2016: 5).

Importantly, too, as our focus on the everyday habitual and demotic acts of newssharing and news engagement in Chapter 4 has pointed to, social media analytics should not become obsessed with the small number of content items that achieve rapid ‘viral’ dissemination: in itself, “most information on social media platforms does not go viral” (Klinger and Svensson 2016: 31), yet it still contributes in aggregate to the development of a broader picture of current developments and to the emergence of collective frames through which large publics of users understand the news and other current developments. Viral distribution of specific stories is often also strictly limited in its temporal extent; by contrast, most “distribution on social media platforms depends partly on like-minded and popular online intermediaries who serve as catalysts” (Klinger and Svensson 2016: 32), and with their help new issues and topics diffuse through the networks of social media at a more measured pace but may also have considerably greater lasting impact. As Papacharissi points out, “comparative exercises focused on measuring the public sphere potential of net-related platforms further undermine and misrepresent the civic potential of the internet by retrofitting it into models for civic engagement that speak to the political economies of prior eras” (2014: 26), and the widespread emphasis on assessing the public visibility of specific messages—on measuring which specific *Twitter* and *Facebook* posts go viral, and how many users have seen and shared them—misses the bigger picture of whether the dissemination of such messages, and many others on similar topics that achieve considerably less virality, effects a lasting shift in the themes and topics debated within a myriad of personal, event-driven, and theme-specific publics across the contemporary media ecology.

“A theory of public life that clings dogmatically to the vision of a unified public sphere in which ‘public opinion’ and ‘the public interest’ are defined is a chimera—and ... for the sake of democracy it ought now to be jettisoned”, as Keane has bluntly put it (1995: 20). The picture of contemporary public communication processes and practices that emerges from our present discussion instead, then, points to a multitude of overlapping publics of different sizes, lifespans, visibility, and impact, across a variety of online and offline communicative channels and platforms; put simply, “the crowd is actually a

bunch of crowds” (McKelvey *et al.* 2014: 437). Connecting these publics are the participants within them, who are always already inherently members of multiple publics, if with vastly differing levels of attention, engagement, and enthusiasm. Such membership, determined as it is at least in part by personal identity and interests, familial and friendship ties, professional and public roles, is clearly non-random, which will privilege overlaps between some publics (and categories of publics) more than others, yet at the same time these various and potentially contradictory reasons for building bridges between individuals and the publics they participate in also mean that any hermetic disconnections between particular publics are difficult to maintain, and that such disconnections must be constantly policed (this is evident for instance in the steps that some extremist groups take to exclude and ban those they disagree with).

The interplay between different communicative spaces in the contemporary media ecology indicates that reality is considerably more complex than any simple set of categories can depict. *Twitter* hashtags, for example, may be used in a variety of other ways than as a means of gathering together a temporary issue public; *Facebook* pages and groups may fulfil the role of gathering a thematic public more or less well, depending on how specific page owners are controlling access to, operating, and moderating these spaces; users’ conceptions of their imagined audiences of friends and followers as personal publics may vary more widely than existing studies show. This does not invalidate the overall patterns of communication which emerge from the research presented here; it merely serves as a pointed stick encouraging researchers to look even more closely both at the global patterns and at specific, smaller communicative events. Similarly, what applies to *Twitter* may not necessarily apply in the same way to *Facebook* or other platforms, which each have their own communicative idiosyncrasies, nor may it persist beyond the next technological or design change made by these companies to their respective platforms.

A New Agenda for Public Sphere Research

Ultimately, to fully understand the contemporary network of online and offline publics through which intra- and inter-societal debates are now being conducted still requires considerably more research—research that will have to utilise an emerging set of mixed methods combining powerful ‘big social data’ analytics with painstaking close reading of communicative exchanges

across the network. However, the preceding discussion also demonstrates that the various concepts developed to extend or replace the Habermasian public sphere in its most orthodox sense can usefully be applied to and studied in action within *Facebook* and *Twitter* as global systems of public communication. While certain limitations apply to this analysis, what can be observed shows that these theoretical constructs are reflected in everyday communication, and lends support to the suggestion that similar formations of public communication will also exist in other online and offline spaces. If similar observations can be made in these other spaces as well—and ideally, if these observations can be matched against and correlated with each other—, then this could provide the starting-point for a large-scale, empirical study of information flows and participation patterns across the overall public sphere, and could indeed provide new evidence on whose basis it may become possible to address the pressing question of whether the idea of ‘the’ public sphere is still relevant in the contemporary communicative environment.

Any such analysis must crucially take an inclusive stance which extends well beyond the conventional spaces of ‘public’ debate and deliberation; in a media environment where social media play an increasingly important role, where “social and cultural evolution continues to scramble, blur, and reconfigure the distinctions between public and private” (Dahlgren 2009: 75), ‘personal publics’ and ‘privately public’ forms of communication as they exist in social media spaces, but also in many other forms of everyday communication, must necessarily be taken into account as well. Social media, which have helped to make many previously entirely private forms of communication more public, provide an ideal vantage point from which such liminal private/public forms of communication may be observed *en masse*, but in doing so also raise significant questions about the ethics of such large-scale observation (especially where users’ understanding of the implications of their privacy settings for the visibility of their messages cannot be assumed). Similarly, the extent to which the specific communication patterns observed in social media spaces are representative for forms of private/public communication other than themselves remains largely unknown at this stage.

Finally, and perhaps in contrast to traditional public sphere theory which—while acknowledging the very long-term structural transformation of the public sphere—tends to assume that the institutions and actors participating on the “virtual stage of mediated communication” remain relatively stable within historically contingent epochs, it is also important to acknowledge the significant short-term dynamics of contemporary public communication. As

Dahlgren notes, “traditional perspectives on the public sphere do not help us understand how publics ‘come alive,’ ... what their sociocultural dynamic[s] look like” (2009: 74); static perspectives on the roles of specific channels of communication also fail to account for the substantial changes to the uses of such channels which can occur over relatively brief periods of time. The very rise of social media as an increasingly important component of the overall media ecology within less than a decade clearly demonstrates this, but in itself still obscures the considerable internal changes which individual social media platforms themselves have undergone during this time. It should be noted, for example, that the *Twitter* hashtag—which we have seen in Chapters 3 and 4 as a key enabler for the gathering of short-term, *ad hoc* publics on the platform—was itself introduced only some time after the inception of the platform itself, and emerged not from ongoing in-house development of the platform but from the suggestion of a single user, Chris Messina (Halavais 2014); more comprehensive hashtag functionality was only subsequently built into the platform by its developers. Due to the substantially user-driven nature of social media platforms, this co-creation of communicative features between users and operators is likely to continue, on *Twitter* as well as elsewhere, and may significantly impact upon the communicative structures of these platforms as public spaces.

It is inevitable that the structural transformation of (what has traditionally been described as) ‘the’ public sphere will not only continue as the broader media ecology continues to change and adapt to a post-mass media, digitally-driven era, but that each small act of transformation will be all the more perceptible since it affects a very large community of users who engage with media more closely, more frequently, more actively, and more creatively than ever before. Small adjustments to this complex media environment—for example at technical, organisational, or social levels—can and do have significant repercussions, and any return of the overall media ecology to a stable equilibrium appears unlikely for the foreseeable future. Contemporary public sphere theory will need to find a way to describe a dynamic, changeable, and barely controllable system of interacting forces, rather than the comparatively static, balanced, institutionalised structure of old. This dynamic and possibly confusing environment should not inherently scare us, however, even though specific temporary phenomena within it might: overall, Keane suggests, “a healthy democratic regime is one in which various types of public spheres are thriving, with no single one of them actually enjoying a monopoly in public disputes about the distribution of power” (1995: 18).

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