

NEW PUBLIC SPHERE FORMATIONS: THE IMPACT OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract. The concept of the public sphere has been defined in various forms and has remained a subject of continuous debate from Ancient Greece to the modern era. Contemporary discussions still revolve around questions such as to whom this concept belongs, where it begins and ends, and how its boundaries with the private sphere are to be determined. The origins of these debates can be traced back to the distinct separation between the public and private realms in the city-states of Ancient Greece. In the modern context, the blurring of boundaries between the public and private spheres has given rise to issues such as alienation, loneliness, and reification (*Verdinglichung*) in individuals. The distinction between “public” and “private” finds its roots in the structure of the Greek polis. Free citizens divided their lives between these two spheres. While they gathered in public spaces such as the agora – marketplaces where civic issues were discussed – as well as in courts, battlefields, and sites of communal activity, they returned to their private lives, confined to the household, when they withdrew from these areas. This division was grounded in the principle that the head of the household would not carry private matters into the public sphere, with privacy and domesticity strictly confined to the household. Emotions such as modesty, shame, and reserve were considered intrinsic to the private sphere, whereas, in entering the public sphere, the individual would shed these qualities and seek recognition, competition.

Keywords: Public sphere; the private sphere; Habermas; the Frankfurt School

Introduction

The public sphere refers to a shared domain of social life that exists in contrast to the private sphere. Beyond denoting a space associated with state authority, it functions as a communicative arena in which individuals exchange ideas, deliberate on public issues, and seek consensus regarding common values and social norms (Cevizci, 2010, p. 901). Understanding this concept therefore requires examining its historical relationship with the private sphere.

The distinction between public and private life has changed significantly over time. In Ancient Greece, the public sphere was closely linked to political participation, whereas family life and economic activities belonged to the private sphere. Modernity redefined this relationship by separating domestic life from work and differentiating political institutions from civil society (Marshall, 1999, p. 380). Consequently, the public sphere came to represent both civic participation and state authority.

Among contemporary thinkers, Jürgen Habermas has provided the most influential theory of the public sphere. Shaped by the political transformation of post-war Germany, he regarded 1945 as the defining moment of his intellectual development, stating that “*What determined my political life was, indeed, the year 1945*” (Matthew, 2012, p. 21). His analysis positions the public sphere as the communicative foundation of democratic legitimacy, where civil society can critically engage with political authority.

Building on this perspective, this article examines how globalization has transformed the public sphere. References to Turkey are used only for illustrative purposes. Following Hannah Arendt and Jürgen Habermas, the public sphere is understood as a communicative arena for public deliberation, while the private sphere encompasses family life and personal interests. The study argues that globalization and digital communication have reshaped the relationship between these spheres, generating new forms of democratic participation that increasingly transcend national boundaries.

1. Historical evolution of the public sphere

The public sphere has evolved considerably throughout history in response to changing political, social, and economic conditions. In Ancient Greece, it was closely identified with the polis, where citizenship required direct participation in political decision-making and where social and political life largely overlapped. During the Roman era, the public sphere became increasingly institutionalized through legal and administrative authority. In medieval Europe, however, feudal structures and the dominance of religious institutions restricted the development of an autonomous sphere for public discussion.

The late medieval expansion of trade and commercial capitalism transformed this historical framework. The growing bourgeoisie established new venues for public debate, including coffeehouses, salons, newspapers, and literary associations. These spaces encouraged critical discussion beyond state control and gave rise to what Habermas later defined as the **bourgeois public sphere**, functioning as an intermediary realm between political authority and private economic interests.

With the emergence of modernity, society became more clearly differentiated into political, economic, and social domains. As a result, the public sphere increasingly served as the foundation for public opinion, civic engagement, and democratic

participation. In the contemporary era, digital communication technologies have reshaped these historical patterns by creating transnational, network-based forms of interaction that transcend geographical boundaries and challenge traditional conceptions of public life.

2. The replacement of truth by truths

The emergence of the modern state fostered the development of an educated bourgeois class composed of lawyers, physicians, clergy, military officers, academics, teachers, and other professionals drawn from different social groups (Onat, 2013, p. 74). This development raises an important question: why was such a class necessary? The answer lies in the growing need for public communication and independent channels through which society could engage with political authority.

Early journalism initially functioned as an instrument for transmitting royal decrees, administrative decisions, and legal regulations to the public, resembling the role of today's official gazettes. Nevertheless, the expanding readership of the early modern press also made it increasingly susceptible to state supervision. The official publications supported by Cardinal Richelieu in France illustrate this close relationship between the press and political authority (Timur, 2012, p. 44).

As the bourgeoisie expanded, it created a new reading public that became central to the emergence of civil society. While state institutions remained largely inaccessible to ordinary citizens, newspapers and other forms of public communication provided spaces for criticism, discussion, and the pursuit of truth. These developments gradually weakened the state's monopoly over public discourse and contributed to the rise of capitalism.

Habermas describes this transformation as the emergence of the **bourgeois public sphere**, which operated in two interconnected dimensions. First, it represented the communicative space of civil society where individuals could freely organize social life. Second, it served as a forum through which citizens sought influence over political and economic affairs. Although governments attempted to regulate the press, the bourgeoisie defended freedom of expression and rational public debate as essential democratic principles (Timur, 2012, p. 46).

Modernization also transformed prevailing conceptions of truth. Traditional certainties increasingly gave way to multiple and competing interpretations, replacing the notion of a single absolute truth with a plurality of truths (Karadağ, 2006, p. 64). While pluralism broadened intellectual perspectives, it also complicated the establishment of shared moral and social standards. Consequently, understanding the transition from **truth** to **truths** is fundamental to explaining the changing character of the public sphere.

Mass media has played a decisive role in this transformation by transferring issues once regarded as private into the public domain. Matters such as childcare, elderly care, and women's participation in public life have become subjects of

collective discussion, reflecting significant social progress (Onat, 2013, p. 15). At the same time, expanding individual freedoms should remain compatible with social responsibility, since excessive individualization may generate new social tensions and weaken collective cohesion.

The defense of personal beliefs is a natural feature of modern democratic societies, yet such claims require an ethical framework to sustain mutual respect and coexistence (Onat, 2013, p. 22). Ethical principles therefore remain indispensable for preserving order and dialogue within the public sphere despite cultural diversity.

This ethical concern also raises the question of whether different moral standards should apply to public and private life. Although individuals assume different social roles, ethical consistency should not disappear when entering the public sphere. Modern public life often presents itself as culturally neutral, yet it may simultaneously encourage cultural homogenization and suppress diversity through state-centered policies (Karadağ, 2006, p. 70). Such tendencies can weaken individual identity and restrict equal participation in public institutions.

Postmodern developments have challenged these homogenizing tendencies by reopening debates concerning the boundaries of the public sphere (Karadağ, 2006, p. 70). Within this context, the replacement of a single truth by multiple truths has become increasingly visible. Habermas argues that a democratic public sphere should remain grounded in equality, freedom, and communicative rationality, thereby creating greater opportunities for pluralism, critical reflection, and individual participation.

3. The boundary of the public sphere

Defining the boundaries of the public sphere first requires answering the question: **public sphere according to whom?** Individuals experience public spaces differently according to their social position, age, and lived experience. A university campus, for example, represents distinct forms of participation for students, academics, and elderly visitors. Consequently, the public sphere cannot be understood as a fixed or universally defined concept.

This ambiguity is also reflected in cultural understandings of the term. In Yunus Emre's verse, "*We hold no grudge against anyone / The whole world (kamu âlem) is one to us,*" the word *kamu* signifies "everyone" or "all" (Sunar, 2005, p. 11). Contemporary individualization, however, has complicated the relationship between the individual and the public sphere. Since the distinction between public and private life remains contested, spaces such as streets, marketplaces, and even places of worship may simultaneously embody public and semi-private characteristics. Defining these spaces solely through state authority risks reducing the public sphere to an instrument of bureaucratic control and weakening the individual's role as an active citizen (Sunar, 2005, p. 13).

Scholars differ in explaining interventions within the public sphere. Some attribute them to excessive state regulation, whereas others emphasize the failure to maintain appropriate boundaries between public and private life. Debates surrounding the former headscarf ban in Turkey illustrate these tensions. The distinction between the two spheres should never become a mechanism for restricting fundamental rights. Rather, the Turkish experience demonstrates how the public sphere has often been interpreted through bureaucratic rationality instead of the emancipatory tradition that characterized its historical development in Western societies (Sunar, 2005, p. 13).

The essential difference between the private and public spheres lies in the conditions governing individual expression. While the private sphere allows unrestricted personal autonomy, participation in the public sphere requires respect for shared norms and collective responsibility. When this balance is disrupted, individuals may withdraw into alternative communicative arenas, giving rise to phenomena such as **parallel public spheres** or the notion of **multiple Turkeys** (Sunar, 2005, p. 14). Preserving the democratic character of the public sphere therefore requires reducing state monopoly over public communication.

Within his **theory of communicative action**, Jürgen Habermas emphasized the importance of communication media – including newspapers, books, radio, and television – in creating and sustaining the public sphere. Whereas these media historically enabled resistance to bourgeois domination in Western societies, they often served in Turkey as instruments for constructing alternative public spheres in opposition to state authority. Today, digital platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and LinkedIn have fundamentally transformed this process by creating decentralized and interactive spaces for public discussion. Social media has consequently evolved beyond a medium of political opposition into a global arena where public opinion can be formed in relation to governments, institutions, and social actors alike.

As digital communication expands, it becomes increasingly difficult for governments to define or regulate the limits of the public sphere. Nevertheless, this transformation raises important concerns regarding the quality of public deliberation. Powerful organizations and advocacy groups, such as Greenpeace, can amplify particular narratives through media networks, thereby strengthening their influence while simultaneously contributing to the fragmentation of public discourse (Dacheux, 2012, p. 51). As media increasingly legitimizes competing discourses, the relationship between the public sphere and the public itself weakens, reducing opportunities for collective action.

Ultimately, the changing boundaries of the public sphere reflect the broader process of individualization associated with postmodernity. The weakening of the public subject results largely from the erosion of the balance between public and private life. Although the public sphere has historically functioned

as a space of shared communication and civic engagement, its meaning has gradually shifted toward individual experience. Consequently, the authority to define the public sphere increasingly rests with individuals rather than institutions, illustrating one of the defining characteristics of contemporary public life.

3.1. New public sphere formations in the age of globalization

The expansion of digital communication networks has fundamentally transformed the nature of the public sphere beyond the classical bourgeois model described by Habermas. Rather than representing a simple extension of traditional public life, globalization and digitalization have generated new structural forms of communication and participation.

One of the defining characteristics of the contemporary public sphere is its deterritorialized nature. Public debates are no longer confined to specific geographical locations or institutional settings but increasingly unfold across global digital networks. Communication has also shifted from centralized media organizations toward decentralized platforms that enable immediate and interactive participation among individuals regardless of their physical location.

Another significant transformation is the growing influence of algorithmic mediation. Unlike traditional public spheres, where visibility depended primarily on rational-critical discussion, contemporary digital platforms filter, prioritize, and distribute information through algorithmic systems. As a result, public influence is shaped not only by the quality of public deliberation but also by the technological infrastructures governing online communication.

Globalization has likewise encouraged the emergence of transnational publics. Issues such as climate change, migration, pandemics, and human rights increasingly stimulate debates that extend beyond national borders and involve participants from diverse political and cultural contexts. Consequently, contemporary public sphere formations should be understood not merely as larger versions of the classical public sphere but as qualitatively different communicative structures characterized by digital connectivity, decentralized participation, algorithmic governance, and global interaction.

4. The structural transformation of the public sphere

Jürgen Habermas's critical approach to modern society is most comprehensively presented in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*). In this work, he traces the historical development of the bourgeois public sphere from its emergence during the Enlightenment to its gradual transformation within the post-war welfare state. The first part of the book explains how salons, coffeehouses, and other public venues fostered rational-critical debate, whereas the second demonstrates how these spaces progressively lost their autonomy and democratic function (Specter, 2012, p. 47). Habermas describes this process as the “**eclipse of the**

public sphere,” whereby the increasing interdependence of state and society weakened the independence of public communication (Zarka, 2014, p. 54).

A central explanation for this transformation is Habermas’s distinction between the **system** and the **lifeworld (Lebenswelt)**. Unlike the system, which operates through administrative and economic mechanisms, the lifeworld is sustained by culture, communication, and shared social meanings. When the system colonizes the lifeworld, communicative relationships deteriorate and various social pathologies emerge. Finlason (2007, p. 93) identifies these consequences as declining mutual understanding, fragmented social relations, increasing alienation, reduced social responsibility, and growing social instability.

These pathologies are fundamental to Habermas’s diagnosis of the contemporary public sphere. Originally established as a space for collective resistance to injustice, the public sphere has gradually become intertwined with the private sphere, making its public character increasingly ambiguous. As the distinction between public and private weakens, questions arise regarding whether certain issues should remain private or become matters of public concern. This ambiguity also reveals a paradox: although the private sphere is traditionally associated with personal freedom, it may also become a source of exclusion and social isolation. Consequently, even civil public spheres can reproduce hierarchical forms of domination (Sunar, 2005, p. 39).

The transformation of the public sphere cannot be explained solely through the relationship between state and society. Changes within the private sphere also reshape public life. Spaces such as cafés, which regularly host the same social groups, or private homes used for public gatherings, increasingly function as **semi-public** environments, demonstrating the growing permeability of the boundary between public and private life.

Historical and cultural developments further illustrate this transformation. In Iran, for example, the relationship between religious and social practices changed significantly after the revolution: religious practices became increasingly visible in public life, whereas activities such as dancing retreated into private spaces. This reversal demonstrates how the meanings attached to particular spaces are socially constructed and historically contingent (Sunar, 2005, p. 42). As elements of public life penetrate the private sphere, the latter acquires semi-public characteristics, contributing to the transformation of individual identity and everyday social practices.

More broadly, wars, revolutions, and other major historical ruptures continuously reshape both public and private life. These processes blur their traditional boundaries and generate new forms of social organization. Habermas’s analysis remains highly relevant because it explains these structural transformations through the interaction between communicative life, institutional power, and the social pathologies produced when the balance between them is disrupted.

5) The public sphere and politics

The concept of the public sphere has assumed different meanings across historical periods, reflecting broader political, social, and cultural transformations. Generally understood as a domain open to all, the public sphere represents the collective expression of social interests, although this openness has often blurred the distinction between public and private life (Arendt, 1994).

In Ancient Greece, the public sphere was inseparable from political participation, where citizenship implied active involvement in public affairs. Although this tradition remained influential in Western political thought, it evolved differently in Eastern societies (Habermas, 2004). During the Roman period, religious and administrative authority increasingly shaped public life, while the medieval public sphere became organized around feudal institutions and communal spaces such as marketplaces, squares, and fountains (Habermas, 2004).

The rise of modernity in the eighteenth century introduced the bourgeois public sphere, which gradually developed into the liberal public sphere. Initially serving as a foundation for civic participation and the welfare state, it increasingly became a domain in which private interests acquired public legitimacy (Sunar, 2005). At the same time, the distinction between public and private life became more pronounced, with work increasingly identified as part of the private sphere while state influence over public affairs expanded (Fraser, 1992).

Modern societies have transformed the public sphere not only politically but also economically and culturally. Religion has largely been relocated to the private sphere, whereas economic interests have become increasingly influential within public life (Habermas, 1991). Consequently, traditional public spaces – including cities, streets, and the media – have gradually lost their historical role as sites of collective interaction, contributing to declining social cohesion and increasing alienation (Sunar, 2005).

The relationship between public and private life has also changed significantly in Western societies. Private experiences have become increasingly visible within public discourse, exemplified by Michel Foucault's analysis of sexuality as a public discourse rather than a purely private matter (Foucault, 1999). This transformation has normalized the public disclosure of private life, while concepts of privacy (*mahremiyet*) have generally remained more strongly preserved within Islamic societies (Sunar, 2005).

Mass media has been a central driver of these changes. While extending public communication into private life, it has simultaneously become an instrument of political influence and manipulation. Rather than facilitating active participation, television and other traditional media have often reduced citizens to passive audiences, thereby limiting democratic engagement (Sunar, 2005).

The weakening of classical public spaces has also diminished the political function of the public sphere. Arendt (1994) associates this development with the increasing dominance of economic concerns over political participation. Although

economic activity does not replace politics, the growing influence of economic power strengthens state control over the public sphere (Sunar, 2005). Under these conditions, civil society organizations may become depoliticized and integrated into state-centered ideological structures. Despite the liberal ideal of an autonomous public sphere, contemporary governments continue to intervene extensively in economic, religious, and social affairs (Fraser, 1992; Sunar, 2005). The Turkish experience, including the political influence exercised over public economic enterprises and the politicization of religion despite constitutional secularism, illustrates this tendency.

Overall, the increasing publicization of private life and the politicization of public institutions have fundamentally transformed the character of the public sphere, diminishing its autonomy as an independent arena of democratic communication.

Conclusion: The globalizing public sphere

Globalization has transformed the world into an increasingly interconnected **global village**, where political, economic, and social developments rapidly transcend national borders. Consequently, the public sphere has also acquired a global dimension. Decisions made by influential institutions, such as the U.S. Federal Reserve, as well as political messages disseminated through digital platforms, can produce immediate worldwide consequences, illustrating the growing transnational character of contemporary public communication (Castells, 2010).

Throughout history, societies have constructed the relationship between public and private life according to their own cultural traditions. Modernity, however, fundamentally altered this balance by expanding the visibility of private life while simultaneously transforming the public sphere into an arena increasingly shaped by bourgeois and political elites. As a result, individuals face the risk of losing not only their place within the public sphere but also elements of their personal identity (Habermas, 1989).

Although globalization frequently promotes ideals such as democracy, human rights, and the free market, these principles often function within broader political strategies. Consequently, the public sphere increasingly operates as a space in which global political actors compete for influence rather than as a forum dedicated solely to the common good. Public opinion remains important, yet its impact is often conditioned by the priorities of political institutions and transnational power structures (Fraser, 2007).

These developments make the question, “**Where are we in the public sphere?**”, more relevant than ever. The widespread public display of everyday private experiences through digital media has blurred the distinction between public and private life, transforming personal experiences into consumable public content. Practices such as sharing intimate family moments on social media illustrate how digital communication has redefined both privacy and public participation (Bauman, 2000).

Nevertheless, globalization does not produce identical outcomes across societies. The evolution of new public spheres depends upon historical traditions, political culture, institutional capacity, and regime type. Liberal democracies, hybrid political systems, and authoritarian regimes each generate distinct opportunities and constraints for civic participation. Accordingly, the globalization of the public sphere should be understood as an interaction between global communication networks and local political contexts rather than as a uniform historical process.

A democratic public sphere therefore requires more than electoral participation. Genuine democracy depends upon active civic engagement, communicative freedom, and the meaningful involvement of civil society in public decision-making. Attempts by governments to monopolize or politically define the public sphere ultimately weaken its democratic function. Instead, the vitality of the public sphere rests upon the collective participation of citizens, independent media, and civil society organizations.

Although Habermas emphasizes the colonization of the lifeworld by political and economic systems, this process is neither inevitable nor irreversible. Independent institutions, communicative action, and democratic public deliberation continue to provide opportunities to challenge systemic domination and strengthen democratic accountability. The future of the public sphere therefore depends not only on technological innovation but also on society's capacity to preserve pluralism, critical dialogue, and meaningful democratic participation.

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