The New Public Sphere: a Way to Democratization?
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Abstract: Today's political discussions are more actively initiated in cyberspace and generated by people belonging to diverse cultural and professional backgrounds. The development of the Internet has made it possible for all members of recently emerged global network society, both for people with particular knowledge as well as those not affiliated with the field, to talk politics online. However, it is disputable whether accessibility of information and facilitated entry to political debates has led to the new public sphere becoming more democratic. This article examines the essence of the new public sphere and new conditions in which it exists, as well as an ambiguous impact of mass media and social networks on the process of democratization of public spheres. Moreover, it presents intriguing findings of the author regarding the role of publics as independent, free from judgments imposed by media, shapers of their opinions.

Keywords: new public sphere; global network society; global network state; media; public opinion;

I. Introduction
As it is well known, the process of globalization has transformed the world system and the way international affairs are conducted. The nation-state is no longer able to address problems alone primarily because the problems now have global character, so there is a strong need for cooperation both at the intergovernmental and citizen-to-citizen levels. Due to that, transformations have also appeared within national public spheres with their shift to a new dimension. However, it may invoke a question about the role that this new public sphere is given. Does it serve as a mechanism for democratization of international relations? Or is it simply an enlarged forum for governments and citizens to talk politics, where governmental institutions dominate the discussion? It seems necessary to take a deeper insight into such phenomena as public spheres to respond to those questions. That is what this article will focus on. The research is divided into three parts: the first part addresses the traditional model of public spheres and conceptualizes its ideal notion; the second one covers three features that make the new public sphere distinguishable, and indicates the consequences that this change of substance has entailed and impact which they have on international system; the third part elaborates on the significant role of the Internet and media networks in both mediating public interactions and shaping public opinion, then goes further into consideration of public opinion, and lastly deals with controversial question of whether the new public sphere is democratic. The conclusion sums up all observations made in the research.

II. The Public Sphere: Traditional Model
It seems essential to start with indicating the core elements of such concept as “public sphere” as it was viewed traditionally for two main reasons. At first, it is important for better understanding of how and why the contemporary definition of the public sphere differs from the initial one and, secondly, for detecting what is considered as an “ideal public sphere”, so it will be easier to make an assumption whether the recently transformation of public spheres has helped to achieve that ideal pattern.
From the traditional standpoint, a public sphere is perceived as a network that lies between a state and civil society for sharing ideas and autonomous views aimed at influencing the conduction of policies. A very remarkable definition of the public sphere was given by Jürgen Habermas, who treats the concept as the “discursive democracy”[5]. One of the reasons for almost equating the public sphere with the notion of democracy was the idea that the former constitutes the mechanism for “rationalizing” political domination, what is an integral part of the latter. This process of maintaining the balance between expectations of governments and civil societies requires accessibility of information to everyone, what implies that civilians should have equal right with those of political elite. It also means that not only civil society should play by the rules of the state government, but the state itself should be subject to critical scrutiny by citizens as well as have some constrains to its activity being responsive to expressions of public opinion. However, such model of public sphere appears to be pretty much idealized. Although it is true that the core element of public spheres is reciprocity of ideas that
feed public debate, that “reciprocity” does not mean the “equal access” to communication and independence of discussion from any managing ‘from above’. Such realistic view in some degree undermines the belief that the existence of public spheres should necessarily strengthen democracy.

Indeed, to what extent do public spheres contribute to the process of democratization? And are public spheres democratic by themselves? These questions are crucial to be answered in order to be able to make any suppositions regarding whether that ideal pattern of public sphere (which is characterized by equal access to information and capacity of public to constraint governmental agendas) can or cannot be achieved. And no answer can be given without the transformed nature of the public sphere being taken into account.

III. The New Public Sphere

Due to the rapid alteration of today’s world system, it is obvious that subsequent transformation of the public sphere was inevitable. The evolving nature of nation-state has created condition for the public sphere to operate at a new level, which brings some new features to its substance. What consequences has that transformation entailed? Has the new public sphere become more vocal in affecting policymaking? It seems relevant to come back to these questions after addressing the tendencies that make the new public sphere new.

Transnationalization of Public Spheres

The process of globalization has resulted in a shift of public spheres from national to the transnational level where it is not subject to any sovereign power but is shaped by relations between states and numerous non-state actors. From a general view, this new transnational public sphere consists of two dimensions that are global civil society and global network state. The notion of global civil society encompasses numerous local civil societies operating together in response to global problems, whereas the global network state can be described as adapted to new conditions form of state characterized by “shared sovereignty, responsibility, flexibility of governance and diversity in the relationship between government and its citizens in terms of time and space”[2].

However, it should be kept in mind that transnationalization of public spheres implies deeper processes than mere communication between a wider range of actors beyond national levels. At first, there is a need for state activities to become more transparent and, thus, visible for citizens, so they can be addressed at the transnational level. Secondly, it is important for all national spheres to develop similarly over time to find the same issues as matters of common “global” concern. Another point is the necessity of establishment of discursive integration between national spheres in order to make sure that those common issues are not just universally recognized, but also discussed by all national entities. Moreover, some researchers find it essential for transnational public sphere to identify itself as a collective [6], in other words, to move from national to global self-identification. These so-called conditions gave a food for thought for those who are not in favor of accepting the appearance of public sphere at a global level. For example, some criticism comes to assumption that with the emergence of the new public sphere old state-based public spheres are likely to disappear. Colin Sparks in his work emphasizes that state-based spheres still exist. Building his arguments on the analysis of present mass media, Sparks points out there is no media system that is able to “address issues on a global scale” [10], what he considers as a proof that no global public sphere can emerge unless the same information reaches every participant of the global community. Another notable remark was made by Nancy Fraser, who argues that it is challenging for participants to agree on what matters to consider as of common concern, and that there is always an ambiguity between what objectively affects everyone and what is perceived as a common problem [4]. Assuming that discourse convergence is a necessary condition of the global public sphere to be established, Fraser’s statement gives a reason to think that nowadays no public sphere can be perceived as “global”.

Although both arguments reveal limited nature of the global public sphere, it seems reasonable to admit that that new public sphere did emerge, and, moreover, emerged at the transnational level.

Shift to Multimodal Communication Space

Another significant feature of the new public sphere is that it consists of diverse actors: it appears as a space where people belonging to different cultures find participation. Also, state-to-citizen communication no longer constitute the dominant model of interaction, there is a shift towards horizontal citizen-to-citizen communication. Does it mean that the new public sphere has become more democratic?

Considering the number of actors and formal ability of each to contribute to discussion, it seems to be so. Public debate is now generated by ideas that come from a large set of different speakers. There is no longer a state government that alone proposes agenda for discussion, as it was inherent in traditional public spheres, but citizens of different nationalities, social status, and age who make governmental institutions adjust their agendas to discussions initiated by multicultural community.

However, the growth of multiplicity of publics can also be viewed as a departure from democracy. The more actors are involved in discussions, the more difficult it appears to agree on what to consider as shared concerns, and the more likely the gap will appear between those who lead the discussion and those whose voices are not taken into account. On the one hand, it seems to be quite fair that opinions do not have the same weight in discussion because actors are not equally competent in terms of politics. For instance, some researches make a clear distinction between a public sphere where politics is discussed by people in informal social conversation,
and a polity sphere where politics is polemicized by those who are affiliated with it and have some particular knowledge [1]. Following this logic, participants with some political background are more likely to make objective opinions than those who enter discussion just to express their preferences based on the perception of the situation rather than on particular knowledge. On the other hand, it indicates that the value of individual voice still varies according to whom this voice belongs. Moreover, although the shift to horizontal interaction is noticeable, vertical model of state-to-citizen communication as well as the role of governments in managing discussions still cannot be considered as weak.

**Growing Role of Media and Communication Networks**

Multimodal communications could have never developed to the extent they exist today had some “mediator” not occurred between national public spheres. Today’s mass media is the link that connects public spheres and their numerous actors, and allows political discussion to go beyond national borders. In other words, we all are witnesses of a shift from public spheres build around national institutions to the public sphere constituted around media system; public discussions are not free-floating, there is always some media discourse that lies behind. Mass media cannot be viewed as pure independent actor; as it was remarked, “one should not be naïve about states; states are not going to give up controlling mass media – control is by definition the state’s function” [9]. However, media has significant possibility to constitute limits for states’ actions through the same channels that are usually used by governments to affect masses. Above all, with the existence of communication networks (such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, blogs etc.) citizens now have a chance to participate in discussion bypassing any sort of mediation (including governmental). In the new public sphere one of the conditions for participants to have some weight in discussion is to be updated. Since media system has moved online, there is a widening gap between “the electronic haves and have-nots” [1]. And since no governance can occur without use of media, it is necessary to make sure that various networks are properly used. Traditional way of policy conduct is losing its influence; political disputes are more actively fabricated in the cyberspace. The Internet gave a huge opportunity for media networks to expand their coverage and reach wider auditory. However, it is important to note that some researchers, as it was mentioned above, claim there is no media system that is able to address global audience. One can hardly disagree with this statement. Even the most influential world media corporations such as CNN or BBC have relatively small audience in comparison with the total number of members of the global civil society. As Sparks noticed, the audiences are not only small, but also “too rich, and too English-speaking to be considered inclusive” [10]. Although there is a little chance that the global mass media will appear in the foreseeable future, there is no doubt that media system in general has incredible influence on transformation of public spheres and decision-making processes. As to the plenty of media sources that feed public debate, they cause an interesting effect which will be discussed later in this paper.

Coming back to the questions raised at the beginning of the first part, it seems that the main consequence of appearance of the new public sphere is no more, no less its growing influence. Public sphere did become more vocal due to wider range of actors and mass media as a mechanism of delivering opinions involved, although it does not mean it has become more democratic. More detailed examination of mass media, information and their role in formation of public opinion is needed to understand how this new sphere works and whether it helps to democratize the world system.

**IV. The Three “I”s: the Internet, Information, Influence.**

The accessibility of information to the large part of world population has made the enlargement of public spheres possible, as it was discussed above; but it is not the only significant tendency of today’s era of information and mediated political communication. The role of the Internet is not confined to mere distribution of informational content; it also serves to facilitate participation in political debates due to the low entry threshold for audiences. The spread of the Internet use has enabled the voices of “new” members to be heard by global community. An interesting remark was made by Jennifer Strometer-Galley in her research, in which she points out that the Internet provides “a new context for political conversation for those who would not normally engage in face-to-face political conversations” [11]. Here two conclusions may follow. At first, the new public sphere now includes more active debaters of politics as it has ever had before, but, secondly, that may subsequently constitute chaos of opinions (a huge part of which are incompetent and lacking knowledge) and result in fragmentation of interests. Another significant point goes for a mistaken view that mass media seek affecting the global civil society as a whole. It is very important to keep in mind that media audiences are segmented into “strategically targeted” groups for which media companies construct “personalized messages” [1]. “Think global. Act local” [10] principle of mass media activities is crucial for understanding of how public opinion is formed.

**Public Opinion is the New Public Sphere**

Public opinion is one of the core elements of public spheres which appears both as a factor that generates discussions and as a result of public interaction. In the former case public opinion proves to be an essential element for people to enter political conversation: publics aim to bring attention to their expectations through
participation that can subsequently influence decision-making. In the latter case, public opinion is more a product of communication and is formed inside the public sphere through listening to the opinions expressed by others. The influence of public opinion cannot be underestimated. Communicating to make their values known and expressing support to actions that correspond with their view of situation, publics thereby give authority to the governments, when authority leads to legitimacy. This link between public opinion and legitimacy makes the former exceptionally meaningful for the process of decision-making. Public support and public disapproval are significant tools that can change the line of policy. Not to sound unfounded, it seems relevant to pick an example of an Iraq campaign, when on February 2003 one of the biggest demonstrations against the invasion to Iraq was held in the UK. The demonstration was transmitted and showed on television overseas, what served as a key factor for Canadian government to make a decision to keep their troops out of the conflict [8]. In this case what is notable is not only the fact that public opinion indeed had impact on policymaking, but also the role of media networks as a mechanism of its delivery to the broad audiences.

This immediate distribution of information (thanks to development of media systems) has a significant effect on behavior of publics. Citizens now have access to numerous sources and are able to watch ongoing events online. That results in two things – public opinion is becoming super reactive, and publics are getting more suspicious and skepticism. In regard to the first point the main argument is that immediate awareness of public of what is going on in the world leads to their improved ability to respond quickly, what constitutes a serious problem for the governments to keep political discussion under control. The second point seems interesting to focus on. As it was said before, there is no global network that can address the global audience. Information flows from diverse sources which very often contradict each other. This happens because the key task of any media company is not to deliver genuine information to audiences, but to attract as many readers/viewers as possible in order to get higher income. In many cases it is reached by means of distortion of facts or at least representing them in a favorable for media light. That engenders so-called “paradox of plenty” [7], which means that the plenty of information constitutes the lack of attention and, above all, distrust of the public. Surprisingly, this phenomenon also has a positive outcome. It is usually little said about publics as participants in formation of their own opinions, whereas this role is always given to mass media. However, today’s publics appear to be more independent in shaping their opinions by building assumptions on their own analysis of events. It can be explained by the fact that publics got used to enormous floods of unfiltered information and no longer take everything at face value, but has learnt how to recognize so-called “political spectacles” and how to look beyond the facts.

A Way to Democratization?

Although diversity of views, universal access to online discussions, growing independence of opinion-shaping by publics are necessary conditions for realizing the “democratic polity”, it is often argued that the core element is for discussion to be “deliberative” [12]. This deliberative discussion requires strong interactive component, which means that participants should not only propose one’s own views, but also listen to opponents and build argument with respect to positions of others. However, as Lisa Tsaliki emphasizes in her work, existing public sphere is not a forum where opinions are heard and responded, but rather a space for actors to push their own preferences and interests.

This statement appears to be prudent. At first, it cannot be denied that people’s motivation to enter discussions is primarily to be listened rather than to listen to others. Any opinion is based on personal view and personal interest. In this new public sphere two major actors – global network state and global civil society – interact in order to shape activities of each other, although there is a belief that the existence of such forum is designed to promote mutual understanding between state and non-state participants. Secondly, it is hardly possible that groups opposing each other in real politics will reach an agreement in a virtual space. On the contrary, development of communication networks may even enhance that misunderstanding and incline participants to seek support from other “netizens” thereby involving wider audience into the rivalry. In this case the public sphere appears as a mechanism for strengthening one’s own positions rather than a platform where consensus can be achieved.

Another disputable point is equality within the new public sphere. It has been already said that diversity of opinions does not mean that they all have the same weight in discussion. Do all participants have equal access to information? Apparently, not, following the argument made by Sparks that there is a division into the English-speaking and non-English-speaking audiences, so even access to the most influential media networks is relatively limited for those who cannot identify themselves as members of the first (English-speaking) category. Does the Internet provide equality for all its users? Formally, yes. It not necessary for a participant to be a politician or affiliated with politics to enter discussion; everyone has a chance to talk politics online. However, free entry is not a guarantee that participants are equal because there is always someone who dominates and someone who is in the shadow. As it usually happens, a very small number of discussants leads the debate and makes the majority of contributions, what indicates that the interactive element of the Internet is not fully used. The Net in the new public sphere appears to be a vehicle for those already interested in politics.

How likely is that the wide spread of the Internet and increased influence of information will help to democratize public spheres? Admitting advantages that the era of information has brought to political debate, however, it
seems reasonable to agree with the statement proposing that “it would be more realistic to accept that cyberspace is merely another arena for the ongoing struggle for power and political influence”[12].

V. Conclusion

Today only idealists might believe that model of the public sphere proposed by Habermas can be achieved. Despite the fact that public spheres have shifted to a new dimension which lies beyond national borders, and have become a forum which is not under sovereignty of any state, the question whether that has helped them to become more democratic is still open.

On the one hand, the development of new means of communications such as numerous online networks gives chance for diverse publics to take part in discussions and for wide range of opinions to be heard. The Internet eliminates selective component when a person should necessarily be a politician to talk politics, and that encourages more members of world community to enter discussions. These new online debates include diverse people including those who would never discuss politics in real life. Moreover, the shift to horizontal citizen-to-citizen interaction gives a reason to consider this new public sphere as a forum where governmental ‘management’ is no longer dominant.

On the other hand, increased influence of mass media produces dual effect. Although it promotes enlargement of topics discussed, it also serves a mechanism to constrain discussions. There is still no media network that can address global agenda, so different parts of global community are differently informed about ongoing events, what is likely to result in fragmentation of opinions and difficulty to agree on what to consider as common interest. It is also should be noted that the new public sphere remains arena for pushing one’s own preferences and enhancing influence of particular groups rather than for participating in deliberative discussion by listening to each other. Another point is that opinions, once heard, do not have equal weight because the distinction is still made (and what seems to be fair) between those affiliated with political field and those who are less competent. However, it should not be forgotten that the meaning of this new public sphere is remarkable. Although it does not aim to become the “global government” which the world of “global governance” [2]lacks, the public sphere succeeds in having significant impact on decision-making. That firstly relates to public opinion which has become more vocal in affecting policymaking, what, in its turn, gives a reason to view the new public sphere as a phenomenon that brings something to democratization of the world system (not being pure democratic by itself). Despite all controversies, the new public sphere appears as influential mechanism for political cooperation.

VI. References

[9] Remark made by prof. Matthew Fraser during the seminar “Online social networks” (DAFF13906 Sciences Po Paris) on November 20, 2013