

The Digital Public Sphere

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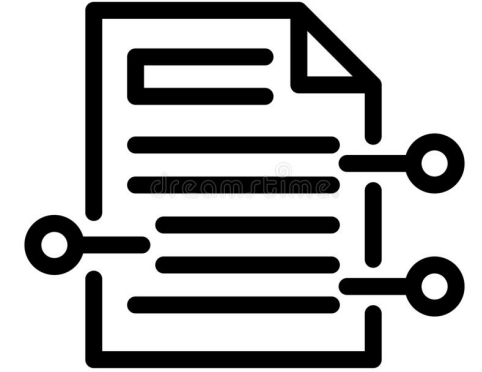
Lecture 8

DGM 711
Introduction to Digital Media



- **Digital technologies** facilitate the active **participation** of **individuals** in media production.
- **Digital collaborations** rely on the **culture of participation**.
- **Digital platforms** offer possibilities for **users** to become **content producers or** contribute to **assessing** and **improving** the **content** provided by a service.
- **Wikipedia, social media and mashup services** are examples of **digital collaboration**.
- **Legal systems** have adapted **copyright laws** to facilitate the spread of **self-publishing platforms** such as **YouTube**.
- **Digital media users** contribute only **marginally** to **decision-making** processes.
- The work of users is **aggregated** for **profit purposes** by private **companies**, removing **power and decisions** from the **users**.

- I. The Media System .
- II. The Networked Public Sphere .
- III. The Journalism and Public Sphere .
- IV. WikiLeaks.
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- VI. Communicative Capitalism .
- VII. Conclusion.

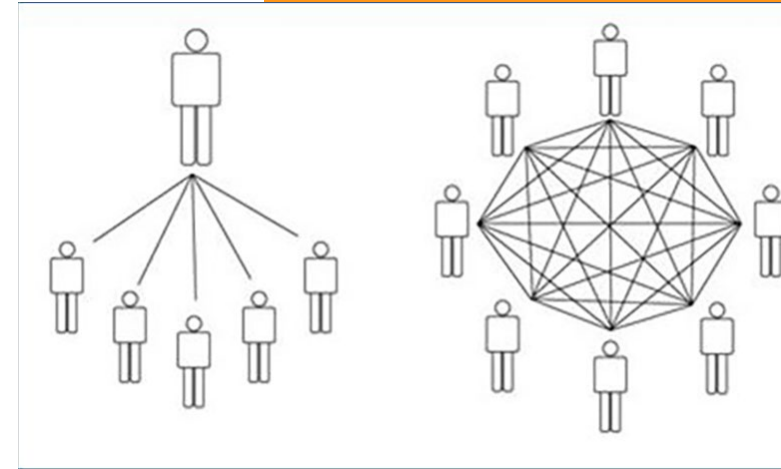


- **Transformations** that involve the **media system** are deeply related to **political change**.
- **The public sphere**, a fundamental component of modern **democracies**, opens to **new practices and actors**.
- In this sphere, the separation between **public and private life** is questioned, and **communications** are subject to forms of **control and surveillance**.
- **The political evolution** of today's societies rests on the ability to manage **the power of communication networks**.

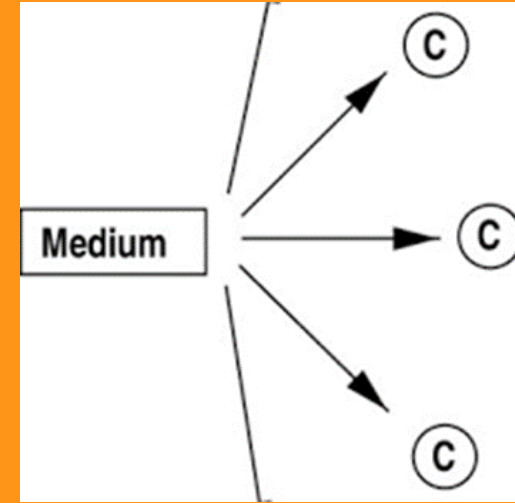
- **Traditionally**, media and communication studies consider the media audiences as **active**.
- **Individuals** who receive a message do not passively perceive it according to predefined meanings, but rather are able to **interpret, evaluate, and respond** to it in different ways.
- If this is true for **broadcast media** that are distributed from **few to many**, such as **television, radio, and print**, within the more complex ecosystems of **digital media** the public further diversifies.
- Indeed, media studies refer to a **plurality** of **media publics** (McQuail).



- **Publics** are increasingly important not only in **choosing** or **interpreting** media content, but also in the **direct production** and **distribution** of such **content**.
- **Broadcast media** such as **newspapers** or **TV channels** are based on a **centralized, one-way** architecture.
- **Decisions** on the news or on the information to be reported is taken by a **few people** who work within a hierarchical **organization**.



- The **communication** travels from **one point**, for example a **television studio**, to a potentially unlimited number of **receivers** that cannot provide immediate **feedback**.
- **Professional journalists** and **publishers**, as well as **companies** and **political parties**, have privileged **access to broadcast media**, and can therefore **reach the public** more easily.





- **Mass media** may be **commercial**, and thus mainly supported by **sales and advertising**, but also **public or non-profit**.
- In all cases, the **system** they compose is characterized by processes of **concentration**, in which the **political or economic control** of many **media channels** is **centralized** in the hands of one **corporation, institution**, or even a **single person**.



- Yet one of the major effects of the emergence of **digital media** is the creation of a more **complex communication system**, shaped by diverse technologies, accessible to **non-commercial and nonstate actors**.
- This **transition** both aligns with ideas about the **democratizing** potential of the **information society** and generates **new challenges**.
- First, **digital media** increase **accessibility**: the **cost** of opening a communication channel, as well as **producing and distributing information**, is **lowering**.

I. The Media System :



- If in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries **the costs required to enter the mass media system** (for example by founding a newspaper or television channel) tended to **increase**, **digital technologies** provide tools that put media production in the hands of a **broader set of actors**.
- **Collaborative tools** such as blogs, online newspapers, social media platforms, and mobile platforms are instruments that allow the production and distribution of information at a **low cost**, and make it **accessible** to individual users or groups that are not equipped with the **financial** means to start a business in broadcast mass media .

- **Platforms for sharing video content**, such as YouTube or Vimeo, or **photographs**, for example Instagram, allow all users to **publish and circulate information**.
- These tools **facilitate debate** through systems that organize comments, rating, and sharing.
- Through **social media and other interactive environments**, users can **publish, comment on, and share** news and information.



- In addition to the typical dynamics of “friendship” that characterize most **social networks**, these platforms use **hashtag systems** to encourage the **creation of temporary and ephemeral publics** around a **news story or theme**.
- For example, all the **posts** that contain the word “**#elections**” (hashtags are preceded by a **#**) are **easily searchable** by anyone who wants to read news or **participate in the debate** about that topic.



- A key characteristic of **communications on digital media** is that they tend to be organized around a blurring of **public and private**: participation in public life is based upon the **sharing of personal content** through individual social media profiles.
- Thus **conversations** are **neither strictly private nor completely public**, but rather assume **hybrid** characteristics.



- Finally, most of the **activities** that take place through **digital technologies** are subject to **systematic surveillance**.
- In fact, **web companies** and **governments** alike **collect information** on or retain a copy of most digital **communications**.
- These **actors** are able to **determine** when, where, with whom, and with which content we interact.
- **Media publics** are thus subject to widespread, continuous, and systematic **control** .



- In sum, **media publics** can successfully become **politically active** thanks to the emergence of an **information-rich digital environment** and its related **communication tools**.
- These changes impact on many aspects of information societies' **communicative sphere**.



- Thanks to **digital media** more and more people have the opportunity to **participate** directly in the **media system**, increasing the degree of **pluralism** .
- **Web platforms** and the participatory practices they foster **change** in depth the role of **traditional cultural industry intermediaries**, for example in journalism and political communication.
- Previous positions of privilege make room for an expansion of the **public** who can access processes of **information production**.





- These changes are the basis of what **Yochai Benkler** has called “**networked public sphere**” (2006).
- **The public sphere** is the place where people meet for discussion in modern societies.
- This metaphor includes **physical spaces**, such as **public squares**, as well as **mediated spaces**, such as the press or digital environments.
- Although **the public sphere** was not **born** with **digital media**, network technologies contribute to its **evolution**.

II. The Networked Public Sphere :

- Political theorist **Hannah Arendt** (1958) defined **the public sphere** as the place where citizens gather and act together to negotiate the rules of coexistence.
- It is therefore an **open system** that can be **accessed** and used in a flexible way.
- **Arendt** was referring to **spaces** in the city, but without an **independent media system** there would not exist a **modern democratic public sphere**.



The Public Sphere

II. The Networked Public Sphere :

- German philosopher **Jürgen Habermas** (1984) placed the emergence of a **modern public sphere** in the **Western world**, **independent** of state and religious powers, and based on **media** such as newspapers, books, and magazines, but also on hangouts such as **cafes**, in the eighteenth century **1984**.
- In this **space** **individuals** that make up civil society are **free** to **discuss politics** without being subject to an external **authority**, and can thus form a **public opinion**.



- In modern liberal societies, a **rich and vital public sphere** is crucial to both the functioning of **democracy** and the legitimacy of **political power**.
- **Mass media independent** of governments and political parties help create a **free public sphere** and can monitor the actions of the powerful, a vital democratic function.
- For example, they can sustain **professional journalists** who identify the most important issues to be put on the **public agenda for debate**.



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II. The Networked Public Sphere :

- However, the **concentration** of **power** in the hands of professional information producers (the so-called “**fourth power**” or “**fourth estate**”) makes professional media a crucial bottleneck of **information flow**, giving them the ability to **filter and direct** news.
- Moreover, their **independence from government** control may result in an increased influence of **economic interests**, for example those of **advertisers**.



- **Digital media** have **transformed** the **functioning** of **the public sphere**, while preserving some of its crucial dynamics.
- For example, **digital media** have the potential to **diversify sources of information**.
- **Individuals** have **access** to an unprecedented variety of **sources**, including independent, alternative, and foreign sources which **can hardly be controlled by state authorities or big media corporations**.



- According to the most utopian visions of the role of **digital media**, **individuals** can break **free** from a **public sphere** led and controlled by professional and hierarchical structures associated with economic and political power, abandon the **political passivity** that characterizes the societies dominated by **traditional mass media**, and assume a **direct and active role** in **the public debate**.
- **The networked public sphere** would thus provide a wider pool of information and let individuals choose topics of interest and relevant opinions.



- Indeed, one of the **transformations** that characterize **the public sphere** in the digital age is **disintermediation**, a process of increased **independence** from **professionals** who traditionally have the role of intermediary between publics and information (Bardoel and Deuze 2001).
- Thanks to **digital technologies**, **individuals** have direct **access** to an immense amount of **information** that was previously the preserve of **experts**, **technicians**, or **professionals**, such as medical information or **direct communications** by politicians on social media.



- Also **new** processes of communication, cooperation, discussion, and **public opinion formation** emerge as **independent of the traditional mass media system**.
- This phenomenon includes epochal **transformations** of **journalism's** role.
- For example, **citizen journalism** is the production and distribution of news by individuals who are not professional journalists and through channels other than those controlled by broadcast communication incumbents (Goode 2009).





- Among the main **tools** available to **citizens** who wish to produce news are **social media**, but the historical evolution of such tools is worth mentioning.
- **Indymedia**, an information site created during the demonstrations against the World Trade Organization that took place in Seattle in 1999, was one of the first successful examples of a platform for **user-led publication of journalistic content**.
- **Anyone**, without the need to be a professional journalist, could **post news or comments** that were then automatically published and thus made accessible to and commented on by other users.



- In the **2000s**, legacy **newspapers** gradually adapted to this change, opening **online editions** in which not only content was made available through new technologies (for example computers, smartphones, or tablets), but also communication started being increasingly focused on the **interaction with readers**.
- The boundaries between mass media and new forms of communication thus changed as newspapers integrated **online news with interactive systems** such as blogging at first, comments and rating later, and eventually moved part of their content to social media.

- As a consequence, the **role** of **professional Journalists** has **changed**.
- For example, through the use of **commercial social media platforms** such as Twitter or Facebook, individual **reporters** can acquire a **visibility** comparable to that of the **newspapers** for which they work (Weaver and Willnat 2016).
- **Social media** also gradually became **sources of information** for **journalists, as politicians** and other actors started using platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to announce decisions or comment on politics (Paulussen and Harder 2014).

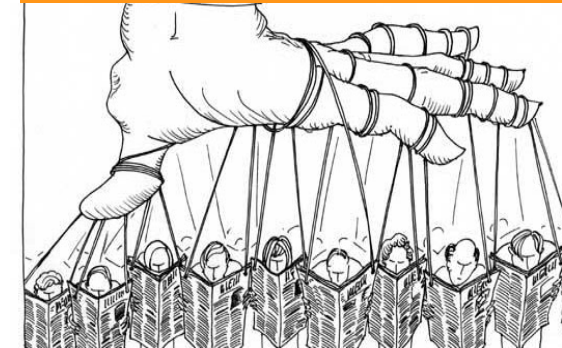


- A key **political function** of **journalism** is **gatekeeping**, i.e. the power to **select** which news will reach the public and which will not.
- In today's **public sphere**, the **gatekeeping** function is no longer exclusively in the hands of broadcast media, but rather at least partially distributed among **users** who produce, select, and examine news and information, as well as to new powerful actors such as **social media companies**.



III. The Journalism and Public Sphere :

- This challenges **the agenda setting power** of mass media, i.e. the ability to **dictate the agenda of public debate** by choosing the news and topics that will be deemed relevant for **discussion in the public sphere** (McQuail 1969).
- Relevant news can now emerge through diffusion on **social media** and eventually reach online newspapers or broadcast media.
- In sum, **digital tools for information production and sharing** allow **users** to participate in the processes that assess and make visible relevant, as well as reliable and verified, news and content.





- **Digital technologies** also favored the emergence of **new kinds of players** in the contemporary **public sphere**.
- An example is **WikiLeaks**, a platform for publishing leaks, or confidential information, which has played an important role in the redefinition of the **public sphere** in a renewed media landscape (Hindman and Thomas 2014).
- **WikiLeaks** is an international non-profit organization that collects and releases collections of documents covered by state or trade secrets restrictions.
- **Individuals** can submit leaked **information anonymously** through **encryption systems**.



- The **organization** is then responsible for verifying the documents' authenticity and publishing them while guaranteeing **anonymity** to its sources.
- Its **goal** is to bring to light “**restricted official materials involving war, spying, and corruption**” for both governments and corporations.
- The purpose of **WikiLeaks** is therefore to increase the **transparency of governments and businesses** through a form of distributed **control** practiced by all its **users**.

- Founded in **2006**, the **organization** became famous with the publication of confidential and restricted documents from **Western governments**.
- To spread these enormous amounts of information, **WikiLeaks** has worked in collaboration with major newspapers such as **The Guardian, The New York Times, and Der Spiegel**.
- At the same time, **WikiLeaks** has received **awards** for its role in the evolution of free speech.



- Throughout its history, **WikiLeaks** has experienced **censorship and boycotts**.
- **Financial institutions** such as Bank of America, Visa, MasterCard, and PayPal have **blocked its cash flow**, hampering its funding model which is based on **donations**.
- Some **US politicians** even got to the point of publicly demanding the judgement of **WikiLeaks'** founder and spokesperson, **the Australian hacker Julian Assange**.



- Following this example, **similar journalistic** initiatives have followed.
- In **2016** an **anonymous source** provided the **International Consortium for Investigative Journalism (ICIJ)** with a set of more than **11 million** classified documents originating from a financial firm based in **Panama** which provided services for transferring offshore funds to tax havens and thus shield them from tax authorities.



- The documents, dubbed “**Panama papers**,” involve heads of state and other politicians (Harding 2016).
- **Political information leaks are not new**, but digital media have changed their scope by allowing the publication of millions of documents and providing the public with an opportunity to read, analyze, and use them without professional intermediation.



- Though fascinating, examples such as citizen journalism or WikiLeaks do not mean that the **networked public sphere** is inherently **democratic** in nature.
- Analyzing the **powerful role of private corporations** and the new forms of control and censorship that characterize **digital media**, several **critics** have pointed out the importance of avoiding representing the new public sphere as perfectly **democratic**.



- For example, **Zizi Papacharissi** has argued that the **internet** is a “**highly privatized public space**,” rather than an accomplished public sphere (2002).
- Political theorist **Jodi Dean** has described **communicative capitalism** as a system of appropriation that resembles a **public sphere** but is actually subject to **exploitation and surveillance** processes enacted by **web corporations**, which are the very actors that create digital participation opportunities.



- In fact, most interactions within the **networked public sphere** occur on digital platforms that are developed, owned, and controlled by **private corporations**.
- This has led to **new forms of media concentration**, as **corporations** tend to exploit processes of merging and acquisition in order to become dominant.
- These **companies** take on the role of **new intermediaries**, and although they have proved able to dent the dominance of traditional players, such as broadcast media or newspapers, they are **not** necessarily more accessible, open, or **democratic**.



- Indeed, they can leverage their position to exercise forms of **power** typical of monopolistic telecom companies (Wu 2010).
- For example, thanks to its technology for searching information and providing free services (maps, video streaming, news, and countless others), **Google** has established itself as one of today's core **intermediaries** between **users and information**.
- In a few years its **Google News service** has become one of the leading global news websites.
- Similarly, **social media** have become crucial services used to access **political and journalistic content**.

Google



- For other **players**, such as **newspapers or news agencies**, services like **Facebook, Twitter, or Snapchat** have become the main battleground on which to **compete for reader attention**.
- **Newspapers** are investing increasing amounts of time and money to boost their presence on **social media**.
- Inside the **newsroom**, the figure of the **social media manager** has acquired a **central role**, while individual **journalists** have now become social media managers of themselves, and need to support the spread of the content they create for their newspapers .





- Although they circulate content produced by other actors, such as newspapers or television channels, services such as **Google News or Facebook** implement a **new form of gatekeeping, or information filter**.
- Furthermore, this **filter function** is often outsourced to the **service's algorithms** rather than journalists.
- Indeed, the **algorithms** that underpin digital platforms such as Google News or Facebook shape **political and social interactions**.
- These are new forms of “**algorithmic gatekeeping**,” often **monopolistic**.

- **Facebook's algorithms** have been accused of playing a crucial **political role** by presenting selected information to specific users, thus limiting news diversity and immersing us in so-called **"filter bubbles"** .
- These new **intermediaries** are **commercial enterprises** driven by **profit**.
- They are **not neutral** but, as most **players** in the world of mass media, express specific **worldviews, values, and interests**.





- **The public sphere**, a fundamental component of modern **democracies**, where **individuals** are **free** to **discuss politics** without being subject to an external **authority**, and can thus form a **public opinion**.
- **Media publics** can successfully become **politically active** thanks to the emergence of an **information-rich digital environment** and its related **communication tools**..
- **Digital technologies** also favored the emergence of **new kinds of players** in the contemporary **public sphere** , such as **WikiLeaks** and “**Panama papers**” .
- The **networked public sphere** is not inherently **democratic** in nature.
- The **algorithms** that underpin digital platforms shape **political and social interactions**.
- These are new forms of “**algorithmic gatekeeping**,”

Thank you for listening

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