

Ph.D. Research Proposal

On the Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere

Rethinking John Dewey's conception of a radical democratic public

The digital revolution that has unfolded since the latter half of the 20th century has released a social, economic, and political change, the dimensions and consequences of which are even farther-reaching than those of the printing revolution or the industrial revolution. The development of the interactive Web 2.0 and its new forms of social media and global communication, the fast and extensive changes involved in the fields of education, science, and journalism have shown that the irreversible process of digitization has also led to an ongoing fundamental structural change of the political public sphere. As it is obvious that the infrastructure of the internet will provide the primary medium of communication in the future, it becomes absolutely essential to include that extensive transformation into the theory of the democratic public sphere and the civil society.

In my research project I reflect on this change from the perspective of normative political philosophy. In this regard I will not only focus my research on the relationship between internet and democracy, but on a broader concept of the public that is deeply affected by the process of digitization. While Jürgen Habermas' work on the public sphere has been seminal in this regard, I opt to focus on the pragmatist account provided by John Dewey, by whom also Habermas has been influenced. Dewey's social and political philosophy has been disregarded for a long period due to different reasons. But during the last 25 years there has been an increasing rediscovery of his work, both in the Anglo-Saxon and in the Continental tradition. One of the main advantages of Dewey's philosophy is its connection of a wide range of different fields and interdisciplinary questions, that has possibly never been as urgent and necessary as in the light of today's global challenges. His conception of a radical democratic public includes a complex interaction between social sciences, politics, education, art, journalism, and a participatory public, and it connects theories of communication, action and anthropological foundations.

In my dissertation I will reconstruct Dewey's normative conception of the democratic public against the background of the process of digitization. I will argue that his conception is more adequate to comprehend the digital transformation of the public sphere than different contemporary approaches that follow mainly Habermas or Arendt due to a variety of systematic, but also historical reasons.

Regarding the systematic aspect, I will defend that Dewey's *pragmatist* approach to political theory has important advantages over contemporary approaches that follow Habermas or Arendt. By focusing on the context of actions, his conception of the public provides a flexible distinction between the private and the public as well as the local and the global, that is necessary to comprehend the multiple levels of communication and action within various contexts of action. It includes notably the temporal and dynamic dimensions of action as well as the role of habits that determine the idleness of progress, but also the stability of social interactions. Based on the actor's perspective, Dewey's conception is capable to address individual personal experience, limits of knowledge, creative cooperation, and collective action. Dewey's deeply pluralistic approach enables a differentiated view of the complexity and entanglement of citizens' interactions and different perspectives within societies.

Concerning the historical reasons, I argue that Dewey's conception of the public is not as strongly tied to the structure of the electronic mass media as is the recent conception of Habermas. Therefore the idea of public communication in Dewey's approach is more suitable for the emerging structure that is enabled by the digitization. Furthermore it is possible to read Dewey as an early advocate of the open access movement that is closely connected to the process of digitization since the 1960s and leads directly to contemporary movements like open science, open data, and open government. The basic trend of these increasingly significant movements corresponds on the other hand with Dewey's normative conception of a non-elitist, radical democratic public and the claim for transparency in politics. Not least this is necessary today in order to bring unwanted consequences of the digital revolution under democratic control.