The Risks of Democracy in the Public Sphere in the Digital Age—A Perspective on Habermas's Theory of Negotiated Democracy

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Abstract: The public sphere plays an important role in modern democracy as a field of deliberation and opinion that discusses public issues, participates in social activities, and shapes public opinion. However, under the impact of new technologies in the digital age, the public sphere has been forced to undergo transformation. This impact is manifested in the absence of gatekeepers of the public sphere and the penetration of consumerism. On this basis, democratic risks have arisen, and the democratic value risk brought by liberalism and the democratic process risk caused by platform capitalism have affected the democratization process of many developing countries, and Habermas's theory of negotiated democracy obviously has limitations in the face of such democratic risks. The prevention of democratic risks and the maintenance of the public sphere require not only spontaneous maintenance by members of society, but also strong guidance by the State.

1. Introduction

The public sphere, as an important concept in the field of democracy, has been widely concerned by scholars. In the 1960s, Habermas put forward the concept of the public sphere, pointing out that with the continuous development of capitalism, the liberal democratic politics that had already landed on the ground had in fact lost its social foundation, and the public sphere as a link between the state and the society had been undermined with the capitalism heading towards monopolization, and its function had been undermined continuously. In this way, under the conditions of late capitalism, the key to rebuilding democratic politics and regaining rationalism lies in re-establishing the social premise and rational basis belonging to the public sphere, and thus Habermas puts forward his own theory of the behavior of interaction, proposing a form of negotiated democracy in an attempt to solve the legitimacy crisis of democracy under the conditions of late capitalism. However, is the negotiated democracy supported by Habermas feasible? Especially in today's digital age, most people have ostensibly gained a cheap opportunity to participate in the network, but can such participation really fulfill Habermas's premise of rational interaction? What are the risks of such a democracy? In the face of the new changes of the times, theories also need to keep pace with the times, and Habermas's theory of the public sphere must be able to see the changes and developments of the times and adapt to the risks of democracy in the public sphere that are hidden in the digital age.

1.1 Impact of the Internet on the public sphere

Accompanied by the continuous development of the scientific and technological revolution, the Internet has already penetrated into all aspects of society, according to the United Nations International Telecommunication Union (ITU) released the "Facts and Figures 2023" report shows that the number of people using the Internet in the world has reached 5.4 billion, accounting for about 67% of the world's population, and in the high-income countries, the proportion is even more alarming to reach 93%. Undoubtedly, the penetration of the Internet into social life has entered a brand new stage. In such a digital era, the public sphere, as a public critical sphere between the state and society, is inevitably affected by digitalization. Habermas pointed out in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere that the public sphere firstly refers to the sphere of discussion and opinion between the sphere of state power and the sphere of private life, in which public issues are discussed, social activities are participated in, and public opinion is formed [1].

In this sense, what Habermas calls the public sphere inevitably needs to take into account the new round of structural transformations that information technology has brought to the public sphere. For the development of the public sphere, it has roughly gone through three major stages from the public sphere in the ancient Greek period, to the representative public sphere in the medieval period, and then to the bourgeois public sphere, and the structure and function of the public sphere have been constantly changing with the continuous development of the society [1]. In today's digital era, capitalism has entered the neo-liberal stage, the degree of monopolization of capital has been further increased, and with the medium of information technology and the development of globalization process, capital has realized the rapid flow of capital on a global scale, which is accompanied by the rapid growth of financial risks, and the credit crisis of 2008 has swept across the world, and the public sphere has also become an important part of the public sphere in the era of highly developed information technology and high-speed flow of factors in the global context. In such an era of highly developed information technology and high-speed mobility of factors on a global scale, the public sphere is also facing a new structural transformation.

1.2 The public sphere in the absence of gatekeepers

In his 2022 book Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffen tlichkeit und die deliberative Politik, Habermas focuses on the impact that new media technologies have had on the public sphere, and in the increasing development of new media technologies, he sees a further decline of the public sphere in the future. "The egalitarian-universalist claim of the bourgeois public sphere to the equal inclusion of all citizens seems to be finally realized in the form of new media [2]." The hidden meaning of this is self-evident, and it is clear that Habermas does not believe that the development of new media truly realizes the social premise and rational basis of the public sphere. Although new media technology has brought about that every private person who enters the public sphere of the Internet ostensibly has the right to express his or her opinion, the potential threat posed by this formal equality deserves to be guarded against. Compared with traditional media, the important feature of new media is decentralization, i.e., at the subject level, every private person in the public sphere is no longer simply a receiver of information, but also a creator of content. Through the production and dissemination of news, individuals entering the public sphere express their own opinions and views on matters of public interest. On the face of it, this is a wonderful situation for everyone as a creator, but at the same time, it is missing an important aspect, namely, control over the content of what is created. In traditional media, such as newspapers, books, television, and radio, the content is controlled by professional editors and basically conforms to certain "cognitive, normative, or aesthetic standards[1]". To a certain extent, this kind of professionalism can reverse the influence on the public who receives the information, and cultivate the public to form the aesthetic ability and appreciation

level that conforms to the norms, i.e., what Habermas called the "gatekeeper model".

In the field of new media, although there is also a certain degree of regulation in terms of content, due to the decentralized characteristics of new media itself, massive amounts of data are generated in batch every day, and Internet platforms and even the government's regulatory capacity can not be controlled in a timely manner for each piece of published content. The expansion of the creative body has reduced professionalism, and a large amount of low-quality news has flooded into the online public sphere. "Fake news" not only undermines the public's enthusiasm to participate in public discussions, but also seriously affects the level of public trust in the news. In addition, ultra-nationalism and populism use the Internet public sphere to disseminate their views, and anti-intellectualism and pseudoscience have also gained room for survival on the Internet. Compared with the traditional media era, the output of opinions via the Internet has a greater impact on the further decline of the public sphere.

2. The public sphere in the context of consumerism

The public sphere in the digital age relies on media platforms, and the monopolistic character of capitalism under the neoliberal system is likewise evident in the Internet sphere. Specifically, these privately controlled digital oligarchs have established one digital platform after another, such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and other media platforms. If private individuals want to express their views and participate in public discussions, they must rely on these platforms, abide by the corresponding rules of the platforms, and accept the ideological stance of the platforms themselves, and if they refuse to accept the relevant rules, this means that private individuals have been excluded from the public sphere of the Internet, and they no longer have the right to express their voices in the public sphere of the Internet.

At the same time, the platforms control a huge amount of data related to users and make precise pushes through artificial intelligence and big data, trapping one private person after another in a cocoon of information. "The law of the market controls the sphere of commodity circulation and social labor, and if it penetrates the sphere manipulated by private individuals as publics, then critical consciousness is gradually transformed into a concept of consumption [1]." Already in the midst of the traditional bourgeois public sphere, the public of cultural critique has been gradually replaced by the public of cultural consumption, a phenomenon that is even more pronounced in the digital age. The behavior of human interaction in the public sphere is replaced by the behavior of consumption, and the platform collects data, acquires the consumption habits of users, and pushes out a large amount of relevant information, where the form of information is not a medium of communication, but a commodity. Inevitably, information in the digital public sphere is used by platforms as a tool for profit, and "under the control of algorithms, social media also facilitates the further commodification of the context of the living world. [2] "This consumer attribute makes the public sphere in the digital era more of a private nature, and becomes a kind of display of commodities, while the real insightful public opinion gradually disappears in the public sphere, and consumerism becomes the mainstream of the digital era.

In the deep structure of digital interactions, technological rationality is reshaping the ontological foundations of the public sphere with a double movement. From a phenomenological perspective, the design of social media interfaces essentially constitutes a new type of embodied cognitive framework, in which the trajectory of a user's finger swipes and the movement of his or her visual focus are encoded as computable behavioral data. This technological manipulation of intersubjectivity into data points leads to a fundamental change in the "qualification of interaction" emphasized by Habermas - when the identity of the interlocutor is deconstructed into feature vectors, and the validity claims of speech are reduced to values of affective polarity, the digital public sphere is reduced to a "prison of

panoramic openness" in the sense of Foucault, where every participant is a part of the data-collection mechanism. Each participant plays the dual role of guardian and prisoner in the data collection mechanism.

The spatial and temporal compression realized by platform capital through algorithmic governance has completely rewritten the nature of presence in public discourse. The "co-temporal presence" on which the traditional public sphere is based has been deconstructed into discrete asynchronous interactions, while the instantaneous logic of algorithmic recommendation creates a false spatial and temporal continuity. This paradoxical tension dissolves the ephemeral dimension necessary for critical reflection, replacing it with the fragmented time crystals of what Deleuze describes as the "society of control". As users constantly switch cognitive focus in a multi-threaded flow of information, the continuity of the subject's attention, on which the rationality of interaction depends, is systematically undermined, and the quality of dialogue in the public sphere takes on the characteristics of what Zygmunt Baumann has characterized as "liquid modernity".

The epistemological violence of recommendation algorithms lies in the fact that they compress complex human value judgments into predictable patterns of behavior through probabilistic modeling. This unconscious operation of technology produces symbolic power that is far more insidious and thorough than the traditional ideological state apparatus. Algorithmic governance reconfigures the cognitive schema of the public sphere at the micro level, reducing the subject of "self-legislation" in the Kantian sense to a parametric variable in a statistical model. The principle of autonomous rationality established since the Enlightenment is fundamentally challenged when the user's freedom of choice is framed within the space of possibilities delimited by collaborative filtering algorithms.

This cognitive manipulation leads to a full-scale return to the "violence of sameness" that Adorno warned about in the digital age. Beneath the personalized appearance of algorithmic recommendations lies a deeper logic of standardization - each user's seemingly unique interest profile is, in essence, a predetermined segmentation of consumption categories by the platform's capital. The essence of this pseudo-personalization is a digital variant of Marcuse's critique of "repressive anti-sublimation," which consolidates the totalitarian domination of consumerism by creating the illusion of difference. When the topic setting of public discussion is determined by algorithmic prioritization, and when the assessment of the impact of opinions is transformed into a race for clicks, the "negative thinking" in the perspective of critical theory loses its room for survival.

And to break the current dilemma it is necessary to return to the meta-critical dimension of the theory of interactional behavior and reconstruct the paradigm of interactional rationality in the digital age at the level of philosophy of technology. It is first necessary to deconstruct the metaphysical foundations of dataism and expose its epistemological violence of quantifying human experience as computable. Here Heidegger's inquiry into the nature of technology reveals a new critical potential - as digital platforms reduce existence to a collection of data points, we need to reconstruct the poetic dimension of technology through the lens of existential difference, transforming the algorithm from a tool of domination into what Habermas calls a "medium of communication. Second, the reconstruction of the digital public sphere requires the development of a new institutionalized ethic of negotiation. This requires integrating algorithmic governance into the framework of consultative democracy and checking the expansion of technological power through a proceduralist legal paradigm. Drawing on the intellectual resources of Habermasian constitutional patriotism, a platform governance model based on digital constitutionalism can be envisioned that transforms the formulation of code rules into a democratic deliberative process with legitimacy. Only by transforming the black-box operation of algorithms into a transparent and auditable public process can the normative connection between technological systems and the lifeworld be restored. Finally, it is necessary to cultivate the forces of subjectivity that resist the alienation of consumerism. This requires the activation of Benjaminian dialectical imagery to rediscover the potential of emancipatory

practices in digital ruins. Through the development of critical digital literacy education, users can be helped to identify the cognitive manipulation strategies of platform capital and maintain a reflective distance in their data-enabled existence. This practice of self-enlightenment forms a hidden dialog with Foucault's theory of self-technology, pointing to an ethical path for the reconstruction of subjectivity in the digital age.

Under the dual attack of consumerism and digital technology, the contemporary public sphere is experiencing an unprecedented existential crisis. This crisis is manifested both in the structural distortion of interactional rationality and in the comprehensive erosion of the lifeworld by technological colonization. The key to solving the dilemma lies in rekindling the starry flame of communicative rationality in the iron cage of the technological system, which requires the conceptual translation of Habermas's ethic of negotiation for the digital age, and even more so, the development of a new type of practical philosophy that resists digital alienation. Only through sustained efforts in the dual dimensions of institutional innovation and subjective reconstruction can we open up a path of salvation to a rational public sphere in the fog of algorithms. This Enlightenment Movement in the digital era is not only about the political agenda of technological democratization, but also a spiritual expedition to regain the dignity of the human subject in the digital existential situation.

3. Risks to democracy in the public sphere in the digital age

Beginning in the 1970s, the third wave of democratization gradually swept across the globe, and many developing countries began to carry out democratization reforms, reforming their political systems in accordance with Western liberal democracy. However, the results of democratization have not been satisfactory, and many developing countries have experienced economic recession, political instability and social unrest during the democratization process. History and reality show a clear conclusion that democratization itself carries risks. "Democracy risk refers to some ideological concepts or political behaviors, potential or apparent, that have a negative impact on political stability and political development, and that emerge with the development of democratic politics. [3]" And with the continuous development of new media technology, this democratic risk does not seem to be circumvented, but rather becomes more and more significant in the soil of the brand new technological field. Admittedly, new media technology plays an important role in promoting political openness and enthusiasm for political participation, but the potential risks involved should not be ignored.

3.1 Value Risks of Liberalism

According to Habermas, the formation of the public sphere requires three elements: first, a public group with independent thinking ability, rational judgment and critical perspective, who have the courage to express their opinions openly and are concerned about and committed to the promotion of the common interests of society; second, as a bridge for the transmission of information and exchange of views, the public media plays an indispensable role in providing a powerful platform for the dissemination of public voices; and third, the public, through sufficient discussion and negotiation, it has the right to participate in the public sphere on issues of general interest. Discussion and consultation, the public reaches a consensus on issues of general interest, forming a strong public opinion, which in turn promotes the positive evolution of society [1]. Such an idealized communication environment is precisely the premise of Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy. However, whether it is the traditional public sphere or the digital public sphere, there is clearly a gulf from such an idealized environment, and in Habermas's view, the principles of quotidian democracy need to be satisfied in order to reach an outcome that is in the public interest. In Between Facts and Norms, Habermas states that "what is valid (gulting) are only those norms of action to which all

possible interested parties are likely to agree as participants in a reasonable deliberation. [4]" From this, it can be seen that the requirements of the basic principles of deliberative democracy are mainly twofold: first, to include as many stakeholders as possible, each of whom expresses his or her views on an equal footing; and second, to consult together and refuse to reach a consensus by means of fraud, coercion, and so on.

It is worth noting that both the conditions for the formation of the public sphere and the principles of deliberative democracy are essentially norms regulated from a liberal standpoint, and if one thinks carefully about these norms of public participation, it is easy to see that a set of contradictions is implied. In the public sphere of the digital age, in order to participate in this sphere of discussion, it is necessary to exclude those members of the community who do not have the qualifications of interaction, those who are not willing to comply with the rationality of interaction, or those who do not have the ability to express themselves rationally, are in fact excluded from the negotiation of democracy. On the surface, the principle of deliberative democracy represents a politics of universalism, in which everyone has an equal right to speak out freely, but essentially it is a politics of particularity, in which those who enter the realm of this politics accept the liberal principle of neutrality without exception [5]. The risk of liberal democracy also arises from this contradiction, as liberals emphasize the principle of universality in democratic politics, advocating pluralism and wanting every individual to be able to express his or her own views, while ignoring the fact that the liberal principle of tolerance does not, in fact, apply to non-liberal conceptions of it. With the rise of the Internet, the chaos caused by this crisis of liberal democracy has become more and more evident, as the extreme right-wing uses issues such as immigration, gender, and race to generate discussion and support in the digital public sphere, while liberals are powerless in the face of this state of affairs, wanting the government to regulate such dangerous speech but at the same time wanting to preserve the principle of universality, in which the dichotomy between the values of pluralism and chaos has led to the creation of a democratic system. In this dichotomy, the value of pluralism and chaos has caused the democratic system to be impacted and challenged, such as the "Capitol Hill Incident" in the United States, the outbreak of large-scale riots in France and so on, and the chaos of pluralism has led to what Zizek called meaningless violence, and the risk of democracy has been magnified in the age of the Internet [6].

3.2 Process risks under platform capitalism

The structure of the public sphere in the digital age has quietly changed due to the absence of the traditional media's "gatekeepers," and the penetration of consumerism into the public sphere has been particularly serious. In such a public space created by social media, all the discussion behaviors of the participants are in fact under the monitoring of the digital other, and the succession of hot news has dissolved the seriousness of political discussion, replaced by the entertainment and irrationalization of public affairs, in this environment, the identity and political cognition of the participants are very easy to be influenced by digital platforms, and the formation of political mobilization power, affecting the democratic process [7].

In Habermas's view, democratic principles that meet the public's legitimacy expectations need to go through the following procedures: firstly, the public needs to consciously participate in the process of political practice; secondly, the state needs to establish the institutional conditions to guarantee the political participation of citizens; and lastly, the resulting principles of justice about society can be fairly evaluated in the discussion environment of deliberative democracy [4]. The political public sphere is not a place where individuals reach conclusions, but rather a place where diversified public opinions are formed through the mass media; however, under the conditions of the digital age, the formation of citizens' political opinions is essentially the result of algorithmic control. Large digital

platforms potentially influence or manipulate voters by monitoring the digital traces of netizens, speculating on their political preferences through big data, and by implanting advertisements during the election process or pushing different political news. In this way, the process of political participation loses the premise of rational discussion and instead becomes part of consumption, and these populations manipulated by platforms and algorithms can play an unpredictable role in the democratization process.

From the perspective of democratic risk, changes in the public sphere in the digital age create two kinds of risk: first, the risk of the process of democratization. The development of new media as part of globalization, the export of ideology occupies an important part, especially in developing countries, the large-scale dissemination of Western media platforms has also brought Western liberal democratic ideas, and the lack of rationality and the guidance of the platform has led to such things as "democratic omnipotence". The lack of rationality and the guidance of the platforms have led to the rise of statements such as "the theory of the omnipotence of democracy" and "the theory of quick democracy", and the public's demand for the democratization of the government and the realization of governmental transparency has increased, and even ignored the basic laws of political construction, resulting in unforeseeable risks. At the same time, the excessive promotion of liberal democracy will also stigmatize the meaning of "democracy," which will have a negative impact on the construction of democracy. Second, there is the risk of mobilization outside the democratic system. Social media in the digital age not only change the structure of the public sphere, but also provide an opportunity for the majority of Internet users to participate directly in politics. What Schmitt called the "applause" of democracy seems to be a reality in the digital age. In hot political events involving the general public, the public gathers and expresses its opinions in the virtual space, and this participation in public events actually creates a group of people with "political passion". Unlike the forces within traditional democracies, which are not always conducive to the building of democracy, these extra-democratic political forces advocate for democratization and reform, but for most developing countries, where the social base is insufficient to support the establishment of democratic institutions, the realpolitik movement triggered by the new media participation in politics can have a significant impact on the democratic process of a country. In the case of the Arab Spring, when the public sphere was inflamed by the self-immolation of a Tunisian businessman, which triggered the democratic upheaval that engulfed the entire Arab world, the extra-institutional mobilizing power of social media added a great deal of risk to democratization.

3.3 Preventing risks to democracy in the digital age

The transformation of the public sphere in the digital age has brought risks to democracy, and the value risks rooted in liberalism and the process risks closely related to consumerism are like the sword of Damocles hanging over everyone's head. From the Arab Spring to the Capitol Hill scandal, the risks of democracy have been exacerbated in the age of globalization through the use of social media, where the public has been given the opportunity to participate in politics, but this participation has always been monitored and guided by capital. The crisis of the substance of modern democracy is manifested in the realm of democratic risk, not to mention the possibility of intertwined democratic risks. In the new era, China's Internet is developing just as rapidly, and the new media have brought a whole new posture to the public sphere, but they also bring risks. In recent years, a large number of hot social issues through the dissemination of the Internet in the public caused heated discussions, all kinds of chaos has arisen, in order to promote the whole process of people's democracy, it is necessary to face up to this social reality, wary of foreign forces to take the opportunity to disrupt the political order, in this regard, the prevention of democratic risks in the public sphere in the digital age is imperative.

How can democratic risks in the digital age be effectively prevented? This question necessitates a comprehensive approach, encompassing the concerted efforts of both the state and society. Below are further elaborated strategies that may provide deeper insights into addressing these risks.First and foremost, strengthening the regulation of online media and establishing a comprehensive self-media qualification review mechanism is a critical first step. In the digital age, the traditional "gatekeeper model" has been profoundly disrupted. The sheer volume of data generated daily has overwhelmed the capabilities of even the most advanced algorithms to filter out harmful or misleading content in real-time. Therefore, relying solely on state or platform regulation, which often post-incident, is insufficient. A proactive approach is needed, one that involves pre-screening self-media outlets for qualifications and credibility. This can be achieved through a multi-layered review process that includes verifying the authenticity of accounts, assessing the accuracy of information shared, and monitoring for patterns of misinformation or hate speech. Additionally, fostering a culture of media literacy among the populace is essential, empowering citizens to discern fact from fiction and making them less susceptible to manipulative narratives.

Second, the comprehensive governance of the online environment, particularly within the digital public sphere, is imperative. This involves creating safe spaces for the expression of diverse viewpoints while simultaneously mitigating irrational or harmful content. Democracy in the digital realm should not be equated with direct democracy, where every voice carries equal weight regardless of its validity or potential for harm. Instead, the state must introduce and enforce laws and regulations that promote rational discourse, penalize the spread of misinformation, and protect individuals from online harassment and bullying. Such regulations should also encourage transparency and accountability from digital platforms, ensuring they take responsibility for the content hosted on their sites.

Moreover, the state must prioritize the construction and reinforcement of mainstream values amidst the proliferation of pluralistic perspectives. In an era where globalization has brought diverse cultures and ideologies into closer proximity, the risk of foreign political intervention through digital hotspots is ever-present. To counteract this, the state should actively promote the construction of socialist core values, fostering a sense of national identity and unity. This includes educating citizens on the importance of patriotism, social justice, and collective well-being over individual gain. Simultaneously, the development of a socialist political culture is crucial, one that emphasizes collective participation and responsible citizenship.

Lastly, strengthening the supervision of digital platforms and improving laws and regulations related to public privacy is vital. In today's data-driven economy, platforms hold immense power over users' personal information. Unauthorized access, misuse, or even sale of this data can have severe consequences for individuals' privacy and security. Therefore, robust data protection laws must be enforced, ensuring that platforms adhere to strict guidelines regarding data collection, storage, and usage. Furthermore, promoting transparency in data practices can enhance trust between platforms and users, fostering a healthier digital ecosystem. By regulating the influence of consumerism advocated by platforms, the state can mitigate its adverse effects on public discourse and democratic processes, thereby reducing democratic risks.

In conclusion, preventing democratic risks in the digital age requires a holistic approach that integrates technological advancements, legal frameworks, educational initiatives, and cultural nurturing. Only through the collaborative efforts of the state and society can we hope to create a safer, more informed, and more resilient digital democracy.

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