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		From the Classical Public Sphere to the Digital Public Arena: A Habermasian Socio-Communicative Analysis of the Transformation of Social Interaction in the Virtual Age	
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Abstract			
<p>This study is situated within the sociology of communication and critically examines the transformation of the public sphere in the context of contemporary digital environments through a Habermasian theoretical lens. Entitled “From the Classical Public Sphere to the Digital Public Arena: A Habermasian Socio-Communicative Analysis of the Transformation of Social Interaction in the Virtual Age,” the research explores how the emergence of the virtual sphere has reconfigured the structure of social relations, communicative practices, and forms of collective interaction. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas’s theory of the public sphere and communicative action, the study analyzes the extent to which digital platforms function as alternative or parallel public arenas capable of sustaining rational-critical debate, deliberative discourse, and collective will formation. It highlights the ambivalent nature of digital communication, which simultaneously expands opportunities for participation, expression, and connectivity while also contributing to fragmented discourse, superficial interaction, weakened social bonds, and algorithmically mediated communication. Through a socio-communicative analytical approach, the research examines transformations in interaction patterns, modes of discourse, and mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion within digital spaces. Particular attention is given to the impact of platform logic, accelerated communication, symbolic compression, and digital mediation on the normative conditions of communicative rationality. The study argues that while the virtual sphere offers new possibilities for public engagement, it also challenges the foundational principles of the Habermasian public sphere, raising critical questions about democratic communication, social integration, and the future of collective deliberation in the digital age.</p>			
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From the Classical Public Sphere to the Digital Public Arena: A Habermasian Socio-Communicative Analysis of the Transformation of Social Interaction in the Virtual Age

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The features of our world today are changing, and it has become an established fact that, amid the explosion of the digital revolution and the dominance of electronic practices, humanity is witnessing radical changes at all levels. The pattern of this change appears in the shift from studying social reality to focusing on the study of virtual society. This change coincided with the rapid pace of transformation under technological development during the last decade of the twentieth century, which caused a disturbance in social balances.

In this regard, Pierre Lévy states: *“What we call a virtual world has come to encompass almost everything: our bodies, our intelligence, our messages, our texts, what we own and exchange. All of this today is touched by the movement toward virtualization. This rapid and globalizing movement has also affected the ways in which we are together, as it has become possible to be a ‘virtual group,’ ‘virtual friends,’ a ‘virtual institution,’ or a ‘virtual democracy’... Does entering the virtual world mean separation from reality?”*

Through this virtual space, a reshaping of human interaction patterns and modes of meaning production within social spaces has been observed. As the virtual sphere has become a parallel field, and sometimes a substitute for the traditional public sphere, new questions have emerged regarding the nature of discourse, the conditions of communication, levels of communicative action, and the ability of this new space to host rational public debate in the Habermasian sense.

Accordingly, this perspective represents a fertile theoretical framework for understanding this transformation, as it emphasizes the centrality of communicative action based on rationality and argumentation in constructing the public sphere as a space for exchanging opinions and forming collective will. However, the transfer of social interactions to the digital space has raised fundamental issues related to the continuity or transformation of these conditions, especially in light of the dominance of digital platforms, ranking algorithms, and the spread of rapid and abbreviated communication, resulting in the reshaping of social relations and patterns of daily interaction.

In the same context, this paper seeks to present a socio-communicative analytical vision of how social relations are affected by the virtual sphere through a critical reading based on Habermasian concepts of discourse, communicative action, and the structure of the public sphere. The article also attempts to deconstruct the mechanisms of transition from face-to-face interaction to digital interaction, highlighting its social repercussions on communication patterns, trust-building, group formation, and the limits of social participation under digital technologies.

Based on the above, we are today living in two parallel worlds: the first is real, in which daily practices and social interactions are gradually fading, and the second is a virtual imaginative world in which we spend most of our time and whose use has become an inevitable necessity of daily life. Thus, internet society has become a scientific reality that cannot be doubted. It is a new science called “Internet Sociology,” where our current sociological study intersects with this term referred to by Dr. Nadim Mansouri in his book *Topics in Internet Sociology*. This science studies the impact of digital technology on human society and thus combines two scientific fields: sociology and the internet. Although the internet is a technology, it has transformed into a social phenomenon and a social fact, where we find in internet society all human phenomena and interactions manifested digitally at the level of groups and individuals. Therefore, it may be difficult to find any researcher who asserts the neutrality of the internet or its freedom from social or psychological effects; hence, researchers recommend studying the internet more effectively.

Based on this, we pose the following question: How has the virtual sphere contributed to reorganizing social relations, and how has this transformation affected the structure of communicative action within the framework of the Habermasian public sphere?

This study aims to analyze the concept of the public sphere in Habermasian theory, monitor the transformations brought about by digital media in communication methods, and evaluate the potential of the virtual sphere as an alternative public sphere, while exploring the limits of communicative rationality in the digital environment.

The current study relies on a theoretical analytical method supported by a critical approach and a comparison between the traditional public sphere and the virtual sphere, in addition to analyzing contemporary sociological and media literature.

1. Jürgen Habermas, Founder of Public Sphere Theory:

Jürgen Habermas is considered one of the greatest philosophers, social theorists, intellectuals, and critics of the contemporary era worldwide. His numerous works (nearly forty books) have been translated into more than thirty

languages, and he has received more than twenty honorary awards from international universities and institutions. His works began to appear in 1952, and he himself became the subject of critical studies from 1964 onward. He continued to write and publish his works until recently. Perhaps the most distinctive feature of this great thinker is the striking diversity of his interests and writings. He has been described as a “border worker” (Grenzgänger) or a “mediator” between philosophy and the social sciences. He is also a fierce intellectual and a committed critic of issues that trouble the major question about the future of Europe. He entered the arena of public debate while still a student at the age of twenty-four, thanks to a journalistic article he published in 1953 in which he criticized Heidegger’s silence regarding Nazi crimes. While deeply engaged in the daily concerns of the society in which he lived—as exemplified by his profound dialogue on “Philosophy in a Time of Terror” with Jacques Derrida—he nevertheless believed that the life of a philosopher always remains poor in terms of external events.

Jürgen Habermas is among the most prominent sociologists who contributed to analyzing the role of communication in modern societies, particularly in the fields of social change and democracy. This is evident in his two major works, *The Theory of Communicative Action* and *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. *The Theory of Communicative Action* is considered one of the most important works in his social and philosophical project, representing a model work that crowns his efforts during the 1960s and 1970s and brings together diverse philosophical, sociological, scientific, and linguistic references.

2. The Concept of the Public Sphere and the Conditions of Its Formation:

2.1 The Public Sphere in the Habermasian Concept:

According to Jürgen Habermas in his thesis published in 1960 entitled *The Public Sphere: An Archaeology of Advertising as a Structural Component of Bourgeois Society*, he addressed the idea of the birth of the bourgeois public sphere during the eighteenth century, which witnessed the emergence of the press as a means used by authority to disseminate news of courts, security, and product prices. Public spaces such as cafés, libraries, and clubs also appeared, where the bourgeoisie presented their ideas and discussed issues of art, theater, and literature.

Habermas believes that the public sphere is a space for public affairs, communication issues, and the lifeworld, within which citizenship is proclaimed, nurtured, and fully practiced. There is no meaning to the public sphere unless it is a domain for practicing citizenship and democratic political action based on dialogue and the exchange of opinions.

Kerry Lewis L. Quéré describes the public sphere as: “a symbolic space that allows individuals to position themselves within society and its orientations.” The concept carries two ideas: first, that it is a public domain for free expression viewed as a space for communication; second, that individuals within it express their opinions through public debate, resorting to rational arguments in an attempt to find appropriate solutions to public issues.

Thus, the public sphere becomes a segment of social life in which public opinion is formed, and people act as a single body.

This concept has become influential in debates about how to create and maintain structures that demonstrate that people can communicate freely. These structures represent the field of social life, where people can raise and discuss matters related to the public interest without referring to traditional authorities. On this basis, the central idea around which the public sphere revolves is free and open rational debate. Habermas considers human disclosure a fundamental rule of rational dialogue, as it is necessary to engage in meta-communicative discourses and intentions that frame what may happen thereafter. In this regard, Habermas states: “We cannot achieve a value consensus regarding experiential and virtual contents without simultaneously entering into a meta-communicative discourse concerning the choice between various possible practices of human relations.”

Accordingly, it can be said that the public sphere according to Habermas is reflection on the communicative process between parties in societies in order to achieve interaction and social integration, as it is used to exchange opinions, ideas, and debates. Ideas discussed in this sphere can become public opinion through communication. In this context, Habermas points out that “communication is the only means that enables the re-establishment of connections among members of society participating in the communicative process.”

Among the most important characteristics of the public sphere identified by Habermas are the following:

- The public sphere is a domain of our social life through which something approaching public opinion can be formed.
- The public sphere emerges from private individuals who come together as a public to address society's needs vis-à-vis the state.
- The public sphere is a group of individuals who make use of their rationality and thinking in discussing public issues.
- In general, the public sphere consists of spaces in which members address their preferences and reach decisions about how they will live and work together collectively in the future. It is characterized by three aspects: open participation, equality of positions and roles regardless of social and economic status, and the openness of any issue to discussion.

2.2 The Formation of the Concept of the Public Sphere:

Public Sphere Theory emerged as a social and political theory by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1962. The theory explains and describes the emergence of the public sphere between the domain of public authority (government) and the private domain (family and private individual affairs). According to Habermas, the public sphere emerged in European bourgeois societies in particular at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century through public debates on government policies, within which public opinion trends crystallized. However, it existed in different forms and names in earlier periods, as it was associated with the Greek city-state at the height of its political, administrative, legal, and philosophical development. The Greeks practiced their daily lives in public squares known as the Agora, which were places for oratory, presenting ideas, and discussing public issues.

3. Sociology of Communicative Action in the Virtual Sphere:

With technological advancement, the communication revolution and new media and communication technologies—especially the internet—have contributed to the emergence of a new social public space that can reflect Habermasian ideas. This led some researchers to add the characteristic of virtuality to the public sphere, linking it to the internet and forming what is known as the virtual public sphere, within which ideas, opinions, and shared interests are discussed and exchanged among individuals from different regions of the world. Consequently, individuals gain freedom in expressing ideas that they cannot declare in their real space.

Other researchers have sought to explore the possibilities that new media may hold for the public sphere and democracy by using the term virtual public sphere. Benkler defines it as the transformation of the public sphere from analog to digital, which enabled individuals and various groups to produce, publish, and circulate information and ideas for political and civic action, thereby disrupting the authority of mass media.

According to Bruno Latour, it is a physical space as a real place (geographical, urban, rural...) or virtual (social networks) within which the “public” manifests, and within which groups, individuals, and also objects (devices, texts, competencies, structures...) and quasi-objects—hybrid entities—gather.

Other researchers such as Castells argue that the virtual public sphere can lead to the emergence of a transnational public sphere as ideas flow rapidly between producers, distributors, and audiences at local, national, regional, and international levels. Zizi Papacharissi affirms that the internet and surrounding technologies carry the promise of reviving the public sphere, although many aspects of these new technologies may limit or enhance this potential. While internet technologies provide vast capabilities for storing and retrieving data, allowing access to information previously unavailable.

By applying definitions of the public sphere to the digital space, it becomes clear that it is “the space in which dialogue, discussion, and the exchange of opinions take place around public affairs and citizens’ political and social issues, and the space that allows the political citizen the possibility of communication and interaction to discuss various issues of their society,” meaning that internet spaces represent an embodiment of what Habermas discussed.

In general, the virtual public sphere is distinguished from the traditional public sphere by several characteristics at the following levels:

- **Reshaping the boundaries between public and private:** Social networking sites have become spaces for building individual identity and self-presentation in the public sphere, allowing people to access the subjective worlds of others. This overlap between private subjective worlds and external worlds leads to reshaping cultural norms that define privacy and subjectivity in Arab societies.
- **New forms of social action:** Social networking sites have enabled marginalized political elites to bypass mechanisms of exclusion from the traditional public sphere dominated by the state, forming spaces governed by intellectual affinity that produce political and cultural content.
- **New aesthetics:** Subjective worlds, opinions, and ideas related to public affairs appear in the virtual public sphere, manifested through expressive forms such as images, texts, and videos.
- **The innovative user:** Audiences in the virtual public sphere have become content creators, and the production of discourse is no longer monopolized by a specific elite as in the traditional public sphere. These creations may be original or reinterpretations of traditional media content.
- **New elites:** Social networking sites have produced new elites consisting of bloggers and Facebook page administrators who dominate discussions and steer them due to their popularity.

From the above, it can be said that the focus has recently shifted from the internet as a new virtual public sphere to social networking sites as a new public sphere. Researchers emphasize that the services provided by social networking sites—especially Facebook—facilitate communication among individuals and may represent the best means of achieving a genuine virtual public sphere compared to previous communication tools.

Thus, communicative action shifts from a search for shared truth to a search for interaction, and from discourse oriented toward agreement to discourse oriented toward appearance and spectacle.

4. Criticisms Directed at Habermasian Theory:

The theory has been subjected to a number of criticisms, summarized as follows:

- Habermas presented an overly idealized picture of the bourgeois public sphere as being based on rational, logical discussions, while ignoring all irrational aspects that affect debate. Moreover, discourses presented through this sphere express the social power of participants laden with their ideologies, such as wealthy bourgeois elites, generating dominant discourses that reflect the private interests of the most influential social groups while excluding other segments of society.
- The idea of a single, comprehensive public sphere proposed by Habermas is among the most criticized points. Although the public sphere can be based on the idea of multiple publics, given that audiences belong to diverse sectors with different characteristics and ideologies, this results in diversity in discussion topics and axes reflecting their particular interests. Social inequality within capitalist systems does not create one public sphere but rather multiple and diverse public spheres.

In addition to the foregoing, the concept of the public sphere has been subjected to wide-ranging criticisms from various multidisciplinary perspectives, ranging from historical criticism to feminist theory critiques. Despite all these criticisms, Sparks argues that researchers tend to retain the concept of the public sphere due to its strong appeal, as it functions as a normative framework through which we can measure the democratic claims of a given media system.

5. Communicative Action in the Digital Age – A Socio-Communicative Reading

Regarding the relationship between the subject of our study and the public sphere referred to by Habermas, it can be said that through new media a virtual public sphere is formed. Understanding this virtual sphere requires a different vision of new media that breaks away from the “instrumental” conception. New media are not merely tools for transmission, delivery, reporting, dissemination, or influence. Breaking with this instrumental conception leads to an emphasis on the complex nature of media—both institutional and technical at the same time—and a shift from the problem of transmission and delivery to the problem of mediation. New media establish a multidimensional space that accommodates multiple patterns of interaction (both individual and collective), new forms of writing

(blogging), and forms of communication that follow traditional models despite existing within the virtual space, such as advertising and marketing. Thus, new media have a composite technological, political, and cultural nature and maintain a pervasive presence in social life.

Consequently, new media are not merely a technological phenomenon; rather, they are based on possibilities and applications that the user may activate within their social and cultural context, or ignore. Our view of Facebook, for example, in the Arab world allows us to observe the reciprocal influence between it and the contexts in which it operates as a network. The network influences its cultural context because it enables specific forms of expression, action, and organization. Conversely, this cultural context influences it, since these new forms of expression, action, and organization are specific, meaning that their meanings and dimensions are linked to particular contexts.

In light of this theory, it can be said that the virtual space and its contributions are not limited merely to communication among users across the world, but go beyond that to creating interaction and building social relationships among individuals. Social networking sites, and Facebook in particular, are considered among the most prominent stations of this space due to the features that distinguish them from other sites. They have demonstrated, in a striking manner, their ability to provide subscribers with opportunities to exchange information and experiences and to express their opinions freely, gathering within virtual frameworks that grant them a virtual space for dialogue, exchange of subscriptions, and shared interests. This space closely resembles the public sphere discussed by Habermas.

This theory also enables us to identify the role of social networking sites as spaces for dialogue, discussion, expression of opinions, and sharing of common interests among users, all with complete freedom. This explains the role of social networking sites in shaping a public sphere and the extent of its impact on the private sphere, whereby we can observe the resulting effects on users' social lives.

Thus, the objective of employing the theory of communicative action is to highlight the concept of the public sphere and link it to the concept of social communication. This concept is no longer confined to satisfying desires and needs that were the primary motive for accessing these sites; rather, it has become a scientific theory. Hence, Habermasian postulates serve as evidence of this digital transformation. They represent beginnings that benefited from social science theories focusing on self-identity and interaction with others in the virtual space and the behaviors resulting from this in the real world. Social communication is a reciprocal process between a sender and a receiver, and it also refers to social relations that occur between actors within a specific social system (the virtual space). Accordingly, the public sphere proposed by Habermas is considered one of the most important central issues that focus on the role of reason in managing discussions through his emphasis on the issue of rationality, which requires a social system, due to the important role it plays in the communicative process.

Conclusion:

This study shows that the transition from the traditional public sphere to the virtual sphere represents a profound sociological transformation that affects the essence of communicative action as formulated by Habermas within his project of deliberative rationality. While the virtual sphere expands the boundaries of participation and breaks the monopoly over discourse production, it introduces new factors that reshape public debate, most notably algorithms, the culture of rapid interaction, and the fragmentation of discourse.

If the Habermasian sphere is based on dialogue and equality of opportunities for expression, the digital environment reveals new balances between technological empowerment on the one hand and symbolic and algorithmic domination on the other. This makes the virtual sphere a dual domain:

- It provides the possibility of reproducing a participatory public sphere.
- Yet it suffers from constraints that render communicative rationality vulnerable to distortion or structural bias.

In conclusion, we emphasize that understanding the nature of this transformation requires integrating sociological analysis with media criticism, in view of the growing roles of digital media in shaping public opinion and producing meaning. The study concludes that the future of the public sphere depends on societies' ability to develop technological and regulatory mechanisms that protect the values of transparency, dialogue, and deliberative discourse, in a manner consistent with the spirit of communicative rationality defended by Habermas.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based on theoretical analysis and conceptual interpretation of existing sociological and communication theories. It does not involve human participants, personal data, or experimental procedures. Therefore, no ethical approval was required. The authors confirm adherence to academic integrity standards, proper citation practices, and respect for intellectual property.

Author Contributions

- **Dr. Sabrina Fekir** contributed to the conceptual framework, theoretical analysis, literature review, and drafting of the manuscript.
- **Dr. Boulebda Ali** contributed to the analytical interpretation, refinement of the Habermasian framework, critical discussion, and final revision of the manuscript.

Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript and take full responsibility for its content.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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