ABSTRACT

Purpose – Jurgen Habermas expressed his concern with streamlining and strengthening the democratic values in his book ‘The Structural Transformation of Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into Bourgeoisie Society, Economy (1962) in which he emphasises that the public sphere which is a forum of private individuals that emerged in different phases in modern times is continuously being bourgeoisified. The present study is an attempt to make assessment of the relevance of Habermasian public sphere in new media regime. It also looks at the possibility of making the public sphere more robust an vibrant in a cyber age that has widened the gap between information rich and information poor.

Design/Methodology /Approach – Histo-analytical methodology has been used in the present study.

Findings – Habermasian concept of public sphere may be used as an affective tool for realizing real democracy even in a cyber age.

Research limitations / Implications – The study lacks empirical enrichment owing to the paucity of time and resources.

Practical implications – Invites attention for further study.
**Originality /value** – Analysis of the development of new global public spheres with the internet and new multimedia technology today goes beyond Habermas.

**Keywords** – Public sphere, cyber democracy, cyber age, life world, communication action.

**Type of the paper** – Research Paper.

**Introduction**

Jurgen Habermas’ concern with genuine democracy is expressed in his study ‘The Structural Transformation of The Public Sphere’ which was initially published in 1962, generated productive controversy and insight and in so many different fields it still continues to be relevant and deserves critical scrutiny. Habermas’ focus on democratization was linked with emphasis on political participation as the core of a democratic society and as an essential element in individual self-development. His study contrasted various forms of an active, participatory bourgeois public sphere in the heroic era of liberal democracy with the more privatized forms of spectator politics in a bureaucratic industrial society in which the media and elites controlled the public sphere.\(^1\) The two major themes of the book include analysis of the historical genesis of the bourgeois public sphere, followed by an account of the structural change of the public sphere in the contemporary era with the rise of state capitalism, the culture industries, and the increasingly powerful positions of economic corporations and big business in public life. On this account, big economic and governmental organizations took over the public sphere, while citizens became content to become primarily consumers of goods, services, political administration, and spectacle.
The bourgeois public sphere, which began appearing around 1700 in Habermas’ interpretation, was to mediate between the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic, and social life contrasted to the demands and concerns of social and public life. This involved mediation of the contradiction between ‘bourgeois’ and ‘citoyen’, to use terms developed by Hegel and the early Marx, overcoming private interests and opinions to discover common interests and to reach societal consensus. The public sphere consisted of organs of information and political debate such as newspapers and journals, as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs and coffee houses, meeting halls, and other public spaces where socio-political discussion took place. For the first time in history, individuals and groups could shape public opinion, giving direct expression to their needs and interests while influencing political practice. The bourgeois public sphere made it possible to form a realm of public opinion that opposed state power and the powerful interest that were coming to sphere bourgeois society. ²

Habermas’ concept of the public sphere thus described a space of institutions and practices between the private interests of everyday life in civil society and the realm of state power. The public sphere thus mediates between the domains of the family and the workplace—where private interests prevail—and the state which often exerts arbitrary form of power and domination. What Habermas called the “bourgeois public sphere” consisted of social paces where individuals gathered to discuss their common public affairs and to organize against arbitrary and oppressive forms of social and public power.

The principles of the public sphere involved an open discussion of all issues of general concern in which discursive argumentation was employed to ascertain general interests and the public good. The public sphere thus presupposed freedoms of speech and assembly, a free press, and the
right to freely participate in political debate and decision-making. After the democratic revolutions, freely participate in political debate and decision-making. After the democratic revolutions, Habermas suggested, the bourgeois public sphere was institutionalized in constitutional orders which guaranteed a wide range of political rights, and which established a judicial system that was to mediate between claims between various individuals or groups, or between individuals and groups and the state.

Habermas added historical grounding by arguing that a “refeudalization” of the public sphere began occurring in the late 19th century. The transformation involved private interests assuming direct political functions, as powerful corporations came to control and manipulate the media and state. On the other hand, the state began to play a more fundamental role in the private realm and everyday life, thus eroding the difference between state and civil society, between the public and private sphere. As the public sphere declined, citizens became consumers, dedicating themselves more to passive consumption and private concerns than to issues of the common good and democratic participation.

While in the bourgeois public sphere, public opinion, on Habermas’ analysis, was formed by political debate and consensus, in the debased public sphere of welfare state capitalism, public opinion is administered by political, economic, and media elites which manage public opinion as part of systems management and social control. Thus, while in an earlier stage of bourgeois development, public opinion was formed in open political debate concerning interests of common concern that attempted to forge a consensus in regard to general interests, in the contemporary stage of capitalism, public opinion was formed by dominant elites and thus represented for the most part their particular private interests. No longer is rational consensus among individuals and groups in the interests of articulation of common goods the norm. Instead,
struggle among groups to advance their own private interests characterizes the scene of contemporary politics.

Hence, Habermas describes a transition from the liberal public sphere which originated in the Enlightenment and the American and French Revolution to a media-dominated public sphere in the current era of what he calls “welfare state capitalism and mass democracy”. This historical transformation is grounded. The culture industry, in which giant corporations have taken over the public sphere and transformed it from a sphere of rational debate into one of manipulative consumption and passivity. In this transformation, “public opinion” shifts from rational consensus emerging from debate, discussion, and reflection to the manufactured opinion of polls or media experts. Rational debate and consensus has thus been replaced by managed discussion and manipulation by the machinations of advertising and political consulting agencies.\(^3\)

**Habermas and Public Sphere: A Critical Evaluation**

Habermas offered tentative proposals to revitalize the public sphere by setting “in motion a critical process of public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it”. He concluded with the suggestion that “a critical publicity brought to life within intra-organizational public spheres” might lead to democratization of the major institutions of civil society, though he did not provide concrete examples, propose any strategies, or sketch out the features of an oppositional or post-bourgeois public sphere.\(^4\)

In his later work, I would argue, Habermas indulges in a romanticism of the lifeworld, appealing to the “true humanity” operative within interpersonal relations, assuming face-to-face communication as his model of undistorted communication, and replacing structural transformation with the ideal of cultivation of the communicatively-rational individual and group. His analysis is discourse-oriented, developing discourse theories of morality, democracy,
and law, grounded in a theory of communicative action. While these analyses provide some extremely powerful insights into the conditions of democratic deliberation and consensus, moral action and development, and the role of communication in spheres ranging from morality to politics to law, the quasi-ontological separation of the sphere of communicative action/lifeworld from system I problematic, as is his specific categorical bifurcation of the social system.\footnote{5}

The crux of the problem with Habermas’s analysis is that he makes too rigid a categorical distinction between system and lifeworld, constructing each according to their own imperatives, thus removing the “system” (i.e. economy and state) from democratic transformation, while limiting the site of participatory democracy to the lifeworld. Against this conception, I would argue, as Habermas himself recognizes, that the lifeworld. I would argue, as Habermas himself recognizes, that the lifeworld is increasingly subject to imperatives from the system, but that in the current era of technological revolution, interaction and communication play an increasingly important role in the economy and polity that Habermas labels the “system”. Moreover, I will suggest that the volatility and turbulence of the contemporary “great transformation” that we are undergoing constitute a contradictory process where the lifeworld undergoes new threats from the system-especially through the areas of colonization by media and new technologies that Habermas does not systematically theorize--, while at the same time there are new conflicts and openings in the economy and polity for democratic intervention and transformation.

Earlier, Habermas made a similar categorical distinction between production and interaction, arguing that the former (including technology) was governed by the logic of instrumental action and could not be transformed, while “interaction” was deemed the categorical field for rational discourse, moral development, and democratic will-formation.
Habermas does not adequately theorize the nature and social functions of contemporary media of communication and information, they are for him mere mechanisms for transmitting messages, instruments that are neither an essential part of the economy or polity in his schema, and of derivative importance for democracy in comparison to processes of rational debate and consensus in the lifeworld. \(^6\)

Hence, Habermas never really formulates the positive and indeed necessary functions of the media in democracy and cannot do so, with his categorical distinctions. In Transformation, he sketches the degeneration of media from print-based journalism to the electronic media of the twentieth century, in an analysis that, as his critics maintain, tends to idealize earlier print media and journalism within a democratic public sphere contrasted to an excessively negative sketch of later electronic media and consumption in a debased public sphere of contemporary capitalism. \(^7\)

Habermas, neglects intense focus on the vicissitudes of the media, excludes democratization of the media from the realm of democratic politics, and does not envisage how new media and technology could lead to an expansion and revitalization of new and more democratic public spheres. In fact Habermas simply does not theorize the functions of the media within the contemporary public sphere, deriving his model more from face-to-face communication and discussion, rather than from media interaction or communication mediated by the media and technology. \(^8\) However, the development of new global public spheres with the Internet and new multimedia technology require further development of the concept of the public sphere today and reflection on the emerging importance of new technologies within democracy.

**Globalization, New Technologies, and New Public Spheres**

In the contemporary high-tech societies there is emerging a significant expansion and redefinition of the public sphere. It goes beyond Habermas, to conceive of the public sphere as a
site of information, discussion, contestation, political struggle, and organization that includes the broadcasting media and new cyberspaces as well as the face-to-face interactions of everyday life. A new democratic politics will be concerned that new media and computer theologies be used to serve the interests of the people and not corporate elites. A democratic politics will strive to see that broadcast media and computers are used to inform and enlighten individual rather than to manipulate them. A democratic politics will teach individuals how to use the new technologies, to articulate their own experiences and interests, and to promote democratic debate and diversity, allowing a full range of voices and ideas to become part of the cyber democracy of the future. Now more than ever, public debate over the use of new technologies is of utmost importance to the future of democracy. Who will control the media and technologies of the future, and debates over the public’s access to media, media accountability and responsibility, media funding and regulation, and what kinds of culture are best for cultivating individual freedom, democracy, and human happiness and well-being will become increasingly important in the future. The proliferation of media culture and computer technologies focuses attention on the importance of new technologies and the need for public intervention in debates over the future of media culture and communications in the information highways and entertainment by-ways of the future. The technological revolution of our time thus involves the creation of new public spheres and the need for democratic strategies to promote the project of democratization and to provide access to more people to get involved in more political issues and struggles so that democracy might have a chance in the new millennium.

Yet it is the merit of Habermas’ analysis to focus attention on the nature and the structural transformations of the public sphere and its functions within contemporary society. This analysis
thus may be expended to take account of the technological revolution and global restructuring of capitalism that in currently taking place and rethink the critical theory of society and democratic politics in the light of these developments. Through thinking together the vicissitudes of the economy, polity, technology, culture, and everyday life, Habarmasian analysis provides valuable theoretical resources to meet the crucial tasks of the contemporary era.

Foot notes

7. See McLuhan (1964) Understanding Media: The Extension of Man. New York: Signet Books p.60, for arguments that print media were a fundamental constituent of modernity.
8. While Habermas describes the public sphere as “a network of communicating information and points of view” in Between Facts and Norms, he then states. “Like the lifeworld as a whole, so, too the public sphere is reproduced through communicative

