

## **Changing Nature Of Public Sphere And The Role Of Media In Contemporary Politics :Theoretical Analysis**

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### **Abstract**

Media especially social media provides individuals an outlet or Public space to express their views and at the same time it acts as a tool for organizing collective actions .It facilitates people a space where diverse discussions on public affairs can occur freely, Social media is connecting bridge which acts as a channel of communication between government and people, it sublimates the strict division of Public and Private Sphere and at the same time it acts as a tool for organizing political activities. Jurgen Habermas in his seminal work “The structural transformation of Public sphere” defined “Public sphere” as social setting where people assembles and unite freely to express their views which in turn safeguards the democratic traditions. Present paper wants to explore how the concept of public sphere has been changed in digitalized era and how mass media is playing its role in controlling Politics in general and political processes like election in particular.

**Key words** – Social media, Public sphere, Digitalized, Political Processes, Political activities

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going to know about the meaning of Public sphere one must be aware about the fact that “ Public spaces “ and “Public sphere” are two different concepts Public spaces provides an outlet for public sphere to convene <sup>1</sup>“Public sphere” as Habermas defines is a “sphere which mediates between society and state”. Origination of term “Public sphere” and “Public Opinion” dates back to 18<sup>th</sup> century Habermas believes that before the rise of Bourgeoisie the term “Public” had different connotation and understanding, feudal authorities were called “Public” feudal lords were seen as the “public” and their public representation was stating their authorities before the people .But when the feudal power of church and nobility diminished by the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century it paved the way for the rise of bourgeois society in Europe which in turn gave birth to “Bourgeois public sphere” and the meaning of term” public” changed, meaning of “public “ no longer understood as “representatives” now private individuals on whom public authorities once directed their authorities became public body ,this newly emerged bourgeois public sphere which could be understood as Public body where private individuals assembled and started opposing public authorities become new public sphere and the tool of their opposition was “intellectual newspapers” and “ critical journals” in these newspapers and journals they debated over general rules of social order and social intercourse <sup>2</sup> (In late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century England ) coffee houses became a public space where literary public met and discussed art and politics but this newly emerged public sphere had its own pros and cons ,on the positive side this literary public sphere was less exclusionary but on the negative side it was gendered in nature . Illiteracy, poverty ruled out most of the rural and property less urban population to become a part of this public sphere <sup>3</sup>

Habermas in his liberal model of public sphere describes how media plays a crucial and critical role in directing and also informing public opinion<sup>4</sup> . He also mentions that fundamental rights guaranteed under the modern constitutions provided society the sphere of private autonomy and reflected the perfect image of liberal model ,these modern constitutions also restricted the functions of public authority to few<sup>5</sup> , Habermas also points out that private autonomy exists only in the legitimate political order and only legitimate political order

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<sup>1</sup> Papacharissi, Z.(2002,February).*Sage Journals* ,The virtual sphere 2.0 ,The internet ,the public sphere ,and beyond 4(1), 230

<sup>2</sup> Habermas J .,Lennox S.,Lennox F .,(1974, Autumn).*New German Critique*, The Public sphere :An encyclopedia article No.3 , 51

<sup>3</sup> Goode,L.(2005).Plato Press London .Ann Arbor, MI, *Jurgen Habermas :Democracy and Public Sphere* , PP.7-8

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*;P.232

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*; P.52

guarantees individual rights , and liberties , and without the framework of rights or democratic decision making institution autonomy is not only difficult it simply ceases to exist <sup>6</sup>

Only deliberative democracy provides people an outlet for deliberative participation and it is also open for free discourses where anyone can take part in discourses and challenge the claims made by other , But After the first world war faith of mainstream intellectuals dwindled from direct democracy ,Propaganda efforts reinforced the idea that ordinary men and women are incapable of rational thought <sup>7</sup> only intellectuals are capable to form public opinion which legitimized Hebermas's view regarding "pseudo public sphere " which he discussed in his liberal model of public sphere as sphere where masses are passive spectators incapable of rational thoughtful public discourses

Today mass media has become a tool of deliberation and abstract spaces of appearances where invisible public has created the " Digital Public sphere " that's why new public sphere is tightly intertwined with the media and social media and this new public sphere can be defined precisely in the definition mentioned below :

"It is defined in relation to mass media because the media permit the circulation of opinion and offers the condition in which forum can function"<sup>8</sup>

But at the same time free and independent media without any state control is necessary for this digital public sphere to function properly,<sup>9</sup> most of the communist and authoritarian states controls the media and even when they allows their fellow citizens to access internet they strictly monitors their activity and limits their freedom of speech and expression here state controls the media and shapes political consciousness of Individual in such a manner that they becomes an active supporter of government but the believers of Marxist instrumentalist theory of media propagates that in capitalist states , owners of media controls the media content and media function for ideological indoctrination and makes audience passive by showing content which only reflects narrow and biased opinions of owners, these owners are part of ruling elite and they function to make capitalists status quo intact in western democracies .

In capitalist countries, Habermas , puts forth that the very nature of media has been commercialized ,he sheds lights upon how post Bourgeois public sphere is lacking "realm of freedom" which once Bourgeois public sphere exhibited he also says that In Post Bourgeois Public Sphere urban and Sub urban lifestyles are damaging the integrity of both privacy and publicity , sociability of public sphere and solitary acts of reading is replaced by television dominated living rooms .Gabriel Trade's standpoint suggests that in 1898 "Mass media was not making public passive it contributed to groupthink "The Public" of 1898 was " the social group of future" and their private thoughts on any national and international public issues were by product of press even when these newspaper presented the homogenized pictures of reality Trade argues that even in 1898 "conversation of individuals.....are forced to follow the groove of their borrowed thoughts .One pen suffices to set off a million tongues"<sup>10</sup> but at least as Habermas suggests it had Greek civic sense and it's nature was not Pseudo which Habermas finds absent today he argues that the Critical nature which Bourgeois possessed and which showed "Political character in Greek sense of being emancipated from the constraints of survival requirement" is absent in this modern life. Mainstream media is colonizing public sphere and public discourses are extinct in this post Bourgeois public sphere<sup>11</sup> media especially social media is making society a mass society of fragmented atomized and private individuals who are unable to form a healthy critical rational public opinion . Habermas calls this media dominated public sphere "Pseudo Public sphere" where people are mere passive spectator audiences not genuine public it simply distracting public from taking political actions .<sup>12</sup>Mass culture is not only making audiences passive it also depriving audiences an adequate spaces to carry out for themselves psychological work, media has created the culture of immediacy which Marshall McLuhan puts in his term as ,Private life is Publicized and we got fed with lots of biographies and psychological profiles of politicians, movie stars and at the same time debate and discussions on cultural goods are not altogether ignored but

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<sup>6</sup> Fultner ,B.(2014).Rutledge Taylor and Francis group, *Jurgen Habermas key concept*, (P.96)

<sup>7</sup> Bernays ,L.E(1923),*Open Road integrated media, Crystallizing Public Opinion* ,(P.13)

<sup>8</sup> Bentivegan,S.(2002).*Politics and new media*.In L.Lievrouw &Livingstone (Eds.),*Handbook of new media :Social shapings and Consequences of ICTs* (PP.50-60') .London :Sages.(P.52)

<sup>9</sup> Odugemi,A.(2008).*Public Opinion the public sphere ,and quality of governance; An exploration*. In S.Odugbemi &T.Jacobson (Eds,)*Governance reform under real -world conditions ,Citizens,Stakeholders ,and voice* (PP.15-37),Washington D.C:The world bank (p.17)

<sup>10</sup> Bernays ,L.E(1923),*Open Road integrated media, Crystallizing Public Opinion*, p-11

<sup>11</sup> Goode,L.(2005).Plato Press London .Ann Arbor, MI, *Jurgen Habermas :Democracy and Public Sphere* , PP.18-19

<sup>12</sup> Livingstone,S. and Iunt,P.(1994)(eds).Rutledge London, *Talk on Television audience participation and Public debate* ,PP.9-35

confined to professional media spaces only, it is more like a mediated conversation where audience is passive listener of news debates but this argument is little less effective in the case of social media as Nielsen puts forth's "Mundane Internet tools"<sup>13</sup> such as facebook and twitter are mobilizing tools for political parties , social media is now an effective tool for civic engagement and grassroots' movement against government (eg . Arab Spring , March on capitol hill) social media ,also most of time acts like a tool of spreading words of hatred , mobilizing people via spreading fake information regarding any incidence and initiating riots. Curran in his words says "The internet is very effective tool mode of communication between activists linking them together and mobilize them at short notice"<sup>14</sup>Media especially Social media in postmodern culture has given birth to narcissistically motivated Political views which Christopher Lasch In his book titled "The culture of Narcissism" calls value of self expression which eventually emerges into civically motivated narcissism ,political thoughts expressed on blogs are self serving and sometimes self motivated which he calls "pseudo self -Insight"<sup>15</sup> which eventually motivates viewers either to support political issue or to protest against it .

Now question emerges do Journalists, bloggers or news outlets projects their self motivated views and attitudes into news? Answer is obviously Yes , Media outlets are so partisan that it reflects in their news reporting and sometimes their narcissistic views subtly shows seeds of hatred in young minds, they plays a major role in creating political consciousness in people ,alteration of news and presentation of news in altered manner not only narrows down the actual issue of discussion but also creates politically motivated consciousness in young minds ,some Print media outlets in India like The Hindu ,Statesman are pro leftist outlet which only projects their own self serving narcissistic views in their newspapers same applies in the case of Pro rightist and Centralist newspapers like Tribune, The Indian express and Hindustan times. Consumers of these newspaper only feed with the news which validates their pre formed views regarding Government in particular and Political processes in General .Same Propaganda can be seen in Pro government and anti government blogs where blogger's self expression leads towards which Lasch calls New Narcissus where not only Pseudo self insights works but also deprecatory humors too . Digital marketers and malicious actors also plays their part in running junk news factories which induces misinformation to harm the opponent whom they dislike These kind of dissemination of information ,misinforms the consumer of the news and ultimately makes them hostile towards the particular political party or government in general. Social media has become a platform of civic engagement and political action , In the time of fluctuating political environment it has become a chief vehicle for the circulation of ideas and discussion forum where people converse about politics and public policy But these social media platforms has become a forum of manipulative disinformation campaigns where political parties runs their smear campaigns against each other through their supporters .Social media algorithms creates eco chambers where software agents uses political "bots" to manipulate Public opinions which gives birth to computation propaganda<sup>16</sup> these bots builders are like hired guns who may be apolitical but works solely to earn money from the political parties or person who have hired them .Junk news which spreads through social media through some kind of computation propaganda also plays a significant role in initiating political violence and social movements .Thompson's views that Public activity is now indirect and filtered through communication technologies ,Public opinions are not only manipulated but also carefully collected by governments for security purpose or control purpose .Modern governments are not relying on the direct public dialogue they are relying on modern ways to know Public opinion and the best way to know public opinion is "Data mining" Which helps governments to manipulate the Public opinion ,It stresses on the perspective that "Citizens knows less about the Government and Government knows a lot about their citizens " which Thompsons calls "Public opinion data" ,Main target of "computation propaganda" during election times in competitive Bi- party and multiparty party democratic systems are those swing voters who does not affiliate themselves with any political party "algorithmic manipulation " helps competitive parties to induce their party ideology through all these subtle tactics , targeted individuals simply knows nothing about these control mechanisms their political consciousness shapes through all these subtle art of control .These tactics has been used in United States of

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<sup>13</sup> P ,Bogdan. and P, Monica.(2014)(eds). Springer International Publishing Switzerland , *Social media in politics case study on political power on social media*,P.7

<sup>14</sup> Curren.J and Fenton .N (2012).Rutledge London ,*Misunderstanding the Internet* pp.14-15

<sup>15</sup> Papacharissi, Z.(2002,February).Sage Journals ,*The virtual sphere 2.0 ,The internet ,the public sphere ,and beyond* 4(1), PP.237-238

<sup>16</sup> P ,Bogdan. and P, Monica.(2014)(eds). Springer International Publishing Switzerland , *Social media in politics case study on political power on social media*,P.7

<sup>17</sup>Curren.J and Fenton .N (2012).Rutledge London ,*Misunderstanding the Internet* pp.14-15

<sup>18</sup>Papacharissi, Z.(2002,February).Sage Journals ,*The virtual sphere 2.0 ,The internet ,the public sphere ,and beyond* 4(1), PP.237-238

America where mostly Young and swing voters targeted during Presidential elections, where Chunk of Anti-Hillary Clinton news bombarded on news feeds and walls of facebook users who belonged to the category of “Swing Voters” , With the help of data harvesting Cambridge analytica data firm owned by right winger Robert Mercer collected psychological profiles of American voters from facebook to help Donald Trump win US presidential elections <sup>17</sup> Communication plays a key role in liberal democracy and liberal democracy has lost its essence which evolved during 18<sup>th</sup> century where Governments emerged to protect people from oppressive powers but today liberal democratic model emphasis on “Libertarian” model which advocates for minimal government interference and maximum individuals liberties’ also advocates for free and open completion which also manifests in Political arena, where political parties competes with each other just like a business firms competes in marketplace to attract more and more consumers to their services politics is also a marketplace of ideas and public is “Vote Bank” for attracting attention of consumer i.e voter , political parties uses media outlets as marketplace where multiple ideas of different political parties competes for public attention and where political ideas collides in intellectual marketplace <sup>18</sup> and to sell their political ideas to the citizens they requires good marketing strategies to tilt public opinion in their favor and for fulfilling this objective political parties uses public opinion data to manipulate the mind of voters .

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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html> accessed on 15.2.23

<sup>13</sup>Parloff M.Richard(2014).Routledge Taylor and francis group.*The dynamics of political communication*.PP-13-14