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Remarks on network public theory

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1. Introduction

In the 80's Alvin Toffler [17, p. 44–45] advanced a thesis that mankind entered a new civilization development stage and that the old order will be replaced with a new one in a very dramatic way. Collision of the old order and the new one will force a transformation of all social relations, including authorities, policy and customs. Rise of the information era cannot be described by a particular turning point. All turning points are determined normatively and irrespective of the fact they are or not associated with Internet occurrence, economy networking, globalization or the occurrence of new social movements; moreover, their affection is different over time. In other words the changes are not revolutionary but they mean erosion of the old institutions and growing power of the new network based institutions. However, such processes may take place due to a catalyst (accelerating factor) or delaying factor, they penetrate each other, hence, they accumulate or compete with each other.

In this paper attention is paid to considerations regarding the public sphere from a traditional point of view – presented by Jürgen Habermas [4] – and in the context of the network society concept by Manuel Castells [2]. The goal of this paper is the identification of the factors affecting the transformation of the public sphere from the traditional one to the network one and consequences they stimulate in the field of relations between public actors. At the same time a hypothesis is advanced that the traditional public sphere has been the subject of the atrophy, however, the network public sphere has been the subject of the augmentation process. A thesis formed up in such a manner implicates other questions: (1) do the afore-mentioned processes take place simultaneously, in other words, do the same factors result in the atrophy and augmentation?; (2) did the medium, through which the dialog among public actors take place, change?

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2. Public sphere transformation

The 'public sphere' term has been explained and interpreted many times in the field of sociology. In its traditional meaning it regarded interactions between particular members of the society, characterized by open nature. J. Habermas [4, p. 56–57] defines a public sphere as a reality zone where the audience is a public opinion carrier. Hence, public sphere bodies are state authorities and mass media which are used to send messages inside the audience.

A tradition of participation in the public sphere origins from middle-class traditions dated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the very beginning the audience (term) covered addressees, consumers and critics of pieces of art, which enabled to define civil & middle-class public sphere as a zone of private individuals who collectively compose an audience [4, p. 95–101]. The process, which consists in observing, taking particular positions and presenting own opinions publicly by audience has significantly evolved over the ages. Contemporarily it takes place with a share of the mass media and on the free market. As it is said by J. Habermas, who was quoted previously, a consequence of it is a growing tendency to penetrate the public sphere and private zone, arising from the nature of the economic system based on private property and making the private zone public, which may be summarized in the following way: „large-city human is a mass human and he/she cannot cultivate the private zone any longer" [4, p. 279–306].

Changes, which have taken place in the public sphere in the recent two decades, seem to be equally significant as those described previously. Commercialization of the media which consists in sale of information instead of a provision of issues to be discussed caused that the public discourse has been abandoned and it initiated the process called media *tabloidization*. This term means acquisition of a tabloid's attributes by newspapers and magazines and then, by other media. A consequence of this process is a change of priorities in a particular medium and growing advantage of the entertainment, consequently, exceeding of good taste boundaries in the field of different content forms [9]. Other illustrations of changes in media is the *infotainment* phenomenon. It is a neologism which combines the words „information" and „entertainment", which means material emitted by electronic media and which is intended to inform and to entertain or, in other words, to present information in an interesting manner [6]. The changes caused the public sphere (in the contemporary form) atrophy.

Public sphere atrophy obviously does not mean that all social contacts disappear. It rather comes about a collapse of the bourgeois public sphere. A human being has a natural need to express his/her own opinions which are, at the same time, accordant and contrary to opinions of other public life participants and the

public sphere 'forms up' a measure to perform this tendency. Considering the hierarchy of needs of Abraham H. Maslow [8, p. 82–86], one may conclude that the needs of affiliation, respect and self-realization are seriously expressed by participation in the dialog with other members of the society. Hence, the public sphere *sui generis* does not disappear but its traditional form fades away and at the same time feeds the new one. In the network society it is logic that the public sphere has been moved to virtual space.

Basically, the network society is based on three main pillars: structure, technology and a driving force [2, p. 20–40; 14, p. 7–16]. Each of these elements is reflected by new social order institutions, including the public sphere. In M. Castells' opinion a driving force is social movements, which he deems (on the basis of his research approach) to be self-aware [14, p. 93]. Looking for one's identity and a role in the social order of social movements members make them an engine of restructuring accepted institutions. This process requires the use of technologies and more accurately, IT technologies which allow for a new efficiency of communication [7, p. 199–214]. They enable us to shape network relations instead of hierarchic ones, and of a global nature instead of local character. Consequently, collective consumption limits, which are characteristic for urban issues, are omitted [14, s. 23].

Network public sphere is a resultant of afore-mentioned factors and its 'size' depends on their specificity at the particular civilization development stage since – as they are categories – they are always present. In the contemporary society the social movements have relevant tools to move the dialogue between public actors into other platforms. Internet has become a platform as a communication medium, which is so popular that approx. 34% of global population has on-line access, the internet being the most significant information medium. However, as M. Castells pointed out [2, p. 21] – structuring of the dialogue on the network enabled a bipolar relation between the network (as the entireness) and the identity (as the individuality).

Bipolarity means, on the one hand, looking for a network of profiles, each correlated to individual identity, and on the other hand, forming the network up on the basis of its own preferences. Flexibility of the network structure enables such forming since the network is nothing else but a system of mutually connected nodes [2, p. 468], that is without limits imposed by agents (contrary to the hierarchy). In connection with the communication possibilities provided by the Internet, one has previously unknown possibilities to participate actively in the public sphere dialogue under one's own conditions.

Network public sphere, according to information paradigm, has its place in the virtual space. It enables participation of social actors in the public life irrespective of time, place [7, p. 223–227] and social status. Internet forums are

available for everyone and anytime. The extent of participation depends only on willingness, involvement, knowledge and skills of a person having access to the network. It means that the participation rate in the public sphere is not the same for the entire audience. It would be advisable to divide this heterogeneous group into two sub-groups. The first group comprises persons, who actively participate in the public life (they enter any content[1] into the public sphere) and which may be called 'public actors'. This expression responds to the bourgeois audience of the traditional public sphere. The second group comprises of extras, that is passive observers of events.

Extras of the public sphere became meaningful as a result of the digital revolution and the occurrence of a network society. Due to the technology they gained simple possibilities to express their preferences without the necessity to develop their own content or knowledge of observed events. One such tools are social portals which enable participation in the public sphere e.g. by the popular 'like it' button in case of Facebook[2]. Networking enabled abandoning the role of extra and becoming active actors in the network public sphere. It is a consequence of the bipolarity of relations between a community (collectivity) and individuals. Looking for one's own identity in the network public sphere, actors may become active and passive again and again, what was limited in the traditional public sphere. Tabloidization described above and monopolization of access to the information was replaced by variety and free access, through social media (mainly social portals and blogosphere).

3. Role of social media in the network public sphere

M. Castells observed, at the turn of 60's and 70's, that the essence of cities is collective consumption [14, p. 21–28]. Collective provision of goods and hence, mass production, is a characteristic attribute of the industrial era. Mass-scale, even if unquestionably it is a source of economic efficiency, covered also social life fields where it was not favorable. The public sphere belongs to such types of examples. The public sphere power is quality of dialogues between the actors. Through activity one may find a consensus between what the society wants and what is performed by groups having the power. Moreover, it comes about

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[1] No matter these are *de facto* texts, pictures, music, or any other content which can be recorded and copied in form of computer file. Generally, all of them are information goods and, as it is proved by Jeremy Riffkin [11, p. 146–148], they are cultural goods at the same time.

[2] This kind of mechanisms is a form of marking (*tagging*) and they are used by all of important social portals.

the authority arising from the legitimism of violence measures (state), economic authority (monopoly) and other types arising from keeping a kind of *status quo*. Since the dialogue taking place in the public sphere is nothing more but communication, that is information flow, the supervision over its medium is synonymous to the orientation of activity of public actors.

The role of supervisor or a moderator in the twentieth century was held by mass-media managers. Consequently, there took place a mass-consumption of information which means that crowds could become just extras or finally, they could just come into conflict in form of protests and strikes which is not a dialogue in the framework of public sphere but a fight. The power of media communication has been basically appreciated since the radio was invented. Both W. Churchill and A. Hitler appreciated mass communication and based their political activities on radio messages [7, p. 154–161].

J. Habermas mentions the integration of that the mass media and advertising services is one of factors of public sphere re-feudalization [4, s. 359]. It is connected to the fact that the exchange of information between public actors takes representative[3] form again (characteristic for the feudal period), where most of the citizens are passive observers. It seems that in the course of further mass-media development this idea did not find a justification but for sure the mass-scale contributes to the atrophy of traditional middle-class public sphere.

Network public sphere is characterized by reverse correctness. At first, the dialogues take place beyond the mass media. Blogosphere and other social media, even those slightly commercial, are of serious meaning. Secondly, it is a zone of large diversification of opinions and goals of public actors. Looking for one's identity makes that information flowing through the Internet is very varied. M. Castells [1, p. 65–66] mentions that variety of Internet content is seriously related to the fact that the social movements from beyond the main stream could be revealed here.

Paul Levinson [7, p. 223–227] proves that simplified access to the possibility of becoming an „*on-line*" author – that is development and distribution of own texts – resulted in a variety of points of view and ideas [7, p. 223–227]. Similarly, M. Castells [1, p. 65–68] says that for the variety of the content in the Internet virtual communitarians are responsible, whose ergonomic technology of computer interface enables expressing one's own ideas. Before the Internet era content development on the global market was reserved for large publishing houses which had relevantly accumulated financial capital as well as human resources. The information paradigm is connected to the reduction of final costs of reproduction

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[3] Acc. to J. Habermas' considerations it is a form where the society is represented by single actors of the public sphere [4, p. 60–71].

and information products distribution in digital form, which is reflected by the removal of entry barriers into the group of authors [13, p. 53; 12, p. 15, 36; 3, p. 9–20]. In turn, authors who present their ideas and opinions are active actors of a network public sphere.

According to a survey carried out by Technorati Inc., the authors of blogs take up subjects regarding politics, economy as well as entertainment or culture. Nearly 50% of subjects cannot be classified anywhere since they are focused on a very wide range of issues. To a large extent – 45% bloggers share their own ideas with their readers, not focused on a particular issue [15, Day 2, Page 2]. In figure 1 results of a questionnaire divided into subjects the blogosphere deals with, are presented.
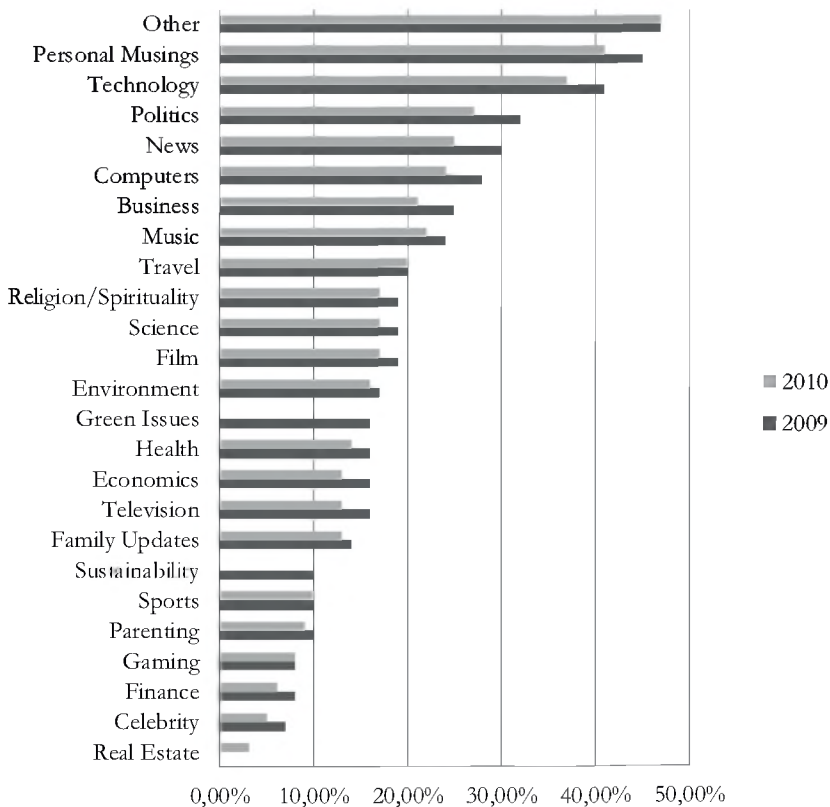
Figure 1. Blogs – subjects (data 2009)

Source: developed on the basis of data [15, Day 2, Page 2; 16, Day 2, Page 2]

The importance of the blogosphere in the exchange of social information, that is a dialogue between actors of the network public sphere, has been growing. Data made available by Technorati Inc. dated 2011 proves that bloggers think they are those who stimulate serious discussions in the blogosphere (22% of respondents approves this thesis). It means that the dialogue on blogs is very active. These are not just descriptions and comments of mass-media information but discussions started by the actors of the networked public sphere. Printing media to less extent (8%) and TV (approx. 3%). Even commercial media existing in the Internet (pages of media giants such as CNN or New York Times) have relatively poor impact (approx. 7%) [16, Part 2, Page 2].

Respondents polled by Technorati Inc. also indicate that blogs are more and more frequently deemed to be an information source (65% of them accepts this opinion). Approximately 50% of respondents state that these blogs are as significant media as the traditional mass media. More than half of them say that the mass media are trusted by a less number of respondents than 5 years ago and nearly 25% of them think that traditional media will not survive another 10 years [16, Part 2, Page 2–3].

This survey supports the hypothesis on the traditional public sphere which is subject of lower trust and on augmentation of the network public sphere. It also proves the fact that the dialogue between public actors takes place in social media to a large extent (among others blogosphere) and simultaneously the mass media meaning has been decreasing. Obviously, it is not possible to point out that the mass media have not meaning in the field of dialogue shaping but definitely they lose its hegemonic position in relation to the social media.

4. Miscellaneous

Summarizing the considerations contained in this paper one may state that the atrophy of the traditional public sphere is an unavoidable process. The weakening of activity of its actors is a consequence of both, factors beyond the networked public sphere and the other ones. An independent factor is significant (if not total) commercialization of the dialogue medium. Nowadays the public sphere medium is no longer direct performance e.g. like famous monologues at *Speakers' Corner* in London Hyde-Park, but printed and electronic media which, converting themselves into mass-media, have been commercialized. Their ubiquity made other forms of communication less meaningful. Hence, passive extras from beyond the media world converted into active actors.

In an industrial society the role of extra could be satisfying but in a network society, where looking for the identity is a bipolar process taking part between

the network and individual person, it has become insufficient. Considerations over oneself and internal need of finding oneself within social order are a factor causing a link between atrophy and augmentation. Traditional public sphere stops being an attractive institution for self-aware social movements – thus it is abandoned. In turn, the network social zone creates possibilities to occur in dialogues - and this is a desired situation.

In practice, this possibility is expressed by the Internet. In other words – by technological factors, assuring the effectiveness of replication and information distribution. Actors enclosed in the static role of traditional public sphere, in the network zone may freely start activity either, to less an extent – by support for expressed issues or by total commitment in a form of a particular position. The activity rate depends on themselves and not on an owner of a medium.

Social media have become medium of the networked public sphere (non-commercial) and they respond to mechanics of social movements. The tendency of private expression on the public forum has been growing. The middle-class citizen has no monopoly to cultivate the private zone but the network citizen hasn't got it as well. It also should not be forgotten that the Internet is no longer anonymous. Even if, in fact, it does not provide total impunity (there exist measures enabling the identification of each Internet user separately) at the stage of everyday expression it enables wearing masks, so called: avatars.

Finally, the traditional public sphere must be replaced by the network one since its shape does not respond to the valid needs of social actors. This fact is also observed by the representatives of mass media and their administers, who follow forms characteristic for social media – blogs of large publishing houses, politicians, famous persons, representatives of religion institutions. It does not change the fact that in order to participate in the dialogue via the social media they must proceed acc. to its principles, otherwise they shall be excluded [10, p. 153–178].

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