



## UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

### Critical publicity and its epistemic challenges

*A philosophical approach to public opinion formation in a post-digital public sphere*

Roovers, D.M.G.

#### Publication date

2025

#### Document Version

Final published version

[Link to publication](#)

#### Citation for published version (APA):

Roovers, D. M. G. (2025). *Critical publicity and its epistemic challenges: A philosophical approach to public opinion formation in a post-digital public sphere*. [Thesis, externally prepared, Universiteit van Amsterdam].

#### General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

#### Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Daan Roovers



# **Critical Publicity and its Epistemic Challenges**

A Philosophical Approach to Public Opinion Formation  
in a Post-Digital Public Sphere



**Critical  
Publicity  
and its  
Epistemic  
Challenges**

**A Philosophical Approach to Public Opinion  
Formation in a Post-Digital Public Sphere**

ISBN 978-90-9041201-6  
NUR 730

© Daan Roovers, 2025  
All rights reserved

Design: Ontwerpburo Suggestie & illusie  
Print: LibertasPascal

Critical Publicity and its Epistemic Challenges  
A Philosophical Approach to Public Opinion Formation in a Post-Digital Public Sphere

ACADEMISCH PROEFSCHRIFT

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor  
aan de Universiteit van Amsterdam  
op gezag van de Rector Magnificus  
prof. dr. ir. P.P.C.C. Verbeek  
ten overstaan van een door het College voor Promoties ingestelde commissie,  
in het openbaar te verdedigen in de Aula der Universiteit  
op woensdag 3 december 2025, te 14.00 uur

door Daniëlla Maria Gerardina Roovers  
geboren te Veghel

# Promotiecommissie

*Promotores:*

prof. dr. H.Y.M. Jansen  
dr. M. Stauff

Universiteit van Amsterdam  
Universiteit van Amsterdam

*Overige leden:*

prof. dr. M.J.P. Deuze  
prof. dr. H.O. Dijkstra  
prof. dr. N. Sterkenburg  
dr. D. Loick  
dr. T.E. Lijster

Universiteit van Amsterdam  
Universiteit van Amsterdam  
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam  
Universiteit van Amsterdam  
Rijksuniversiteit Groningen

Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen

# Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>9</b>
A 'disrupted' public sphere	9
Philosophical contributions to theorising public opinion formation	14
Research question and research design	19
Vocabulary and key concepts	25
Outline of the argument and the chapters	28
<b>Part I: A conceptual framework for theorising critical publicity</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>1. A normative and epistemic concept of public opinion formation</b>	<b>36</b>
1.1 Introduction	36
1.2 A normative concept of opinion formation: Democracy's diarchy	40
1.2.1 Diagnosis of democratic disfiguration	41
1.2.2 Model of democratic proceduralism	45
1.3 Criticising the liberal approach of proceduralism	48
1.3.1 Deliberation as a normative model	49
1.3.2 The epistemic dimension of deliberation	51
1.4 Defending public sphere theory as a reflective theory	56
1.4.1 The emergence of the public sphere	57
1.4.2 Criticism of the historical and ideological concept	59
1.5 Conclusion: Defending a deliberative and reflective approach	64
<b>2. Critical publicity (1): Defining its processes and normative requirements</b>	<b>65</b>
2.1 Introduction	65
2.2 Critical publicity: A third domain	69
2.2.1 Critical publicity is a public process	72
2.2.2 The 'who' and the 'how'	74
2.2.3 Public and private as rhetorical labels	77

2.3	The 'media system' as a black box	78
2.4	Input, output, and throughput legitimacy	83
2.5	Throughput: Public controversy, epistemic dimension, problem definition	86
2.6	Three arguments for developing a throughput model for publicity	92
2.6.1	Throughput is a black box and is easily overlooked	92
2.6.2	Throughput might be under pressure in a commercialised context	96
2.6.3	A critical concept of publicity requires throughput legitimacy	97
2.7	Conclusion: Rearticulation of critical publicity from a throughput perspective	100
<b>3</b>	<b>Critical publicity (2): Determining its infrastructural transformations and post-digital challenges</b>	<b>102</b>
3.1	Introduction	102
3.2	Infrastructural transformations	104
3.2.1	Coffeehouses: Establishing free debate	106
3.2.2	Newspapers: The rise of journalism	108
3.2.3	Professional codes and authorship	110
3.2.4	Mass media: Consumerism and increasing commercialisation	114
3.2.5	From a networked to a platformed public sphere	118
3.3	The post-digital public sphere	124
3.4	Post-digital challenges	128
3.5	Conclusion: The epistemic dimension under pressure	133

<b>Part II: Boundary cases and the critical potential of alternative publishing powers</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>Introduction to part II</b>	<b>136</b>
Using boundary cases	141
Method	145
<b>4 Influencers in the COVID-19 crisis: Exploring the critical potential of epistemic power</b>	<b>150</b>
4.1 Introduction	150
4.2 The role of influencers as publicity agents	153
4.3 COVID-19: A public sphere in times of crisis	156
4.4 Three examples of influencers as a part of the crisis infrastructure	159
4.5 Epistemic power	165
4.6 Reflective and deliberative qualities	169
4.6.1 Reflected authorship	169
4.6.2 A deliberative position	171
4.6.3 Assessing the different roles	172
4.7 Conclusion	176
<b>5 Activists in media: Transforming publicity through epistemic protest</b>	<b>178</b>
5.1 Introduction	178
5.2 An ambivalent relationship	181
5.2.1 Mobilising public attention	182
5.3 The epistemic dynamics of activism: Triple A	185
5.3.1 Alternatives: Creating new media	186
5.3.2 Adaptation: News sources	188
5.3.3 Attack: Contesting epistemic procedures	189
5.4 Contesting the media and their editorial procedures – I	191
5.4.1 Stepping off the stage	191
5.4.2 Stealing the conversation	194
5.5 (Re)politicising epistemic dynamics	199
5.6 Contesting the media and their editorial procedures – II	202
5.7 Conclusion	205

<b>6 Networked journalism: Reinventing epistemic legitimacy</b>	<b>207</b>
6.1 Introduction	207
6.2 Averting newsroom-centricity	210
6.3 Networked journalism	213
6.4 Case 1: The International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ)	217
6.5 The epistemic authority of networked journalism	221
6.6 Case 2: Investigative collective Bellingcat	225
6.7 From epistemic authority to epistemic legitimacy	230
6.8 Conclusion	233
<b>7 Final reflections</b>	<b>235</b>
Throughput as the missing dimension	238
The boundary cases	241
A reconceptualisation	245
<b>Reference List</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>273</b>
<b>Samenvatting</b>	<b>283</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>297</b>

# Introduction

## A ‘disrupted’ public sphere

In June 2024, the international weekly science journal, *Nature*, published a special issue dedicated to fake news. The publication is an indication of the contemporary interest, in both public and academic debates, regarding mis- and disinformation, commonly attributed to digitisation.<sup>1</sup> The principal article (Budak et al. 2024) highlights the supposedly significant differences between public and academic debates. While concerns about misinformation dominate the public debate, according to the authors, the scientific discussion exhibits much more nuance and prudence regarding its implications.

Let me briefly summarise the outline of the main article. Based on several recent empirical studies, Budak and colleagues argue that three misconceptions prevail in the public debate. Firstly, the scale and influence of misinformation – how severe it is – is systematically overestimated. Secondly, the spread of misinformation is wrongly attributed to the primary effect of algorithms. According to the authors, the emphasis on technology obscures the role of actors – political and media elites – combined with strong audience demand. Thirdly, a connection is frequently drawn between misinformation and other problems, such as polarisation, for which limited evidence exists. Consequently, not only the prevalence but also the effects of disinformation on society, such as its connection to polarisation, are overstated.

Before reflecting on the problem of misinformation from a broader perspective, I want to express a reservation about the underlying data. One justification for their claim that the harms of misinformation are systematically overstated is formulated as follows: “Traditional news, and in particular television news, still dominates people’s news consumption”

1 Of note is that the cover mentions fake news. However, the articles mainly focus on misinformation, which is a slightly different topic. I follow the scholarly interpretation that misinformation is unintentionally publishing or distributing incorrect information, whereas disinformation refers to explicitly disseminating false or misleading information. Fake news is equivalent to disinformation.

(Budak et al. 2024, 50). In a footnote, the authors support this statement with a paper from 2020 based on data from 2016–2018. There are plausible reasons to question the adequacy of these figures. These data are based on online behaviour from (mainly) before the widespread popularity of TikTok,<sup>2</sup> which, since its inception, has frequently served as a news source (Pew Research Center 2024). The data also predates the COVID-19 pandemic. This is only to mention two relevant occurrences regarding online news consumption and the potential exposure to misinformation since 2018. With these swift and significant developments related to platformed infrastructures, it is highly questionable how accurate the previously published figures were in 2024. These rapid transformations address a core problem with empirical research in this fast-evolving area: the risk of lagging behind the facts. From data showing that, as of 2018, most Americans primarily consumed news via television, can one infer that this is still true in 2024? It seems unlikely.

Another article in *Nature's* fake news edition, by a different group of researchers, challenges the claim of overstating the problems of misinformation (Ecker et al. 2024). These researchers, with a background in social psychology and the cognitive sciences, signal serious threats to democracy from widespread misinformation and manipulation. Because of the undermining of informed public discourse and the prevalence of election-related misinformation, the researchers relate these phenomena as a direct danger to democratic integrity.

The problem of misinformation and disinformation is a subject of a broad academic debate, in which also media theorists, sociologists, and philosophers participate. In their book *Network Propaganda: Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics* (2018), media scholars Benkler, Farris and Roberts aim to understand how the American public sphere has become “so vulnerable to disinformation, propaganda, and just sheer bullshit” (p. 8). In their research, mapping the disorders of what they call the “current epistemic crisis”, the authors distinguish several related problems of disinformation, misinformation, manipulation and propaganda (p. 11). They find that mis- and disinformation practices cannot

2 TikTok's breakthrough in the United States occurred in November 2018. At that time, it was almost exclusively used as a platform for music and dance videos (Yurieff 2018).

be limited to factual misstatements but must also include a broader scope that includes the framing and manipulative and distracting tactics that have emerged in the digitised, networked public sphere (p. 34).

Noteworthy is that these are not the usual suspects speaking. In 2006, one of the authors, Yochai Benkler, praised the role of the internet in reversing some of the harmful characteristics of the increasingly commercialised public sphere, thereby actualising the original ideal of Jürgen Habermas (Benkler 2006; Habermas 1962).<sup>3</sup> Benkler criticised the market-driven mass-media that dominated the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and hailed the new potential of digitised and networked public communication. From being an early advocate of ‘the wealth of networks’, the title of one of his previous studies, promising new opportunities (as well as some challenges) of digitisation, Benkler’s latest writings have developed into a more critical voice addressing the epistemic problems of the recent platformed public sphere, arguing these problems should be discussed in a broader, networked media-context (2006; Benkler, Farris & Roberts 2018).

Recently, the grandmaster of public sphere theory, Jürgen Habermas, supported the analysis (as provided by Benkler et al.) that disinformation is not the key problem, but is rather a symptom of the more widespread challenge of “disrupted public spheres that have become detached from the journalistically institutionalised public sphere” (2022, 167). In these reflections, initially published in 2021, Habermas reconsiders the public sphere theory he developed in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, and includes the effects of digitisation (1962; 2021).<sup>4</sup> Reflecting on the problem of disinformation, Habermas diagnoses a malfunctioning public sphere. “It is not the accumulation of fake news that is significant for a widespread deformation of the perception of the political public sphere, but the fact that fake news can no longer even be identified as such” (2022, 167). One of the explanations Habermas identifies is the loss of traditional gatekeepers in present-day digitised media coverage: “The technically and organisationally highly complex media system requires a professionalised

3 See Section 3.2.5 for a more detailed discussion.

4 The text was published as the epilogue of *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, a special edition of the *Berliner Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft* (Seeliger and Sevignani 2021). In 2022, this slightly revised text was published by Suhrkamp (Habermas 2022a) and later translated into English (Habermas 2022b).

staff that plays the gatekeeper role (as it has come to be called) for the communicative currents from which the citizens distil public opinions” (p. 157). According to Habermas, instead of focusing on disinformation, the problems in digitised publicity can be discussed more fundamentally when systematically reflecting on the disruption or malfunctioning of the public sphere, the need for gatekeepers and the preconditions of public opinion formation.

An additional notable feature in the *Nature* misinformation debate is the distinction between social media and “traditional news, and in particular television news”. This is intriguing for two reasons. Firstly, these forms of media are increasingly intertwined. Television channels use social media platforms to expand their reach, while posts on social media platforms become sources for various forms of news, including traditional news programmes. Furthermore, traditional broadcasters extend their content to online platforms as well. Thus, the division is not so clear-cut, which is why this thesis will refer to the present-day public sphere as ‘post-digital’. Secondly, and more intriguingly, “traditional news and in particular television news” is presented as a kind of benchmark – that is, as a model of serious news. This assumption is not further elaborated on but is particularly interesting for my thesis as it embodies a crucial reference point: it implies the existence of a reliable and less problematic model of information provision, namely traditional television news. It relates the specific characteristic of this *normative benchmark* of reliability to an *infrastructure*: a television broadcaster. However, the specific normative requirements for this model of information provision, aside from the infrastructural aspect of being broadcast on television, are not discussed. The argument I deploy in this thesis is that a normative approach to critical publicity should not focus on the infrastructures as decisive, but rather on the publicity processes that need to be enabled by these infrastructures.

The debate in *Nature* focuses on whether we overestimate or underestimate the dangers of misinformation for democracy. The circulation of misinformation and its supposed effects, however, are multifaceted. As Habermas and Benkler argue, these phenomena cannot be fully understood by studying respondents use of news sources (online or broadcast) and how severe or moderate the exposure to misinformation is. Furthermore, historians can confirm that misinformation has always existed, the issue having already been observed in the Middle Ages (Winston 2020). Presently,

without doubt, the circulation has increased due to the transformation to a post-digital publicity. The same might be said of the persistent dissemination of propaganda or conspiracy theories. While one can investigate the severity, mechanisms and consequences of these phenomena, in recent debates on disinformation, a central question has become how democracy can build *resilience* to disinformation and manipulation (Lewandowsky & van der Linden 2021; Kont et al. 2024). Resilience, in this context, may relate to persons, organisations as well as to public communication. Either way, resilience is associated with a challenge or threat and to “the ability to withstand, adapt and recover, mitigating potential negative effects” (Kont et al. 2024, 3).

In this thesis, I will examine the publicity processes and the infrastructures shaping public debate, which have become epistemically vulnerable to misinformation, even resulting in “a potential epistemic crisis of the public sphere” and the undermining of the process of public opinion formation (Chambers 2021, 157; see also Starr 2020). The issue is not whether misinformation is widespread or influential. Instead, I ask how a critical public sphere and informed public debate, as potential counteractants, can be realised and facilitated in the post-digital context. The focus is not on combating misinformation, but on the requirements of a critical post-digital public sphere that is resilient to withstand disruptive threats of misinformation and manipulation, and can adapt to crises.

A resilient public sphere is accommodated by well-functioning publicity infrastructures, providing the capacity to facilitate an inclusive and free debate. It is the reverse of a disrupted, malfunctioning public sphere. In philosophical discussions, the notion also includes a normative dimension. While it entails claims regarding the actual functioning or distortion of the public communicative processes, resilience simultaneously refers to an ideal: a concept of how the public sphere *should* function in ideal circumstances, a standard of a well-functioning sphere serving to support an inclusive and free debate. This ideal aspect is continuously underlined in Habermas’ writings. In a recent contribution to the debate, he argues that “empirical studies of the formation of opinions under democratic conditions become pointless if they are not also interpreted in the light of the normative requirements they are supposed to satisfy in constitutional democracies” (2022, 147).

With this dissertation, I want to take up this normative dimension. My preliminary research question is: What are the normative requirements for the formation of public opinion in present-day, post-digital democracy?

### **Philosophical contributions to theorising public opinion formation**

To address whether democracy is genuinely threatened by misinformation, it is not enough to examine the prevalence of misinformation; it also requires a reflection on the role of information provision in democracy, on its functions, and according to what qualitative standards these are ideally shaped. Therefore, a theory of democracy and its relation to the infrastructures of information provision and opinion formation is needed, starting from the normative question of why it is important to have an informed debate in the first place. Recent contributions to this discussion, highlighting the role of public opinion formation in protecting and promoting specific democratic values, for instance by Nadia Urbinati (2014) and Jürgen Habermas (2022), bear the traces of preceding debates. For a proper understanding of public opinion formation, these contributions deserve a role in the preliminary exploration of the concept.

In previous philosophical debates, public opinion has emerged as a contested and continuously problematised term. The normative relation between public opinion and political decision-making has been a central topic in the evolution of the concept. I will single out three decisive periods that have left traces in the present-day interpretation. I start with the ancient Greek period, followed by a short excursion to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Finally, I will briefly discuss a more sceptical stance towards public opinions, developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Philosophical genealogies of the concept of *opinion* usually start from the Greek word *doxa* (in Latin: ‘opinio’, the domain of opinions), which has a double meaning.<sup>5</sup> The first connotation refers to a civil context. It means a judgment on what someone represents in a common and public environment, in the opinion of others, one’s reputation, esteem or regard. On the other hand, the philosophical interpretation, dominant in Plato’s dialogues, defines *doxa* as an uncertain, contingent cognitive claim, as

5 For the genealogy of the concept, I rely on Brunner (2004), as well as Urbinati (2014) and Habermas (1989).

opposed to the Greek *episteme*, the domain of knowledge and truth. In dialogue with the slave Meno, Socrates claims:

*True opinions are a fine thing and do all sorts of good so long as they stay in their place; but they will not stay long. They run away from a man's mind, so they are not worth much, until you tether them by working out the reason. [...] Once they are tied down, they become knowledge, and are stable. That is why knowledge is something more valuable than right opinion.*  
(Plato 1977, 98A)

*Doxa* is here related to contingency and prejudice, and for that reason, according to Plato and his protagonists, cannot serve as a stable foundation for politics and government. Knowledge is 'more valuable'.

This basic opposition of 'opinion' versus 'knowledge' is constitutive in future interpretations, but its hierarchy in political debate is contested. Present-day political theorist Nadia Urbinati, for example, defines democracy as government by opinion and revalues the meaning of *doxa* for democratic societies (2014). The rebalancing of the roles of *doxa* and *episteme*, interpreted as opinion and expertise, remains an actual and relevant issue in democratic theory and in debates on the risks of technocracy.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of '*public opinion*' came into being during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. According to Habermas (1989), the qualifier 'public' in public opinion became prevalent around this period. Until then, phrases such as 'vulgar opinion' or 'general opinion' were known, but as Habermas points out, these interpretations of 'opinion' were predominantly associated with the previously sketched, more civil connotation, referring to the judgment of the many, one's reputation, or rumour. Adding the adjective 'public' to opinion would only produce a pleonasm: every opinion implied a public view (Habermas 1989, 90).

The writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau gave the interpretation of the concept of 'public opinion' a new twist. Even though he pursued the tradition of the more critical interpretation of public opinion as reputation,

6 I will discuss this further in Chapter 1.

as a judgment of condemnation by others,<sup>7</sup> Rousseau was among the first writers to add the adjective ‘public’ to the concept of opinion, providing it with a *political* significance. In his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, Rousseau refers to this new phrase ‘public opinion’ as a critical statement, adding the notion ‘public’ to speak against the alienated intellectuals and philosophers. This is because, in Rousseau’s view, they are the enemies of public opinion, and therefore the enemies of (ordinary) men.<sup>8</sup> Intellectuals are speaking from a position of knowledge, power or expertise, and are opposed to the naturalness and pureness of the opinions of ordinary men (as opposed to the alienated intellectuals and aristocrats).

This interpretation was contested by a group of leading French Enlightenment thinkers and economists, known as the physiocrats. They defined the very notion of public opinion as “an opinion purified through critical discussion in the public sphere to constitute a true opinion” (Habermas 1989, 95). This alternative account of the concept of public opinion, purified by being subjected to public processes, can be read as an antithesis of Rousseau’s primary characterisation. The tension between an interpretation of public opinion relying on a natural meaning, and the more deliberative concept of public opinion, based on public interaction, is still present in our present-day understanding of the concept. A public opinion, defined as an aggregation of individual opinions, a well-known concept in liberal traditions, can be aligned with a Rousseauian interpretation of natural opinions.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, the deliberative vision on public opinion,

7 “I distinguish in what is called honor, that which is drawn from public opinion, and that which derives from self-esteem. The former consists in vain prejudices more tossed than a windblown wave; the latter has its basis in the eternal truths of morality” (Rousseau 1997, 69).

8 “They smile contemptuously at such old-fashioned words as homeland and religion and dedicate their talents and their philosophy to destroying and degrading all that is sacred among men. Not that at bottom they hate either virtue or our dogmas; they are enemies of public opinion, and to bring them back to the feet of the altars it would be enough to consign them among the atheists. O fury to gain distinction, of what are you not capable?” (Rousseau & Cress 2011, 15).

9 Another resonance of the Rousseauian interpretation can be found in theories on direct democracy. According to Habermas, attaching the adjective ‘public’ to opinion is closely related to Rousseau’s political view on direct democracy, where sovereign authority – the people – must be present in person to enforce political powers, as if they were gathered in the Greek *polis*. “Opinion publique derived its attribute from it, that is, from the citizens assembled for acclamation and not from the rational-public debate of a public éclairé” (Habermas 1989, 99). When Rousseau refers to ‘public’ in his political writings, he regularly and literally means a group of people in person, and not a public debate, a public sphere, or a

claiming that a public opinion is not only a collection of individual preferences, but a deliberative and reflective result, holding new qualities, is a continuation of the physiocratic view of ‘purification’.

In both interpretations, the notion ‘public opinion’ bears the spirit of preparing for an emancipatory political turn, creating a counterforce to state authority. The widespread use of the concept on the eve of the French Revolution reflects the need for new social and functional concepts in the era of the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>10</sup> This is, according to Urbinati, the moment democracy obtains its characteristic form. The introduction of general elections translated the will of the people to indirect assemblies and transferred the power to delegates governing the country. It also provided modern democracy with its distinctive ‘diarchic structure’, where will and opinion structurally diverge, as exemplified by representative democracy.<sup>11</sup> This diarchy is expressed by two structuring pillars: will and opinion. Even without exercising direct political power, public opinion became a politically powerful notion: “The public opinion that is worked up via democratic procedures into communicative power cannot ‘rule’ of itself, but can only point the use of administrative power in specific directions” (Habermas 1996, 300). In this notion of public opinion as a communicative power, the two previously mentioned connotations remain discernible: the cognitive aspect of an uncertain judgement, and the social dimension of a judgment produced in a common or public environment.

public interaction. Rousseau advocates the concept of public opinion embodied in one public body: one sphere where deliberation and decision does take place in one public assembly.

This Rousseauian notion of public opinion takes a skeptical stance towards an autonomous sphere of deliberation, intermediating between individual opinions and political institutions.

10 See for instance Kurt Braatz in his study on public opinion (2011): “Die historische Basishypothese lautet sinngemäß: Wenn der Begriff der Öffentlichen Meinung an der Schwelle zur Neuzeit entstanden ist, so deutet dies darauf hin, daß auch die mit ihm bezeichnete soziale Erscheinung eng mit den Entwicklungen der Neuzeit verbunden ist” (p. 2).

11 For a more historical context, see de Dijn (2020). She explains how, since the publication of *The Federalist Papers* (Hamilton, Madison and Jay, 1788), representative government has grown out as the fundamental substructure of Western liberal democracies, as well as in the American Republic and several nation-states in Europe. Although inspired by communities of direct democracy from former centuries, the authors of *The Federalist Papers* argue that the will of the people would be more in line with the common good, when represented by delegates, than it would be in direct assemblies. By handing over governing power to a ‘chosen body’ of wise citizens, Madison argues, the public voice would be “more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves, convened for the purpose” (de Dijn 2020, 213).

The opposition between *doxa* and *episteme* and their significance for political decision-making has remained an underlying dichotomy in recent debates on opinion formation. A prominent theorist on public opinion, predominantly in media and journalism studies, is the American philosopher and journalist Walter Lippmann. He dedicated several studies to the creation of public opinion (e.g., 1922 and 1925), adopting a sceptical stance towards the public's competence in comprehending the complexity of the globalising world.<sup>12</sup>

Lippmann's view on opinion is clearly derived from the Platonic tradition, declaring knowledge and expertise superior to opinion. Though he does value the role of public opinion in a democratic society, Lippmann proposes a theory of improving the quality of opinions, encouraging and enhancing information provision. He aims to reassess the role of experts and expertise in democratic institutions. He worked on a theory to grasp and translate complex phenomena into comprehensible and verified information, attributing a constitutive role to journalism for democracy. While being concerned about the role of the commercialised media in early 20<sup>th</sup> century democracies, Lippmann thought of other, newly arising institutions, such as 'intelligence bureaus', as a kind of epistemic support, translating non-partisan expert knowledge to a non-expert public and serving to improve public opinion formation (Lippmann 2010, 202–213). To address the problem of "the current epistemic crisis", as Benkler et al. (2018) have characterised post-digital public debate, Lippmann can be an inspiring voice, especially in outlining and accentuating journalistic qualities and in the search for complementary potential.

A fierce critic of 'public opinion' as a communicative, political power is the German sociologist Elisabeth Noelle-Neuman. Combining conceptual and empirical research, her major study, *The Spiral of Silence* (1974), analyses how minority views might remain suppressed due to dominant opinion-forming powers in public debate. She theorises public opinion mainly as a social-psychological mechanism, highlighting the profound social embeddedness of opinion formation. Rather than emerging purely

12 The opposition between public and academic debate, created in the *Nature* debate on misinformation and arguing that there is a public misunderstanding of complex academic problems, echoes Lippmann's questioning the public's competence of grasping complicated scientific discussion.

from reasoned deliberation, public opinion in Noelle-Neumann's model is conditioned by individuals' perception of majority views, suppressing dissenting and minority opinions, out of fear of isolation.

By focusing on social mechanisms, however, Noelle-Neumann risks reducing public opinion to a neutral dynamics, thereby overlooking the normative dimensions of the *formation* of opinions and the role of dialogue, experts and media in that formation. That being said, accusations of ties to Nazi organisations that came up since 1991 started a debate over ideological bias in her early work, and mostly discredited her theories (Simpson 1996).

Looking back on the key moments of the evolution of the concepts, I distil two historical lines that are relevant for a present-day understanding of public opinion. The first one is the relation between *doxa* and *episteme*, and its alleged hierarchy for political decision-making. The second one is the significance of the qualifier 'public' in public opinion. Does it refer to a Rousseauian natural expression, or in a more Habermasian interpretation, to a result of a deliberative process? Both of these lines will return in my approach to public opinion formation.

### **Research question and research design**

To further elaborate my preliminary research question – 'What are the normative requirements for the formation of public opinion in present-day, post-digital democracy?' – I will now outline the steps involved in developing my approach.

With this research, I want to contribute to the body of normative and conceptual research on public opinion formation from a philosophical perspective. A normative approach is required because it provides the standards against which actual communicative practices, and a potential disruption of these, can be evaluated. Without normative criteria, we cannot judge whether public debate is actually serving the democratic values attributed to public opinion formation.

The normative approach of Nadia Urbinati, who developed a theory of a well-functioning democracy secured by the balancing of political institutions and opinion formation, provide my starting point in the recent discussion. In *Democracy Disfigured* (2014), she sketches the characteristic

diarchic figure of representative democracy, consisting of the two bearing structures: political institutions and a forum of opinions. She explains that due to recent technological and economic developments, the pillar of opinion is increasingly challenged.

Urbinati emphasises the relatively autonomous role of public opinion as a fundamental pillar of a well-functioning democracy, alongside political institutions. She envisions public opinion formation as a free exchange process in a forum, where individual preferences are expressed and aggregated, structured by normative procedures safeguarding democratic values such as inclusion and equal opportunity for participation. Her approach, known as a democratic proceduralism, highlights the formation of public opinion generated by fair procedures: “it presumes and claims the equal right and opportunity citizens have to participate in the formation of majority view with their individual votes and their opinions” (2014, 19).

Nevertheless, the process of formation itself is beyond the scope of her theory. As a liberal theorist, Urbinati’s emphasis lies in the pursuit of fair procedures. She opposes Habermas and other deliberatist approaches, which in her view aim to improve the quality of public opinion formation, on other grounds than the strictly procedural ones, for example by valuing deliberation for its educational and epistemic benefits. If guaranteed that they are free and inclusive, then for Urbinati the processes of *how* opinions are formed are of minor importance.

The first exploration of previous concepts of opinion formation, including the work of Urbinati, has shown that its normative requirements are predominantly defined by its relation to political institutions, and vice versa. In Urbinati’s theory, after having secured the power balance and the liberal values of free and inclusive interaction, the formation processes receive minimal attention. For my research on public opinion formation, however, I aim to investigate the *ongoing process* of opinion formation and its requirements. For this process, in which opinions are formed and thus transformed, a liberal model that conceives of opinions as individual preferences that can be exchanged as ‘goods’ on a market is inadequate: it cannot account for the transformative potential of public discussion. The writings of Habermas offer a more comprehensive response to this issue. They do not merely enable a fair procedure for deliberation and decision-making, as in Urbinati’s democratic proceduralism, but also comprise

a realm where “normative content arises from the very structure of communicative actions” (1994, 6).

The analysis of public opinion as an ongoing and transformative formation process, which I propose in this thesis, is mostly built upon the writings of Jürgen Habermas and, of course, his critics. As previously mentioned, Habermas has worked on this topic for sixty years, aiming to understand the impact of the gradually evolving media infrastructures on public opinion formation. In a 1964 encyclopaedia article, he formulated the fundamentals of a mediated public sphere, consisting of public deliberation and media infrastructures.

*The concept: By “the public sphere” we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. [...] Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion – that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions – about matters of general interest. In a large public body, this kind of communication requires specific means to transmit information and influence those who receive it. Today, newspapers and magazines, radio and television are the media of the public sphere. (Habermas, Lennox & Lennox 1974, 49)*

In my view, Habermas’ dynamic and communicative concept of the public sphere is helpful to conceive the transformative potential of opinion formation. Habermas systematically rethought his concept, initially developed in the *Strukturwandel* (1962), twice, nearly thirty years apart. In 1992, prompted by an English translation, he refined his concept of the public sphere to consider the commercialisation of the media. The second time, invited by the *Berliner Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft* (2021), he explored how digitisation transformed public opinion formation, emphasising the challenges online media poses to democratic discourse and deliberative communication.

One of the critical voices I have included in revising the Habermasian framework is that of Nancy Fraser, an early Habermas critic. She challenges Habermas’ concept of the public sphere for being too idealised and

exclusionary. Fraser advances different arguments critiquing public sphere theory as a result of a class- and gender-biased notion of publicity (1992), followed by questioning the critical potential of publicity as an empirical and normative concept in a post-Westphalian context (2007). Fraser's work rightly addresses some of Habermas' blind spots. She expands the range of the notion of publicity to other, previously overlooked spheres. Her distinction between the 'who' and the 'how' will serve as a lever for my normative framework of assessing publicity processes, since it enables a critical view on the borders of public debate, to the included voices and to the public issues, constantly questioning these.

In this thesis, I will proceed from the revised Habermas' concept of *critical publicity*, referring to both the processes (for instance: informing, discussing, curating) as well as the infrastructures (newspapers, broadcasting, platforms, etc.) shaping public opinion formation. Habermas does not make this distinction, using the word publicity for both dimensions. But I will analytically distinguish processes and infrastructures, allowing me to separately define the normative requirements of the processes, in a more abstract philosophical way.

I will amend the concept of critical publicity on two crucial points. The first amendment is the adjustment to the post-digital publicity infrastructures, characterised by networks and platforms. The second addresses the processual understanding of publicity, which remains under-theorised and implicit in Habermas' theory.

In the first place, historic reconstructions have shown the relevance of the emergence of different media institutions such as newspapers, radio and television broadcasting, transforming publicity practices. New infrastructures unlock other, sometimes unexpected potentials. As the emergence of newspapers enabled the distribution of the news worldwide, the evolution of radio accelerated the news cycle. This infrastructural revolution transformed the work of the press and related public opinion formation. Interpreting this transformation and its consequences is, by and large, the project of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, initially published in 1962.

The present-day predominantly digitised context, again, requires a re-evaluation of the status quo of the communicative infrastructures engaged

in public opinion formation. Commercial and technological forces, further globalising and accelerating the public debate, have transformed these structures and continue to do so. These transformations undeniably radically affect the formation of public opinion and call for a revision of the engaged concepts. Habermas (2021) made a first attempt but felt under-qualified to study the newly structured public sphere, as well as its consequences, in depth.<sup>13</sup> As I argue in this dissertation, the recent transformation not only requires a reconsideration in infrastructural terms but might also demand an update to the normative approach. The pre-digitally informed normative requirements need to be reassessed to the post-digital era, which is characterised by networked and platformed communication and influencer-driven publicity.

Secondly, I will go one step beyond Habermas' interpretation since in my view, and especially in his later writings, he provides a mostly infrastructural approach to publicity. In contrast, I will draw an analytical distinction between processes and infrastructures, highlighting critical *processes*. By describing these (critical) processes as distinct from the infrastructures, I can discern critical publicity processes from the traditional infrastructures and professionals, such as gatekeepers and journalism. I analytically detach them, so to speak, from the subject matter and the (accidental) empirical manifestation and develop a framework of normative requirements.

The normative approach to critical publicity processes that I propose identifies input, output, and throughput requirements, which all put forward specific demands. The division sheds light on throughput processes, as a distinct aspect, that is overlooked in the Habermasian theory. Throughput requirements are the normative demands to the processes taking place in organising, orchestrating and curating public conversation, such as filtering, editing and prioritising the input.

In the formative period of the public sphere, journalism and professional media were central to shaping and organising public debate. As Habermas'

13 "Since I must leave these investigations to younger colleagues, all I can do is speculate. For these changes are being driven by digital communication, which represents a deep evolutionary caesura in this and other respects", Habermas expresses in an interview (Czington, Diefenbach and Kempf 2020, 31).

writings predominantly focus on the mass media dominated public sphere (and the preceding periods), he can afford to rely on professional journalism taking care of the proper processing of opinions, information and arguments. However, as the interactions in publicity practices are increasingly accelerated and technically mediated and obscured, the concept of professionalism falls short in guaranteeing throughput requirements. This raises a critical issue: Habermas' theory does not reach beyond journalism. My processual understanding – one that accentuates the *how* of filtering, framing, and processing of information and messages – enables a critical normative approach to post-digital publicity that challenge, or encourage, critical processes.

Recognising that the public sphere and its publicity infrastructures form a crowded and complex arena – marked by countless interactions among individuals, institutions, politicians, lobbyists, media, parties, interest groups, activists, and others – this space is shaped by a multitude of actors exchanging conversations, protests, debates, speeches, conferences, videos, demonstrations, trending topics, and hashtags. For this thesis, I focus specifically on publicity as the curation and organisation of public debate. Given that media and journalistic organisations have traditionally served as the main custodians of throughput procedures, they will constitute the starting point of my research. However, in Part II, I will expand my initial focus, moving towards alternative critical media potential.

The answer to my initial research question, 'What are the normative requirements for the formation of public opinion in present-day, post-digital democracy?', will take me, in three chapters, through the following steps. Firstly, I will analyse characteristics of free, inclusive and democratic opinion formation, comparing two philosophical models (liberal and deliberative). Secondly, I will construct a normative framework of critical publicity processes, dividing these into input, output and throughput requirements – focussing on the third category. And thirdly, I will examine the recent infrastructural transformations of networking and platformisation into a post-digital sphere. In the second part of the thesis, I will explore the theoretical concepts, bringing these into dialogue with three present-day publicity features. This will reframe my initial question into: 'Are the normative requirements for critical publicity processes mostly developed in the predigital era, still applicable after the digital transformation of media infrastructures?' Provided that this is the case,

then, can these criteria be adopted by alternative publicity features? Or, if they appear to be inadequate, do they need to be reconceptualised?

### **Vocabulary and key concepts**

I will briefly present my key concepts. In the Habermasian interpretation, the public sphere has been a *normative concept* from the outset. Habermas has always primarily been concerned with what the idea of the bourgeois public sphere promised – in what it, ideally, could produce. Bernstein (2012) argues that the normative aspect in particular is the revolutionary force of the concept. This normative core is “the standard by which he evaluates the degeneration of the public sphere and the debasement of the concepts of public opinion and the principle of publicity” (p. 769). This standard can, according to Bernstein, still be applied ‘in our time’ (referring to the year 2012; p. 773), but I will question whether it still does in 2025. What is more, I will examine whether this standard, developed in another historical and infrastructural context, might require a normative revision.

Habermas’ normative approach to public opinion formation articulates three distinct elements, articulating and promoting specific values: “first, the private autonomy of citizens, each of whom pursues a life of his or her own; second, democratic citizenship, that is, the inclusion of free and equal citizens in the political community; and third, the independence of a public sphere that operates as an intermediary system between state and society” (2006, 412). The third element, an independently functioning public sphere, is the focus of my approach to the role of publicity processes in public opinion formation.

*Publicity*, the communicative network that shapes public discourse and debate, has an empirical and a normative dimension, briefly summarised as ‘infrastructures’ and ‘processes’. Publicity processes are shaped by the organisation of and interaction between individual expressions and political, governance, and media institutions, and are afforded by infrastructures of public communication. In my theoretical framework, I will develop a normative perspective, based on an empirically informed analysis.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> This is, again, mostly a Habermasian approach. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines the reflective engagement of critical theory inspired by the Habermasian tradition, stating that it aims to reflect “normative perspectives with empirically informed analysis” (Celikates & Flynn 2023). This approach does not take the normative aspects of its study for granted, nor

A resilient public sphere is supported by critical publicity, facilitating an inclusive and free public debate. Critical publicity advances a ‘critical’ quality, supposing to meet several requirements that are not fulfilled in manufactured publicity, advertisement, and propaganda. Critical publicity is thus opposed to manufactured publicity or sheer publicity. It is the revenue of complying with three, to some extent, interrelated conditions, which I characterise as *input*, *output* and *throughput* requirements. I consider these three lenses as the building blocks of my normative framework to evaluate critical publicity. This is where I differ from Habermas, who does not scrutinise the normative dimensions of input, output and throughput, but regards these as empirical categories.<sup>15</sup>

In the normative model I develop in this thesis, critical publicity has legitimacy if and because its normative requirements are, to a certain extent, fulfilled. Legitimacy, *Anerkennungswürdigkeit*, is a normative concept, implying the aspect of recognition (*Anerkennung*), but also the connotation of ‘worthiness’, which in the Habermasian interpretation is generated by a rational justification or validation.<sup>16</sup> Relevant for this recognition and support is that we can justify its procedures as fair and valid requirements. Attributed to publicity, or critical publicity in my theory, legitimacy is the result of having achieved the standards of input, output and throughput requirements. Then sheer publicity has evolved into critical publicity.

When I refer to the *input* requirements of critical publicity, values of inclusion, participation and representation are implied. *Output* requirements for critical publicity refer to the fair and correct presentation of problems and positions in public debate. *Throughput* requirements are the normative demands to the processes taking place in organising, orchestrating and curating public conversation, the route from the input (voices, preferences, data) to the output (presentation), such as: filtering, gatekeeping, selecting, prioritising, researching and editing; in sum, *processing* the input of issues and voices into outputs as articles, debates, round tables, reports and news.

does it consider these as abstract principles. Rather, it critically reflects on normative notions in the light of empirical knowledge, as I will do in scrutinising publicity processes.

15 I will demonstrate this in Section 2.3.

16 For an explanation and discussion of the Habermasian use of legitimacy, see Nickel (2018).

These throughput requirements are dissected into three distinct functions. The first function is public controversy or *contestation*, a deliberative process in which opinions are confronted with distinct, divergent, opposing, and competing viewpoints. Due to its interactive and dynamic nature, contestation operates as a throughput process. The second function of critical publicity is *epistemic*: it involves processing information and arguments, thereby contributing to the cognitive potential of deliberation. The third function, *Problemverarbeitung* entails the critical reflection of public debate and its issues of common concern. Rather than merely identifying problems, it aims to evaluate and frame them from multiple perspectives as shared societal concerns.

For my research, the epistemic function will turn out to be the most relevant notion. It is a broad concept that encompasses various aspects. As a general philosophical delineation, 'epistemic' refers to a relationship with knowledge. More specifically, in relation to communication and publicity, the qualifier 'epistemic' can be interpreted in different ways. First, the mere distribution of knowledge and information, usually referred to as dissemination, contributes to the epistemic quality of publicity because it multiplies knowledge amongst the public. This plays a major role, for example, in Chapter 4, which examines the epistemic power of influencers. But the epistemic function can also refer to other processes, such as a discussion or exchange of information and arguments, whether between laypeople or between experts and non-experts. In addition, it also covers a process or collective reasoning (as in deliberation) or epistemic procedures such as cross examination or rebuttal (as in court or journalism). All these processes contribute to the epistemic quality, which values the significance of information, arguments, and expertise in public debate.

If publicity infrastructures transform or convert the information, as for example in filtering, journalistic procedures or fact checking, then the epistemic function is considered a throughput process. However, epistemic quality can also be attributed as input (including expert voices) or output (emphasising scholarly contributions in the presented subject matter). Nonetheless, as I will argue in Section 3.2.4, the epistemic function is situated in the post-digital context of increasing importance as a throughput requirement.

## **Outline of the argument and the chapters**

Having outlined the dissertation's central questions and concepts, I will now provide an overview of the subjects discussed in each chapter.

In **Chapter 1**, I will discuss two philosophical approaches that develop a normative and procedural concept of opinion formation: those of Nadia Urbinati and Jürgen Habermas. These two authors employ different theoretical approaches. I will contrast Urbinati's forum of opinions with Habermas' theory of the public sphere. In pursuit of advancing a theory of critical publicity, my initial question is: Which conceptual framework provides a comprehensive theory for assessing public opinion formation as a process, not as an outcome? I will argue that while Urbinati's theory overlooks the process of *how* public opinion formation takes place, Habermas is rightly interested in this 'how'. Countering the liberal approach with deliberative theorists' critique, I conclude that Habermas' public sphere theory provides a more comprehensive notion of the procedures that will enable me to develop my normative concept of publicity processes. I claim that a normative concept of opinion formation requires a deliberative, an epistemic, and a reflective dimension.

In **Chapter 2**, I continue presenting research on the normative requirements of public opinion formation by fleshing out the Habermasian concept of critical publicity as a constitutive element of the public sphere. I will somewhat artificially distinguish between critical publicity as a process and an infrastructure, as two complementary aspects of critical publicity. This will allow me to rethink the normative requirements of post-digital publicity, focusing on the rather abstract processes, without merely relying on traditional 'professional' practices. Chapter 2 focuses specifically on understanding the (normative) processes. From political theory, I adopt the input, output, and throughput legitimacy model to assess these practices and the performance of critical publicity. I discern input (the 'who' of public discourse, defined as representation), output (the 'what' of discourse, defined as presentation), and throughput legitimacy (the 'how' of discourse, defined as processing of opinions, information and arguments). In addressing my question about the normative requirements, I focus on throughput legitimacy, asserting that, in addition to input and output, this is a precondition for critical publicity. I argue that there are several reasons why this focus is urgent in the present-day context. Throughput is frequently neglected because it operates in obscured 'black boxes', outside

public scrutiny. It is also increasingly distorted by commercial pressures. Moreover, the throughput focus is barely developed in Habermas's framework, as he essentially outsources and entrusts throughput legitimacy to professional practices and institutions. Since Habermas has relied too heavily on the 'professional media system' in guaranteeing critical and deliberative quality, his theory falls short in assessing the recent platformed public sphere, in which critical processes have taken on a very different, if not unrecognisable, shape. I will amend his theory with a focus on the 'how', particularly defining the requirements of these transformed and partly obscured throughput processes, which are a pertinent component of a resilient public sphere, since they organise and curate the discourse.

The chapter concludes with an operational definition of throughput processes, which fulfil three, partly related functions (and achieve legitimacy if they at least partially fulfil these functions). The first function is controversy or public deliberation, a deliberative process in which divergent and opposing viewpoints are confronted. The second function is epistemic: it centres on processing information and expertise. The third one is the reflective function, which seeks to evaluate and frame issues of common concern from multiple perspectives.

Abstract processes depend on infrastructures, whose material and economic characteristics shape the potential of, and the challenges to, the normative requirements. Chapter 3 presents a historical overview of infrastructural transformations based on Habermasian and media-theoretical literature. I will discuss the rise of newspapers, journalism and intelligence work, the increase of commercialisation, and the recent changes brought about by digitisation and platformisation. These transformed infrastructures afford critical publicity functions, providing threats and new potential. I will argue that Habermas' analysis from 1962 was foremost an infrastructural reconstruction and therefore falls short in reconsidering the present-day transformations, being inappropriate for reconsidering the normative throughput functions, since it was predominantly relying on professional practices, which are increasingly challenged in the post-digital context. My question is: What are the relevant infrastructural transformations that affect throughput legitimacy? Which of these can be seen as challenges or, conversely, as new opportunities? I identify several challenges posed by the post-digital, specifically-platformed public sphere, setting the scene for present-day critical publicity. These challenges include the obscurity

of provenance and authorship, the disintermediation of the public sphere due to the decline of professional gatekeepers, and fragmentation. These developments challenge certain throughput functions, mainly the epistemic and reflective functions. They do not necessarily hinder the public contestation function, although this form of contestation is not always equally deliberative.<sup>17</sup> Accordingly, these challenges affect the resilience of a public sphere that, due to these post-digital characteristics, is vulnerable to noise and misinformation.

Part II explores how to reinforce the critical functions of post-digital publicity, primarily fostering throughput. To get a more practice-based perspective on the normative requirements, and because it combines processual and infrastructural questions, Part II starts focusing on what the recent challenges mean for journalism. I critique Habermas' narrow, newsroom-centred approach of journalism, arguing for a broader conception of critical publicity – one that acknowledges how digital and post-digital infrastructures now shape public opinion beyond traditional media institutions.

Therefore, I explore some alternative publicity actors and networks impacting the post-digital public discourse and their possible contribution to critical throughput processes. By critically discussing cases of alternative contributors to throughput procedures, I will explore whether in a platformed media sphere, where the position of professional media is marginalised, alternative agents or networks could adopt some of these processes. I will illustrate these alternative practices with prototypical examples to detect the characteristic features of post-digital publishing processes, and bring these into dialogue with my theoretical framework, evaluating their effects on the epistemic and reflective functions.

In my cases in Part II, I analyse some of the boundaries of traditional journalism, challenged by new actors that are better adjusted to post-digital publicity, enabling new critical potential. These examples, viz. influencers, activism, and networked journalism, undeniably leave their marks on

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on the deliberative qualities of present-day media infrastructures, see Wessler's commentary on Twitter (2018, 100–104).

present-day public debate and publicity processes. I will explore whether these alternative publishing powers contribute to *critical* publicity.

Influencers challenge the boundary of professionalism and authorship. As non-expert voices, but with an impactful following, they are considered to serve as 'epistemic powers' in public discourse, disseminating, for instance, health information and advice among their mostly young followers. In **Chapter 4**, my question is whether influencers can contribute meaningfully to the epistemic function of critical publicity. Influencers, characterised as non-trained authors in the traditional sense and not being submitted to codes of conduct as journalists are, but highly impactful in public discourse, risk being reduced to mere advertising or manufactured publicity. However, new forms of authorship may emerge if influencers adopt deliberative communicative practices.

In **Chapter 5**, I investigate how 'media activism' challenges traditional journalistic practices by exposing and questioning editorial procedures. Media activists do, to some extent, concur with journalism and its impact on the public agenda. By using their own platforms in the post-digital era, activists directly influence public debate and critique how conventional journalism shapes issues of common concern. This chapter explores how activism can act as a reflective form of critical publicity by reinterpreting problem definitions and shifting the focus of debate. I argue that such activism foregrounds the epistemic function of journalism and creates new opportunities for reconfiguring public discourse by questioning its procedures and its borders.

**Chapter 6** investigates networked journalism as a response to the precarisation of journalism and professional media organisations. Emerging from alternative economic models and supported by foundations, networked journalism is better adapted to the technological, international, and social conditions of the post-digital era. This chapter examines the boundaries of journalism, which are stretched by amateur contributors and open-source methodologies. It questions how epistemic authority can be established in horizontal collaborations between researchers, publishers, and the public. I argue that networked journalism redefines epistemic authority through transparent practices, offering a renewed and critical contribution to the contemporary public sphere.

These three partly new, partly traditional, yet altered practices that explore the boundaries of journalism transform critical publicity processes. To what extent and under what conditions do they contribute to throughput procedures of critical publicity? Moreover, what insights do these developments provide for the normative requirements of critical publicity? In my Final Reflections, this will ultimately result in an adjusted processual concept of critical publicity, which gradually disentangles journalism from traditional media organisations.

To conclude on a personal note, another reason that I have been motivated to conduct this research is because of my long-standing and intensive engagement with public debate. I started to become involved in journalism as a philosophy student in the 1990s. For journalism and the publicity industry, where I started to work, this was a turbulent, but also optimistic period. Digital transformation stirred the imagination to realise previously implicit or unattainable ideals: a truly accessible, diverse, low-threshold, widespread public debate, unhindered by geographical restrictions. This interconnected environment was celebrated for its democratic and deliberative potential. In retrospect, even Habermas himself looks back to this time (the early 1990s) with moderate enthusiasm, as explicated in an interview in 2020: “The Internet was rightly hailed by its pioneers as liberating precisely in virtue of its anarchic infrastructure” (Czington, Diefenbach, and Kempf 2020, 32).

The rapidly evolving digitisation, which resulted in lowering publishing costs, easy access and worldwide connections, but simultaneously increased commercialisation and fragmentation, affected the publishing practice, offering new potential as well as challenges. Working as an editor connecting the academic sphere to a broader public, it sparked my interest in shaping and encouraging public discussion. The widespread adoption of digital infrastructures made Habermas’ deliberative ideal appear attainable for the first time at a large scale; an aspiration that ultimately inspired the direction of this thesis. In the Final Reflections, I will reflect on some of my experiences and observations in this formative period of the post-digital era.

Lastly, I am aware that I chose a ‘hot’ and broad topic, addressing extensive and wide-ranging questions. Nevertheless, I believe that by narrowing these down to the normative processes of critical publicity, I can contribute purposefully to a revised model of public opinion formation. Over the years

that I have been conducting my research, the media landscape has changed rapidly and thoroughly, giving me the feeling that I was writing about a moving target. It made me sometimes feel rushed and, at other moments, feel that this research is particularly pertinent. The transformation of publicity infrastructures, debates on economic models, the increasing intertwining of political and economic powers, the regulations on content moderation, and the circulation of AI-generated content will continue and even accelerate over the next few years. However, I hope that the arguments developed in this dissertation do make a purposeful contribution to future critical discussions about these features.



**Part I:**  
**A conceptual  
framework  
for theorising  
critical  
publicity**

# 1. A normative and epistemic concept of public opinion formation

## 1.1 Introduction

*Since Public Opinion is supposed to be the prime mover in democracies, one might reasonably expect to find a vast literature. One does not find it. There are excellent books on government and parties, that is on the machinery which in theory registers public opinions after they are formed. But on the sources from which these public opinions arise, in the processes by which they are derived, there is relatively little. The existence of a force called Public Opinion is in the main taken for granted. (Lippmann 1922, 139)*

In his work *Public Opinion*, American journalist and philosopher Walter Lippmann underlined the importance of studying the role of public opinion in democracy and observed a distinct lack of such research. In 1922, public opinion was clearly a topic that political writers and their textbooks neglected. As a professional journalist and philosopher, Lippmann appeals to a study of “where the information was to come from on which the will of the people was to be based” (1922, 173).

More than a century later, a vast body of research in political theory exists. Public opinion is supposed to be “one of the most vital and enduring concepts in the social sciences” (Donsbach and Traugott 2008, p.2). Most studies, however, are not the qualitative inquiries that Lippmann sought. Instead, they are primarily empirical analyses: during the last fifty years, a focus on polling techniques and surveys has dominated public opinion research.<sup>18</sup> Discussing methodology, reviewing effects, and evaluating

18 As an illustration, almost 400 of the 600 pages of the standard *The Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research* (2008) are dedicated to the methodology of survey research, polling,

consequences has generated a sizeable corpus of scientific literature.<sup>19</sup> In social and political sciences and communication studies, there is some normative study of public opinion, researching patterns of dominance, silencing and group interactions.<sup>20</sup>

In this chapter, I examine the corpus of recent *philosophical* literature on public opinion formation, especially the works of Nadia Urbinati and Jürgen Habermas. Both authors employ a normative and procedural model of public opinion formation but have different ideas about these concepts. Starting with the normative aspect, both authors think it is critical to develop a normative theory instead of a purely empirical informed theory, thereby articulating specific values. These underlying values, however, differ. For Urbinati, democracy's core characteristic is "to protect and promote equal political liberty", emphasising the values of autonomy, inclusion, and equal opportunity for participation (2014, 19). Habermas does not dispute the significance of equal political liberty; however, in forming public opinion, he articulates some additional values for organising public opinion. His normative theory of democracy articulates three elements: private autonomy of citizens, the inclusion of free and equal citizens, and third, "the independence of a public sphere that operates as an intermediary system between state and society" (Habermas 2006, 412). The first two criteria align with Urbinati's values; the third is an additional criterion. This third aspect will be of profound significance in my philosophical understanding of public opinion formation as a process.

A related problem to be addressed is the difference in their 'procedural' approaches. Urbinati applies a liberal<sup>21</sup> account of procedural theory, defining minimal criteria for fair procedures. These criteria consist of equal access and the transparent and impartial aggregation of inputs. Habermas,

questionnaires, and response.

19 The *International Journal of Public Opinion Research* describes its scope of topics as "studies of public opinion that contribute to theory development and testing about political, social, and current issues, particularly those that involve comparative analysis; - the role of public opinion polls in political decision making, the development of public policies, electoral behavior, and mass communications; - evaluations of and improvements in the methodology of public opinion surveys" (IJPOR 2024).

20 See for instance the works of Noelle-Neumann (1974), Bennett and Entman (2001), Katz (1964) and Sunstein (2017).

21 In Section 1.2, I will define and further discuss this notion of 'liberal'.

however, is more demanding of the procedural aspect of his deliberative model, which requires “a procedure of opinion and will formation that grants (a) publicity and transparency for the deliberative process, (b) inclusion and equal opportunity for participation, and (c) a justified presumption for reasonable outcomes” (2006, 419). The third aspect, already foreshadowing the epistemic dimension of public opinion formation that I will underline in my own approach, is a pertinent criterion in Habermas’ framework that is absent in Urbinati’s theory. This aspect is a crucial element in my own theory of public opinion formation.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. I start by considering Nadia Urbinati’s *Democracy Disfigured* (2014), in which she problematises the role of public opinion in liberal democracy. Presenting representative democracy as a diarchic figure, consisting of the two bearing structures of democracy (political institutions and opinions), Urbinati emphasises the relatively autonomous role of public opinion. Her diagnosis is that the pillar of opinion is challenged due to technological and economic developments. In Urbinati’s model, the pillar of opinion is to be conceived as a forum of opinions, providing the normative preconditions of opinion formation. In conceptualising the domain of opinions as a forum, Urbinati articulates a liberal account of deliberation, organising the exchange and the aggregation of individual expressions. When criticising her notion of public opinion as a forum as functional and formal, I will argue that a discursive, deliberative concept of opinion formation is a more appropriate description of the interactive and public requirements of opinion formation.

Secondly, I argue that public opinion formation, emerging from public deliberation, always entails an epistemic dimension valued as cognitive potential. The epistemic potential I want to explore can be studied more fundamentally when returning to a Habermasian approach. This is because the deliberative process of exchanging arguments and information not only has functional value but also grants intrinsic epistemic value to public opinion formation. This approach produces a normative perspective on the cognitive potential of deliberation.

Thirdly, based on the discursive, epistemic notion of public opinion formation, I will differentiate between an instrumental and a more reflective idea of public opinion that is open to challenge and adjustment. In the instrumental definition, the normative value of deliberation is to

validate the outcome as a legitimate result. Process-oriented values are subordinate and instrumental in achieving a valid outcome. I will argue that an outcome-related conceptualisation cannot entirely appreciate the cognitive potential of public opinion formation as a reflective process evaluating problems brought forth and framed from various perspectives. A reflective concept inherently values the deliberation process, irrespective of its instrumental value.

In this chapter, I develop the first part of my theoretical framework. Discussing the relevant literature on the normative theory of public opinion, I advance a *discursive*, *epistemic*, and *reflective* approach to public opinion formation. This approach spotlights public opinion formation as a public and interactive process. I conclude that public opinion studies should not be reduced to empirical research, nor should a normative account be reduced to assess the fairness of an outcome, as a liberal account is inclined to do. Public opinion formation is an ongoing and reflective process of an engaged public in an interactive conversation on publicly relevant issues and requires a substantive concept. To comprehend the communicative dynamics of publics and their powers, a liberal democracy requires a discursive concept of public opinion formation, appreciating its epistemic potential. From the critical comparison of Urbinati and Habermas, I construct a new normative and procedural public opinion formation model with a deliberative, epistemic, and reflexive function. These characteristics result from the encounter of opinions mediated by critical publicity.

## 1.2 A normative concept of opinion formation: Democracy's diarchy

Nadia Urbinati's *Democracy Disfigured* (2014) provides a normative account of public opinion formation in present-day democracy. In this study, Urbinati articulates three disfigurations of contemporary democracy caused by an eroded realm of public opinion. She conceives of public opinion as a forum, a model I dispute in the following paragraphs. Before discussing her model, I will briefly present her diagnosis of the disfiguration of democracy.

Urbinati reflects on the preconditions of democracy, defined as a “government by means of opinion” (2014, 2). Representative democracy, Urbinati argues, rests on two pillars, summarised as ‘will’ and ‘opinion’.

*[I]t relies on the premise that representative democracy is a diarchic system in which ‘will’ (by which I mean the right to vote and the procedures and institutions that regulate the making of authoritative decisions) and ‘opinion’ (by which I mean the extra institutional domain of political opinions) influence each other and cooperate without merging. (Urbinati 2014, 2)*

Presenting the image of a diarchy, Urbinati characterises the two political powers of the citizens, ‘will’ and ‘opinion’. She identifies these as two distinct bearing structures of democracy, although in constant interaction. When speaking of opinion as a power essential to democracy, Urbinati reintroduces the Greek word *doxa*, combining two different meanings in one concept: “On the one hand, *doxa* has a philosophical meaning as an idea that is impervious to truth and on the other, it has a civil meaning as a kind of judgment that signals how a view or an act performed by someone is received by others” (2014, 28). As I already noted in the genealogy of the concept in the introduction, the word *doxa* is an ambivalent notion, connecting the connotations of ‘opinion’ with that of ‘reputation’. The first connotation is connected to the cognitive realm, and the latter is related to public conversation. Both traditions are merged in the present-day signification of opinion: that of a natural judgment (or prejudice) that can become subject to public discussion. The pillar of opinion is shaped by

expressing and exchanging individual judgments, culminating in public opinion.<sup>22</sup>

Urbinati's advocacy for the diarchic structure of representative democracy assigns a separate domain to public opinion formation. Her approach (studying public opinion as an autonomous power in political institutions) is fruitful in understanding present-day challenges to democracy, resulting from the erosion of one of the pillars (opinion) and affecting the intricate balance. The relevance of this model will be shown in the following paragraphs. However, her theory of the diarchic structure of distinct powers does not critically discuss *how* the interconnection between opinions and institutions is shaped. Consequently, it does not sufficiently account for how an economic or technological transformation of infrastructures affects public opinion – it primarily explains *that* it does. Secondly, since Urbinati's theory focuses on balancing powers, her critique does not focus on the functioning of the distinct pillars. Therefore, Urbinati's democratic proceduralism appears to be an inadequate paradigm for understanding the normative requirements of public opinion formation.

### **1.2.1 Diagnosis of democratic disfiguration**

As a political researcher and a direct witness, Urbinati developed an interest in the rise of populism in Italy at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Broadening her outlook on political and institutional discussions, she examined public opinion as a vital structure in modern politics and an essential precondition for safeguarding governing institutions. In her view, the traditional diarchic structure of will and opinion, a structure that is central to representative democracy, is potentially undermined by economic and technological developments. In the past decades, populist movements in Italy, Hungary, and Venezuela used technological innovations and accumulative economic power to destabilise liberal democracy (Saffon and Urbinati 2013, 454). Another serious concern is the erosion of the pillar of opinion, because of

22 In the Introduction, I elaborated on this genealogy. I pointed out that since the 18th century, the concept of 'public opinion' developed into two different strands of significance. Whereas Rousseau's notion of public opinion refers to the connotation of naturalness and pureness of the opinions of ordinary men (as opposed to the alienated intellectuals), this interpretation was contested by a group of leading French Enlightenment thinkers and economists, who defined the very notion of public opinion as an opinion purified through critical discussion in the public sphere.

economic powers that are translated into political powers, also known as the 'Berlusconi effect' (Urbinati 2014, 4). As economic powers invade the forum of opinions, a fair and inclusive public debate might be jeopardised.

*Whereas in ancient times, risks to democracy came mostly from the side of the decision-making power (depriving the many of their right to sit in the assembly and the popular juries), today, risks come mostly from within the forum. [...] Doxa can become, and actually has become in several democratic countries, a commodity that money can sell with the unavoidable consequence of making inequality in politics a consolidated condition against which lawmakers have to constantly devise new strategies. (Urbinati 2014, 237)*

Here, Urbinati highlights recent challenges of democratic disfiguration caused by the degeneration of the domain of public opinion that predominantly emerge from 'within' the forum (p. 4). Elaborating on this diagnosis, she discerns three different distortions of the public domain. These are a polarised, impaired, and disrespected realm, respectively connected to the rise of populism, plebiscitarianism, and technocracy. I will briefly introduce these disfigurations and adhere to the first and the second. Urbinati's third distortion, technocracy, will reveal problematic assumptions in her conceptual model.

*Populism* is described as an anti-pluralist movement, disavowing the diarchic structure of democracy by denying dissenting and minority opinions, believing in one voice of the people articulated by a strong and charismatic leader, and depreciating the diversity and complexity of public opinion. Populist politics tend to divide the community into the pure many and the corrupt few (the elite). Populism acknowledges only one dominant opinion while arousing hostility towards minority opinions. The people, reduced to one singular voice, are supposed to express themselves in one unified majority public opinion targeting elite powers. Democracy is threatened by a verticalised and polarised domain of opinions, suppressing pluralism and minority views (Urbinati 2014, 128–70).

The second disfiguration, *plebiscitarian politics*, values control by public opinion over legalistic procedures and institutional checks and balances, thereby mainly fulfilling, in Urbinati's terms, the 'negative function' of the forum of opinions: that of legitimising authority by publicly acclaiming its

mandate. Merely acknowledging its reactive voice by collectively saying ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the legislator’s claims, the public is not engaged in public debate, expressing itself in the positive function of opinion as co-legislator.<sup>23</sup> This ‘audience democracy’ jeopardises the representative, diarchic structure of democracy because the domain of opinions is downgraded to an aesthetic arena: a gladiator’s experience where the citizens are primarily addressed as a passive crowd. In plebiscitarian politics, the domain of opinions does not encourage deliberation, nor the expression of individual opinions (2014, 171–227).

Urbinati’s most complex and interesting critique is that of ‘*unpolitical democracy*’, by which she means the practice of (over)valuing the role of experts in decision-making. In unpolitical democracy, the assumption is that political judgment can be improved by augmenting knowledge and expertise in the process of opinion formation. Urbinati argues that improving decisions, measured by epistemic standards, as for instance Lippmann proposes, is unpolitical and anti-democratic.

In her theory, there are different forms of unpolitical democracies. Technocracy, as a governing system that prioritises professional input over the citizen’s voice, is unpolitical since a criterion of competence intrinsically conflicts with the egalitarian foundation of democracy. It is the substitution of *doxa* with *episteme*, of opinion with knowledge. This form of democracy, ‘democratic Platonism’ in Urbinati’s terms, claims a normativity of ‘good decisions’ based on criteria external to the democratic process (2014, 86). Urbinati argues that unpolitical democracy is characterised by a notion

23 The forum of opinions has two related powers. The positive power is that of allowing citizens to authorise sovereignty and participate in legislation. The negative power is that of controlling the established order, judging, and contesting its decisions, materialised in either a ‘thumbs up’ or saying no. In a vital forum of opinions, both of these powers should be employed. In her analysis, Urbinati makes the strong claim that the forum of opinions should have an uncontrolled and self-determined position towards governing institutions. In addition, the negative as well as positive powers should be safeguarded. This is a normative claim: the world of deliberation should not coincide with the world of decision, as it does in direct democracy, which is mono-archaic (deliberation and voting occur in the same assembly). In a representative democracy, voting is the formal way of expressing citizens’ voices, assigning delegates for a limited period. This indirectness generates a buffer zone between citizens and delegates taking decisions and discloses an arena of deliberation and opinions: “modern democracy marks the end of yes-no politics and transforms politics into an open arena of contestable opinions and ever-revisable decisions” (Urbinati 2014, 25).

of 'better outcomes' and, as a consequence, depoliticises democracy. Introducing epistemic quality in public debate leads to a verticalisation between experts and non-experts, exposes a disrespect toward 'opinion', and is incompatible with democratic egalitarianism. Urbinati believes opinions should be valued irrespective of the expertise or knowledge position included. Democracy is the realm of opinion, and every attempt to prioritise expert voices in political debate is undermining the fundamental democratic openness of the public arena to competing political visions.

Remarkably, Urbinati also considers forms of direct democracies and expert panels as predominantly unpolitical democracies. Direct democratic assemblies, she argues, intend a particular form of decision-making in a civic, non-parliamentary context, thereby mobilising a few citizens while making the many even more passive. These deliberative committees may encourage elitism because the citizens with the most interest in politics and those who already have a louder voice are often over-represented in these committees (2014, 114). In addition, these deliberative panels tend to expand the forum of opinions to political institutions. Seeing 'will' and 'power' as a continuum entails an 'unpolitical' view of democracy because it gives political priority to the deliberation of non-elected bodies (p. 128).

In Urbinati's diarchic model, a fairly applied majority rule is the most secure communicative instrument for translating the dissociated domains of will and power, safeguarding their relative autonomy. This model demonstrates a liberal<sup>24</sup> interpretation of a 'forum of opinions', where individual preferences are free and unconstrainedly formed and expressed. Then, fair procedures justify decisions, guaranteeing a free and equal right to vote.

To Urbinati, this concept of a forum is an adequate model for analysing democratic disfigurements since it emphasises the critical balance of powers

24 When I refer to a liberal model of democracy, I support the distinction Habermas makes in 'Three Normative Models of Democracy' (1994). In this essay, he differentiates between a liberal, republican and discursive view of democracy, outlining the liberal approach as the view in which "the political process of opinion- and will-formation in the public sphere and in parliament is determined by the competition of strategically acting collectivities trying to maintain or acquire positions of power. Success is measured by the citizens' approval, quantified as votes, of persons and programs. In their choices at the polls, voters give expression to their preferences. Their voting decisions have the same structure as the acts of choice made by participants in a market" (1994, 3).

and procedures. In my view, however, a liberal concept risks overlooking some interactive and public aspects of public opinion formation. This is problematic because it does not address the role of dialogue and critical debate, nor the infrastructures which are engaged in the public discussion. As I shall point out in Section 1.4, these interactive aspects are more explicitly addressed in a deliberative approach.

### **1.2.2 Model of democratic proceduralism**

Urbinati's normative model is democratic proceduralism: decisions are legitimate because they are based on fair procedures established by normative principles. One of the main principles of this proceduralism is the majority rule. The majority rule aggregates individual opinions and serves as a normative legitimation for public opinion formation. This view of construing an overall public opinion aggregated from discrete individual opinions as if they were free atoms, described as a mere physical process, characterises the liberal, proceduralist approach to public opinion formation.

Democratic proceduralism's normative claim is limited to defining how democratic decision-making is structured and providing the proper procedures by cause of which citizens can fairly participate. Urbinati's normative theory of democracy is grounded in pursuing democratic norms and procedures. The value of democracy is its proceduralism, which is a minimum but sufficient normative foundation.

*We may say that democratic proceduralism is in the service of equal political liberty since it presumes and claims the equal right and opportunity citizens have to participate in the formation of the majority view with their individual votes and their opinions. (Urbinati 2014, 19)*

Urbinati's emphasis on equal rights and opportunity as fundamental presumptions highlights the circumstances of opinion formation as politically relevant conditions for citizens to enjoy their political rights meaningfully. The 'forum of opinions', as a public good, ensures these conditions.

The forum of opinions is conceived as an immaterial sphere that discusses issues of widespread concern. It goes back to a notion forwarded by John Stuart Mill. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, thanks to modern means of communication

such as newspapers, Mill envisioned a national conversation among citizens. According to Urbinati, this forum is a public, extra-institutional domain, serving a cognitive, dissenting and monitoring role, and keeping the political powers under the judgment of the public: “The forum of opinions is meant to host and diffuse information, stimulate public reason, express political dissent and criticism, and keep politicians and institutions under people’s eyes” (2014, 36). The forum exposes politicians and policies to public judgment. It is a place of agreement and disagreement, anchored by procedures of political equality and plurality, establishing ‘public opinion’.<sup>25</sup> A vital forum accommodates ‘a plural space’, characterised by ‘plurality’ and ‘diversity’. It plays the role of a “unifying and ‘inclusive discourse’ that lies underneath democratic politics as the condition that keeps *doxa* and freedom related” (p. 40).

By applying the notion of the ‘forum’, Urbinati displays her affiliation with the liberal tradition, which tends to see aggregation as a means to compromise between competing individual preferences. The rather non-problematising way in which Urbinati depicts a forum as “composed of several kinds of opinions” reflects a formal, functional approach to the domain of public opinion as if it is just a realm of opposing and attracting elements, fully understood by describing these kinds of opinions, the external forces influencing them, and the institutional context in which they emerge (2014, 40). Urbinati primarily discusses the function of public opinion, not so much analysing or commenting on the establishment or the practice of it. Her diarchic model reviews the critical balancing and the division of powers between will and opinion. Though her analysis of the disfigurations does give a sense of some normative requirements of the forum (the role of experts, diverse views), she does not develop analytical instruments to scrutinise the shaping of public opinion in any other than a formal way. In her liberal account of opinion formation, she deploys a concept of a forum in which competing ‘opinions’ (or ‘political judgments’, terms which she uses interchangeably), as clear and distinct judgments, strive to gain majorities governed by fair procedures.

25 Urbinati almost sneers when she writes that this is “an object that social and political scientists have not yet been able to define in an uncontroversial way” (2014, 40).

*Democratic procedures, as we saw, settle avenues of behavior that regulate participation (both in form and in making decisions) by projecting them to win a majority. (2014, 114)*

Urbinati's emphasis on winning a majority expresses her functional account of democratic proceduralism. A relevant question regarding this formal approach is whether it adequately addresses the interactive and public aspects of opinion formation that emerge from a public conversation. In Urbinati's liberal vocabulary, the forum promises a "debate among diverse and competing views" and that a "competition of ideas and political vision is a fundamental condition for the citizens to have their opinions formed and make their choices". The proceduralist vocabulary of 'winning', 'competition', and 'majority' does not encourage a more nuanced understanding of the deliberative dynamics and their communicative potential.

I believe that Urbinati's diagnosis of democratic disfigurement arising from within, due to an attenuation of the pillar of opinion, is particularly relevant to studying recent challenges of potential disbalancing. A resilient public forum benefits from a well-functioning balance of powers. However, achieving resilience, to withstand potential distortions of polarisation or manipulation, also depends on the internal operation of the pillar of opinion. Urbinati's theoretical framework, which applies the concept of a forum and considers private opinions as individual modules for an overarching pillar of public opinion, under-theorises the transformative potential of public opinion formation. When studying the relevance of it as a critical process, an aggregational theory might overlook what is gained in the interaction.

In the next section, I argue that a formal, liberal view of public opinion, as represented in Urbinati's works, is inadequate because it focuses on *exchanging* preferences and cannot account for *transforming* them instead.

## 1.3 Criticising the liberal approach of proceduralism

In her theory on public opinion formation, Urbinati repeatedly refers to Habermas' previous writings on public opinion and deliberation. He is commemorated as a philosophical predecessor who, in 1962, had already foreshadowed the disfiguration of the public sphere due to the upcoming mass media in his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. However, Habermas and other deliberative theorists are also staged as protagonists of the disfiguration of 'unpolitical democracy', claiming that "discursive social relations among citizens have the merit of producing decisions that are better because they are less partisan than those produced by instrumental bargaining or simply majority rule" (Urbinati 2014, 93). Praising its inherent educational qualities, Habermas attributes not only political but also epistemic value to deliberation (p. 94). Valuing the educational and epistemic gains of discourse makes him a representative of the disfiguration of unpolitical democracy, in Urbinati's view. I argue in this section that respecting expertise and epistemic potential does not undermine the priority of equal and fair procedures. A Habermasian approach to deliberation encourages expertise without implying an undemocratic position.

Furthermore, Urbinati's proceduralist approach to opinion formation, as a liberal model, has some connoted restrictions that I want to address. One of these limitations is that deliberation might be valued purely for its personal significance, that is, having your individual opinion formed. Liberal theory does not adequately credit public relevance to an open conversation, as embodied in the concept of the public sphere. It is a 'severely truncated version' of what public deliberation is or should be about: "Public deliberation is not just about people making up their minds on topics that are on the public agenda, using available information and opinions" (B. Peters 2005, 105). In public sphere theory, deliberation is not only relevant for decisions, but entails a lot more. It also involves the setting of the agenda, the definition of common concern, and collective self-understanding. The Habermasian notion *Öffentlichkeit*, which may be translated either as 'public sphere' or as 'public', combines a connotation of a social space of communication and some kind of collectivity or community, addressing the

intersubjective social and political relevance of deliberation.<sup>26</sup> Substituting the forum with the public sphere,<sup>27</sup> as I do in this study, allows me to discuss these intersubjective or public gains of deliberation.

A second deficiency in a proceduralist approach is that it does not consider that these competing views are visions or ideas of something, and that in exchanging these, there is a desire to express a particular message. In that respect, a conversation is not just a transaction, transferring a message from agent A to agent B. Political theorist David Estlund (2008, 87) notes that this “flight from substance” does not adequately capture why it makes sense to have an informed public discussion anyway. Estlund contends that by just aggregating individual preferences, democratic proceduralism abstains not only from the substance but also from normatively valuing the communicative and transformative potential of public debate: “predeliberation, postdeliberation, it does not matter” (ibid.). This view supports my argument that a forum-based theory does not attribute a productive contribution to deliberation and, therefore, cannot address the intrinsic value of a communicative process. An alternative model considering this value is elaborated in a deliberative model.

### **1.3.1 Deliberation as a normative model**

Political theorist Jon Elster also critiques the forum-based concept of politics. He argues that representing the immaterial sphere as a *forum* suggests that exchanging political opinions requires a structure identical to that of the market of exchanging goods. This problem is elaborated in his essay ‘The Market and the Forum’ (2005), in which he critically reviews different political theories that compare interactions on the political forum with economic transactions. One of the problematic assumptions here is that an economic model of politics equates citizens’ intersubjective political relations in a democracy with sovereign relations of consumers on the market. In his analysis, Elster supports Habermas, who also used the market analogy when criticising the liberal concept of democracy (see Habermas 1994). Elster refers to the “confusion between the kind of behaviour that is appropriate in the marketplace and that which is appropriate in the forum” (Elster 2005, 329).

26 For a more detailed analysis, see B. Peters (2005, 87 ff).

27 In Section 1.4, I will elaborate on the emergence of the public sphere.

The transactional model exhibits an instrumental view of the exchange process:

*The economic theory of democracy, therefore, rests on the idea that the forum should be like the market, in its purpose as well as in its mode of functioning. The purpose is defined in economic terms, and the mode of functioning is that of aggregating individual decisions. (Elster 2005, 337)*

Elster argues that this instrumental view of the transaction of political judgments on a forum as if they were goods overlooks the communicative potential of interaction in a public debate. As he puts it, engagement in public debate consists of “arguing rather than bargaining” (2005, 331). Or, in terms that I prefer, engagement in debate requires *deliberation*, a demanding form of communication characterised by asking for and giving reasons rather than just exchanging. Instead of simply calculating the results at the end of the day as the market is closing, as the aggregation theory does, a *discursive* or deliberative concept of democracy grants normativity to public deliberation. It does not guarantee a better outcome; it offers potential. This means that public deliberation, governing dialogue, and confrontation of arguments potentially produce higher epistemic quality and lead to better democratic decisions.

Before explaining the concept of epistemic quality, I will address a common misunderstanding, which is also present in Urbinati’s proceduralist theory. This is the claim that a deliberative concept of democracy might be problematic for the following reason:

*Deliberation in Jürgen Habermas’s classical rendering argues that discursive social relations among citizens have the merit of producing decisions that are better because they are less partial than those produced by instrumental bargaining or simply majority rule. (Urbinati 2014, 93)*

Urbinati criticises deliberative democracy as a process of rationalising collective decisions because it amends the political primacy of *doxa*. She opposes a moral, educational, or epistemic legitimation of deliberation as *unpolitical* since it is supposed to accommodate an idea of better decisions valued by other than instrumental or procedural criteria. In her theory, this notion of a valuable outcome or better decision is questionable. A political judgment (Urbinati’s synonym for ‘opinion’) differs from a scientific or

juridical judgment because there are no accurate/false conclusions to make, and not even 'better' or 'worse' judgments. Since there are no epistemic criteria to discern better or worse judgments, there is no epistemological progress in political judgment.

*I employ the procedural interpretation of democracy to argue against the epistemic theory of democracy that procedures (the rules of the game) rather than content and achievement are the primary goods and what makes a procedural conception of democracy normative. Democracy's normative value lies in its process's unmatched capacity to protect and promote equal political liberty. (Urbinati 2014, 19)*

In Urbinati's interpretation, the epistemic theory, as a particular version of deliberative democracy, is incompatible with the egalitarian foundation of democratic procedures and equal political liberty. This is because it entails an epistemic claim valuing the content and achievement of a decision. This view implies that an epistemic version of deliberative democracy risks becoming undemocratic, favouring standards of epistemic quality and expert opinion, and potentially challenging the egalitarian foundation of democratic procedures.

In my view, Urbinati rightly marks the epistemic value of deliberative democracy, but I oppose her critique of deliberation as unpolitical and undemocratic. Urbinati mistakenly equals expertise with experts and knowledge with knowers. By erroneously identifying achieving 'good' or 'better' decisions with privileging knowledge positions and disqualifying these as undemocratic, Urbinati ignores the epistemic potential produced by the deliberative process as an inherent normative characteristic. Epistemic quality, then, is attributed to the conversation, not to the participants.

### **1.3.2 The epistemic dimension of deliberation**

Several arguments substantiate the intrinsic epistemic quality of deliberation. I will pick out two that explicitly combine a proceduralist and an epistemic interpretation of deliberation. In the first place, I follow David Estlund in his claim that endorsing an epistemic dimension in democratic procedures is not the same as relying on the authority of the experts. The latter we might call 'epistocracy' and can be rightly judged as undemocratic.

As Estlund concisely summarises, for a *democratic* account of epistemic quality, the question is “how to bring in knowledge without privileging any class of knowers” (2008, 7). To illustrate his position, he compares a public discussion with the procedures of a court jury. Estlund delineates several distinct communicative processes enhancing the epistemic quality of the verdict, as testimony, cross-examination, and collective deliberation. Epistemic quality, he argues, is not defined by the content of the outcome of the verdict (‘guilty’ or ‘not guilty’), or by a specially trained class of experts, but by well-defined epistemic procedures improving and authorising the verdict: “When the jury reaches a verdict, its legitimacy and authority do not depend on its correctness, but they do depend on the epistemic value of the procedure” (p. 108). His approach, also known as ‘epistemic proceduralism’, combines the assurance of fair procedures and the pursuit of epistemic quality.

Improving epistemic quality can be achieved by pursuing epistemic procedures, and does not, by definition, privilege the experts. A second argument to counter the allegation of being undemocratic is that a deliberative concept of democracy implies that the process of exchange of opinions *itself* has an epistemic dimension, because it augments and differentiates the individual and the public perspective. The ‘cognitive potential’<sup>28</sup> or in other words, the epistemic claim, implies “the idea that in some sense knowledge is gained through the public exchange of arguments and information” (Groen-Reijman 2018, 11). According to deliberative democrats, this view is valued for its *inherent* learning process. The process of exchanging information and arguments has cognitive potential because it potentially improves, adjusts, and complements the prior views of citizens (Habermas 2006; Chambers 2018; Groen-Reijman 2018). Habermas scholar Bernard Peters puts it nicely: “public deliberation should lead to learning effects, to an enrichment of the collective ‘stock’ of arguments and ideas, to a reflective examination and possibly transformation of one’s own convictions and preferences, to a certain degree of understanding and respect for opposing positions, and with all that, to a higher degree of rationality and legitimacy of political decisions” (2005, 104). Deliberation, as a process, initiates a transformative force, both for individual participants and for the collective outcome. Accordingly, it results in epistemic progress. Epistemic quality, then, is attributed to the deliberative procedure.

28 This notion is used by Habermas (2006, 414).

In underlining the epistemic potential of deliberation, opinions cannot be adequately understood as given preferences, ready-made, and brought into the public sphere. Conversely, I will adhere to a deliberative concept, emphasising that opinions emerge in a deliberation process. Throughout his writings, Habermas provides normative and empirical arguments for such a discursive or deliberative approach. In 'Three Normative Models of Democracy' (1994), he presents a normative argument for deliberation as the process of intersubjective, 'discursive rationalisation' of communication, as "the subjectless forms of communication that regulate the flow of deliberations in such a way that their fallible results enjoy the presumption of rationality" (p.10).<sup>29</sup> In a Habermasian vocabulary, rationality is attributed not merely to people but to (communicative and non-communicative) actions, to "how speaking and acting subjects acquire and use knowledge" (p. 8). T. S. Graham observes that over the years, Habermas has moved away from an individualistic notion of rationality, replacing it with a notion of communicative action: "rationality becomes a collective construct produced by social interaction" (2009, 17). Rationality has evolved into an intersubjective notion, supporting the *approach* to information: it is not the possession of (the right) knowledge, but rather it refers to acquiring and applying the available knowledge. Whereas Urbinati suggests that improving the epistemic quality of deliberation prioritises competence and might threaten democracy's egalitarian foundation, the Habermasian concept of the epistemic dimension of deliberation is foremostly defined as an intersubjective quality. In his later writings, Habermas also offers empirical evidence for his argument that deliberation enhances cooperative learning (2006, 414; 2009, 152).

29 The criterion of rationality is not very well defined in Habermas' early writings. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (published in 1962), it mainly emerges in the context of 'rational-critical debate'. In his later works, this notion becomes more intersubjective. In his *Theory of Communicative Action* (2004), rationality is assigned not merely to people but also to (communicative and non-communicative) actions that embody knowledge (p. 8). Habermas indicates that (informal) opinions, before going into the process of debate, should be formed rationally, "in conscious grappling with cognitively accessible state of affairs" (1989, 221). Rationality is not the disposition of (the right) knowledge; rationality is related to acquiring and applying the available knowledge. Translated to the domain of public opinion, one can say that rationality has to do with the approach to information. It results in an intersubjective definition, for rationality is situated in the communicative process.

The normative account of deliberative democracy is thus not about achieving ‘correct outcomes’. Instead, it is about improving the process of correcting or creating more correct outcomes. It is, according to my Habermasian model, a reflective process, correcting itself and ever open to new insights, perspectives and arguments. The epistemic claim of deliberationism is embodied in the deliberative procedure itself. In deliberation, there is a cognitive potential to be gained in exchanging views and opinions on an individual and collective level. The cognitive potential of deliberation is an achievement of collective reasoning, thus not referring to or privileging experts’ positions. Therefore, I claim that deliberation is compatible with normative proceduralism and authorised by promoting free and equal democratic participation. As the Habermas scholar Chambers concludes (2017), it is the core principle of deliberative democracy that epistemic quality and equal participation are tightly connected.

The arguments of Estlund and Habermas in defending an epistemic approach of deliberation do differ slightly. Contrasting these competing models of epistemic proceduralism, James Gledhill (2015) concludes that Estlund’s model assigns an *instrumental* value to the epistemic quality of deliberation. We can again apply the metaphor of the court verdict: for Estlund, communicative procedures are the principal requirements for a jury to reach a legitimate verdict. The jury follows the procedure *in order to* authorise the verdict. For Habermas, however, democratic discourse procedures do have instrumental value in legitimising the verdict, but are also valuable in themselves.<sup>30</sup> Estlund’s account of epistemic proceduralism is instrumental in backing the judgment, and in that sense as inadequate to examine the processes of public opinion formation as Urbinati’s model of the forum is. Habermas’ proceduralism, by contrast, entails a reflective character of continuous collective reasoning: “All participants can revisit perceived public opinions and respond to them after reconsideration” (Habermas 2006, 418). This reflectivity is “the most important trait of the public sphere” (*ibid.*). For Habermas, (majority) decisions are expressions of a temporarily interrupted deliberation process, under the pressure to

30 Gledhill (2015) summarises the Habermasian approach: “democratic procedures of discourse have extrinsic value, but they are valuable in themselves if they qualify as exemplary local embodiments of the idealizing presuppositions of the public use of reason, which Habermas has famously (or infamously) argued, can be represented in terms of conditions of an ideal speech situation” (2015, 494).

decide: every temporarily achieved majority is constantly open to challenge. A reflective process evaluates issues brought forth and framed from various perspectives and values the process of deliberation itself, irrespective of its outcome or its instrumental value.

The deliberative approach to democracy implies that the spotlight is shifting from public opinion towards public opinion *formation*. Here, Habermas quotes John Dewey, who criticises majority rule:

*Majority rule, just as majority rule, is as foolish as its critics charge it with being. But it never is merely majority rule. [...] “The means by which a majority comes to be a majority is the more important thing”: antecedent debates, modification of views to meet the opinions of minorities. [...] The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. (Habermas 1996, 304; quoting Dewey 2016, 224)<sup>31</sup>*

Discussing public opinion formation as a critical process requires a review of the descriptive and normative conditions and the production of public debate, ‘by which a majority comes to be a majority’. A theory that does not consider the communicative processes of deliberation and their potential epistemic effects is inadequate in explaining the transformative potential of public debate or individual opinions reflecting on public debate. My normative theory will focus on these dynamics, enabling a critical stance towards forming majorities and the methods and conditions involved.

31 Dewey, in turn, attributes this quote to the politician Samuel J. Tilden.

## 1.4 Defending public sphere theory as a reflective theory

In the aforementioned essay ‘Three normative models of democracy’ (1994), Habermas writes that in a liberal view of democracy, competing opinions have the same structure as the acts of choice made by participants in a market model. Opposing this liberal paradigm, Habermas develops a deliberative theory of democracy: “As in the liberal model, the boundaries between ‘state’ and ‘society’ are respected; but in this case, civil society provides the social basis of autonomous public spheres that remain as distinct from the economic system as from the administration” (p. 8).<sup>32</sup>

In a model of deliberative democracy, the domain of public opinion is an extra-institutional power. It does not merely enable a procedure for deliberation and decision-making, as in Urbinati’s democratic proceduralism, but is also a place where “normative content arises from the very structure of communicative actions” (Habermas 1994, 6). Whereas a liberal theory of democracy relates to a forum of opinions, the normative model of deliberative democracy is associated with the concept of the public sphere. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, 1962)*, Habermas developed his idea on two levels, an empirical-historical perspective and a normative perspective.

The German term *Öffentlichkeit*, generally translated as ‘public sphere’, refers to a communicative sphere: “a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer of public opinion” (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox 1974, p. 50). Compared to the concept of the forum, which predominantly focuses on the exchange of preferences and their aggregation, the notion of the public sphere introduces an additional perspective. This perspective enables the

32 For reasons of conciseness, I will skip the second normative model, the republican view of democracy. This is a tradition built on shared citizenry, imagining politics “as contestation over questions of value” (Habermas 1994, 3) In the Habermasian interpretation, this view is characterised by a concept of sovereignty embodied in an assembly of physically present people (as we already found in Rousseau’s works), and therefore incompatible with a representative model of contemporary Western liberal democracy. For this research project, which considers public opinion formation in contemporary democracies, we need not consider this model any further.

exploration and assessment of infrastructures and processes of public deliberation.

I will first sketch the basic structure of Habermas' notion of the public sphere and afterwards contrast it with some, most notably, feminist critiques.

#### **1.4.1 The emergence of the public sphere**

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas takes his readers back to Western Europe's sociological, political, and economic developments in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The emergence of finance and trade capitalism in Western Europe created a new social order characterised by the bourgeois society, which encouraged the rise of a public sphere. The appearance of a class, not powerful by birth but with a solid economic position, combined with the increase of horizontal economic dependencies, created an intermediary communicative sphere. Hence, the public sphere emerged initially from the gathering of private people with financial interests, the bourgeoisie, as an attempt to counter government policy. It gave impetus to a counterforce of the state apparatus. The bourgeois, private people who had economic but no political power, relating to each other as a public, formed an intermediary between the state and the interests of private individuals.

Habermas distinguishes between a literary and a political public sphere. The literary public sphere, created around the salons, Tischgesellschaften, and coffee houses, consisted of a reading public, discussing and reasoning on common concerns, and criticising works of art. Being part of a group of 'befitting equals' debating general affairs, this public of readers, listeners, and spectators considered itself to be an open and, in principle, inclusive public, accessible to anyone who, as a reader, listener, or spectator, was able to participate.<sup>33</sup>

33 "However exclusive the public might be in any given instance, it could never close itself off entirely and become consolidated as a clique; for it always understood and found itself immersed within a more inclusive public of all private people, persons who - insofar as they were propertied and educated - as readers, listeners, and spectators could avail themselves via the market of the objects that were subject to discussion" (Habermas 1989, 37).

The literary sphere, which preceded the establishment of the political public sphere, served as an exercise in humanity and education. Habermas states that the “fully developed bourgeois public sphere was based on the fictitious identity of the two roles assumed by the privatized individuals who came together to form a public: the role of the property owners and the role of the human being pure and simple” (1989, 56).

In the political public sphere, citizens can express and discuss their ideas on public affairs and general interests. This public sphere requires institutions of communication and publicity, such as media institutions and political journalism. This formation of an intermediary public body will culminate in the development of public opinion. As Habermas and colleagues note:

*The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labor. The medium of this political confrontation was peculiar and without historical precedent: people's public use of their reason (öffentliches Raisonement). (Habermas, Lennox and Lennox 1974, 73)*

The public sphere came into being as an intermediary sphere between the state and private individuals. According to Habermas, at this moment, the distinction between mere ‘opinion’ (as unreflected collective prejudices and values) and public opinion originated. Because of its production by a preceding rational-critical debate, it obtained a particular authority in political power relations. Gradually, it developed into an intermediary between society and the state as the carrier of public opinion.

Despite its emancipatory potential, it is fair to say that the initial public sphere was elitist, if only because of the barrier of having been able to read and buy books or to visit a performance. Although it is often claimed to be so, this elitism is not a blind spot in Habermas’ work. He explicitly addresses this contradiction in ‘publicness’ himself. According to Habermas, the bourgeois public, which was dominated by privileged male property owners, was conscious of their propertied and educated elitist position. Despite its biased constitution, the bourgeois public sphere was not blind to the non-participating part of the public and even sought to voice its concerns: “it did

not equate itself with the public but at most claimed to act as its mouthpiece, in its name, perhaps even as its educator – the new form of bourgeois representation” (1989, 37). In Habermas’ reconstruction, the public of the first generations acted as if they could represent the larger public.

It is exactly this ‘as if’ assumption – the assumption that societal inequality can be overcome by bourgeois representation – that is a very problematic one, according to prevailing feminist critiques. The assumption shows, according to Nancy Fraser (1992), that the original concept of a critical public sphere is not critical enough: subordinated social classes were included in principle but excluded and marginalised in social reality. The self-proclaimed inclusiveness of the literary public rested on the substantial exclusion of, in general, women, the poor and propertyless workers – a feminist critique that I will discuss in more detail in the next section. Fraser claims that we cannot bracket social inequalities in public discourse since bracketing usually favours dominant groups and disadvantages the underprivileged. She argues that a political theory of deliberation is not a critical theory if it does not intend to eliminate social inequalities (Fraser 1992, 117).

#### **1.4.2 Criticism of the historical and ideological concept**

Many scholars critically disputed the historical correctness of Habermas’ reconstruction of the public sphere and, subsequently, its normative claim, proposing historical and conceptual adjustments. In the German context, Negt and Kluge (1972) formulated an early critique, challenging the public sphere’s historical and normative claims. An extensive and diverse critique was published in 1992 in response to a 1989 conference on the English translation of the *Strukturwandel*. This collection contains contributions from, among others, feminist authors Seyla Benhabib and Nancy Fraser, as well as a concluding essay by Habermas. In this essay, he revised his initial concept for the first time. In 2021, in response to an invitation from the *Berliner Zeitschrift für Sozialwissenschaft*, Habermas again reviewed the concept in light of the digitised public sphere. I will refer to these critiques and revisions in various chapters when relevant.

Two lines of critical review, both addressing the exclusion of particular voices in the ‘public’ sphere, appear particularly relevant to my research on public opinion formation. They can be summarised as ‘contingent’ historical revision and the more fundamental ‘constitutive’ or essential

exclusion (Fraser 2017, 248; Landes 1988, 7). The first critique on exclusion, historical revision, considers the gap between the ideal and the social reality, manifesting a lack of representation of non-dominant perspectives. While the first critique primarily addresses overlooking the role of women and other subordinated classes, the second one attends to the more fundamental feminist aspect: the use and reproduction of gender-biased notions.

Firstly, scholars point at the disparity between historical actuality and the ideal type of the public sphere. They point out that the public sphere that Habermas described never did exist in this idealised form.<sup>34</sup> In an answer to his critics, Habermas addresses this point, admitting some of his empirical shortfalls and making some partial adjustments. In his defence, Habermas states that he was never primarily interested in giving a historically accurate description of a public sphere. Instead, he intended to discover what this bourgeois public sphere *could be* in its normative aspiration. Revising some historical aspects, therefore, “does not falsify the larger outline of the process of transformation that I presented” (1992b, 430). A chapter title like ‘The Bourgeois Public Sphere: Idea and Ideology’ demonstrates this normative emphasis. This ideological reading is supported by Bernstein (2012), who argues that the notion of the public sphere should be understood as an ideal or ideological concept and not as an actual practice. The perceived disparity between the historical actuality and the ideal type of the public sphere does not necessarily affect the normative core of the public sphere (ibid.).

For my research on the normative requirements of public opinion formation, I will also focus on the normative core. It might, however, be productive to use this feminist revision to sharpen the critical aspects of public sphere theory. Fraser (1992) writes that a historiographic perspective can illuminate the existence of subaltern publics formed by women, workers, people of colour, and others. These publics developed into “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 123). These voices were not present in the archetypical bourgeois public sphere since these areas were not considered public.

34 See, amongst others, Negt, Kluge and Labanyi (1988) and Eley (1994).

From my perspective of opinion formation, overlooking specific subordinated voices is irreconcilable with realising the full epistemic potential of deliberation, which precisely requires the expression of different perspectives. Suggesting that overlooked, non-dominant perspectives do not falsify “the larger outline of the process”, as Habermas does, displays the limits of the reflective character of the initial public sphere (1992b, 430). A critical public sphere that does not explicitly address the absence of subordinated voices that are not included, is not reflective enough; it preserves the status quo. Therefore, I conclude that although the 18<sup>th</sup> century public sphere might be considered the prototype of a critical and reflective public sphere, it has serious deficiencies.

The second relevant critique from my perspective is the gender-biased notion of the normative concept of the public sphere. The core of this criticism is not only the incomplete and insecure historical reconstruction that mistakenly eliminated the role of women; it is the gender-biased concept of the public sphere underlying or arising from it (Ryan 2003; Eley 2021; Fraser 1992). Ryan did document women’s activities in public outlets, such as street protests, philanthropy and moral-reform societies, but these activities do not reach *the definition* of the official bourgeois public sphere. Similar historical findings documenting women’s activities and civil participation brought Fraser to the conclusion that considering the bourgeois public as ‘the public’, as Habermas does, is incorrect from the beginning and is based on a gender-biased notion of publicity. In addition, defining what counts as a public concern (and, consequently, a private concern) is, in Habermas’ reconstruction, an uncontested male bourgeois privilege. This is not to be thought of as a historical misconception. Rather, it is a relevant philosophical misunderstanding, as Fraser concludes: “the view that women were excluded from the public sphere turns out to be ideological” (Fraser 1992, 116).

Fraser demonstrates that the notion of publicity defines but accordingly restrains what is considered a public concern or contribution. A true reflective account of publicity, then, has a critical stance towards its own subjects and its definition of issues as issues of common concern. It takes the borders of its own practice into account. I will elaborate on this reflective function in Section 2.2.2.

In answering these feminist critiques, Habermas admits that excluding women had a severe structuring significance. He points out that overlooking women's counterculture in his interpretation did influence his normative concept of the public sphere. It was not just a matter of 'contingency' that led to them being excluded; by doing so, the private and public spheres "have been determined in a gender-specific fashion" (1992b, 428). Despite this unilateral perspective, predominantly constituted by male discourses and agendas, Habermas argues that, thanks to the undeniable existence and increasing opposition of these countercultures, the initial concept of the public sphere gradually transformed, underlining its reflective potential. These movements became relevant as a transformative force in the public sphere:

*Contact with these movements, in turn, transformed these discourses and the structures of the public sphere itself from within. From the very beginning, the universalistic discourses of the bourgeois public sphere were based on self-referential premises. (Habermas 1992b, 429)*

Here, Habermas declares that the public sphere, as a whole, has a similar transformative potential to the one that he previously attributed to deliberation and public opinion formation: ever revisable to correction. This implies the possibility of including new perspectives, resulting in self-transformation. The public sphere is reflective and open to challenge. Referring to the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere into a more complex notion of publics and counter-publics as a result of a collective learning process of public deliberation, Habermas adheres to his initial normative concept, claiming it to be reflective and responsive to transformative forces. In answer to his critics, Habermas even more robustly defends his initial (but slightly revised) concept as the most potent ideal for a democracy.

*The discourse-centered theoretical approach has the advantage of being able to specify the preconditions for communication that have to be fulfilled in the various forms of rational debate and in negotiations if the results of such discourses are to be presumed to be rational. Therewith this approach opens up the possibility of linking normative considerations to empirical sociological ones. (Habermas 1992b, 448)*

Habermas' reply might effectively address and adjust his omission of women's countercultures and their practices in his theory. Nevertheless, he does not satisfyingly counter the critique that the concept of the public sphere *as an ideal* is also gender-biased, as Fraser has demonstrated. Habermas' argument opposing the initial gender-biased concept is, in essence, an *empirical and historical* one: the idea gradually transforms when confronted with countercultures. However, this reply does not acknowledge the ingrained conceptual bias incorporated into his ideological approach to *defining* public and publicity. In Chapter 2, I will consider this question, applying it to the 'critical' aspect of critical publicity. For now, I support a deliberative, epistemic, and reflective theory of public opinion formation, leaving the question, 'What makes publicity *critical* publicity?' to be answered in Chapter 2.

## 1.5 Conclusion: Defending a deliberative and reflective approach

This chapter identified three elementary characteristics relevant to exploring the normative assessment of opinion formation that precede my upcoming conceptualisation. Firstly, public opinion is established in a *deliberative* process, which I will refer to as a public debate. It is preceded by an interactive process of discussing and exchanging arguments on issues of public interest among free and equal participants. Consequently, public opinion formation entails an *epistemic dimension*. If the public is open and diverse, there is cognitive potential that can be realised by exchanging perspectives and arguments. Consequently, to be epistemically productive, limited and exclusive manifestations of a public should be avoided and disputed. The epistemic gain is not to be evaluated as a ‘correct view’; it is valued for its continuous openness to be improved and adjusted. And finally, public opinion formation is a *reflective* process. The public character of including and exchanging perspectives creates increased awareness of public opinion, evaluates issues framed from various perspectives, and is open to challenge. These three characteristics cannot be reduced to individual preferences or an aggregation of individual preferences.

In Chapter 2, this concept of opinion formation will be related to *critical publicity*, developing a normative model for assessing the critical potential of the public sphere as a third, interconnecting space between institutionalised discourse and everyday communication in civil society. The practice of publicity did transform due to the introduction of mass media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it has been thoroughly transformed once again, due to digitisation. Did this transformation also affect the normative concept? Is Habermas’ notion of critical publicity, implicitly informed by a pre-digital mass media context, still applicable in a post-digital media infrastructure?<sup>35</sup> I will argue that, notwithstanding its pre-digital conceptual structure, critical publicity can still be a tool for theorising the present if some normative functions are reallocated and adjusted to a post-digital timeframe.

35 This question is inspired by the approach of Fraser (2007). 45 years after the publication of Habermas’ *Strukturwandel*, in her critical review of his ‘Westphalian’ concept of the public sphere, Fraser reformulated it into a modernised notion of the transnational public sphere.

# 2. Critical publicity (1): Defining its processes and normative requirements

## 2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed three elementary characteristics of the public opinion formation process: the deliberative, epistemic, and reflective dimensions. I argued that these potentials cannot be reduced to individual preferences, nor to their aggregation. In this chapter, I will scrutinise 'critical publicity' as the mediating process between institutionalised discourse and everyday communication, safeguarding these dimensions.

In the initial Habermasian model, public communication combines two processes: deliberation and critical publicity. As I discussed in the first chapter, the first process is a predominantly horizontally structured process of debate or deliberation between citizens. In his *Strukturwandel*, Habermas prefers the term 'rational-critical debate'.<sup>36</sup> Since critical publicity, on the other hand, connects civil society to the institutionalised sphere, this is not just a horizontal interaction between equals but is instead defined as an interaction between the formal and informal realms. It is a 'discourse-resembling communicative process', to a greater or lesser extent supported

36 This notion of rational-critical debate, often referred to in the text, is the English version of what in German is described as '*öffentliches Raisonement*' or '*raisonieren*' - sometimes provided with the additional qualification '*literarisch*' or '*politisch*'. In the English translation, the emphasis is on debate - an intersubjective interaction; the original articulation of '*Raisonement*' does not explicitly assign intersubjectivity. In my view, this is a subtle but essential variation. In the English translation, the emphasis is on the intersubjective process. I would suggest that this more intersubjective accent in the translation is a result of the relatively late introduction of this early work into the English language. Only after 37 years was the *Strukturwandel* translated into English. During that time, Habermas evolved his thoughts and concepts. For instance, Habermas scholars indicate that, when it comes to the process of reasoning, in his later works on communicative action, Habermas develops a more intersubjective stance on reasoning.

by institutions intermediating between different spheres (Habermas 1992b, 437). As a linking framework between private and political spheres, providing public deliberation and debate, it has a crucial role in my research into public opinion formation.

In this chapter, I critically rearticulate the Habermasian concept of *critical publicity* by analytically dissecting it into processes and the infrastructures that afford them. Throughout his writings, Habermas has given much, and recently even more attention to infrastructural questions, as the basis of his theory. But as the public sphere becomes increasingly mediated by digital platforms, algorithms, and decentralised networks, it is no longer sufficient to study publicity as an infrastructure, predominantly shaped by institutional and professional actors. Instead, I argue for a processual understanding of publicity – one that emphasises *how* messages are filtered, framed, and contested. Although fundamentally intertwined, I will analytically distinguish these aspects as much as possible. The distinction allows me to separately scrutinise the normative requirements of publicity processes. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the consequences of the altered infrastructural context for the normative discussion by formulating new challenges to this process.

To begin, I delimit critical publicity from sheer or manufactured publicity. Being critical involves not only the publication or distribution of messages but also implies active engagement of the public and openness to contestation. Additionally, inspired by the work of Fraser, I include a more accurate view on the diversity of the public and its definition of public issues, by continuously contesting the borders of publicity.

Thereafter, I attend to the quality assurance of critical publicity processes, which in the Habermasian approach is assigned to the professional media-system, leaving its processual requirements mostly implicit. I expand and develop this framework and its inherent requirements, into explicated normative requirements that are suitable to assess present-day publicity processes that are not mediated by professionals per se, but increasingly steered by data-driven, obscured processes, and algorithms.

In the normative model I develop in this thesis, critical publicity has legitimacy if and because its normative requirements of input, output and throughput are, to a certain extent, fulfilled. When I refer to the *input*

requirements of critical publicity, values of inclusion, participation and representation are implied. *Output* requirements for critical publicity refer to the fair and correct presentation of problems and positions in public debate. I suggest that a critical public sphere cannot rely on just input and output requirements. It must also foreground *throughput* – the processing of voices, information and opinions. Legitimacy, then, is achieved in the *way* voices, arguments, and issues are handled within the publicity process.

Throughput requirements are the normative demands relevant to the processes taking place in organising, orchestrating and curating public conversation, the route from the input (voices, preferences, data) to the output (presentation). Such requirements include filtering, gatekeeping, selecting, prioritising, researching and editing; in sum, *processing* the input of issues and voices into outputs as articles, debates, town hall meetings, round tables, reports, news, and tweets. These requirements fulfil three functions, which are slightly redefined manifestations of the potentials of the public sphere that I addressed in the first chapter. First, the deliberative function refers to the public controversy of differing and even antagonistic viewpoints. Second, the epistemic function refers to the processing of information and the encouragement of collective knowledge. Third, the reflective dimension entails the public evaluation and framing of societal concerns – what Habermas has described as *Problemverarbeitung*, or problem-processing.

My argument for a throughput legitimacy approach as a crucial paradigm in critical publicity is based on the observation that the new digitised infrastructures are increasingly directed by platform interactions, public participation, and algorithms, obscuring the translation from inputs to output. I will provide three additional arguments that support this approach. First, throughput is often neglected because it typically occurs within ‘black boxes’, frequently bypassing the public sphere. Second, throughput processes are increasingly compromised by commercial pressures. Third, the absence of throughput legitimacy has a direct and detrimental impact on both input and output legitimacy, undermining the overall credibility of public communication.

Ultimately, I argue that public opinion formation fosters democracy as a supporting pillar if and because it is generated by critical publicity that has input, output, and throughput legitimacy. This means that it should

assure a representational (input: voice), a presentational (output: efficacy, mobilisation of opinions on an agenda), and a throughput dimension (the processes that enable deliberation, epistemic and reflective engagement).

## 2.2 Critical publicity: A third domain

Critical publicity might as well refer to the *processes* of public conversation, as to the *infrastructures* engaged in these processes. Before I give my interpretation of critical publicity, I will briefly discuss how Habermas developed the notion. In the *Strukturwandel*, he situates critical publicity in a separate sphere.

*An opinion that is public in the strict sense however can only be generated in the degree that the two domains of communication are mediated by a third, that of critical publicity. (Habermas 1989, 248)*

There are several ways to characterise these two domains of communication. Prevalent classifications Habermas gave are of civil society versus state, private versus political, informal versus formal, and everyday communication versus institutionalised political discourse. In all these slightly different characterisations, there is a third domain between these two spheres, providing a reflective dimension regarding both. In an essay specifically addressed to political communication, Habermas defines the third domain as the “level of ‘media-based communication’ with a more or less passive public of readers, listeners, and viewers, where public opinions take shape” (2009, 159). It is fair to say, though, that the role of this sphere is not limited to media institutions; the former coffeehouses also served as organisers of critical publicity.

As the normative characterisation of the political public sphere, critical publicity is a process linking different spheres, primarily established since the 19<sup>th</sup> century by professional media. It is not just a horizontal interaction between equals, as deliberation is. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was a predominantly vertically organised process, establishing communication between the informal and the formal realms. By not merely mirroring established opinion but allowing contributions from all participants (citizens and institutional actors), and thereby reconsidering and revisiting ‘perceived public opinions’, critical publicity provides the public sphere with reflectivity, as I have already argued in Chapter 1 (Habermas 2006, 418).<sup>37</sup>

37 Of note is that in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas never mentions

Consequently, supplemented with an interconnecting domain, this creates a triarchic model, in contrast to Urbinati's diarchy.

Habermas' interpretation of the formal and informal domains closely relates to Urbinati's definition of will and opinion. In her diarchic model, however, the role and practice of intermediation are somewhat differently structured. Her model does not offer a third sphere. Instead, she outlines the concept of intermediating bodies as organising structures that translate messages from one sphere to another, gathering and aggregating individual opinions into a 'public opinion' and disseminating relevant information from the domain of power (politics) to that of will (citizens; Urbinati 2014, 192). These bodies, like political parties and professional journalism, mediate between the two realms, converting discussion into decision and vice versa. However, these structures do not comprise a distinct realm.

Urbinati argues that the erosion of these intermediary bodies is a characteristic trait of recent challenges to democracy. In 'A Revolt against Intermediary Bodies', she stresses the democratic importance of a vital infrastructure of intermediary bodies, safeguarding an open and inclusive space for participation and representation. Nonetheless, due to recent economic and technological developments, predominantly digitisation, these bodies are being contested. Two central concerns occur in her theory: first, the accumulation of economic and political power, which blurs the boundaries between will and opinion (known as the Berlusconi effect<sup>38</sup>); and second, the populist bypassing of classically mediated practices facilitated on the internet by self-made journalism, as endorsed by Italian Five Star politician Beppe Grillo, thereby avoiding and neglecting the press and political parties as countervailing and intermediating powers (2014, 4; 2015,

public opinions in the plural. There are private opinions and non- or quasi-public opinions, but there seems to be one public opinion. This does not entail that public opinion speaks with one undivided voice. Public opinion, even in singular use, does not refer to a univocal opinion or agreement, but it reflects the controversy after considering different arguments and perspectives. In his later works, for instance *Between Fact and Norms*, Habermas incidentally speaks of 'public opinions', but very rarely and always concerning an informal circuit, or 'topically specified' public opinions - the plural most probably being used to refer to the plurality of topics instead of the plurality of opinions. Taking the digital public sphere into account, the later Habermas (since 2006) has changed his vocabulary somewhat, speaking of 'considered public opinions' processed from the deliberative process.

38 See Chapter 3 for a discussion of the increasing commercialisation of the media and the accumulation of power.

482). Both problems concern the gradual blurring of boundaries between the forum and the institutions – a diagnosis I concur with, as I pointed out in Chapter 1.

In the diarchic model, it is hard to conceive the challenges to critical publicity that increasingly dominate the present-day commercialised and digitised media context, for instance misinformation and manipulation. Urbinati barely offers qualitative suggestions for ensuring critical publicity beyond respecting its professional distance from political institutions and the pursuance of fair procedures: “In a democratic society distortions come from the violation of equality or the escalation of inequality in the conditions that determine a fair use of those procedures” (2014, 237). If only all citizens are allowed to voice their preferences freely and equally, then the normative requirements of free public debate are fulfilled. When using the word ‘publicity’, Urbinati refers to a principle or a strategy of disclosure, an antonym for being secret or concealed. Publicity is a characteristic of what is published or under the public’s scrutiny. In a diarchic structure, the way intermediary bodies transfer or translate communicative messages – the ‘how’ of publicity – is systematically under-reflected and not critically reviewed.

As I argued in the first chapter, according to the Habermasian distinction, Urbinati’s normative model is a liberal one, relying on a functional and formal account of the public forum.<sup>39</sup> Although explicitly normatively valued, her use of ‘intermediary bodies’ as interconnecting and mediating structures supports this functional account since these bodies are merely described as functional infrastructures. Urbinati does not go into detail as to what these bodies are or how they operate, but merely notes their function:

39 The concept of a forum, consisting of private people exchanging views, also exists in the Habermasian reconstruction. In a historical context, the concept existed before the advent of the public sphere in the 18th and 19th centuries. As the literary public sphere expanded into a political public sphere, the bourgeois citizens were emancipated from a gathering of private people to a public one: “as a forum in which the private people, come together to form a public, readied themselves to compel public authority to legitimate itself before public opinion. The publicum developed into the public, the subjectum into the [reasoning] subject, the receiver of regulations from above into the ruling authorities’ adversary” (Habermas 1989, 25). This gradual shift in terminology reflects a historic switch in the presence and the perception of a public, previously referred to as ‘world’, ‘Welt/Lesewelt’ or ‘(tout le) monde’. The ‘publicum’ developed into an active and engaged public, producing publicity: “Whatever was submitted to the judgment of the public gained *Publizität* (publicity)” (p. 26).

a proper organisation of political judgments as elements of public debate by fairly applying equal, correct procedures for translating these expressions of will into power relations. Urbinati's reflections do not enter the practices of these intermediary bodies, limiting their evaluation to their instrumental value of organising debate.<sup>40</sup>

To develop my argument that its normative requirements might best be evaluated by reviewing processes rather than solely critiquing the infrastructures, it is supportive not to focus on 'the bodies' of publicity, but to scrutinise publicity as a distinct sphere characterised by intermediating procedures. Therefore, I stick to the initial notion of critical publicity. I draw an analytical distinction between processes and infrastructures, highlighting critical *processes*. I analytically detach the publicity processes from their (accidental) empirical manifestations, which enables me to develop a framework of normative requirements. Nonetheless, I will first amend the Habermasian concept, expanding it with a notion of critical reflection on public debate itself.

### **2.2.1 Critical publicity is a public process**

The first quality of critical publicity as a process of public deliberation that I want to examine is its *public* character. In Urbinati's interpretation, the forum of public opinions has a spatial connotation, a physical or virtual place where people can meet. In Habermasian theory, public is not defined by spatial qualities, or by an overt expression 'in public'; it is defined by processual qualities. Habermas scholar Simone Chambers defines the idea of critical publicity succinctly when she describes it as "not only bringing something to the public's attention but also requiring or asking the public to scrutinise the object in question critically" (200, 193).

In the first place, public is not the same as overt; not every verbalised experience or expression counts as a public opinion. When not potentially challenged in a public sphere, these personal preferences do not meet Habermas' public opinion criteria and are considered 'non-public opinions'. A similar argument applies to 'quasi-public opinions': top-down expressed formal and institutionally organised opinions, such as declarations,

40 Urbinati defines the functional requirements as expression, exposure, and social integration of opinions (2014, 36).

speeches, and announcements. Although publicly manifested, such expressions are not considered public opinion because they are one-way and top-down and do not meet the requirements of being subject to a public controversy.

Group opinions are not public opinions either. According to Habermas, a group does not necessarily embody a plurality of social relations and interests, the second requirement for being 'public'. In this respect, from a Habermasian perspective, groups differ from a public. Opinions can unpolemically be reproduced within the group; there is no inevitable contestation. The controversy between substantiated pros and cons is founded on the public sphere, where citizens argue, exchange views and opinions, and interact with equals. The publicity process is not (only) liable to expressing opinions, but "personal opinions could evolve through the rational-critical debate of a public into public opinion – *opinion publique*" (1989, 219). This implies that personal opinions transform into a different power through public discussion, not simply reducible to their individual parts. A fundamental characteristic of this controversy is that opinions are contested and challenged by a plurality of viewpoints.

*Once the subject of public opinion is reduced to an entity neutral to the difference between public and private spheres, namely, the group – thus documenting a structural transformation, albeit not providing its concept – and once public opinion itself is dissolved into a group relationship neutral to the difference between reasonable communication and irrational conformity, the articulation of the relationship between group opinions and public authority is left to be accomplished within the framework of an auxiliary science of public administration. (Habermas 1989, 242)*

According to Habermas, a purely descriptive notion – "neutral to the difference between reasonable communication and irrational conformity" – loses its normative connotation, which is supposed to be inherent to the idea of public opinion. In his approach, 'public' also includes a norm, an ideal that must be pursued.

A second characteristic of 'public' is the connotation of the active engagement of this public. Only some forms of publicity are considered to be a process of critical publicity. I distinguish 'critical' from forms of non-critical publicity, such as propaganda, marketing strategies, and

manipulative messages, using one specific Habermasian term: staged display. This is manufactured opinion in service of special interests, advertisement and entertainment.

*'Public opinion' takes on a different meaning depending on whether it is brought into play as a critical authority in connection with the normative mandate that the exercise of political and social power be subject to publicity or as the object to be molded in connection with a staged display of, and manipulative propagation of, publicity in the service of persons, institutions, consumer goods, and programs. (Habermas 1989, 236)*

Relating the concept to a more commonsense understanding of public opinion using inverted commas, Habermas refers to 'the public' as the addressee of any publicity. 'Public', then, is referring to a passive audience: 'the public'. In this so-called 'public opinion', the adjective public is a mere descriptive attribute of opinion. In this standard interpretation, opinion is public opinion when publicly voiced, openly accessible, and transparent; or when referring to the opinion of a public, a group of people, or a mass – no normative criteria required. As the public in the socio-psychological approach<sup>41</sup> is just an *addressee* of publicity and not an actor, this concept is susceptible to manipulation by commercial forces and political propaganda. For Habermas, this does not meet the qualification of critical publicity, which requires being subjected to a normative procedure of public scrutiny.

As a first sketch, to be called critical, publicity processes, whether supported by media or other mediating infrastructures, have to be open to (1) public controversy from (2) a plurality of viewpoints; furthermore, there is also the aspect of (3) active engagement of the public in critical publicity.

### **2.2.2 The 'who' and the 'how'**

After having defined the active engagement of the public, a problem still needs to be addressed: who is this public? In this respect, Nancy Fraser is unconvinced of the critical potential of Habermas' concept of publicity because he does not problematise the definition of 'public' nor the distinction between 'private' and 'public'. According to Fraser (and that might seem ironic), Habermas' theory is built upon a fundamental

41 This is Habermas' term for the empirical use of public opinion and opinion polling.

characteristic of the liberal paradigm, drawing a sharp distinction between public and private spheres – in her words, “key signifiers of bourgeois difference from both higher and lower social strata” (1992, 115). A discourse of publicity, “one which accepts at face value the bourgeois public’s claim to be the public”, is not critical enough (p. 116).

Continuing this line of argument, the differentiation and interaction between the ‘who’ and the ‘how’ is one of Fraser’s central critiques of Habermas’ notion of publicity. In a later article (2007), alleging that he one-sidedly explored the ‘how’, neglecting the ‘who’, Fraser advances several arguments that show that Habermas’ understanding of public is too limited and not really critical. Of these, I will discuss two arguments that are most relevant to my theory because they strongly affect ‘the how’ of critical publicity.

Firstly, Fraser explicitly defines that the qualifier ‘critical’ requires a critical position regarding ‘the who’ of publicity.

*[If] public sphere theory is to function today as a critical theory, it must revise its account of the normative legitimacy and political efficacy of public opinion. [...] Thus, the legitimacy critique of existing publicity must now interrogate not only the ‘how’ but also the ‘who’ of existing publicity. Or rather, it must interrogate parity and inclusiveness together, by asking: participatory parity among whom? (2007, 24)*

Critiquing the ‘who’ of the public (as Fraser does) does not only affect the members of the public. The ‘who’ of the public also extends to the ‘what’, to defining the issues of common concern, and transforms the ‘how’ of discussing these issues,<sup>42</sup> even challenging the ‘where’, since critical debate is not confined to a specific location, but the public character is guaranteed by its process characteristics of controversy and plurality.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Habermas slightly downplays the relevance of the ‘who’, by capturing the public sphere as an ideal, rather than a full and accurate description of historic reality: no matter how limited a public may be in its actual, empirical form at a given moment, its members understand themselves as part of a counterfactual collective, “in principle inclusive”

42 This is also addressed by Seyla Benhabib (1992), as I will discuss in Section 2.6.3.

(1989, 37). Despite its class and male-biased manifestation “it did not equate itself with the public but at most claimed to act as its mouthpiece, in its name” (ibid.).

Fraser opposes the historic interpretation, as outlined in Chapter 1. Moreover, she also counters the ideal of this “in principle inclusive” public as an *ideal*. She introduces the notion of ‘subaltern counterpublics’, parallel discursive arenas, that “formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (1992, 123). This is not only a social complement, but it is also reshaping the normative standard. Subaltern spheres can develop into spheres of emancipation, and “stand in a contestatory relationship to dominant publics”, questioning the boundaries of the public sphere (p. 128).

This interpublic contestation challenges the question of what counts as a public concern. In the traditional interpretation of a public sphere, it is difficult for issues related to the private sphere to transform into issues of common concern. For example, issues of the intimate life, like domestic violence or sexual abuse, were considered to be private matters. In Fraser’s critical re-articulation of publicity, as part of public debate, these boundaries are continuously contested. For instance, on domestic violence as a common concern, “after sustained discursive contestation, we succeeded in *making* it a common concern” (Fraser 1992, 129).

A critical public sphere needs the outsider’s perspective to constantly question its proper boundaries. Widening the arenas to the voices of counterpublics will affect the definition of common concerns and the way that they are addressed.<sup>43</sup> Extending the ‘who’ transforms the ‘how’. Furthermore, Fraser argues that encouraging heterogeneity of voices will lead to improvement and transformation of the publicity process (2007, 20). I will reconsider the mutual interference between ‘the who’ and ‘the how’ in Section 2.6.3.

43 In response to this criticism, in recent writings Habermas amends his vocabulary, creating amalgams of semi-publics, semi-public spheres, and “semi-private, semi-public communication” (2022b, 153). Still, in creating a new hybrid notion, Habermas is not questioning the initial distinction of private and public as ideological concepts, merely slightly rearranging their (empirical) boundaries: public and private become interdependent qualifiers that are not strictly demarcated.

### 2.2.3 Public and private as rhetorical labels

Fraser has given us a second argument that prompts a rethink of the use of 'critical' in relation to publicity. She argues that describing classifications as 'public' and 'private' has a valorising effect. Defining these issues as 'public' (or 'private') legitimises the distinction.

*[C]ritical theory needs to take a harder, more critical look at the terms 'private' and 'public.' These terms, after all, are not simply straightforward designations of societal spheres; they are cultural classifications and rhetorical labels. In political discourse they are powerful terms frequently deployed to delegitimize some interests, views and topics and to valorize others. (Fraser 1992, 131)*

Classifying a subject as a 'public issue' expresses a normative view and simultaneously valorises it. With this claim, Fraser adds a relevant, critical perspective: 'private' and 'public' are rhetorical labels constituting valid common concerns.

Supporting Fraser's critique, my definition implies that critical publicity should always include reflection on the (ideological) foundation of publicity as part of the critical debate. Critical publicity should not take for granted what is public or being published as issues of public interest and should constantly question the borders of public debate and be aware of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy, that once an issue is labelled a public affair, it has become a public affair. A clear view on the valorising effect of designating something as being of public concern has to be a central aspect of critical publicity and public debate.

In conclusion, my definition of critical publicity, derived from Habermas' concept and readjusted in light of Fraser's critique, has a reflective character. In Fraser's view, the definition of 'common concerns' *displays* a normative position. This critical review of one's own perspective must be considered when reflecting on the critical character of publicity. Hence, a complete concept of critical publicity entails several characteristics: (1) potential for controversy in virtue of (2) a plurality of viewpoints, (3) the active engagement of the public, and (4) discussing the ideological perspectives, defining the public issues of critical debate and continuously contesting its borders.

## 2.3 The ‘media system’ as a black box

Having refined and adjusted the concept of critical publicity as a third domain, I will now develop a normative framework to assess its critical processes. Before I explicate my model, categorising input, output and throughput requirements, I will briefly return to Habermas, who in the early days of digitisation updated his vocabulary.

In his later work, since at least 2006, Habermas has not used the term ‘critical publicity’. Instead, he prefers to speak of political communication (or the political public sphere) and the media (system), directing his attention increasingly to infrastructural aspects. The new technological advances at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century prompted Habermas to reflect on the media system, placing it at the centre of the public sphere. Although critical publicity does not necessarily coincide with the system of (mass) media organisations – coffeehouses can be considered part of the publicity infrastructure, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 3 – they remain the benchmark of Habermas’ theory, even in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The model that Habermas developed in these years predominantly addresses infrastructural questions, the subject of Chapter 3, but since it emphasises the role of professionals, it is relevant to the infrastructures as well as to the processes. The media system, as a central locus in publicity processes in Habermas’ theory of 1962, is attributed a special responsibility in safeguarding critical communicative processes in the political public sphere, intermediating between the informal and the formal domains. And even though the context has changed radically with the rise of the Internet, Habermas does not renounce the approach he developed in 1962: that of a public sphere shaped by and centred around professional media organisations.

Nonetheless, for assessing the normative processes in a post-digital media context, I believe the focus on professionalism will prove to be an ineffective standard. To develop this argument, I will present Habermas’ slight revision of the public sphere theory and his updated vocabulary, which is helpful to my further approach.

To illustrate the continuity between traditional and new dynamics in his public sphere model, Habermas provided a flow chart of the infrastructural network's inputs and outputs, introducing a provisional division of processes in the public sphere (2009, 166).<sup>44</sup>

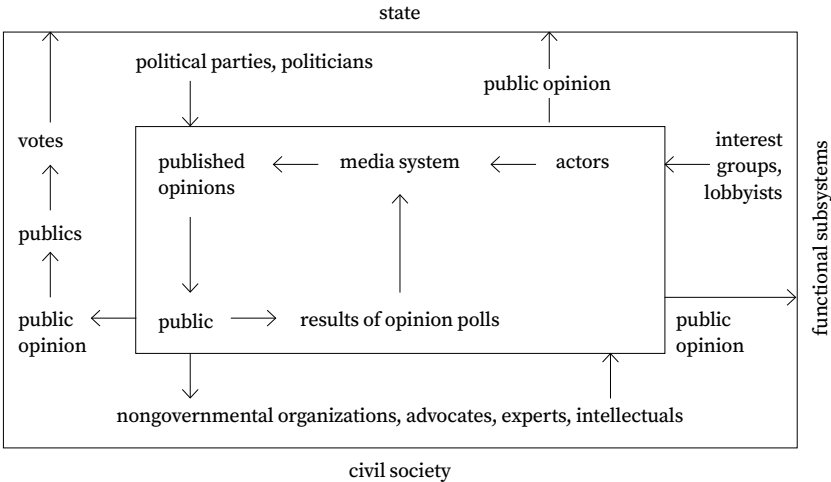


Figure 1. Public sphere: inputs and outputs. Reproduced from Habermas (2009, 166).

Figure 1 illustrates public opinion formation by visualising the interactions between actors and subsystems. The result is a complex web of input and output flows between political actors, mass media, civil society, and state institutions, with the media at its centre. In Habermas' interpretation, the small box in this figure represents the public sphere. Input is provided from three angles: politics, civil society, and functional subsystems such as industry, health care, education, etc. This affords the contribution of actors to 'the media system'. Output covers published public opinions generated by the media and the results of polls concerning the state, the functional subsystems, and civil society. Habermas describes the public sphere as an interplay of actors influencing the media system, resulting in published opinions, affecting the public, translating opinions into the results of

44 The model elaborates a previously applied distinction in deliberative theory by Habermas scholar Peters (2005), reflecting on legitimising public discourse in the European Union.

opinion polls, and, in turn, informing the media system. In his text from 2009 (and a similar one from 2006), Habermas predominantly refers to input and output as *empirical* categories.<sup>45</sup>

An important issue with the new model is that Habermas does not address the media system's generally non-public character: the core of the public sphere, the media-system, consisting of publishing and news agencies, is by itself *not* a public institution. In general, media companies are private enterprises, with some exceptions (like public broadcasting stations). But more importantly, even when they are publicly funded and their output is publicly available (although not in all cases, because often citizens pay for the output), their inputs and especially their throughput, conceived as the processing of information and opinions, are not publicly executed. In the process of critical publicity, the media system remains a black box. Missing from this systemic theorisation and Habermas' visualisation of the public sphere is a theory of the legitimacy of the practices and processes that go on in the 'black box' of the media system.

Habermas assigns the quality assurance of critical publicity to a professional media-system, leaving its processual requirements mostly implicit. However, since the operation of media agencies is increasingly directed by platform interactions, public participation, and algorithms, I argue that we need to explicate the criteria for these non-public processes assigned to perform publicity functions.

In his recent work, he makes the following attempt to comprehend the media system:

*The technically and organisationally highly complex media system requires a professionalized staff that plays the gatekeeper role. [...] This staff directs the throughput and, together with the companies that manage production and organize distribution, forms the infrastructure of the public sphere that ultimately determines the two decisive parameters of public communication – the scope and the deliberative quality of the offerings. (Habermas 2022b, 157)*

45 My interpretation is supported by Peters (2005, 103).

A professionalised staff is responsible for editorial processes, but in this description, it is no more than an abstract notion. Habermas assigns the assurance of deliberative quality to professionals, who organise and distribute content. This makes Habermas' approach 'newsroom-centred'.<sup>46</sup> However, he does not clarify what the professionalism of the staff entails. His view on professional media avoids discussion on the involved normative processes, attributing the proper performance of these to 'professionals'. This is problematic because, in this particular essay, one of his main concerns is that media enterprises, platforms, and social media are driven not only by a professional staff, but also by automated processes such as algorithms.

I think that this is a relevant observation. If he is correct, however, he should have concluded that the criterion of professionalism must be rethought and that it must be discussed if and under what circumstances it could also apply to automated processes. How can this organisational process be ensured if we cannot rely on 'professional staff'? Habermas' black boxing prevents him from rethinking the substance of critical standards and normative processes endowed to these professional organisations.

My argument for a throughput legitimacy approach is based on the shared observation that the new digitised infrastructures do not operate traditionally, in that 'professionalism' is assigned to professional staff. Since the operation of media agencies is increasingly directed by platform interactions, public participation and algorithms, I argue that we need alternative criteria for throughput as a normative notion, generating legitimacy in media practices.

Despite Habermas' adjusted vocabulary of 'media system' and 'political communication', I will return to the notion of critical publicity for two reasons. Firstly, because of its inherently normative aspect, the 'critical' aspect immediately includes a normative dimension. Throughout the *Strukturwandel*, there is a significant distinction between 'critical publicity' and 'manufactured publicity', such as propaganda. This 'critical' versus 'manufactured' aspect is hard to visualise in a model, where 'the media system' is sketched mainly as a black box between input and output,

46 In the Introduction to Part II, I will take up the discussion of newsroom-centrism.

obscuring its critical potential. Secondly, the conjunction of processes and infrastructures might be confusing in some respects. Still, these two aspects are sometimes intertwined in intricate ways, as I will show in the next chapter, which discusses the functions of journalism, editing and intelligence work. These functions are best described in terms of both processes and infrastructures. This is increasingly true in the post-digital public sphere: processes and infrastructures are strongly intertwined from a technical perspective. Therefore, envisioning the interconnection in the same notion is more adequate in the post-digital context because speaking of 'communication' and 'system', as Habermas does in recent writings, tends to obscure this intricate interrelation.

I adopt the notions of input, output, and throughput, although I apply these differently. For Habermas, these were mostly empirical categories. Inspired by political and public administration theory, I will reinterpret these notions as normative paradigms to public sphere theory.

## 2.4 Input, output, and throughput legitimacy

By analysing critical publicity and dissecting the processes and infrastructures that enable it, I aim to reconceptualise how normative requirements can be upheld in today's transformed media environment. Critical publicity is opposed to manufactured publicity or sheer publicity. It is the result of complying with certain standards. I propose a theoretical framework in which legitimacy is ensured through the fulfilment of three, partly interrelated, normative requirements, which I will characterise as *input*, *output* and *throughput* requirements. This model provides a basis for evaluating critical publicity by examining its capacity for representation (input), presentation (output), and the communicative process of organising opinions and arguments (throughput).

Legitimacy, or *Anerkennungswürdigkeit* (the worthiness of recognition) of a public process is achieved if and because these normative requirements are, at least to a certain degree, fulfilled.<sup>47</sup> The model of input and output legitimacy is inspired by the normative approach of political and public administration theory, where input, output, and, a few years later, throughput legitimacy are introduced as normative paradigms to evaluate the legitimacy of democratic policymaking. I argue that a normative model, distinguishing input, output, and throughput legitimacy, is a beneficial approach to rethinking the legitimacy of critical publicity in a post-digital context. Attending to the throughput requirements, this will result in a refined characterisation of the three elementary dimensions of public opinion formation, as defined in Chapter 1.

First, let me briefly summarise the input and output legitimacy model, as initially developed in political theory. It was first introduced and developed in democracy theory by Fritz Scharpf (1970). The distinct paradigms of input and output legitimacy are complementary and should be assessed distinctly. Input legitimacy refers to the legitimacy of political processes ensured by political participation and institutions of electoral representation: "Input-oriented democratic thought emphasises 'government by the people'. Political choices are legitimate if and because they reflect the 'will of the

47 For an explanation and discussion of the Habermasian use of legitimacy, see Nickel (2018).

people’ – that is if they can be derived from the authentic preferences of the community members” (Scharpf 1999, 6). Output legitimacy concerns the outcome of government actions and decisions: the adequate problem-solving quality of laws and policy. Applied to evaluate the legitimacy of democratic policy-making in the European Union, the context where this theory is most prominently adhered to, one could say that input-oriented legitimisation of policies involves political participation *by* the people and, on the other hand, output-oriented legitimisation is focused on the ability of European Union institutions to govern effectively *for* the people.

The complement of throughput legitimacy in political and public administration theory is more recent, and its theorisation is relatively new (Scharpf 2001; Schmidt 2013; Bokhorst 2014). Throughput legitimacy focuses on policymaking processes on the institutional level. It emphasises the intermediary processes between political input and the coming about of the political output. The integrated model affords a normative assessment of three dimensions of governing processes, not only by participation *by* the people (input) and policy outcomes *for* the people (output), but also by the governance process itself *with* the people (throughput; Schmidt 2013).

In his recent work, Habermas briefly refers to input, output and throughput, redefining his initial empirical concepts as functional requirements to ensure the deliberative quality of media infrastructures:

*The media system is crucially important if the political public sphere is to fulfil its role in generating competing public opinions that satisfy the standards of deliberative politics. For the deliberative quality of these opinions depends on whether the process from which they emerge satisfies certain functional requirements on both the input side and the throughput and output sides. (Habermas 2022b, 157)*

While in 2006, Habermas referred to input and output as empirical categories, here, he moves towards a normative definition, referring to functional standards that should be fulfilled. He applies the terms input, output, and throughput as requirements to authorise the quality of deliberative interaction in the digitised public sphere, demanding that all three requirements should be met.

He did not develop this vocabulary in his previous reflections on public opinion. However, although he partly adopts a new vocabulary, he is not really attributing new functions to the (digitised) media system. Rereading his previous work brings me to the conclusion that the functional requirements of input, output and throughput were already present in his work on the public sphere and the media system. Habermas hardly defines these concepts but emphasises, in particular, the importance of the throughput function of 'the media system' and its 'professionalized staff' (2022b, 157).

In the next section, I will critically discuss this notion of throughput, which has been taken up by some scholars recently.

## 2.5 Throughput: Public controversy, epistemic dimension, problem definition

In their contribution to *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (2021), media theorists Otfried Jarren and Renate Fischer draw the threefold distinction of input, output, and throughput to evaluate the function of journalism and media platforms, demarcating the different functions more explicitly. Jarren and Fischer introduce the functional distinction as three *paradigms* of the public sphere before discussing Habermas' reflections on public opinion since 1962.<sup>48</sup> The 'input paradigm' in public sphere theory focuses on the active participation of citizens, people being engaged as much as possible, and the voicing of diverse perspectives. For the input paradigm, accessibility to the public sphere and a plurality of participating communities are essential values. Jarren and Fischer refer to it as 'the participative paradigm'. Public opinion has legitimacy if and because it reflects the voices of community members in all their diversity. The standards, then, apply to the preconditions of inclusion and diversity.

The input paradigm places a great emphasis on ensuring the participation of all. Additionally, previously assumed private questions can become political (Fischer and Jarren 2024, 202). The low threshold participation in the platformed publicity infrastructure ensures a widening of discourse, as Fraser advances. The 'who' of the public might extend to subaltern, previously silenced publics. The increased heterogeneity contributes to a more inclusive and better definition of common concerns, which simultaneously influences the debate itself, as I have argued. However, expert positions are no longer prioritised. As Habermas characterises this new balance: "The price for the welcome increase in egalitarianism due to the internet is a decentring of the modes of access to unedited inputs. In this medium, the contributions of intellectuals can no longer constitute a focal point" (Habermas 2009, 53). Expert voices are included in a wide and egalitarian discursive arena, but are not considered as decisive per se.

In the 'output paradigm', media serve as a soundboard of all societal voices and worries, mirroring their ratio and appearance in the public sphere.

48 'Paradigmen in Öffentlichkeitstheorien' (Jarren and Fischer 2021, 366).

Jarren and Fischer identify this output-orientated public sphere paradigm as the 'liberal paradigm': "the public sphere serves as a representative sounding board for all issues and opinions on political topics" (2024, 201). It is results- or performance-orientated, producing effective policies in public administration theory. A controversy amongst scholars is whether different opinions should be represented in corresponding proportions. Jarren and Fischer apparently aim for this statistical correspondence, as they defined the representative soundboard of public issues, "*wobei die gesellschaftlichen Mehrheitsverhältnisse gespiegelt werden sollen*", as an output criterion (2021, 366). In this respect, the relation between input and output is more or less similar to the initially discussed forum model propagated by Urbinati, in which individual preferences are mediated by fair procedures, resulting in aggregation and majority views.

However, regarding output legitimacy, there is also another rationale increasingly valuing experts and expertise, and highlighting the presentational performance of publicity. Media scholar Rasmussen (2013) characterises the constitutive, presentational dimension of the soundboard (as opposed to the representational dimension, the input) as "the deliberation over some common issues by central figures in leading media, acting, and replacing the voices of the people" (p. 101). Public concerns should be mobilised *effectively*, not necessarily in a statistically proportional manner. This allows the voice of experts to carry more weight, producing, for instance, a more educational outcome.

For Habermas, the relation between individual expressions and public presentation of opinions is not necessarily displayed in a statistically proportional manner, either: "Public opinion is not representative in the statistical sense" (1996, 362). The representational dimension (input) guarantees diversification, the presentational dimension results in "a public agenda and an expression of public opinion to politics as a resonance for rational decision-making" (Rasmussen 2014, 1326). As an organised expression of public discourse, this might allow a more informative role to certain parts of publicity. To avoid the risk of technocracy, as addressed by Urbinati, both aspects of publicity should be respected. The presentational dimension should not overshadow the representation.

In both approaches, the participatory input legitimacy and the presentational output legitimacy, the 'how' of media processes is under-

exposed. In my theory, input and output legitimacy are necessary but insufficient. A throughput approach can add the dimension of the 'how'. Throughput is related to the 'deliberative paradigm', in which the public processing of positions and arguments is considered essential to achieve legitimacy (Fischer and Jarren 2024, 201). Crucial to this function is the activity of '*Problembearbeitung*' – an interactive process that requires engagement and effort from its participants (Jarren and Fischer, 2021, 366).<sup>49</sup> Corresponding with the deliberative process in discourse theory, a decision is not entirely legitimised by the outcome or the majority rule. The preceding deliberative process is crucial to legitimising a decision. In political theory, throughput as a governing process is evaluated in terms of "inclusiveness and openness to consultation *with* the people" (Schmidt 2013, 2). In the deliberative context, this process is intended to reach, ideally, a rationally motivated consensus. In the throughput paradigm, the interactive process of critical debate between different voices, expert and non-expert, is fundamental. It is process-oriented and could be described in Jarren and Fischer's terms as 'processing topics' (2024, 211). Concerning the media, throughput legitimacy can be achieved by codes of conduct defining media practices, such as fair hearings and dealing with sources of information.

Throughput refers to the publicity processes engaged in the active and interactive confrontation of a voice or opinion in a critical sphere, challenged by a plurality of voices, perspectives and forms of expertise, producing a reflection on or a transformation of the original issue ('*Problembearbeitung*'). The distinction between *by* the people, *for* the people, and particularly, *with* the people can help us to reflect on the normative requirements of public opinion formation. However, 'with the people' (describing the interactive confrontation) might, in a digitised, technologically-steered context, be extended to with other organisations, networks, platforms, algorithms and databases, which I will discuss in Chapter 3.

This differentiation in input, output, and throughput might resonate with Fraser's distinction between normative legitimacy and political efficacy as two basic ideas substantiating the public sphere in democratic theory

49 Habermas prefers the term '*Verarbeitung*'. See for example Habermas (1992a, 77; 1992a, 455). I will use these notions interchangeably.

(2007, 7). Political efficacy refers to mobilising public opinion as a political force, which can be considered an output evaluation. Normative legitimacy concerns its inclusiveness ('who?') and the realisation of participatory parity ('how?'). These can be viewed as input and throughput criteria.

Although I discern similarities between the approaches, Fraser's theory addresses the public sphere and its participants as a political order. My approach is to assess critical publicity as a communicative process itself. Therefore, input is not only related to the inclusiveness of different voices but also includes non-human notions like information, expertise, and potentially technically mediated interventions like trolls, bots, and tweets by fictional characters, as I will illustrate when discussing the platformed public sphere. They are relevant inputs because they generate dynamics and interaction – conceived as throughput. Additionally, the output is not confined to mobilised public opinion or decisions that have to be taken but explicitly focuses on artefacts and products, for instance, news reports and hashtag campaigns.

Another difference that should be commented on is that Fraser criticises Habermas for underestimating the relevance of input (the 'who') while overvaluing the 'how'. That might be true when referring to the predominantly horizontal deliberation process in the public sphere and the principles of discourse. However, as I argued in the previous section regarding the process of critical publicity, connecting civil society to the political public sphere leads Habermas to resort to abstractions, submitting the 'how' to a media system equipped with a professionalised staff – not defining or sketching what exactly the term 'professionalised' entails and how it generates legitimacy.

Instead of relying on 'professionalism', I shall define three functions contributing to throughput legitimacy. The throughput functions that I outline are slightly redefined manifestations of the previously sketched potentials of the public sphere that I addressed in the first chapter, that is to say, the deliberative, epistemic and reflective dimensions, engaged in public opinion formation.

The throughput focus enables me to slightly adjust and reassign these conceptualisations. Firstly, I determine the practice of public controversy or contestation. One of the public sphere's first and most important objectives is

the confrontation of distinct, divergent, opposing, and competing opinions. Tracing this back to Habermas' basic theory, 'public controversy' is one of the vital normative requirements. Reflected opinions emerge from 'literary and rational controversy' (Habermas 1989, 246 and 250). The discursive level of opinion formation requires a "more or less exhaustive controversy in which proposals, information, and reasons can be more or less rationally dealt with" (1996, 362). Because of its interactive, encountering characteristics, contestation can be considered a throughput process.

The second process contributing to throughput legitimacy is the epistemic function of critical publicity, which is a manifestation of the epistemic potential deliberation. According to Habermas, deliberative discourses have an epistemic dimension, or 'cognitive potential'. In discursive opinion formation, "relevant issues and controversial answers, requisite information and appropriate answers for and against will be mobilized", culminating in reflected public opinions (2009, 162). This normative claim is substantiated by empirical research, he argues. In deliberation, people do not merely exchange opinions and arguments and criticise false assertions. Rather, by doing so, they become engaged in a process of collective, cooperative learning, making cognitive gains.<sup>50</sup> The epistemic dimension mobilises "relevant issues, required information, and appropriate contributions" (2006, 418).

The third process contributing to throughput legitimacy is problem-disclosing and problem-solving. The phrase 'problem-solving' is frequently used to translate distinct German words, such as *Problembearbeitung*, *Problemverarbeitung*, and *Problemlösung*.<sup>51</sup> An inclusive public sphere produces new descriptions of public and political issues that should be addressed. Fraser rightly added that this also includes identifying new or overlooked issues. In addition, asking and giving reasons generates a

50 Habermas relies on empirical studies in political communication that demonstrate that after group deliberations, participants exhibited "improved levels of information and, in general, wider perspectives and had a more comprehensive and precise definition of the issue at stake" (2009, 150).

51 I do prefer the German term *Problembearbeitung* or *-verarbeitung* over 'problem-solving'. Obviously, in deliberation, one can aspire to solve problems while working on them, but the deliberating effort does not lose its significance when that result is not achieved. The output-oriented notion of 'problem-solving' has a connotation to a particular *outcome*, while '*Problembearbeitung*' focuses on the practice of deliberation.

process of collective learning, resulting in new and better positions for societal questions – the problem-solving potential.

Unlike the word '*Problembearbeitung*', the English translation 'problem-solving' has a connotation to a particular *outcome*, discussing different solutions. In contrast, the German word focuses on the practice of deliberation, reflecting on the issues of common concern and producing new reports of public issues that should be discussed. Especially in discussing the normative dimension of the throughput of publicity and deliberative practices, I think that the spotlight on the process, not on the outcome, is to be preferred. 'Issue transformation' or collective 'problem definition' might cover this connotation more specifically.

This leads to my argument that public opinion formation is legitimate if and because it is supported by critical publicity with input, output, and throughput legitimacy. This means representational (input, voice), presentational (output, efficacy, mobilising opinions to the agenda), and throughput functions (tested in controversy, epistemic function, and problem definition) should be met.

## 2.6 Three arguments for developing a throughput model for publicity

Briefly recalling the first section of this chapter, critical publicity consists of closely interrelated processes and infrastructures. I will analytically distinguish them in separate chapters, dedicating this chapter to the normative aspects of the processes and the next chapter to the transformation of the infrastructures. However, as we will see in the following section, processes and infrastructures go together in every case. I will now advance three arguments to apply a model of throughput legitimacy applied to media processes.

### 2.6.1 Throughput is a black box and is easily overlooked

To further explore the throughput paradigm, I will proceed with Schmidt's (2013) insights on introducing throughput legitimacy in public administration theory. Since Scharpf (1970) introduced input and output, they have become relevant normative criteria in democratic and public administration theory. The relatively late introduction of throughput might be explained by its 'black box' character: it is therefore easily overlooked. For theorists, it is an inapparent and non-obvious realm of the policymaking processes.

*'Throughput' legitimacy concentrates on what goes on inside the 'black box' of EU governance, in the space between the political input and the policy output, which has typically been left blank by political systems theorists. It focuses on the quality of the governance processes of the EU as contributing to a different kind of normative legitimacy from both the performance-oriented legitimacy of output and the participation-oriented legitimacy of input. Throughput is process-oriented. (Schmidt 2013, 5)*

Drawing an analogy between the political and media systems, I will translate Schmidt's observations to the present-day media context, starting with a recent example of an unbalanced legitimacy approach in Dutch media.<sup>52</sup> This case supports the view that input and output come first in an

<sup>52</sup> This case is predominantly centred around broadcast media. In Chapter 3, I will expand the focus to digital media as well.

official normative assessment procedure, overlooking throughput. While I aim to discuss the process aspect of public broadcasting in the example presented here, infrastructural elements are also engaged.

#### 2.6.1.1 *Intermezzo: An example of an unbalanced legitimacy approach: Dutch Public Broadcasting*

The Dutch model of public service broadcasting is a remnant of almost fifty years of pillarisation as a characteristic societal structure (Daalmeijer 2004). It is a particular way of organising input legitimacy by organising ‘external pluralism’, referring to the existence of different media channels, each expressing its own (differing) point of view.<sup>53</sup> The model consists of a decentralised framework of independent, publicly funded, member-based broadcasters, traditionally reflecting social and religious movements and, more recently, also specific target groups (e.g., young people or the elderly). The individual broadcasting organisations are serviced by the NPO (Nederlandse Publieke Omroep-organisatie) as an umbrella organisation, coordinating the programming and distribution of the channels and online platforms.

In April 2021, the Dutch Council for Culture<sup>54</sup> advised the Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media, Arie Slob, to accept an application from a new broadcaster, (On)gehoord Nederland. The new entrant, abbreviated ON!, claims to provide a voice for people who feel estranged from politics and public services (that is, ‘Unheard’). ON! applied for a license to broadcast on Dutch public radio and television channels, along with the related public funding.

53 The distinction between internal and external pluralism is drawn, for instance, in *A Free and Pluralistic Media to Sustain European Democracy: The Report of the High Level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism*, presented to the European Commission in January 2013. Internal pluralism refers to the obligation of broadcasters to present different political viewpoints in a balanced way without favouring any particular party or political movement, applying the adversarial principle. In contrast, external pluralism refers to the media landscape as a whole, for example, in terms of the number of different media providers active in any given country.

54 “The Council for Culture is a body established by law to advise the Dutch Government and Parliament on the arts, culture and media [...] (T)he Council provides a recommendation at the request of the Minister of the OCW (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science). Every four years, the Council presents its recommendations on the perennial, government-subsidized cultural institutions. The recommendation is not binding; the Minister decides which institutes are eligible for subsidy” (Raad Voor Cultuur 2025a).

*The Council attaches great importance to ensuring that public broadcasting remains a platform where all possible voices can be heard. In previous statements by the initiators of ON!, and also in previously broadcast online programmes, the NOS [the official Dutch news organisation] is systematically accused of deliberately spreading disinformation. Each broadcaster is of course free to contest the selection of news facts by the NOS, to put forward other facts or to present other views or opinions on the basis of facts. In fact, pluralism of opinions, however contrary and wilful it may be, enriches the system. (Raad Voor Cultuur 2025b)<sup>55</sup>*

The Dutch public broadcasting policy exemplifies a particular form of input-legitimacy, also known as ‘external pluralism’: the public service system provides diverse social and religious groups with their own broadcast organisations catering to their respective constituencies. This vision is reinforced by depicting public broadcasting as a *platform* for all possible voices and attributing pluralism as its core value, as the Council does in its report. A platform is generally conceived as an environment that is a neutral territory, providing equal opportunity for all kinds of possible voices to speak out.<sup>56</sup> This explicitly echoes the vision of the NPO, as formulated in 2016 in a Dutch newspaper. A few days after the unforeseen first time election of Donald Trump, the then chief of the NPO, Shula Rijxman, wrote an op-ed in *De Volkskrant* on what lessons her organisation should learn from this presidential election, which came as a surprise to most American and European citizens at that time: “It is our duty to take all expressions and visions in society seriously and to give them a voice and show them”<sup>57</sup> (Rijxman 2016). In her view, media organisations were primarily dominated by expert and elite voices; the election of Donald Trump served as a fresh impetus to cover the voices of the street in public media coverage.

The reaction of the public broadcasting organisation articulates a characteristically Dutch approach to public debate. In her research on the different media strategies that Benelux countries apply to reporting

55 Translation mine.

56 In Chapter 3, I will discuss the concept of platforming. The idea of a platform reflects the liberal approach to the expression of opinion, as discussed in Chapter 1. This involves exchanging opinions as goods on a marketplace, overlooking the communicative potential of interaction.

57 Translation mine.

on right-wing populist parties, researcher Léonie de Jonge (2019) refers to Rijnman's self-critical statement as an example of a characteristic Dutch media practice: maintaining an open mind and stating "that the views of 'the common people' are considered just as important as those held by elites" (p. 200). De Jonge concludes that Dutch media, newspapers, and broadcasters use a different approach to some of their Benelux colleagues: "In general, the Dutch media see their role less as educators; instead, they think of themselves as providing a forum for debate" (ibid.). As one of the editors-in-chief of an influential Dutch newspaper said, "We're a platform for collisions" (as reported by de Jonge, p. 199). Pursuing the publicity ideal of a platform as a first-hand report on the voices and visions of ordinary people is an input evaluation. In Chapter 3, I will reflect on the platforming concept and its normative implications. At present, I want to highlight the 'Dutch approach' as an exemplification of the intricate relationship between the idea of media as a platform and input legitimacy.

Notwithstanding the dominance of input legitimacy in this example, there are some relevant throughput criteria (the 'how') engaged in public broadcasting. These include describing the practice of a fair hearing and dealing with sources of information, filed in a Code of Journalistic Principles of NPO 01-01-2017,<sup>58</sup> a two-page document specifying good practice, conduct, and responsibility in journalism. However, committing to this Code is secondary and subordinate to the accession procedure. Only after being authorised as a new entrant by the Minister for Primary and Secondary Education and Media is the broadcaster considered to have subscribed to this Code.<sup>59</sup> I will discuss the productive and limiting practice of media codes in Chapter 3.

The example of Dutch public broadcasting illustrates that input and output are dominant when assessing media infrastructures, while throughput criteria are added as a second stage. It shows that publicity, conceived as a platforming process, might only partially acknowledge its initial contesting function, relying on the alleged external plurality of the system.

58 A dynamic assessment framework, open to review at any time. The version that was relevant in this case was updated on 1 January 2017, and published as an appendix in *Onderzoek naar schending van de Journalistieke Code in publicaties van omroep ON*, June 2022.

59 Persistent dissatisfaction with this practice led to recommendations regarding the procedure (Ministerie van Onderwijs 2023).

As a platform of divergent media organisations, it might primarily mirror and not necessarily challenge the primary judgments. Consequently, the deliberative, epistemic and reflective potentials, as put forward in Chapter 1, will only be partially realised.

### **2.6.2 Throughput might be under pressure in a commercialised context**

As a second argument for my throughput model, I will present a relevant observation on commercialisation affecting normative criteria that media researcher de Jonge puts forward in her previously mentioned research on media responses to right-wing parties in different Benelux regions (2019). In her interviews, de Jonge observes that Dutch and Flemish media practitioners have gradually become more accommodating toward right-wing parties, thereby embracing a platform-based media infrastructure. In contrast, Walloon and Luxembourgish journalists apply a different stance of a strict demarcation of right-wing parties, adhering to an output-motivated, educational role (p. 202). De Jonge argues that the platform ideal of media is partly explained by the commercialised, liberal model of the media system, which is more profound in the Netherlands and Flanders than in other Benelux regions.

*Specifically, it appears that the Dutch-speaking media are shifting away from the world of politics toward the world of business [...] Throughout the interviews, there was evidence of commercial thinking among Dutch and Flemish media representatives. [...] In the Netherlands, interviewees routinely referred to their readers and viewers as 'clients'. (de Jonge 2019, 203)*

An increasingly commercial mindset in Dutch journalism affords the accommodative style of platforming of Dutch media. As de Jonge observes, it is noteworthy that the Dutch public-service broadcaster also subscribes to this commercially-inspired view.

*This is interesting given that they are primarily funded by the state and therefore isolated from market mechanisms. This suggests that the differences in media strategies cannot simply be attributed to commercialization. The media do not exist in a vacuum. (de Jonge 2019, 204)*

For me, the 'typical Dutch' aspect of this media approach is not so relevant, but the suggestion that commercial thinking encourages accommodation

and platform-based media ambitions is, and that this accentuates input legitimacy. This observation echoes the Habermasian concern regarding commercialisation transforming the infrastructures, even risking a refeudalisation of public communication. This capitalist transformation, which is reinforced by digitisation and the supremacy of online media, will be taken up in Chapter 3 (see Section 3.2.4).

### **2.6.3 A critical concept of publicity requires throughput legitimacy**

The three forms of legitimacy cannot be strictly separated. As Schmidt delineates for public administration, input, output, and throughput complement each other. However, it is helpful to distinguish throughput as a separate process since it is easily overlooked. It is, nonetheless, particularly relevant, as the machinery of the institution:

*[U]nlike with input politics and output policies, where more of either is likely to increase the public's sense of democratic legitimacy, with throughput processes, more of it may have little effect on public perceptions of legitimacy, while less of it via corruption, incompetence and exclusion may bring down the whole house of cards. (Schmidt 2013, 14)*

Schmidt concludes that this third normative criterion and the interactive effects of all three criteria should be evaluated. Although the 'how' (throughput) might be obscured, it is as relevant as the 'who' (input) and the 'what' (output), and affects the others.

As previously discussed, the interaction between input and throughput – or between the 'who' and the 'how' – is central to Fraser's theory of publicity. She argues that diversifying input – by including a broader range of voices and experiences – enhances not only representational inclusivity but also transforms the process of deliberation itself (2007, 20). In other words, input is not simply the starting point of publicity; it shapes and conditions the throughput. To ensure epistemically productive throughput – deliberation that enables collective learning and reflective judgment – the scope and quality of input must be sufficiently broad and diverse. Conversely, when input is restricted, throughput risks becoming exclusionary, elite-dominated or epistemically one-sided.

A critical concept of publicity must therefore attend to how the 'who' and the 'how' interact: who participates determines what kinds of arguments,

experiences, and knowledge claims circulate and are processed and are considered valid. This is particularly important when conceiving throughput not merely as a separate stage, but as a dynamic process: an ongoing sequence of filtering, framing, contesting, and validating arguments within communicative infrastructures.

Seyla Benhabib (1992) deepens this perspective by extending the domain of public participation beyond formal political deliberation. She argues that critical engagement must also include social and cultural practices, thereby pushing the boundaries of what counts as politically relevant discourse. This expansion redefines input, introducing new actors, issues, and modes of expression, and simultaneously reshapes throughput by diversifying the discursive and interpretive resources available. Through what she calls the sphere of 'practical debate', the public sphere is enlarged not just in scope but in epistemic variety (1992, 86). This conceptual broadening has implications not only for who is included (input), but for how dialogue is processed, challenged, and rearticulated (throughput).<sup>60</sup>

Both Fraser and Benhabib reconsider the scope of the public and its participants to dissolve the elitism in the original concept while reviewing not only the input but also the practices involved. Basically, if new voices enter the stage, they also transform the traditional practices. Habermas acknowledged these critical adjustments, recognising the interaction between the input and the processes. In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), Habermas accentuated the 'dual orientation' of new social movements, bringing new subjects into public debate and changing, revitalising, and enlarging the public sphere: "these actors get the chance to reverse the normal circuits of communication in the political system and the public sphere. In this way, they can shift the entire system's mode of problem solving" (p. 381). In this formulation, it seems that Habermas believes that these new voices are granted a position in the public sphere, whereas it may be more appropriate to say that they achieve or seize it. Be that as it may, my point is that new voices emerge as new inputs and accordingly change the throughput. I will discuss the role of social movements in

60 "Public space is not understood agonistically as a space of competition for acclaim and immortality among a political elite; it is viewed democratically as the creation of procedures whereby those affected by general social norms and collective political decisions can have a say in their formulation, stipulation, and adoption" (Benhabib 1992, 87).

reshaping critical publicity by challenging the input and, correspondingly, the throughput function (how to govern information) in Chapter 5, which deals with media-activism.

## 2.7 Conclusion: Rearticulation of critical publicity from a throughput perspective

In this chapter, I made an analytical, somewhat artificial distinction between critical publicity as a process and as an infrastructure. Although several writings in his later work support both aspects, Habermas tends to accentuate the more infrastructural aspect the most. Particularly in his more recent work (2021), Habermas underlines the relevance of infrastructures, looking for an architecture that can safeguard critical interaction.

I argued that public opinion formation should be supported by critical publicity processes that encourages input, output, and throughput legitimacy. This means representational (voices), presentational (output, efficacy, mobilising opinions on agendas), and throughput legitimacy, the adequate processing of voices, information and opinions. Introducing throughput as a normative criterion, as Habermas implicitly did, contributes to theorising critical publicity. I claimed that overlooking the 'how' (or throughput) of critical publicity while predominantly focusing on the input (the 'who') and the output (the 'what') will hamper a qualitative assessment of media infrastructures and their processes. Consequently, public opinion formation may lose its critical, contesting function, merely mirroring and not challenging the primary judgments.

The focus on throughput enables me to define and refine three functions that these processes should guarantee. These functions implement, slightly adjusted, the three previously discussed potentials of the public sphere, in publicity processes. The first of these functions is public controversy or contestation: a deliberative function where an opinion is confronted with distinct, divergent, opposing, and competing opinions. Because of its interactive and encountering characteristics, contestation can be considered a throughput process. The second function critical publicity should perform is epistemic, which consists of processing information and arguments and thus realising the cognitive potential of deliberation. The third is *Problemverarbeitung*, or problem definition, which involves the critical reflection of public debate. This is not so much about naming problems but rather evaluating problems brought forth and framed from various perspectives as issues of common concern.

In the next chapter, I will explore the challenges of throughput legitimacy in the post-digitised public sphere and its infrastructures. The context of Habermas' original reflections in 1962 was characterised by the dominance of broadcasting media. The rise of major mass media powers and their swift and voluminous outreach did alter the public sphere and impede the creation of a public in critical interaction, turning it into a passive audience. However, sixty years later, in the post-digital context, we envision a post-digital landscape where interaction is revitalised. It was Habermas himself who admitted that initially, he felt rather pessimistic about the political public sphere (1962); almost thirty years later, he seemed to sound less pessimistic (1989). Recently, he declared himself to be “more perplexed than pessimistic” about the public sphere in the post-digital context, while at the same time not knowing how to define the infrastructure of the post-digital public sphere as the equivalent of 18<sup>th</sup> century structures (Czington, Diefenbach and Kempf 2020, 31).

Chapter 3 will outline how the digitised media landscape affects the performance and the processes of critical publicity. The increased public participation and interaction create new opportunities, but at the same time make extra epistemic demands. I will revise the pre-digital publicity concept, rearticulating and rebalancing the role of controversy, epistemic function and problem definition. I will argue that, to prevent epistemic vulnerability, new procedures to foster throughput legitimacy, and particularly its epistemic procedures, must be (re)discovered. To maintain its critical role in public opinion formation, critical publicity needs to be digitally adjusted and reconstructed through the post-digital frame.

# **3. Critical publicity (2): Determining its infrastructural transformations and post-digital challenges**

## **3.1 Introduction**

The notion of critical publicity refers to both processes and infrastructures. As mentioned previously, these are to be distinguished analytically. Whereas Chapter 2 discussed critical publicity as the processes, safeguarding the normative dimension of public opinion formation, I now will concentrate on the *infrastructural context* underlying and enabling those processes. This approach considers the different historic manifestations of publicity infrastructures, resulting in an empirically informed view on critical processes. It supports the focus on recent transfigurations and the preconditions of the critical functions. Studying the empirical characteristics of critical publicity infrastructures is pivotal in identifying the recent challenges and potentials pertaining to throughput legitimacy. In Chapter 2, I identified three functions of critical publicity needed to establish throughput legitimacy: public controversy, the epistemic function, and problem definition. These processes, crucial for public debate, are facilitated but also limited by infrastructures.

In mapping these infrastructures, I once again begin by discussing Habermas' writings. The transformation of the public sphere he described in his *Strukturwandel* is undeniably infrastructural. I discuss his consideration of coffeehouses, newspapers, and broadcast media as infrastructures. I also critically review the relevant publicity processes they afford, like the public debate, the emergence of journalism, and editing and

other ‘intelligence work’, as well as the commercialisation that affected the publicity domain and its functions. Because Habermas completed his study in 1962, I supplement his ideas with recent infrastructural theory on the networked public sphere (Benkler 2006; Castells 2008) and the platformed public sphere (Poell, Nieborg and van Dijck 2019; Schneiders, Stegmann and Stark 2023; de Winkel 2023), allowing for new, partly unexpected critical publicity processes. This results in an assessment of a technologically mediated, highly commercialised, globally networked, hybrid, post-digital public sphere.

After conceptually extending the historical transformations to the present, I examine what contemporary hybrid media, mixing up digital and broadcast infrastructures, signify for the process of critical publicity. Throughput legitimacy, consisting of the selection and processing of deliberative contributions in public opinion formation (discussed in Chapter 2), was until recently predominantly performed by professional media organisations. However, since digitisation has impacted the public sphere, professional media organisations operate in a radically transformed context, no longer being the dominant power in structuring and controlling the flow of information and opinion. Deciding on selection, pertinence and deliberative quality (throughput processes formerly in the hands of a professional staff), has partly become a job of technological intervention. How does this infrastructural transformation into a post-digital public sphere affect publicity processes and the critical functions that assure public controversy, epistemic functions, and problem definition?

Focusing on the role of critical publicity, in this chapter I conclude with the recent challenges of information provision and processing in a post-digital media network. Digitisation has enabled the facile sharing and exchange of information, easy connecting, and a low-threshold forum for new voices to self-publishing. However, digitisation also poses new epistemic challenges, such as the obscurity of authorship and provenance, the lack of gatekeepers, and fragmentation. These effects complicate the throughput process, mainly the epistemic function and problem definition. The challenges of this complex, post-digital context provide the background against which I have selected my cases. In the second part of this dissertation, I will try to find new responses and alternatives to the challenged epistemic function.

## 3.2 Infrastructural transformations

*The infrastructure of the public sphere has changed along with the forms of organization, marketing, and consumption of a professionalized book production that operates on a larger scale and is oriented to new strata of readers, and of a newspaper and periodical press whose contents have also not remained the same [...] In conjunction with an ever more commercialized and increasingly dense network of communication, with the growing capital requirements and organizational scale of publishing enterprises, the channel of communication became more regulated, and the opportunities for access to public communication became subjected to ever greater selective pressure. (Habermas 1992b, 436)*

In his later writings, Habermas turns to the notion of an ‘infrastructure’ to identify recent challenges to publicity processes. In this reflection, written thirty years after his original study, Habermas uses the concept of infrastructures to refer to the communication structures of the public sphere. This is a term he did not apply in his earlier writings. In doing so, he supports a scholarly trend: since 1990, the use of the term ‘infrastructures’ has gradually emerged in media and internet studies. Some scholars have even remarked that this constitutes an ‘infrastructural turn’ (e.g. Hesmondhalgh, 2021). Digital networks have since generated considerable academic and public interest in information and media infrastructures. Initially propagated as the study of the ‘boring things’ of materiality, such as cables, wires, hardware and engineering, the emphasis gradually shifted to include the ‘soft’ aspects of people, protocols, and organisations (p. 136).

In this section, I will explore the infrastructures that allow critical publicity processes, starting with a broader conceptual sketch. In everyday language, an ‘infrastructure’ refers to “the basic systems and services that are necessary for a country or an organization to run smoothly, for example, buildings, transport and water and power supplies” (Oxford 2024). However, a small historical sidestep shows the increasing complexity of the word’s meaning. The phrase originated during the 19th century in French railroad engineering, referring to subsoil structures supporting the tracks as the antonym of the ‘superstructure’ of tracks: stations and trains (Lee and Schmidt 2018). The term also encompassed

the largely invisible subsoil machinery, enabling traffic movements. In subsequent contexts, the word preserved its initial material connotations.

In public sphere theory, the ‘infrastructural turn’, which has been in motion since the last decade of the previous century, redefined the study of political communication processes. Initially, it primarily highlighted technological qualifications and material preconditions (Star 1999). However, the focus shifted from the more technical concept of ‘infrastructures’, including wires, cables and hardware, to a new body of knowledge: ‘information infrastructures’. This covered softer organisational elements (such as protocols, people and organisations). Additionally, the broader social and economic context was included. As the anthropologist Brian Larkin puts it, the invention of the light bulb is not entirely conceived in terms of glass, filament, and electricity; a complete conception also needs an understanding of the associated financial and organisational structures. Thus, infrastructure is not confined to technology. Rather, “it is an amalgam of technical, administrative and financial techniques” (Larkin 2013, 330). The more comprehensive notion of infrastructures offers a functional perspective on the relation to the processes or products such infrastructures support. Infrastructural elements, such as a specific commercial context, *produce* a unique design with characteristic functions.<sup>61</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that, regarding critical publicity, specific practices of publicity are being supported, enabled, or hampered by a particular infrastructural context. Just like the coffeehouses and salons, the infrastructures that fostered public deliberation among citizens – namely, the profession of writing, reporting and disseminating information known as ‘journalism’ – only originated with the emergence of the newspaper and publishing industry. The professional practices of journalism changed with the commercialisation of the press, which introduced the role of the editor. Later, as broadcast infrastructures enabled new journalistic trends such

61 A perfect example is the modern design of the light bulb. Initially manufactured at the end of the 19th century, it could efficiently operate for 2500 hours. This posed companies with a problem: the demand for new light bulbs was low. In 1924, the Phoebus cartel, including large companies such as Osram and Philips, decreed the maximum life span of the light bulb as 1000 hours. A special 100-hour Life Committee issued fines when exceeding this norm. This is how the modern light bulb was invented: it was specifically designed to become obsolete after a specific period of time. For an account of the full story, see Rau and Oberhuber (2022, 12-18).

as live reporting and talk shows, critical and communicative procedures began to take on a new appearance.

The final major transformation culminated in the internet as the dominant infrastructural architecture, shaped by digital technology, network protocols and automated moderation, but also affording a grid of economic and commercial potential, and expanding the network to a new social sphere of self-publishers. The internet offers the setting for diverse media products, including blogs, social media, and messaging services, accommodating formal, non-formal, semiformal, commercial, non-commercial, and semi-commercial media. It is not the internet as such, that should be considered as an infrastructure, it is the complex fabric of technological, economic, public and professional affordances. Depending on their commercial and political aspirations, these publishing practices afford more or fewer controversies, epistemic interactions, and collective problem definition. As such, they should be assessed distinctly – as I will do for three of them in my cases.

Although Habermas did not use the concept in his *Strukturwandel*, that work can doubtlessly be read as an ‘infrastructural transformation’ that resulted in modern challenges to critical debate. Interpreting the historical transformation as an infrastructural transformation from coffeehouses and the printing press to mass media, networks, and platforms helps to identify the original infrastructural organisation of the deliberative, epistemic, and reflexive processes. This analysis facilitates disentangling critical publicity as an empirical concept (*viz.* infrastructures) that enables different media practices and produces critical processes.

In the next section, I will discuss infrastructural transformations of the public sphere, predominantly based on Habermas’ theory. This will provide an elementary context to the previously described processes of public controversy, epistemic potential, and problem definition.

### **3.2.1 Coffeehouses: Establishing free debate**

In his historical reconstruction, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas did not use the concept of infrastructures. However, in hindsight, the salons, theatres and coffeehouses of the 18th century can be considered as the basic infrastructure of the initial public sphere. Coffeehouses were private businesses where citizens (i.e. property-

owning 'bourgeois' men) would gather and freely debate the day's literary, political and economic issues. Publicness was thus initially produced in private institutions. Three institutional criteria grounded publicness. Firstly, there was a disregard for social hierarchy in the debate. Although this social equivalence was never practically realised, it was significant as an idea: participants acted 'as if' they were social equals.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, the domain of 'common concern', heretofore monopolised by church and state authority, became an object of public culture. As cultural products (such as art and books) became commodities for propertied citizens, the public's critical attention expanded to new questions, transforming issues of common concern. The third institutional criterion is a consequence of the profanation and commodification of culture: the public is 'in principle' inclusive and does not close itself off.<sup>63</sup> The issues discussed, therefore, became 'general' and accessible to 'everyone', meaning every propertied and educated citizen ought to be able to participate.

In Habermas' description, the coffeehouses, as private businesses, were supplemented by a network of public institutions. These included theatres, libraries, and museums; they were further supplemented by cultural products like books, concerts, and plays. This basic infrastructure of public assemblies, supported by commercial and public products, resulted in a public debate that prompted a critical conversation among participants, serving as a counterforce to the official powers. Opposing the church's monopoly on public conversation, defining issues of common concern (that is, 'problem definition') became part of the debate. Public deliberation enabled critical interaction and contestation of expressed ideas. Public interaction also allowed for the throughput aspects of controversy and problem definition. However, the epistemic function of the bourgeois public sphere imposes additional admission requirements. Education – reading, informing, observing – is a precondition for entering the public sphere. Thus, the access protocol to public debate has specific *input criteria*, restricting the inclusivity of its public to literate people of the property-owning class. One had to read (and buy) a book before being allowed to enter the book club.

62 This bracketing of 'as if' is one of Fraser's primary critiques, as I pointed out in Chapter 1.

63 However, in practice, it was inaccessible to many others, especially women. See the discussion in Chapter 1.

In Section 3.2.5, when discussing the effects of platformisation, I will return to the input aspect of the epistemic dimension of coffeehouses. I will argue that the absence of input criteria requires additional throughput effort in the post-digital context.

### **3.2.2 Newspapers: The rise of journalism**

Another traditional infrastructural pillar of the public sphere is the newspaper industry, which emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, seceding the tradition of political pamphleteering and private correspondence. Economic entrepreneurship and the increasing capacity of printing presses were relevant structuring elements facilitating the rise and the gradual transmutation of the newspaper industry, reflecting the evolution of an organisation of private men of letters into large media conglomerates. This upscaling did not merely affect organisational and economic structures; new processes and a new journalistic *modus operandi* also accompanied it: the newspaper was transformed from an instrument of commerce, distributing economic messages, into an instrument of continuous political deliberation (Barnhurst and Nerone 2009, 18).

Around 1830, journalism came into play as a professional discipline. As a skilled writing practice, journalism represents a new contribution to critical processes in the public sphere. With the creation of modern rights such as copyrights and the freedom of the press, newspapers gradually evolved from sheer transporters of collated economic messages into storytellers, reporters of opinion, and, subsequently, significant political agents in and of themselves. This affected publicity processes. From merely being distributors, newspapers developed into organising infrastructures of public debate: “from being a merchant of news to being a dealer in public opinion”, as Habermas quotes German economist and journalist Karl Bücher (Habermas 1989, 182). The distributors of the news thus evolved into the very manufacturers of public debate.

The upscaling of news organisations in the 19<sup>th</sup> century created a new functional role, positioned between the gathering of the news and its publication: the editor. Instigated by the acceleration and expansion of news distribution, the editorial function developed from a literary activity to a journalistic one: “The selection of material became more important than the lead article” (Habermas 1989, 185). Excellence in storytelling and the creation of well-formulated commentaries took a back seat to the

selection and presentation of content. Informing the public, organising the selection of news, and the public controversy of opinions became the core qualifications of the political public press. The printing and distribution infrastructure, supplemented by journalistic and editorial expertise, allowed for an organised controversy of opinions, albeit limited to elite views. The editorial selection and organisation of the news, throughput procedures par excellence, provided a top-down definition of relevant issues. The professional administration of the information flow allowed for a controlled epistemic contribution to public debate. At the same time, relying on editorial professionalism to decide on the deliberative quality of news coverage also involved a risk. An editor is closer to the publisher than a writer or journalist and, therefore, might be granted less professional autonomy than journalists. An editor may be more easily susceptible to commercial interests knocking on the newsroom's door.<sup>64</sup>

For Habermas, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century newspaper industry was the most suitable, supplementary counterpart to the political public sphere of those days. It provided “vertical communication flows”, based on “the distribution and broadcasting of press, radio and television programmes”, directing the public's attention to political issues (Czington, Diefenbach and Kempf 2020, 33). This partly accounts for his focus on newspapers and journalism.

*After all, it was no accident that political public spheres (..) arose in the historical context of parliamentarism and the formation of a party system. This communication structure was an essential functional prerequisite for every democracy, because it was able to direct the attention of a large population to relatively few issues of relevance for political decision-making and to awaken and keep alive a general interest in such issues. (Habermas, in an interview with Czington, Diefenbach and Kempf 2020, 33)*

It was a combination of these two characteristics that highlighted journalism as a highly relevant institution in Habermas' public sphere

64 This analysis was not only made by Habermas, but his wasn't even the first. Richard Bernstein (2012) rightly argued that Habermas might as well have cited Walter Lippmann as a source to support his critiques on the degeneration of the newspaper industry and the associated impairment of the political public sphere - but he did not. Lippmann, a philosopher whose principal employment was as a political journalist, specifically addressed the epistemic challenges of acceleration and globalisation of information supply.

theory: its power to centralise attention, thanks to its vertically distributive, broadcasting infrastructure, and, secondly, its adherence, as a profession, to issues of “general interest”. Because of this combination, Habermas prioritises the (political) press, and consequently the media system (compared to other institutional manifestations, such as commercial enterprises, trade unions, and non-governmental organisations), as the ideal counterpart of democratic institutions.

Habermas’ interest in the press and media unmistakably displays a normative position. It is not that other products of popular culture, such as music, films, or games, do not shape our thoughts and preferences; his view is that our opinions *should* be shaped by journalistically informed media. In my normative perspective on public opinion formation, Habermas rightfully prioritises critical publicity in his framework. However, his view on journalism is too narrowly defined by a traditional understanding of the profession, shaped in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century newspaper era and sustained during the infrastructural transformation as an allegedly well-defined professional practice, centrally steered from the newsroom.

### 3.2.3 Professional codes and authorship

For a discussion on the changing role of professional journalism in times of considerable infrastructural transformation, I will briefly review Lippmann’s writings. Being a philosopher and a political journalist, Lippmann reflected on the impact of the media transitions of his age, the first decades of the 20th century. The works of Lippmann, especially *Public Opinion* (1922), analyse the gradual transformation and commercialisation of media infrastructures.<sup>65</sup> Lippmann, ‘the philosopher in the newsroom’, watched the rise of far-reaching and easily accessible media, especially

65 Although Walter Lippmann applied a slightly naive and imprecise concept of public opinion, referring to the plural ‘public opinions’ mainly as pictures inside our heads, he was one of the first and most important intellectuals to explicitly call attention to the political significance of the accuracy of the news and the reliability of information sources in a changing media context, underlining the epistemic assignment of the media in a modern democracy. Already alluding to his definition of public opinion, a voluminous quote from Plato’s *Republic*, taken from ‘The Simile of the Cave’, introduces his book. Referring to ‘the shadows’, ‘the screen’ and the ‘marionette players’, Lippmann is already hinting at his own view on opinions: “The pictures inside the heads of these human beings, the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationships, are their public opinions. Those pictures which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters” (1922, 21).

radio broadcasting and international newspapers, which created a newsfeed capable of rapidly travelling around the globe.<sup>66</sup> For journalism, broadening scope to a global scale added to its epistemic potential by expanding news coverage to formerly unknown worlds. At the same time, its epistemic contribution was hampered since the accelerated pace demanded a reduced profundity, which placed pressure on journalists to adjust their coverage, reducing the length and complexity of journalistic writing (1922, 173–197). The infrastructures allowed for engaging with complex and formerly unknown matters, but they simultaneously hampered nuanced processing.

Lippmann argued that upcoming media (newspapers and radio) were the main intermediary between events in the world and the minds of the public. As the ears and eyes of the public, he emphasised their commitment to *reliably informing* the citizens on global political and economic developments. In his view, media constantly wrestled with the conflicting demands of information provision in democracy. In epistemic terms, on the one hand they were responding to the public demand, i.e. the widespread availability and distribution of information. On the other hand, they were meeting the complexity demand, i.e. an accurate and comprehensive reflection of the facts. As circulation was broader than ever before, one could easily reach many people with only elementary messages. Consequently, the media infrastructures of his day were extremely well-equipped to fulfil the first demand: extensive reach of the news, engaging a large audience. However, Lippmann also observed that the acceleration of the news cycle and increasing commercialisation frustrated the demand for accuracy and complexity. Length restrictions and simplification constantly hampered stories in newspapers and on the radio, so the reports were never very accurate, falling short in their job of proper information provision. The effect of the rising newspaper industry on the epistemic dimension of public debate was two-sided: news became available more widely than ever. This led to the rapid dissemination of the news, which Lippmann saw as an elementary epistemic gain. However, he was concerned about the quality of the information and the public's comprehension of an oversupply of short, simple, partisan, out-of-context news feeds, generating (in my own choice of words) an epistemic vulnerability.<sup>67</sup>

66 I borrow this characterisation of Lippmann from Curry Jansen (2021, 423).

67 Lippmann doubted our human cognitive potential, dealing with abstract information

Skilled journalism, anchored in professional criteria, were Lippmann's answer to the challenges of speed and complexity. It guaranteed a proper throughput process for defining the standards for filtering the input, balancing the available information, and explicating the method.

I distil four criteria Lippmann saw as crucial for a professional journalist as a skilled author, which can be considered as the beginning of the first professional media code. These are based on his essential writings, which in total encompass thousands of pages, so I cannot do complete justice to the richness of this corpus.<sup>68</sup> First, journalism should adhere to *simple* words, be well-written, and be understandable to a public of non-experts. For journalism, Lippmann considers it a merit to keep the subject matter uncomplicated (Steel 1980, 201). Secondly, journalists should focus on the *facts* instead of opinions, or in the words of Lippmann, “going behind opinion” because opinions are often concealed interests (Lippmann 2021, 41). Journalists should not only be sceptical of powerful interests put forth by governments and influential stakeholders, but should also be conscientious of their own opinions. Thirdly, in order to deliver accurate and reliable information, a trained writer should adopt a *scientific approach*. In observing, researching, checking one's observations, and describing the news as accurately as possible, “good reporting requires the exercise of the highest of the scientific virtues” (p. 49). Finally, to effectuate a more objective and scientific approach in journalism, Lippmann thinks it necessary to pay attention to the *journalist's method*. Lippmann supported a turn to professionalism and a professional code of honour setting the standards (Rossiter and Lare 1982, 405). Regarding this third and fourth standard, it is evident that it is the ‘how’ of journalism, that Lippmann seeks to anchor, as these principles ensure the legitimacy of the journalistic procedure.

(‘unseen environments’) in any case. Newspapers and radio broadcasting were the leading messengers in informing the public on almost any subject American audiences had no direct contact with, such as the First World War (which took place mainly in Europe) and the Russian Revolution. Ongoing globalisation made the ‘world outside’, a notion Lippmann used to describe the world beyond our firsthand experience, grow very quickly. How could citizens conceive a reliable picture of this world? Since this aspect also addresses Lippmann's more fundamental doubts about the limits of the human mind, I will leave this out of the discussion.

68 As essential works on this subject I consider Lippmann (1993; 1922; 2021) and Rossiter and Lare (1982).

Although Habermas does not refer to him, Lippmann's work can be seen as a predecessor of his theory. At the very least, Lippmann addresses similar concerns over the epistemic challenges of technological and economic transformation of media infrastructures. Where Habermas underlines the (infra)structural transformation of the media context, affording critical processes, Lippmann stresses the duty and competence of journalism as a professional discipline. In addition, Lippmann paid specific attention to the role of expert knowledge in public debate. In his view, professional journalism alone could not live up to the economically and technically altered media infrastructures, which accelerated the news cycle and sought large consumer audiences. To handle this great responsibility, journalism should be assisted by a new discipline, 'intelligence work' as epistemic support, translating non-partisan expert knowledge to a non-expert public. Lippmann conceived of a new class of 'intelligence workers' as a mainstay for fair information provision, consisting of journalists and independent, disinterested experts and advisers to expertise the public and decisionmakers. Intelligence work entails translating complex expert information stories into comprehensible narratives. In Lippmann's account, the intelligence worker's purpose is to educate the public and political leaders by providing and disseminating reliable information. However, a few years later, after *The Phantom Public* (1925), Lippmann moved away from the ambition of expertising the public, suggesting that priority should be given to disinterested advising of politicians and policymakers. The public, then, might be called in to judge in undecided and unprecedented controversies.<sup>69</sup> His philosophical opponent Dewey fiercely opposed this position in *The Public and its Problems* (Dewey 2016). For that reason, both Dewey and Urbinati consider Lippmann to be a representative of unpolitical democracy. In the eyes of Urbinati (2014, 88), Lippmann defended a technocratic approach to political issues.<sup>70</sup> If, as Urbinati does, publicity is conceived as one pillar of the diarchy, translating the sum of opinions to

69 Reconsidering the dynamics between experts, politicians and publics, Lippmann construed the emergence of an active public at the heart of controversies: "Yet it is controversies of this kind, the hardest controversies to disentangle, that the public is called in to judge. Where the facts are most obscure, where precedents are lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything, the public in all its unfitness is compelled to make its most important decisions. The hardest problems are those which institutions cannot handle. They are the public's problems" (1925b, 121).

70 A recent contribution to the role of experts and expertise in democracy, starting from a discussion of the Lippmann-Dewey debate, is Douglas (2021).

the political domain, a privileged position for experts and intelligence work may be incompatible with democratic demands. However, as I have argued in Section 2.2, when considering a triangular model, the role of expertise in critical publicity, as a third domain, does not conflict with the requirements of democratic politics.

Lippmann's ideas on objectivity, professionalism, and the role of the press as a vital and critical infrastructure in democracy played a significant role in shaping the push for ethical standards in the first professional code of journalism, written down in 'The Canons of Journalism' and adopted by the American Society of Newspaper Editors (1923). Since then, many media organisations have adopted a professional convention in any form.

In *Between Facts and Norms* Habermas elaborates on the “task that media ought to fulfil in democratic political systems”, interpreting several principles of a professional code of journalism, addressing functions of dialoguing, agenda-setting, and creating incentives for citizens to learn and to become involved (1996, 378). Concerning throughput function, Habermas mentions the media's responsibility “to be receptive to the public's concerns and proposals, take up these issues and contributions impartially, augment criticism, and confront the political process with articulate demand for legitimisation” (ibid.). A code of journalism secures the throughput legitimacy of publicity processes, namely the potential for controversy, epistemic demands and the (ongoing) definition of common concern.

#### **3.2.4 Mass media: Consumerism and increasing commercialisation**

In Habermas' and Lippmann's writings, commercialisation is discussed as a relevant trend. It increasingly dominates media infrastructures while putting pressure on public information services and public debate. The periods of bourgeois entrepreneurship, followed by industrial capitalism, ended in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with a consumerist economy of mass media, propelled by entertainment and the intertwining of news and human interest.

As discussed in Chapter 2, commercialisation affected the processes of critical publicity. However, public and commercial interests are not antagonistic forces per se. Habermas traces the relationship between media and the economy back to the emergence of the public sphere, when the emancipation of property-owning individuals created a counterforce to state

powers. These privileged, private citizens used their influence and capacity to create a free debate among equals – although one can question the free and equal character of these debates. That being said, the public sphere as a public institution emerged from, and thanks to, private capitalist initiative. This aspect is often overlooked or misinterpreted in readings of Habermas.<sup>71</sup>

The problem of commercialising publicity infrastructures is not commercial interests entering the public sphere per se. Instead, it concerns the scale of commercialisation and the power concentration in a limited number of large enterprises. In the United Kingdom and the United States, the problem became urgent from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards when the ownership of newspapers and broadcasting stations became concentrated in a few competing companies (Hampton 2009, 7). Although this commercialisation in media is rightly criticised in public sphere theory, the commercialisation of media infrastructures also implied an emancipation of the press from political institutions from an early stage, encouraging its potential for uncovering controversies. In the United Kingdom, for instance, newspapers were financially dependent on political parties to a large degree. It was not until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the press relied more and more on advertising, “and thus freed itself from financial support from, and therefore control by, politicians” (Boyce, Curran and Wingate 1978, 35).

The continuous quest for new audiences and advertisers influenced the tone and presentation of newspaper reports: stories tended to include more spectacle and more human interest topics.<sup>72</sup> Broadcasting media, radio, and television reporting followed the same rationale. The mass media gradually transformed from information providers into enterprises of opinion management and finally into public consumer services, eroding its epistemic functions. Increasingly integrating and mixing up entertainment, advertisement and the traditional information supply, this process gradually blurred the lines between state and society, leading to a ‘refeudalisation’ in Habermasian terms: “Because private enterprises evoke in their customers

71 Urbinati seems to do so too, writing that “Jürgen Habermas has claimed that the public forum is essential to democracy on the condition it remains public, pluralistic, and autonomous from private interests of all sorts”, although it is debatable as to what ‘autonomous’ exactly means in this sentence (2015, 483).

72 Lippmann had already complained about the “preference for the curious trivial”, such as “three legged calves” (1922, 197).

the idea that in their consumption decisions, they act in their capacity as citizens, the state has to 'address' its citizens as consumers. As a result, public authority too competes for publicity" (1989, 195).

Economic forces initially provided the conditions for the emergence of a public sphere. But as publicity transformed into a mass media dominated sphere, those economic forces became overpowering, influencing the nature of the debate itself. Mass media enterprises eroded the primacy and the authority of direct critical civil interaction and this resulted in a more passive audience of spectators. Critical debate and controversy of opinions, invented in the coffeehouses, were now administered in mass media as a performance of representatives. Habermas marks this transition:

*To be sure, one time the commercialization of cultural goods had been the precondition for rational-critical debate; but it was itself in principle excluded from the exchange relationships of the market and remained the center of exactly that sphere in which property-owning private people would meet as 'human beings' and only as such. Put bluntly: you had to pay for books, theater, concert, and museum but not for the conversation about what you had read, heard, and seen, and what you might completely absorb through this conversation. Today, the conversation itself is administered. [...] Discussion, now a 'business', becomes formalized; the presentation of positions and counterpositions is bound to certain prearranged rules of the game... Critical debate arranged in this manner certainly fulfills important social-psychological functions, especially that of a tranquilizing substitute for action; however, it increasingly loses its critical function. (Habermas 1989, 164)*

In the bourgeois public sphere, accessibility was controlled by economic standards. As mass media became the dominant infrastructure of critical publicity and the influence of commercialization extended, the public sphere's character changed. It was not only access and participation that changed, but also the structure of the conversation itself. Where the market once controlled and limited *who* could access the public sphere, in the second half of the 20th century, the market entered the conversation and structured *how* citizens were engaged in public debate. They were now treated as spectators, rather than participants.<sup>73</sup> The 'who' in this

73 For a similar interpretation and discussion, see Stewart and Hartmann (2020).

conversation relates to input-legitimacy: only well-informed citizens were admitted to the coffeehouse conversations. The 'how' is a throughput criterion. Where the representation of the 'who' gradually has improved in the transformed public sphere after 1962, including a broader scope of participants and voices, Habermas points out that the 'how' has become commodified. Commercialisation challenges the *processes* of critical publicity.

In the quotation above, Habermas addresses the trend that critical conversation, as the prototype of critical public debate, becomes a performance executed by representatives of 'positions and counterpositions', a vocal elite of intellectuals. Because it is broadcasted, a talkshow still is a public discussion. However, the meaning of 'public' has changed: the discussion substitutes the public's face-to-face deliberation with a discussion between prearranged opinions, leaving the public in the position of a passive audience, witnessing controversial positions, but not taking part. The throughput procedures of curating the debate and confronting opinions have been transferred to a professional organised arena of elites, leaving the public with the role of reflecting on these spectacles.

For Habermas, substituting deliberation with a *presentation* of 'public debate' detracts from the function of controversy for public debate. Having one's opinions contested in a *vis-à-vis* discussion is a central aspect of Habermas' deliberative model, evoking epistemic potential that can be hardly equalled by the passive role of the spectator in public debate. Watching a talk show as the prototype of the administered public debate does not invoke the personal commitment required for deliberation. The administered conversation in mass media between opinion leaders, replacing the voices of the people, satisfies, to a lesser extent, the function of public contestation because it is a pre-arranged controversy of elite opinions. In addition, the aspect of problem definition is also issued in a top-down fashion. However, public debate over some common issues by central figures in leading media does fulfill an epistemic function. It adds to 'the presentational dimension', as discussed in Section 2.5 (Rasmussen 2013, 101). As I argued in Chapter 2, this is an output evaluation because of its presentational aspect. This shift of input and throughput to output legitimacy will prove to be relevant in the digitisation of public debate.

In 1989, reflecting on his early writings, Habermas admitted that in 1962, he had felt rather pessimistic about the political public sphere. Then, his diagnosis included an account of how large advertisers entered news media agencies and gradually transformed the public sphere, imposing economic imperatives on the form and content of newspapers and broadcasting. Commercial interference in media organisations corroded the self-government of media infrastructures: through the need to find large and consumptive audiences for the advertisers, news messaging, radio stations and television channels were adapted to suit market interests. Accordingly, the debating public would become a consuming public. In a foreword to a new edition published almost thirty years later (in 1989), Habermas sounded less pessimistic after rereading his work and answering his critics. He considered his analysis of the decline from “culture-debating public to a culture consuming public” too simplistic. He had underestimated “the critical potential of a pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public whose cultural usages have begun to shake off the constraints of class” (1992b, 438). Public debate was not entirely disintegrated by commercial interference. Pluralistic, emancipated publics produced practical counterforces. His thoughts in the early days of electronic communication and the origin of the internet align with a more optimistic view from the 1990s, which now appears rather naïve, as I will discuss in the next section.

### **3.2.5 From a networked to a platformed public sphere**

As a prelude to his study on networked media, Benkler (2006) summarises the problems with the commercialisation of media infrastructures in three common critiques due to the concentration of media in capitalist conglomerates (Benkler 2006). In some form, these criticisms were already present in Habermas’ writings. Firstly, the concentration of media ownership leaves too many voices unexplored. Local or socially diverse concerns may be unrepresented in the professional cadre of large media enterprises. Secondly, concentration of ownership leads to unbalanced media power. Thirdly, dependency on advertisement demands the maximisation of audience numbers and therefore sensational stories, rather than critical public conversation or political matters.<sup>74</sup>

74 There is a lot of interesting literature on the commercialisation of the public sphere that is beyond the scope of the present study. Amongst others, the fierce criticism of Herman and Chomsky (1994) and Jodi Dean (2003) are particularly well worth reading.

The emergence of networked technology at the end of the 20th century appeared to offer a counterforce to commercialised mass media, and a potential for re-establishing public conversation. In his book, Benkler discusses the impact of network infrastructures on information and communicative processes, in which he sees an opportunity for the revitalisation of interpersonal public debate. He explores the emergence of the internet and its significance for the networked public sphere, as a “moment of opportunity and challenge” (2006, 1). His early enthusiasm corresponds to the optimism in public debate at the beginning of the 21st century.<sup>75</sup> The new communicative infrastructure afforded public participation and deliberative processes. Digitisation and networking facilitated informative services: all kinds of information sources became easily available. It lowered the threshold for direct interaction with experts and gave citizens easy access to their expertise. However, after only a few years, the promising paradigm of the networked public sphere as the dominant public sphere model generating new deliberative potential had to be reconsidered.

The infrastructural transformation into the networked public sphere requires a revision of the concept of the public sphere (Friedland, Hove and Rojas 2006). Supplementing and reconsidering Habermas’ public sphere theory, Friedland and colleagues argue that a greater understanding of networks, social networks, and networks of information and communication technology in interlinked environments has evolved from Manuel Castells’ ‘network society’, a concept initially coined in *The Rise of Network Society* (1996). It is characterised by media infrastructures interconnected with technological design – such as databases and information networks – that link with other participants, including citizens and activists, thereby broadening its geographical scope and fostering global connectivity. Since networked communication prevails, new digital techniques profoundly configure every aspect of communicative interaction, speeding it up, lowering the threshold for active participation, and mixing the publics of senders and receivers. New entrants (non-

75 An excellent example of this optimism about the internet is reflected in the words of former U. S. President Bill Clinton, who, in his 2000 speech on China Trade Bill, hailed the internet as an unbound sphere of free speech, preceding a new era of liberty. He warned authoritarian governments attempting to control the internet: “Good luck. That’s sort of like trying to nail Jello to the wall”. The full text of this speech can be found in IATP (2024).

humans, such as bots) appear on the stage, with engagement managed by technical protocols and algorithms, criss-crossing in chaotic and decentralised spheres, featuring a network of vertical, transversal, and horizontal relationships, all powered by technology. This creates an experience of an almost full-time active, communicative engagement.<sup>76</sup>

As discussed in Chapter 1, several Habermas critics have asserted that there never might have been only one public sphere; however, the traditional one-to-many mass communication of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has now splintered into a diversity of numerous interacting and partly overlapping political spheres, media channels and platforms, populated with a variety of interconnected actors. The proliferation of swift, voluminous, interactive circulation opportunities creates a dynamic web of communicative relations. This new communicative infrastructure establishes possibilities for facile participation, network creation, and public engagement in formulating issues of common concern. Benkler (2006) celebrates the merits of the networked public sphere, which provides a participatory potential that was not foreseen: “In the networked information environment, everyone is free to observe, report, question, and debate, not only in principle but in actual capability. [...] The network allows all citizens to change their relationship to the public sphere. They no longer need to be consumers and passive spectators. They can become creators and primary subjects. It is in this sense that the Internet democratizes” (p. 272).

The networked public sphere revitalised some of the previous dialoguing opportunities. As the broadcasting era was predominantly characterised by the easy and swift dissemination of information, networking enhanced participation and deliberation. The book *Speaking into the Air* elaborates on the distinction between dissemination and dialogue (J. D. Peters 2001).<sup>77</sup>

76 For a more detailed linguistic analysis of the consequences for political discourse, see, for example, Blommaert (2020).

77 Choosing two archetypal proponents of these distinct patterns of communication, Peters introduces a new vocabulary to assess the information provision in the networked public sphere. On the one hand, Peters describes Jesus as the icon of dissemination, versus Socrates as the greatest proponent of dialogue. Peters creates a traditional contrast between Jesus, as the prototypical patron, spreading his words to the public, and the interactive one-to-one approach of Socrates when dialoguing with his fellow citizens. In *Speaking into the Air*, Peters is rehabilitating dissemination as a normatively relevant, full-fledged form of communication, not to be replaced or superseded by dialoguing (Peters 2001).

Peters contrasts disseminating, which means spreading information, with interactive one-to-one dialogue. Claiming that the intellectual tradition, led by Habermasians, values dialogue over dissemination, Peters aims to rehabilitate dissemination as a relevant technique for public communication, offering a universal access to the reception of messages, focussing the public's attention on open and shared information (pp. 34–35).

From a throughput perspective, the distinction between dissemination and dialogue is significant. Dissemination is an effective media technique, traditionally creating an information infrastructure that predominantly could be evaluated by input and output criteria: it did not transform the messages, in contrast to dialoguing. Throughput functions of contestation of ideas, epistemic gains of debate and collective problem definition primarily arise in processes of participation and dialogue. In a networked public sphere, however, new opportunities arise. Through digitisation, most present-day messaging is not labelled as pure dissemination or dialogue but as a combination of interactive, communicative relations. Dissemination, fostering the epistemic dimension of sharing and distributing knowledge, has become a more complex assignment in a fragmented public sphere. Information must be distributed among various publics, which places intricate demands on the disseminating process, thereby looking for new adjusted procedures, as I will discuss in the case study of the public sphere in crisis mode (Chapter 4).

The new digitised and networked infrastructure afforded unexpected new deliberative qualities. A low threshold and easy interaction boosted the potential for controversy, in principle a throughput gain of deliberation. However, in his study of the deliberative qualities of (new) media, Hartmut Wessler (2018) attributes some additional criteria to the deliberative potential of media. They involve inclusiveness, responsiveness, justification and civility (pp. 95–99). Set against these standards, some, but not all online conversations can be valued as contributing to the deliberative or controversial potential, depending on if they do meet the other deliberative criteria, as will be discussed in the case on influencers (Chapter 4). However, at first sight, the potential for controversy has dramatically increased in the networked public sphere.

Additionally, the networked public sphere enabled easy sharing and exchanging of information (both true and false), also unlocking epistemic

and reflective potential. The ease of connecting provided a low-threshold forum for new voices to enter public debate, giving new perspectives and reflections on common concerns. It allowed for the re-establishment of public debate and the upscaling of participation in a historic, unprecedented way.

However, in a few years, technical, economic, and social transformations of the digital network replaced the networked public sphere with the platform as the dominant infrastructural model (Poell, Nieborg and van Dijck 2019; Helmond 2015). The concept of the platform affords more critical potential in understanding economic and power structures:

*The terminology of the platformized public sphere refers to the economic, social, and technical transformation of networked media into platformized media, which has enabled the constitution of a new public sphere that is highly privatised and monopolized, and opens up public sphere theory to new modes of analysis, critique, and perspectives, emphasizing contention, hierarchies, and dynamics. (de Winkel 2023, 50)*

This platform infrastructure is predominantly administered by a few commercialised platforms, leaving the public sphere as a highly competitive market privatised by platform providers, once again resulting in a complete blurring of the distinction between citizens and consumers and between political public spheres and private worlds of consumption (Staab and Thiel 2022, 139). Blending public and private interests in public debate and the lack of clear boundaries constitutes a challenge to its critical function. Furthermore, the recent threat to platform infrastructures is that it has now been intruded on and is rubbing up against political powers.

All consequences considered, the effects on throughput processes are ambiguous. Networking and platforming allow for swift and efficient dissemination. Additionally, it lowered the threshold for entering public debate. Consequently, not only elite opinions but more common concerns are included in public controversy and problem definition. The lowered threshold, however, simultaneously affects interaction. The qualifications for input, output and throughput have been rearranged. In an easily accessible post-digital public sphere, there are no educational preconditions to entering the public conversation, as was the case with the original infrastructures of the coffeehouses and salons. As a result, disparity

and even discrepancy in information is the rule rather than the exception, lending extra weight to the epistemic dimension of public opinion formation. If discussion is a current starting point of informing, then debate and dissemination have to coincide. Therefore, in the present-day context, the epistemic practice of informing has to be conceived as a *throughput requirement* and as a part of the opinion formation's interactivity. To put it somewhat bluntly, one becomes informed while interacting in the public sphere, not before entering it.

This assigns an extra task to the platform infrastructures, which in the first place were developed as socialising opportunities for conversation and easy sharing. Presently, however, they serve as prominent news suppliers: over a half of American adults get their daily news from social media platforms (Pew Research Center 2024). Even when considered in their role as 'mere' conversation platforms (as models of 'online coffee houses'), social media platforms are not just chatting tools. Commercially, socially or politically informed, untransparent algorithms promote or shadow-ban messages, which restructures public conversation. Through obscured throughput procedures, they reorganise public debate by accelerating and enhancing information flows, accommodating the effortless forwarding and endorsing of messages.

As news providers and infrastructures of public debate, platforms produce a voluminous information flow. Users experience an oversupply of stories. Media organisations looking for new audiences might do so driven by commercial logic. Attracting and retaining wider audiences is, as I have argued in the previous paragraphs, a dominant economic principle that was already present in the 19th century. However, combining economic interests and an immersive communicative technology creates a new situation. Articulated straightforwardly, the public might not be looking for news; news messages are looking for – and actively pursuing – their public.

### 3.3 The post-digital public sphere

The present-day platformed public sphere is a fragmented sphere of interactive public messaging in a highly commercialised context. I prefer *the post-digital public sphere* as a central notion, referring to a blended digital and non-digital media infrastructure.<sup>78</sup> Though profoundly shaped and influenced by social and digital media, the public sphere is not a digital public sphere per se; it coincides and overlaps with non- or pre-digital infrastructures. Since the digital revolution, online and offline communication cannot be strictly separated: mutual interference exists. They are interconnected in an online-offline nexus of interacting messages. Even so, network and broadcasting publicity structures concur. Traditional offline and mass media communication and messaging have not disappeared. Instead, they have become integrated into a hybrid media system (Chadwick 2013). I shall refer to this communicative common, the interconnected network of online and offline media, as the post-digital public sphere.

Although the grid of publicity is an amalgam of traditional and recent infrastructures, public discussion is deeply impacted by social and digital media. The decentralised interaction on platforms invokes the notion of the forum of opinions as a marketplace (as discussed in Chapter 1). The *platform* concept reflects the liberal approach to communication and voicing opinions on a social media forum. I have argued that in the liberal model of the forum (or a platform, for that matter), the expression and exchange of opinions is envisioned as the display and transfer of goods in a neutral marketplace, which do not transform or adjust while being exchanged, and thus depreciates its unique epistemic potential. It is just a give-and-take of items.

78 The concept 'post-digital' was not initially a media-theoretical concept, but instead emerged in the visual arts context. Once understood as a critical reflection of digital immaterialism in arts, the term became a phrase for describing the disordered intertwining of art and media after digital technology revolutions had blurred the boundaries (Cramer 2014). Translated to the public sphere, one can say that post-digital is the media culture in which digital media interact with formerly traditional print and broadcast media in a complex of publicity techniques, reports, and voices. Alternatively, focused on the actors and agencies, "post-digital environments involve a multitude of actors, some of whom are human and some non-human, and all of whom operate both as producers and receivers of political messages" (Blommaert 2020, 398).

Fischer and Jarren (2024) develop a similar argument, that on platforms throughput is inadequately conceived and organised: “Platforms have facilitated the access to the public sphere (input) and have also partially democratized it. However, processing topics (throughput) has become unclear and messy due to the sheer volume of topics which are now discussed in public simultaneously, and aggregation has become demanding as there are no institutionalized actors taking care of the process” (p. 211). The marketplace may be vivid, but according to these authors, it is a poorly equipped, disorganised and untransparent mess, gradually losing its critical function.

The structuring of topics, performed by untransparent commercial or politically informed algorithms, establishes a throughput procedure; however, due to its obscure character, it is not a critical process. Additionally, the lack of institutionalised actors or professional gatekeepers organising and ‘editing’ conversations on the platform limits its epistemic function to merely distributing messages. A staff of journalists and editors traditionally ensured the throughput processes of organising the scope and pertinence of the contributions. Now, however, these are predominantly performed by new infrastructures. The dwindling role of professional journalism in the platformed public sphere has reorganised the public debate. The role of professional media organisations has diminished, and new media powers are preeminent.

In an article on epistemic uncertainty, Habermas scholar Simone Chambers draws attention to the increasing role of social media platforms as central news transmitters: “Their epistemic role and function as transmitters of important facts about what is going on in the world, including the world of politics, was an unintended development. Perhaps this role could have been predicted, but it is not what they were designed, or apparently prepared, for” (2021, 151). The present-day preferred information suppliers and social media platforms are not (yet) fully receptive to this authority. In a platformed public sphere, filtering and selecting news are not undertaken as journalistic activities, but rather as a data-driven competency performed by algorithms. This process, previously considered an area of expertise for media enterprises, is now predominantly carried out by technology companies. In the post-digital context, the lion’s share of information provisioning is executed by profit-making, non-journalistic platforms, following their commercial logic: it is not whether you are interested in the news; the news is interested in you.

In Chapter 2, I argued that to ensure throughput legitimacy, publicity infrastructures must foster the potential for controversy, provoke the epistemic function, and enable *Problembearbeitung*. In this chapter, I argued that the transformation of publicity infrastructures altered these processes, encouraging some aspects, for example that of controversy. Low thresholds and easy access facilitated public participation, encouraging interactive debate and controversies. Forasmuch as not all controversies meet the deliberative standards of inclusiveness and civility, not every online controversy can contribute to the deliberative function.<sup>79</sup>

The infrastructural transformation endangers other qualities of publicity processes, primarily the epistemic function and collective problem definition. Considering the epistemic function, the processing of information and arguments is predominantly processed by untransparent and commercially driven algorithms, lacking transparent standards and not filtering and balancing by epistemic qualities per se. However, as I argued in Section 3.2.5, due to the intensified participation, demands for the epistemic function have increased. The advent of the discrepancy in information positions of participants requires extra epistemic effort for public opinion formation. In the digital context, processes of moderation and informing in public debate coincide and are predominantly performed by technological procedures.

Regarding the reflective function, the ongoing effort of problem definition, new potential is unplugged since bottom-up access to publicity is available to new voices with alternative perspectives. However, the splintering into many mini-public spheres and the obscure process of algorithmic intermediation does not make it easy to reach broad or targeted audiences, or to direct the public's attention to collective issues.

In conclusion, the infrastructural transformation results in a threefold shift in critical publicity: the processes, their demands and the execution have altered. The infrastructural environment, combined with the increased epistemic demand, requires a special effort to critical publicity to ensure throughput legitimacy. If not, public opinion formation may lose its critical, contesting function, merely mirroring and not challenging the primary judgments.

79 For a discussion, see Wessler (2018).

To complete the historical reconstruction, I will briefly return to the reflections of the initiator of public sphere theory. In 2020, Habermas declared that he was unsure how to conceive of the infrastructure of the post-digital public sphere as equivalent to 18<sup>th</sup>-century structures. Initially “rightly hailed” as a liberating, anarchic infrastructure, the introduction of the internet was a promising development as a potential inclusive, public communicative infrastructure (Czington, Diefenbach and Kempf 2020, 32). The re-establishment of critical dialogue came as a surprise. However, two decades after the rise of mass social media, Habermas has expressed his concerns about the fragmentation, the lack of professional filtering, the inability to focus the public’s attention on relevant topics, and the centrifugal pull of information bubbles (Czington, Diefenbach and Kempf 2020). Regarding professional journalism, Habermas argues that “the ‘platformisation of the public sphere’ is creating difficulties for the traditional media, both economically and in view of dwindling journalistic influence and the weakening of professional standards” (Habermas 2022b, 164; see also Fischer and Jarren 2024).

The erosion of professional journalism has affected the epistemic function and the public’s central attention to issues of general interest. In the next section, I will sketch some consequences of the so-called “unedited public sphere” (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga 2020). In my argument that public opinion formation should be supported by throughput legitimacy, new supplementary processes are needed to ensure particularly the epistemic and problem-defining dimensions of public debate.

### 3.4 Post-digital challenges

As discussed in this chapter, the throughput function, critical to my research, was performed by critical debate in the coffeehouses of the 17th century. Following the introduction of newspapers, a new professional discipline emerged: journalism. Constantly adapting to relevant infrastructural transformations, the profession has adjusted its procedures and practices. By various means, it remained a key player in public debate all this time. Journalism fostered public controversy of expert and elite opinions, advanced information and argument, supported the epistemic dimension, accommodated problem definition, and administered predominantly top-down issue transformation. The inclusion of many more voices and everyday concerns in the post-digital public sphere enriched the potential for public controversy and diverse perspectives on public issues. However, the emergence of many parallel public conversations, not necessarily fostered by journalism, also provides a background for new epistemic challenges. The intricate complex of news and information flows in present-day communication networks raises specific questions. The Habermasian approach, which attributes throughput legitimacy to processes performed by a professional staff (as put forward in Chapter 2), falls short. As algorithms have taken over an essential part of throughput dynamics, publicity processes occur in a decentralised, opaque, technological context.

The transformation to a post-digital era culminated in a publicity infrastructure vulnerable to several malformations, such as misinformation, noise, and the persistent circulation of hate speech or conspiracy theories. Obviously, these malformations are not exclusively reserved for the recent context; my point, and that of many scholars, is that post-digital publicity might be less resilient to such epistemic malformations (Chambers 2021; Chambers and Kopstein 2022; Starr 2020). Given my throughput perspective, I will restrict my research to three typical post-digital features that impact the epistemic and reflective functions of opinion formation. These three problems relate to the already-discussed issues of authorship, professional standards of editing and moderation, and common problem definition. The challenges affect publicity and communicative processes as a whole; in the introduction to Part II, I will specify these problems and their effects on the role of journalism.

Firstly, *the obscured position of authors and provenance* poses a challenge. In the post-digital public sphere, participants are not distinctly divided along traditional lines of experts and laypeople, writers and readers, professionals and marketeers, and politicians and their publics. Identified, pseudonymous, and anonymous voices, as well as humans and non-humans, are all intermingled in digital media, making it more challenging to evaluate the validity and authority of publications. These shuffled and sometimes unclearly identified roles and sources generate obscurity of provenance and easy deception of authorship, impacting the authority of the conversational claims (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga 2020). Social media facilitates almost unconstrained authoring and the easy dissemination of one's own messages or those of other people. Low thresholds and facile forwarding and endorsing of messages produce a voluminous information flow: "Social media facilitate engaging with messages in terms of their social context, as opposed to their origins or veracity" *ibid.*). These abundant, intertwined information flows loosen the connection between the sender and the message, as well as between the information and its source. They reorganise the debate by obscuring the author and the provenance of information.

These publicity dynamics disengage the origin and the dissemination of messages, creating an epistemic challenge as well as a new potential. A new interplay of creating, disseminating, and multiplying information flows generates a finely branched publicity infrastructure fit to distribute and endorse (semi-)public information flows. However, since the public cannot automatically rely on editorial interventions and professional considerations and procedures in the post-digital public sphere, the quality of the message must prove itself *after* publication and *in* public discussion (Sevignani 2022, 92). Additionally, easy and potentially obscured authorship questions the position of the author.

In a recent essay, Habermas writes that "[j]ust as printing made everyone a potential reader, today digitalisation is making everyone into a potential author" (2022b, 160). This calls for a new, more complex notion of 'authorship'. In Chapter 4, in the case exploring influencers, I will reflect on the post-digital author and its epistemic requirements.

A second relevant aspect is known as *disintermediation*, resulting from the *loss of professional gatekeepers*.<sup>80</sup> Traditional structuring disciplines, such as professional media organisations, are no longer effective in centrally managing or accommodating public debate. This represents the loss of a decisive filtering authority or gatekeeper that decides on gathering and selecting the news based on specific professional criteria (Sevignani 2022, 92). Disintermediation refers to the unstructured, or perhaps better phrased, unconventionally structured public sphere, due to the deficit of classical editing by gatekeepers, which is defined as the threefold function of filtering truth-biased claims before public dissemination, identifying and correcting false claims, and providing sources to help audiences assess the validity of information independently (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga 2020, 710).

Disintermediation might not be the correct term to apply, as there is undoubtedly a form of intermediation in digitised communication. Benkler (2006) perceived the intermediating of search engines, moderators, tags and filters in the networked public sphere as potential assistants or substitutes for professional editors and journalists. However, as argued in Section 3.2.5, the platformed media, which replaced the networked sphere, applies an alternative, highly commercialised rationale lacking throughput legitimacy. Social media platforms have evolved into dominant controlling powers. Their main functions are facilitating public participation, organising public conversations, and curating public opinion (Balkin 2020). By “taking down or rearranging the content, but also by regulating the speed of propagation and the reach of content”, these platforms have also developed into key players in the political public sphere. As the dominant disseminating powers do not perform a role as gatekeepers, this results in an ‘unedited public sphere’ (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga 2020).

The post-digital sphere is thus intermediated, but there is no classical editing, or ‘epistemic editing’, of filtering and correcting claims and providing sources. The new, digital intermediating infrastructures are generally not in the hands of a news or media organisation but are increasingly powered by a ‘platform’, without responsibilities for bundling and contextualisation of news and information (Gillespie 2010; Dijck 2018). Hence, the selection of information and opinions is not judged by the

<sup>80</sup> See Section 6.2 for a more detailed discussion on ‘gatekeeping’.

standards of deliberative, epistemic and reflective standards. Algorithms, based on personalised considerations, substitute for editorial choice. Although there are arguments that propose the demise of the editor's preferences as an emancipatory shift, algorithmic selection is not a licensed substitute for gatekeeping in its traditional function, providing criteria for selecting the news (as for instance defined by DeFleur and DeFleur 2016, 148–158). Algorithmic selection might seem like an automated editorship, as artificial 'intelligence work', but the operation is directed by a completely different logic. The collection of newsfeeds compiled by algorithms is based on individual preferences gathered by reading your personal data history. Accordingly, public values, such as relevance and urgency of the information expressed in selecting and prioritising messages produced by bundling and contextualisation, are replaced with personal values based on personal choice and preferences (Dijck 2018). American scholar Cass Sunstein (2017) coined the term 'The Daily Me' to characterise this personal preference based on information flow. This throughput rationale does not meet the qualification of a critical procedure. Additionally, this mechanism unequivocally implies the vulnerability of public debate to fragmentation (this will also become relevant to the third point below). The loss of professional gatekeepers and, accordingly, the unedited public sphere complicate the process of problem definition. There is increased opportunity for new, diverse, and contesting voices, creating alternative forms of publicity that can be used as new input to public debate. However, defining these issues as relevant and bringing them to central attention is an issue of problem definition, as well as an epistemic challenge.

A third and related element that I want to address in this chapter, as well as in the upcoming cases, is that of *fragmentation* and the shattering of attention into a manifold of partial publics. This is a problem that many scholars have already addressed (Sunstein 2017; Harper 2017; Habermas 2022b). I want to single out two aspects of fragmentation. Firstly, as a result of fragmentation, expressed opinions can circulate widely but still in specific publics, not being challenged or contested in a plurality of viewpoints. As the controversy function is not fulfilled under these circumstances, this might, according to Habermas, produce a group opinion and not a public opinion.

The second aspect of fragmentation that I want to highlight is the lack of central attention to the same topic as a counterpart of the political sphere.

Habermas notes that “the trends towards fragmentation and the dissolution of boundaries reinforce each other to create a dynamic that counteracts the integrating power of the communication context of the nationally centered public spheres established by the press, radio and television” (2022b, 160). Critical topics and accurate information require significant effort to permeate into the communally central attention of a fragmented public. The volume of collectively shared information therefore diminishes. Iyengar and Hahn (2009) conclude: “Selective exposure is especially likely in the new media environment because of information overload” (Iyengar and Hahn 2009, 34). As a result of personal filtering, already addressed by van Dijck (2018), selective exposure allows internet users to focus on the information that appeals to them and to ignore information they think is less relevant. Consequently, “the possibility of individualised information acquisition might be enhanced, collectively shared information by all users may actually narrow in the digital world” (Beam and Kosicki 2014).

As discussed in Chapter 2, Rasmussen (2014) distinguishes between public communication’s representational and presentational dimensions. “The representational dimension refers to the heterogeneity of topics, styles and groups that reflects culture and everyday life, whereas the presentational dimension refers to the deliberation over common issues by central figures acting as voices of the people. The latter presents a public agenda and an expression of public opinion to politics as a resonance for rational decision-making” (p. 1326). In my model, the representational dimension refers to the input, and the presentational dimension refers to the throughput and primarily the output. Rasmussen argues that in a fragmented public sphere, the presentational dimension might come under pressure, supporting the argument developed in Chapter 2 that present-day public and academic debate is highlighting input but overlooking throughput. I will address the need for a ‘presentational dimension’ as one of the problems featured in the case on activism.

### **3.5 Conclusion: The epistemic dimension under pressure**

In early public spheres, journalism and professional media served as key throughput mechanisms, providing structured debates and guiding public attention to relevant issues. The newspaper industry, in particular, became a significant political tool, offering vertical communication, broad dissemination, and epistemic filtering through its editorial practices. However, digitisation and platformisation have transformed the media landscape. Throughput, once predominantly organised and safeguarded by professional media organisations, is now shaped by technological interventions (algorithms), commercial forces (platforms), diverse actors (experts, journalists, activists, influencers, and so on), and individual users. This chapter maps the consequences of this transformation.

In Chapter 2, I argued that to maintain throughput legitimacy, publicity infrastructures must foster controversy, provoke epistemic functions, and enable problem-solving. The transition from a journalistic to an algorithmically moderated publicity created an easily accessible, fragmented, highly commercialised, and opaque post-digital public sphere. This chapter examines how infrastructural transformations have reshaped these processes, promoting some aspects, such as controversy, while undermining others. Lower thresholds and easier access have facilitated public participation and interactive debates. However, not all controversies adhere to deliberative standards of inclusiveness and civility; thus, not every online debate contributes meaningfully to the deliberative function.

The transformations have endangered other vital aspects of publicity, mainly the epistemic function and collective problem definition. The processing of information and arguments is now primarily governed by opaque, commercially driven algorithms lacking professional or epistemic filtering standards. In addition, increased public participation permits discrepancies in participants' informational positions, requiring more significant effort to the epistemic function. The reflective function, which involves redefining problems and fostering new perspectives, is hindered by fragmentation and algorithmic intermediation. While bottom-up access allows new voices to emerge, the splintering of public discourse makes it difficult to reach broader audiences.

I have argued that throughput legitimacy is a relevant parameter for critical publicity. Its epistemic dimension is especially challenged by the obscurity of authorship, the ‘unedited’ public sphere, and fragmentation. The infrastructural transformation, combined with the increased epistemic demand, requires special attention to throughput legitimacy. If not, public opinion formation may lose its critical, contesting function, merely mirroring and not really challenging the primary judgments.

To explore the present-day performance and new alternatives to critical publicity, I will select three examples from the recent media context: influencers, activists and networked journalism. These cases are all situated at the interface of broadcast and networked media infrastructures. Each of these cases addresses one or more specific challenges to epistemic practices in present-day public opinion formation, as defined in this chapter. These cases are selected based on their digitally adjusted approach to recent challenges and their non-traditional contributions to the requirements of mobilising “relevant issues, required information, and appropriate contributions” (Habermas 2006, 418). These partly new, partly adjusted entrants do clearly impact present-day publicity processes. However, I will explore if these alternative publishing powers also contribute to *critical* publicity. I will bring these cases into dialogue with the normative framework from Part I, assessing their effects on the epistemic and reflective function.

In three cases, defined as ‘boundary cases’, I will explore the new potential of throughput functionality in a post-digital context, particularly in relation to its epistemic and reflective dimensions.

**Part II:  
Boundary  
cases and  
the critical  
potential of  
alternative  
publishing  
powers**

# Introduction to part II

In the first part of this dissertation, I developed a normative framework to assess the requirements of public opinion formation through the lens of input, output and throughput. After having described the processes involved and the infrastructures shaping these processes, I concluded with a sketch of the key challenges to the post-digital public sphere, which put these requirements, especially the throughput processes, under pressure. These challenges are the obscurity of provenance and authorship, disintermediation, and fragmentation. In this introduction to Part II, I will examine the implications of these post-digital publicity problems for journalism. To get a more empirical grip on the topic, I focus on journalism and its border zone, as this captures both infrastructural and procedural aspects. In the remaining chapters, I will confront the challenges of journalism and its boundaries through practice-based situations and explore the critical alternatives emerging in post-digital publicity.

In the early stages of the public sphere, journalism and professional media played a pivotal role in shaping public opinion by structuring debates and focusing collective attention on issues of political significance. The newspaper industry, in particular, functioned as a cornerstone of upcoming political institutions, facilitating top-down communication and applying epistemic filtering through editorial judgment. However, the advent of digitisation and the rise of platform-based media have profoundly reshaped this landscape. As traditional journalism's gatekeeping capacity has eroded, algorithmic systems have assumed a central role in moderating information flows, resulting in a public sphere that is increasingly fragmented, commercially driven, and lacking in transparent procedures.

In his theory of the transformation of the public sphere, primarily focused on mass media, Habermas assigns throughput functions, which ensure the material and qualitative conditions for public debate, largely to media infrastructures supporting professional journalism. In the post-digital public sphere, however, these infrastructures have undergone significant transformation. Their critical capacities are increasingly challenged by factors such as the obfuscation of authorship and source, the decline of professional gatekeeping (disintermediation), and growing fragmentation.

These shifts generate new throughput dynamics that open up extra opportunities for deliberation, but also erode the epistemic and reflective functions.

Consequently, the present-day critical public sphere is susceptible to epistemic malformations such as noise, misinformation and conspiracy theories. Academic literature discusses several strategies to improve the resilience of public debate, focused on fair and accurate information provision and truth-tracking qualities. Habermas scholar Chambers (2021) offers a virtue-centred framework of accuracy to assess epistemic weaknesses of public communication. Psychological approaches suggest combatting epistemic threats by encouraging the resilience of the public (Lewandowsky and van der Linden 2021). A more infrastructural approach to these challenges is provided by work on the interconnection of news information, misinformation and platform politics (Helberger 2020; Seipp et al. 2023). Marres (2018) follows the implications of the infrastructural design of social media by redefining the epistemic approach to news and facts and rethinking the (non)sense of fact-checking. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine these various debates in detail. However, the observed epistemic uncertainty or decreased resilience is a common denominator in these debates and in the cases that I will consider in Part II of my thesis.

As discussed in Chapter 3, several infrastructural transformations challenge the previously dominant and undisputed role of journalism in post-digital critical publicity. Commercialisation, which already began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, led to an increased susceptibility to market impulses, enlarging the attentiveness to input and output requirements. Algorithmic selection and technological intermediation, substituting editorial choice with personalised news selection, have diminished the body of collectively shared information. The expansion of participants, thanks to the easy accessibility of the new publicity infrastructures, created competition in information supply, resulting in more parallel discursive arenas. These developments all affected the role, the impact, and the self-understanding of the profession, culminating in a disempowerment of journalism.

In his public sphere theory, Habermas considered 19<sup>th</sup>-century newspaper based journalism as an essential counterpart to the political system, valuing its capacity for vertical communication and its focus on issues of general political interest. Because of its ability to direct the public's attention,

combined with its adherence to relevant political concerns, journalism was, to him, a key infrastructure of democracy. This normative stance elevated journalism above other cultural influences, such as entertainment media and popular culture, within his theory of public opinion formation.

I support Habermas's focus on journalism as a relevant counterpart of political institutions. However, this dissertation critiques Habermas's narrow and historically contingent conception of journalism as the preferred supplier of critical publicity, which privileges a professionalised, newsroom-based model tied to the newspaper era. While his emphasis on critical publicity remains normatively valuable, his framework does not adequately account for the transformations in journalistic practice brought about by digital and post-digital infrastructures. A more expansive understanding of epistemic processes is required; one that recognises new actors, practices, and infrastructures that contribute to the legitimacy of public opinion formation beyond traditional media institutions.

In order to develop a more nuanced view to present-day publicity, I will first discuss the problems of present-day journalism according to Habermas (the de-professionalisation and depoliticisation of journalism). Then I will supplement this discussion with an additional challenge (dislocation of the news). Thereafter, I offer my own interpretation of how the journalistic qualities of organising public debate might be adopted and shaped by alternative actors.

In his recent work, the precarisation of the professional news industry is one of Habermas' major concerns, arising from the platformisation of the public sphere. Via cutbacks and deteriorating working conditions, the precarisation leads to a 'deprofessionalisation' of journalism. In addition, Habermas (2022) posed a second serious challenge to journalism due to digitisation and platformisation: he observes a more cursory, depoliticised practice of journalism that has become the standard in digitised publicity. The traditional journalist, depicted by Habermas as an unambiguous political agent following her professional curiosity and telling a story, is now, due to the growing impact of data management, regarded as an impartial coordinator of facts and figures:

*... the trends towards de-professionalisation and the understanding of journalistic work as a neutral, depoliticized service – as a matter of managing data and attention rather than of targeted research and precise interpretation – are intensifying. As a result, newsrooms, previously places of political debate, are being transformed into coordination centers for the sourcing and the management of the production and distribution of content. (Habermas 2022b, 164)<sup>81</sup>*

This trend towards depoliticising journalism in service of data and attention, affecting the journalistic practice, was already observed in the mass media era, where the political public sphere was “depoliticized through a preoccupation with consumption of culture” (Habermas 1989, 177). This depoliticisation is related to the ongoing commercialisation of media infrastructures. Addressing the consumer instead of the citizen had set the trend. Commercial pressures increased, prioritising spectacle over analysis. Pursuing advertising revenue and audience engagement shifted journalism towards infotainment, reducing its role in delivering in-depth, investigative news coverage. This resulted in a transformation of professional journalism, exploring novel forms of news coverage. Additionally, the competition between news and human interest, fun stories, and other forms of attention management in radio and newspaper journalism (as previously noted with regret by Walter Lippmann in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) became even more fierce. The rivalry between journalism and other media output in the attention-driven dynamics of the post-digital public sphere has grown, resulting in an oversupply of stories, contributing to the previously discussed challenge of disintermediation.

Concerning depoliticisation, Habermas claims that journalism has transformed into a neutral service of data coordination. In previous writings, similar concerns prompted him to suggest that “political journalism in the traditional sense is an outdated model” (Habermas 2009, 180). This comment may be correct when assessing the evolution of serious newspapers over the years, as Habermas suggests in an essay on the financial challenges facing the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *The Boston Globe*, which threatens the system of foreign correspondents (pp. 131–137). However, not all trends point towards depoliticisation. Infrastructural

81 Here, Habermas cites Jarren and Fischer (2021, 371).

transformations had a more profound impact on journalism than producing and publishing content on new channels and devices, seeking new audiences and the consequent ‘data management’. The digitisation of journalistic practice also gave rise to new infrastructural and procedural opportunities. Digitisation, for instance, resolved length restrictions and created public interaction, thereby facilitating the production of in-depth long reads and complex interactive infographics, countering the depoliticisation argument.

In sum, I think that, in general, Habermas’ observations about present-day journalism are inadequate and too cursory. He rightly observes a precarisation of the media sector. But, as I argued in Chapter 2, Habermas has a very ‘newsroom-centred’ approach to journalism, a prevalent reduction frequently observed in media studies (Deuze and Witschge 2018). His argument that journalism’s decreasing influence and authority is caused by media organisations’ decreasing (economic) power appears to equate journalism to media. This may be correct regarding the previous century, but I will argue that there is reason to discuss this equation in the present-day publicity infrastructure.

A final and mostly infrastructural challenge to news and media organisations not mentioned by Habermas, is known as the *dislocation of the news*. In a highly fragmented, platformed public sphere, media organisations no longer manage public interaction with readers, which is mainly in the hands of platform companies. News producers have lost much of their influence on news distribution. To understand the consequences of the increasing interdependencies between journalists as news producers and platforms as news distributors, Ekström and Westlund (2019b) coined the notion of dislocation of news:

*The dislocation of news journalism, however, means less control for news producers over the publishing context as news becomes increasingly detached from the original principle and context of production. (Ekström and Westlund 2019b, 264)*

This development adds to the widening divide between news, publishing, and distribution infrastructures, and therefore between journalism and media. The journalist’s interaction with the public, traditionally mediated by the publishing industry and news companies, is now predominantly

impacted by the algorithms of platform companies. Since these companies position themselves as platforms, not providing content but distributing it, they add a new commercial dynamic to the media. The means by which you find your readers and viewers, organised by (obscured) algorithms, is inaccessible and cut off to news organisations. This contributes to the growing dissociation of journalism and the media organisations.

These three challenges, partly infrastructural, partly commercial and procedural, transform journalism's role in critical publicity processes.

### **Using boundary cases**

The developments of de-professionalisation, depoliticisation and dislocation lead to a reorganised publicity landscape. Digitisation, and the consequent transformations of the media, altered the infrastructural and the processual role of journalism. Regarding the first aspect, it has resulted in a disempowered, dislocated and increasingly precarious position of traditional media organisations. This obviously hinders the traditional public information supply, as regretted by Habermas. However, the increasing disentangling, or even emancipation of journalism from media organisations also leaves room for the emergence of alternative publicity opportunities; for instance, for the participation of marginalised groups, the engagement of citizens, and more collaborative use of open-source research.

Zooming out from the newsroom offers a broader view on journalism, its transformation and its boundaries, following alternative throughput dynamics. In the post-digital context, the emergence of citizen-journalism, co-creating audiences, large-scale international cooperations, and algorithmic filtering alters the dynamics of publicity and might even foster critical functions by unlocking potential for controversy or lowering the threshold for participation. This results in new practices and new boundaries, demarcating journalism from non-journalism.

In this post-digital competition, for journalism, the aim for boundary drawing initially came up as a defensive strategy to protect its core.

*Traditional elites... often attempt to reinforce their position by boundary drawing, sealing off aspects of their mediated practices from outside influences. However, as media systems become more hybrid, the power of elite organisational actors has generally weakened. (Chadwick 2013, 18)*

As citizens, amateurs and activists compete in information provision in the present-day hybrid media sphere, the need to draw boundaries has become an inherent part of the profession's self-understanding. This is not an entirely novel feature in journalism. Burns (2018) adds to this purpose that clear demarcations between professional practitioners and amateur contributors were, from the outset, always contested and "not particularly well-defined" (p. 42).

In a more scholarly, non-defensive way, Carlson (2015) outlines the notion of 'boundary work' for journalism and explore how new participants, practices and professional norms question its former borders and expand, replace and transform the profession. Discussing the limits of 'Who is a journalist?' (amateurs, citizen-journalism) and 'What is an appropriate journalistic practice?' (blogs, tweets) expands the field, moves the discussion away from newsroom-centrism, and evolves into a new self-understanding.

The second part of the thesis will critically discuss the emergence of alternative publicity potential. As a derivative of the notion of 'boundary work', I will refer to these alternatives as boundary cases, exploring some of the borders of traditional functions of journalism and professional media, now challenged, substituted or supplemented by other publishing powers. Whether or not intentionally, by adopting an active position in information supply, these alternatives compete with traditional news services, challenging their alleged boundaries. I will examine the practices of some alternative critical potentials, exploring their characteristics, and bringing these into dialogue with my normative framework. I will analyse whether these publishing actors (influencers, activism and networked journalism) can be considered contributing to *critical* processes, as defined in Part I.

Distinguishing between media organisations and journalism is facilitated by zooming out of the present-day context. Journalism has always made a *specific contribution* to media coverage. Media content is a more comprehensive domain, including entertainment and human-interest stories. Journalism has emerged and thrived within media companies. However, as pointed out in Chapter 2, critical publicity initially emerged from deliberative circles in private coffee houses and public institutions. Only when journalism came into being around 1830 did critical publicity become dominated by the newspaper industry. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, broadcast media supplemented the public sphere, facilitating journalism

as its professional information-servicing discipline. These predominantly private (but sometimes public) media enterprises have been the most appropriate infrastructures affording journalistic processes over the last two centuries.

In scholarly literature, there are numerous definitions of journalism as a profession (Deuze 2005; Lewis 2019). I will build on a prevalent definition by Schudson (2003), because it explicitly defines the role of the public, which effectively corresponds with my interest in public opinion formation.

*Journalism is the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance. It is the business of a set of institutions that publicizes periodically (usually daily) information and commentary on contemporary affairs, normally presented as true and sincere, to a dispersed and anonymous audience so as to publicly include the audience in a discourse taken to be publicly important. (Schudson 2003, 11)*

This definition displays some characteristics of the throughput functions of deliberation (“publicly include the audience in a discourse”), the epistemic function of producing and disseminating information (“normally presented as true and sincere”) and the function of problem definition (“contemporary affairs of general public interest and importance”). However, it does not address the reflective role of the public engagement.

As for its organisational embedding, Schudson refers to the vague notion of ‘a set of institutions’. Broadly speaking, since professional journalistic processes have been equated with media infrastructures for the last two centuries, it is difficult to unravel them. Until recently, the traditional media company was engaged in the entire process of information supply, from reporting the news to delivering the newspaper to the subscriber’s letterbox or broadcasting the programme to the audience’s living room. In the predigital sphere, media companies took responsibility for journalism, publication and (partly) distribution. As a result, we might be inclined to identify journalism with certain specific infrastructures: the newspaper, the radio report or the talk show. However, journalism does not coincide with an infrastructure or a medium but also with a practice of producing. Consequently, the precarisation of specific media companies or infrastructures does not have to result in the de-professionalisation of

journalism per se. Independent, collective research, using open-source intelligence or connecting to databases or citizens' collectives, might emerge or continue in other contexts, and potentially also contribute to throughput legitimacy, if authorised by critical codes or procedures. The new forms of publicity I will explore in Part II, emerge and operate (mainly) independently from traditional media companies.

In the first part of this thesis, I argued that distinguishing critical processes from the underlying publicity infrastructures supports an exploration of alternative actors and networks that can perform these critical functions in the post-digital context. Although a variety of processes and infrastructures are engaged in post-digital communicative dynamics, I will narrow down the concept of critical publicity by starting with a provisional definition of journalism, as it combines both infrastructural and processual aspects. From this point, I will move towards some of its boundaries, considering whether the critical functions traditionally attributed to journalism, can be adopted by other publicity agents in a post-digital context. I will explore procedures that potentially fulfil or supplant journalistic functions without being affiliated with traditional media brands and still contribute to the resilience of publicity.

The previously outlined developments (precarisation, relative depoliticisation, and the dislocation of news) have created conditions under which journalism struggles to fulfil its traditional roles of providing information and facilitating critical public debate. In the forthcoming cases, I identify three areas in which these shortcomings are particularly evident: (1) How do we reach young people with reliable media content? I will examine the activities of influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the boundaries between skilled authorship, experts, and content creators. (2) How can socially relevant problems be fairly and adequately addressed in a fragmented, highly commercialised, partly depoliticised, and human-interest-dominated publicity context? I will focus on media-activists, who address and expose the allegedly inadequate information supply of traditional media, thereby exploring the borders between journalism and epistemic activism. (3) How do we join forces and cooperate in internationally complex affairs, in a competitive and precarious media landscape? To this end, I will focus on foundation-funded, independently organised research collectives, exploring the borders of journalism and networks of amateurs and open-source researchers.

I will examine the critical potential of these recent boundary features that might not comply with professional journalistic criteria, but still contribute to publicity processes and potentially redefine relevant standards. I will explore if and under what conditions these alternative publishing powers potentially contribute to *critical* publicity.

As I argued in Chapter 2, to realise critical potential and to differentiate critical publicity from manufactured publicity and advertising, publicity processes must generate throughput legitimacy. The contesting, epistemic, and reflective functions are fulfilled by organising the conversation and flow of information arguments, processing, and distilling (new) findings from them. In the second part of this study, I will examine how throughput works out in the post-digital context, measured by and assessed in terms of the three throughput processes: first, contestation (the deliberative function); second, the passage of opinions, ideas and arguments to the public, broadening the scope of public debate by being more sensitive to excluded voices and perspectives (the epistemic potential); and third, reflecting on the discussion and its public issues as common concerns and critiquing the status quo of media practices (reflective function).

Digitisation of the public sphere significantly complicates the second and third throughput functions. As already discussed in Chapter 3, contestation is easily realised in a digital context. Since the contesting function is not hindered in the post-digital public sphere, I will primarily focus on the epistemic and reflective potential of alternative publishing.

## **Method**

I will now offer a few remarks to explain my methodology in analysing these cases. I have selected three prototypical examples that provoke normative questions regarding critical publicity's recent, networked and platformed throughput dynamics. My approach will benefit from analysing these examples, which challenge (or enable) epistemic and reflective functions by practically bringing the normative concepts to bear, and by refining the ideas developed in the first part of the thesis. I picked these three examples as 'boundary cases' to question whether they could contribute to the critical potential of present-day publicity processes.

My use of case studies is partly inspired by Flyvberg's examination of their effective use in the social sciences (2006). In his theory, one form of using

cases is that of ‘paradigmatic cases’, which highlight specific characteristics of a theory. Such a case serves as a kind of ‘exemplar’ or ‘practical prototype’ (p. 232). His sociological, mainly empirical approach studies the exemplary relation between a paradigmatic case and the theory, conveying information through the details of a typical case which highlight the more general characteristics of the theory. This exemplary method of relating theory to practice and vice versa inspired me to develop my boundary cases. In my philosophical approach, the cases, as an empirical reference point, are interpreted from a theoretical, normative perspective. More accurately, they must be brought into dialogue with the framework, transferring the typical aspects to a normative understanding and, vice versa, identifying the normative elements in the described practice. I do not aim to extensively examine one practice from the bottom up and deduce or correct a theory. Nor will I proceed in a top-down manner, testing or applying a theoretical paradigm to a practice. Rather, I qualify the interaction between my normative framework and practice-based examples as a dialogue.

I will pick some prototypical examples of recent publishing practices illustrating exemplary communicative actions and relate these to the underlying infrastructures. Characteristic features of these cases challenge traditional epistemic and reflective procedures and evoke a reformulation of throughput processes. I have selected three boundary cases representing potentials and threats to critical qualities in the post-digital context: influencers, activism and networked journalism. I have chosen these examples because of their firm and sometimes controversial presence in present-day publicity, questioning and occasionally provoking public debate’s borders and procedures, thereby transforming critical publicity processes. These three cases contribute to exemplary knowledge and the vocabulary needed to draw conclusions about the role of critical publicity processes in the post-digital public sphere. Thereafter, I discuss what insights these practices provide for the normative understanding of present-day critical publicity.

Before introducing my boundary cases, I will outline my approach more broadly. In every case, I first address the infrastructural aspects that pose the current challenges or potential of the case. I relate the practices to critical publicity processes of traditional journalistic practices. This results in a discussion of the altered epistemic dynamics, concentrating on a few relevant notions (mostly already introduced in Part I) that I

mention here. To evaluate the *epistemic function* of alternative publishing initiatives (principally in Chapters 4 and 6), the concepts of authorship, expertise and authority are significant, as well as the distinction between dissemination and deliberation or manufactured and critical publicity. Chapter 5 mostly assesses the *reflective function*, evaluating the function of *Problemverarbeitung* and the definition of common concerns. Here, the related concepts of (de-)politicisation, critical reflection on editorial and journalistic procedures, and gatekeeping are discussed.

I will briefly introduce the three chapters on boundary cases, the research questions, and related concepts. In my Final Reflections, I will engage in a philosophical discussion, asking whether our normative notions are still pertinent and whether alternatives, additions, or conceptual transformations might be possible.

In Chapter 4, I analyse the practices of social media influencers, exploring the critical potential of publicity powers that redefine authorship and its relation to expertise. Influencers are alternative publishers with a considerable, relatively young audience. They hold a strong publicity position in a fragmented public sphere. During the recent COVID-19 crisis, they played a central role in the public information infrastructure, disseminating expert advice and government instruction. As influential authors in public debate, they occupy a powerful position, which is why they were invited to serve as an extension or a complement to traditional media campaigns. They challenge the borders of professionalism and authorship. Although they may lack formal expertise, their substantial and engaged followings position them as ‘epistemic powers’ in public discourse.

My question is as follows: To what extent can influencers be considered ‘authors’ and contribute to the epistemic function of critical publicity? As argued in Chapter 3, I assume that only practices that have throughput legitimacy can be considered to contribute to *critical* publicity. Otherwise, if throughput legitimacy is not assured, these practices might contribute to publicity but not count as critical. Such cases are mere advertisements or simple, pure distribution. I argue that new forms of authorship could emerge, not relying on expertise or professional codes, if throughput legitimacy is ensured by authentic or reflective communication, and a deliberative position is adopted.

As a second case, I engage with media activists that, to some extent, align with journalists, in shaping the public agenda and influencing discourse. In Chapter 5, I examine the role of media activism as a critical voice contesting the scope and the epistemic procedures of public debate, frequently shaped by human or commercial interests. In their protests, addressing the depoliticisation and commodification of traditional media practices, media-activists might benefit from disintermediation and the loss of professional gatekeepers in the post-digital era, influencing the public agenda directly via their own messaging and channels. By doing so, they concomitantly contest the epistemic dynamics of conventional media that trivialise and commodify public debate. Media activists explore the boundaries of publicity by reinterpreting the problem definition and shifting the focus of debate. In that chapter, I discuss some explicit forms of epistemic activism aiming to expose editorial epistemologies that serve depoliticisation and, presumably, obscure issues of common concern. These confrontational tactics highlight the media's role in shaping public discourse and emphasise the need for greater scrutiny of journalistic practices.

This boundary case mainly discusses the reflective function of critical publicity, questioning and challenging the selection of issues of common concern. My question is: To what extent do media protests, by contesting and exposing editorial epistemic procedures, function as reflective practices of critical publicity and contribute to repoliticisation? I argue that activism can transform publicity through epistemic protest and reinforce the critical function of publicity and repoliticisation by openly assessing 'professional' epistemic procedures of public conversations and journalistic products.

For my last case (Chapter 6), I have selected 'networked journalism' as an answer to the de-professionalisation and the consequent epistemic vulnerability resulting in noise and disinformation. This alternative model of journalism is more advantageously adjusted to the technological, international and social transformation of post-digital infrastructures. Emerging from an alternative economic model and predominantly supported by foundations, this model embodies the emancipation of news reporting from media enterprises and traditional newsrooms. This chapter explores how the boundaries of journalism are being redefined by amateur contributors and open-source methodologies as supplementary contributors to journalistic research.

As journalism transcends its historical limitations to professional media infrastructures, I question how epistemic legitimacy can be established in pure horizontal relationships between researchers, publishers and the public. I argue that networked journalism can contribute to the critical public sphere, redefining epistemic authority through new forms of collaboration and interconnected and transparent methods. It gives the concept of authority an innovative interpretation and redefines the author-public relationship, which reaffirms its epistemic relevance. The legitimacy of this new form of journalism does not rely on conventional brands and reputations but rather on the transparency of its practices.

These three partly new, partly traditional, yet altered boundary practices transform critical publicity processes. To what extent and under what conditions do these actors and networks contribute to the epistemic and reflective function of critical publicity? Moreover, what insights do these developments provide for the normative requirements to 'critical publicity'? Distinguishing between media and journalism might encourage the reconceptualisation of some of the processual requirements in a transformed media landscape. Ultimately, this will result in an adjusted approach to critical publicity, which will be discussed in the Final Reflections.

# **4. Influencers in the COVID-19 crisis: Exploring the critical potential of epistemic power**

## **4.1 Introduction**

The previously discussed precarisation of media organisations, in combination with the fragmentation of the post-digital public sphere, has created conditions under which journalism struggles with its traditional function as a public information service. Especially with regard to young people, it falls short in this job. In today's publicity landscape, social media influencers play a significant role in disseminating information. This chapter focuses on the contributions of influencers to public communication during the COVID-19 crisis. I will examine the activities of influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic, exploring the tension between manufactured and critical publicity, the concept of epistemic power, and the boundaries between skilled and reflected authorship.

The pandemic offered an unprecedented epistemic challenge to swift and large-scale public communication. There was a persistent need for a strategy to rapidly disseminate new, relevant expert information and prevailing advice on controlling the spread of the coronavirus (such as staying home, testing oneself and getting vaccinated). A public sphere in times of crisis requires extra effort to disseminate safety instructions. Furthermore, there was a constant need to discuss these guidelines.

In traditional political communication, mass media were the dominant news providers. However, since digitisation fragmented the public sphere, resulting in the decline of the hegemony of the mass media, several publics were hard to reach. This was especially true of young people. Exploring

new forms of information provision, policymakers experimented with new techniques aimed at groups that are hard to communicate with, such as people under 30. Engaging influencers as a strategy to inform and affect their followers was one of these new techniques. Finland was among the first to do so, soon followed by the Netherlands. Later, the United States also implemented an influencer strategy. These new, well-connected agents appeared to have considerable public relevance during this worldwide health crisis. However, in an effort to support the epistemic demands of crisis communication, this publicity strategy runs the risk of leaning too much towards manufactured publicity instead of encouraging critical publicity.

I will focus on the COVID-19 pandemic as an extreme case, examining the strategy of engaging influencers as publicity agents in the epistemic process of information provision regarding COVID-19 among young people. I explore the relevant influencer literature and compare three different practices: those of Finland, the Netherlands, and the United States. Which infrastructural challenges do they address? How do the practices of these influencers differ from traditional dissemination in the broadcast era? Moreover, how do the epistemic and reflective dynamics work out in this strategy? I analyse the tension between manufactured and critical publicity and question whether epistemic and deliberative requirements can be formulated for this type of communication. In other words, to what extent and under what conditions do the engaged influencers support the epistemic function of critical publicity? As argued in Chapter 3, I assume that only practices that have throughput legitimacy can be considered to contribute to critical publicity. Otherwise, if throughput legitimacy is not assured, these practices may generate publicity but not be considered critical. Such cases are mere advertisements or pure distribution.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I address why influencers are an interesting case in post-digital publicity infrastructures and outline their characteristic practices. Then, I outline the characteristics of a public sphere in crisis mode as an extreme case to provide insight into the epistemic contribution of influencers to dissemination. After that, I present the case of influencer engagement in COVID-19 campaigns, comparing Finland, the Netherlands, and the United States. I interpret the examples, comparing them with some pre-digital predecessors, and

assess their epistemic and critical functions. I argue that influencing can contribute to critical publicity if their procedures have throughout legitimacy; that is, if they apply a transparent sponsorship strategy and adopt a deliberative position in their communication.

## 4.2 The role of influencers as publicity agents

The expansion of social media in the last decade has provided an enormous boost to a new form of celebrity, public personae with considerable media power, who directly communicate with their followers: influencers. Their mode of communication has originated from and is effectively tailored to social media messaging. They typically address some characteristic features of the post-digital infrastructure, including both challenges and potentials. Low threshold authoring, easy two-sided communication with the public, and voluminous dissemination of information are part of their toolkit. Before I analyse their typical platform publishing procedures, comparing these to broadcast and journalistic publicity, I will briefly introduce a selection of literature relevant to my throughput perspective.

Enke and Borchers (2019) describe an influencer as a public persona who has built a credible reputation and is valued by their followers, with whom they share personal content and maintain some relationship. Because of their specific place and function in the media network, social media influencers are characterised by a combination of different aspects, “as third-party actors that have established a significant number of relevant relationships with a specific quality to and influence on organizational stakeholders through content production, content distribution, interaction, and personal appearance on the social web” (p. 267). Brands and organisations align with relevant influencers as a ‘third party’ to reach specific audiences. Freberg and colleagues (2011) had already observed this, defining a social media influencer as a “new type of independent third-party endorser who shapes audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media” (p. 90).

In studying and classifying their activities, Enke and Borchers analyse the social media influencers’ input (in terms of material, resources, and equipment) and output, defined as the content and reach of their messages. Depending on their specific activities and strategic relations, Enke and Borchers distinguish four different roles as distinct appearances and functions: the content creator, the multiplier, the moderator and finally, the protagonist (2019, 265). These roles do not simply describe various activities, but can be conceived as different variations of authorship, where creating demands a more personal voice than multiplying does. These

differentiation in roles might help to analyse the epistemic and deliberative contribution of their activities and draw a boundary between manufactured and critical publicity.

The role of social media influencers in *strategic* communication – disseminating messages to specific target groups – has been studied from an empirical and ethical perspective (Domingues Aguiar and van Reijmersdal 2018). However, the influencer’s position, or that of the online content creator as an actor in the *deliberative process*, remains underexplored. Generally, social media influencers are considered opinion leaders in a specific niche area, be it fashion, beauty, or health. Initial studies on influencing attend to their ability to influence their followers’ consumer behaviour (Enke and Borchers 2019; Freberg et al. 2011). Nevertheless, recent studies have expanded this scope, observing that influencers’ societal and political roles are becoming increasingly relevant by decoupling one’s credibility outside one’s initial persona and engaging with political subjects (Suuronen et al. 2022). Since the influencer enjoys a certain level of trust and a credible *personal* reputation amongst their audience, the attributed authority is personal credibility built up within a particular niche. Suuronen and colleagues found that this capacity can be extended to another area where one does not have specific expertise and that “the societal and political roles of SMIs [social media influencers] are becoming increasingly relevant” (2022, 301). That being said, the above-cited studies primarily examine influencers descriptively, as active contributors to publicity, but do not reflect on the specific deliberative or epistemic relevance of their communication. In my case, I assess whether influencers can contribute to *critical* publicity.

Influencers, whose publishing practices are fully aligned with the platform’s infrastructure, have developed into impactful societal voices and operate independently of traditional media companies. As effective elements of publicity, there are notable infrastructural differences compared to traditional journalism. Since they are not dependent on media organisations, influencers manage the flow of publicity themselves. They operate as self-employed publishers. Accordingly, they maintain a direct and personal relationship with their respective publics. Another striking difference is that they apply an individually customised commercial logic of sponsorship, sales and product placement. In professional media organisations, although commercial pressure is increasing, it is standard

practice to have an editorial statute, which describes the way in which the separation between commerce and editorial staff is guaranteed.<sup>82</sup> But for influencers, commercialising their activities can take on more or less, even non-transparent forms, an issue I will discuss in the forthcoming examples.<sup>83</sup> A final difference to traditional journalism is the lack of professional standards, or to binding or self-binding codes of conduct. Since journalism has suffered a gradual deprofessionalisation and blurred boundaries with self-publishers, this might not be a clear-cut contrast, but rather an escalation of recent developments. For influencers, however, there are no overarching guidelines for this line of work. These organisational contrasts are relevant to the discussion of this case.

As influencers have developed into prominent agents of public debate, the question arises of how to compare the influencer with a publishing author or creator in the more traditional sense. Since it is not because of their expertise on the subjects, how can influencers' publishing activities be considered a legitimate part of *critical* publicity? In my examples of influencers' engagement in different countries, I explore their roles as potentially authentic voices and deliberative agents of an interactive dissemination process. For this specific perspective, the role of influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic as a part of the crisis infrastructure provides a characteristic example.

82 In the Netherlands, this requirement is laid down in the Media Act of 2008.

83 This practice is gradually evolving. In the Netherlands, in 2022, the Media Act was adjusted to include sponsor regulations for influencers with over 500 000 followers who officially work as self-employed entrepreneurs (see *Influencerregels* 2025). Since this was installed after the COVID-19 period, these rules do not apply to the cases discussed in this chapter.

## 4.3 COVID-19: A public sphere in times of crisis

The COVID-19 pandemic is an extreme case of public debate. As severe crises of war and catastrophe have previously demonstrated, the public sphere can switch into crisis mode, displaying an altered logic of communicative and political processes.<sup>84</sup> A public sphere in times of crisis poses an epistemic challenge in several respects. First, new expert information is needed to assess the current situation and discuss its dangers and potential countering strategies. This was particularly true during the pandemic since a previously unknown virus was at its heart. Gaining knowledge of risks and infection prevention was a scientist's daily work, continuously adding new information to the current situation. This information then had to be translated into plain language. Secondly, a crisis urges immediate widespread distribution of relevant information. New insights regarding the spread of the disease, risks, expert advice, and the government's imposition of rules of behaviour had to reach all citizens as soon as possible. For this reason, governments organised one- or two-weekly press conferences during the pandemic. Thirdly, as the crisis continued, citizens had to decide on the government's guidelines for working from home, limiting social contacts, getting vaccinated, and so on. The situation required discrete opinions from all citizens on how to comply with or disregard the current advice. As a result, there was a widespread need for public debate.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the first worldwide challenge to public communication since the digitisation of the public sphere. In a study on the Swiss Twittersphere during the pandemic, Rauchfleisch et al. (2021) indicate four crisis-related dimensions derived from the pre-digital Habermasian public sphere theory, applying these to public communication during the pandemic.<sup>85</sup> They argue that, as expected, (1) the COVID-19 crisis has led to a narrowing of the topic agenda; (2) it led to a more inwardly oriented public sphere; (3) it resulted in increased Twitter (currently X) activity by experts; and (4) actors from the social periphery could more easily reach the centre

<sup>84</sup> See also Habermas (1996, 357), B. Peters, Wessler and Habermas (2007, 50).

<sup>85</sup> Their analysis is predominantly based on Habermas (1996) and Peters, Wessler and Habermas (2007).

of public discourse with their tweets (Rauchfleisch, Vogler and Eisenegger 2021). According to the authors, these findings could, to a certain extent, be generalised to other European countries.

For my case on the role of influencers, the third and fourth observations about social media interactivity are particularly relevant. Expert voices, particularly medical representatives and virologists, prominently featured in broadcast and online discussions, clarifying the situation and sometimes actively intervening in public controversy. Their epistemic contribution is, accordingly, guaranteed by their expertise. Therefore, they are *not* the subject of my case study on the role of social media influencers. I am interested in the epistemic contribution of the non-experts. This calls for another understanding of 'epistemic', namely, an epistemic contribution that values dissemination, endorsement or promotion of expert information. As I will outline in Section 4.5, there is a historical tradition in this type of epistemic support. So, for this case, I will limit my considerations to the role of influencers with no particular expertise in the subject but who are nonetheless asked to endorse the official, expert-informed, government-organised information campaign and get related messages across to their followers.

In addition to these four observations, I would like to mention another characteristic of a public sphere in crisis mode: the need for central and public information provision. In the early stages of a public emergency, the dissemination process is vital to crisis communication. As I argued in Chapter 3 regarding the epistemic function, dissemination is not primarily processing or reflecting information but is merely a distributive function. Like the leaflet in pre-digital times, such communication is predominantly authorised by input and output legitimacy. In this respect, it is closely related to manufactured publicity or advertising. However, since influencers employ an individual and personal tone in their communication, they suggest a personal reflection on the content. Justified or not, this implies throughput legitimacy.

The epistemic challenge of a public sphere in crisis mode is, at least, threefold. First, new expertise is required. This is effectively a request to scientists and other dedicated experts. The increased public activity of virologists, epidemiologists and scientists with expert knowledge of pandemics and viruses addresses this need (Rauchfleisch, Vogler and

Eisenegger 2021). This expertise is an input requirement. Secondly, there is a particular need for information provision and dissemination. This can be established with the public communication infrastructure of mass media, supplemented with social media. However, this is, as van Dijck and Alinejad (2020) have argued, a double-edged sword. Social media facilitated the spread of accurate health information by the same means as it helped to spread misinformation, posing a potential as well as a threat to the epistemic requirements (van Dijck and Alinejad 2020, 8). Thirdly, there is an increased demand for deliberation and debate. As Rauchfleisch et al. found, public discourse intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic and expanded to involve a broader field of speakers: “Formerly passive publics are transformed into active ones and become more involved in public debates” (Rauchfleisch, Vogler and Eisenegger 2021, 132). The influencers’ activities are mainly limited to the second function (information provision). However, they may also extend to deliberative demand, and I will discuss both the disseminating and the deliberative aspects as part of the throughput processes of public debate.

## 4.4 Three examples of influencers as a part of the crisis infrastructure

**Finland, March 2020.** In March 2020, Finland was amongst the first countries to develop a social media strategy in response to the pandemic outbreak. This was probably due to Prime Minister Sanna Marin's young age (34). Almost two years before the start of the pandemic, Finland had already added social media influencers to its pool of essential actors in emergency plans as part of its crisis communication infrastructure. Being aware that government communication cannot reach all citizens via traditional media like television, radio, and newspapers, communication specialists at the Finnish prime minister's office rolled out a strategy of social media messaging to reach younger people. So, along with doctors, bus drivers, and supermarket workers, social media influencers became part of the crisis team. Päivi Anttikoski, the government communications director, told *The Guardian*: "As far as we know, Finland is the only country in the world to have defined social media as 'critical operators'" (Henley 2020). This is why in Finland, a fast mobilisation of a team of social media influencers was possible (Heikkilä 2020).

In Finland, social media influencers were an explicit part of the government's crisis infrastructure. The government provided influencers with the "government's messages in a social media-friendly format" and allowed them to use the messages in their own way. They were free to communicate what they wanted and were not paid for their activities. "This is an honor," explained Finnish YouTube-influencer Inari Fernández in *Politico* (Heikkilä 2020). The goal was to support the influencers (lifestyle bloggers, columnists and journalists) with reliable information, helping the government get the message across to young people. The campaign was accompanied by recommendations such as "stop and think before sharing; review content critically; distinguish fact from opinion; check facts and never share false information" (Henley 2020).

**The Netherlands, April 2020.** In the Netherlands, at about the same time, the Dutch government engaged a dozen influencers (artists and media personalities, not journalists) to spread relevant information regarding the new virus. During the first few weeks of the pandemic, the government informed the public by holding press conferences and urged people to

comply with the new restrictions. In this first early stage of the pandemic, these were relatively uncontroversial messages and not subject to much contestation: staying at home as much as possible and maintaining a safe social distance from other people. The frequent bi- or tri-weekly press conferences were among the main communication tools and attracted millions of viewers. However, the Prime Minister's speeches did not get through to everyone, and even more critically, not every citizen was inclined to follow the instructions issued by politicians and government officials. Additional means of communication had to be utilised to inform specific groups which were hard to reach or convince.<sup>86</sup>

Although not very familiar with and experienced in this new publicity infrastructure, the government found an alternative to traditional broadcast media in the form of social media. In the very early stages of the pandemic, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport decided to hire social media influencers to spread informative messages conceived and articulated by the Ministry. By contracting individual influencers with broad reaches to post messages with the nationally endorsed hashtag #alleensamen (#onlytogether), the Dutch administration could distribute its message and guidelines via 'non-usual suspects' on Instagram. This indirect manner of informing – not speaking to the public in an official capacity, but rather via the voices and channels of influencers – was considered an essential instrument for engaging and informing the adolescent population. At that stage, there was no transparency regarding the selection of voices, the precise agreements, or the fees paid.

A few months later, the Dutch approach aroused much controversy. As the crisis continued, some previously engaged social media influencers took a government-critical stance, reframing their role in the public debate. On Instagram, a group of Dutch artists and influencers started the hashtag #ikdoenietmeer (‘I no longer participate’). In video posts, the celebrities said they were protesting against the government protocols on facemasks,

86 A side note relevant to the Dutch context is that in mobilising new communication techniques, the Dutch government is limited, and even hampered, by the 'co-production-law'. This law restricts financial contributions to media productions on the national broadcasting service. There was no easy legal way to 'buy in' attention to compliance messaging in official Dutch broadcasting channels and programmes.

distancing and testing. They initiated a critical response to the government's communication.

Their call resonated strongly in the public debate, meeting the increased demand for discussion in crisis times, that Rauchfleisch et al. (2021) defined, thereby contributing to the throughput function of controversy. However, since they turned their back on the policy they previously were part of, the influencers were accused of opportunism and hypocrisy, first taking the government's money to endorse its message and then rejecting it a few months later.<sup>87</sup> As the public learned that the influencers had been well-paid to contribute to the initial government campaign, they were depicted (in hindsight) as effectively being the government's hired mouthpieces, disseminating top-down manufactured messages. This undermined their deliberative position in the later stages of the crisis when they critiqued the policy.

The strategy of engaging influencers also backfired on the government<sup>88</sup> The public controversy led to a series of parliamentary questions and the disclosure of the contracts, revealing the details and the fees for the initial campaign. In exchange for a considerable fee<sup>89</sup> (compared to other countries), the social media influencers were asked to deliver a well-defined quantity of (pre-approved) output. The contracts contained special provisions requiring the influencers to submit their videos to the Ministry for authorisation before publishing them.

***The United States, July 2021.*** A year later, as the crisis continued and the vaccination campaign started, United States President Joe Biden engaged some of the most influential young social media stars to help him spread the message. Here is an example from the then-18-year old pop star Olivia Rodrigo, who boasted around 25 to 30 million followers on Instagram:

*Hey, I'm Olivia Rodrigo, and today I am at the White House meeting with President Biden and Doctor Fauci because it is so important that we all*

87 See, for instance, Sprangers (2021) and Telegraaf (2020).

88 This was also observed by van Dijck and Alinejad (2020).

89 For example, approximately €87 000 was offered for the production and publication of nine videos to the agency of artists Ali B, Boef and Famke Louise. These contracts were published in response to parliamentary questions. See Yeşilgöz-Zegerius (2022).

*get vaccinated. It doesn't matter if you're young and healthy; getting the vaccine is about protecting yourself, your friends, and your family. Let's get vaccinated! (Rodrigo 2021)*

Rodrigo is one of the approximately fifty Twitch streamers, YouTubers, and TikTokers with large followings, designated as the 'Influencer's Army', that were recruited by the White House to encourage young people to vaccinate.

Engaging influencers in political campaigns was not new to the Biden administration. Initially hired to support Biden's election campaign, White House Director of Digital Strategy Rob Flaherty suggested involving social media stars in the COVID-19 vaccination campaign, repurposing the influencer marketing strategy. Instead of the proven strategy of endorsing a candidate, influencers were asked to endorse the vaccination campaign, be it in their own style and defining their own approach. The White House staff organised a few online briefings and arranged discussions with experts and social media influencers, answering their questions and addressing their concerns on COVID-19 and vaccination. Preventing a merely top-down approach, the influencers were free to report on these sessions. Parts of these orchestrated interactions were taped and screened via the influencers' channels, reaching millions of young people. The world-famous Olivia Rodrigo was invited to the White House to chat with Biden and Anthony Fauci of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. The White House Director of Digital Strategy aimed for a 'positive information effort' by connecting with the online creators; however, influencers enjoyed individual autonomy in whether to post or not, as well as their questions and comments (Lorenz 2021). There were no rules or restrictions on the influencers' contributions. State and local governments followed this approach, sometimes accommodating the influencers with financial incentives of around \$400 to \$1,000 monthly. Online creators were not paid per message or contracted for a specific, well-defined output but were involved in a long-term engagement (ibid.).

**Overall.** These three different practices in three countries display some relevant aspects in reviewing the epistemic contribution of influencers during the pandemic. I will pick out two striking differences between these distinct approaches. The first one is professional autonomy. As previous research in health campaigns has shown, in general, influencers' engagement might be effective as an outreach strategy from an output

perspective (see, for instance, Bonnevie et al. 2020).<sup>90</sup> However, given my normative conceptual framework, my focus is on their role as critical and epistemic agents of the post-digital infrastructure. Therefore, it is relevant to address their specific position in the publicity process and the epistemic function the government allocated to them. Where the Dutch government merely asked for the dissemination of information and endorsement of the guidelines in predominantly preconceived messages, the Finnish and American influencers were granted more autonomy in their communication. Translating complex information, interviewing experts, and creating messages in one's own voice requires a reflection of the content and performs a critical function.

Secondly, a notable difference in these examples is the honorarium, varying from zero to substantial, and the form of the agreement, ranging from a contract for a specific pre-arranged output to a fixed monthly fee. Monetisation is a common practice in influencer collaboration; it follows their role as endorsers (Suuronen et al. 2022, 302). It is not considered to delegitimise their message. From a throughput perspective, there is no objection to rewarding the effort of influencers if it does not directly interfere with the online creator's autonomy. Since content creation is increasingly considered 'work', a fee is a reasonable compensation for the effort, just like the salary of journalists, filmmakers or artists. However, if one supposes that the fee is conditional on a well-defined 'output' regarding preconceived content, then it might detract from the personal character of the message and make it look like 'contract work' or paid advertisement. This may well erode the influencer's personal credibility and her public persona. Detailed contracts specifying content, official approval, control, and exclusivity might undermine the creator's or author's position. The Dutch influencers made themselves susceptible to the refutation of propaganda by being paid per specific output and submitting their posts

90 As previous academic research has shown, involving social media influencers in public health campaigns can be beneficial. Public health scientist Erika Bonnevie and colleagues (2020) researched a campaign from October 2018 to March 2019 that included social media micro-influencers. They were asked to increase knowledge and positive attitudes towards the influenza vaccine. The evaluation showed that "the approach of using influencers to deliver positive flu vaccine-related information is a promising strategy for communicating health information, changing flu vaccination perceptions, and possibly flu vaccine seeking behavior" (Bonnevie et al. 2020, 10). They considered it to be "an ideal tool for health communication" .

to the ministry's approval. Van Dijck and Alinejad (2020) conclude: "Hiring YouTube influencers to spread government rules about social distancing and other preventive measures may work well one day; the next day, the same influencers may propagate messages that defy the official one because they are paid by another interested party to do so" (van Dijck and Alinejad 2020, 8).

The restricted autonomy in the Dutch case depreciates the critical character of public communication, making it more vulnerable to refutations of manufactured communication and propaganda. Nevertheless, as publicity agents, they still perform an epistemic function as distributors, albeit not a critical one.

## 4.5 Epistemic power

Engaging the influential power of celebrities as an instrument in public communication and dissemination was already a proven method in pre-digital times. To understand the dynamics of this type of intervention, the concept of ‘epistemic power’ can be appropriate: “A person has epistemic power to the extent she is able to influence what people think, believe, and know, *and* to the extent she can enable and disable others from exerting epistemic influence” (Archer et al. 2020, 29). Of note is that this definition does not reference knowledge, expertise, or institutional position: “celebrities have a distinctive form of epistemic power that is not connected to expertise” (p. 38). Celebrities have a power that people rely on. Their epistemic power refers to the ability to influence and enable others to do so based on ‘perceived credibility’.<sup>91</sup> Although celebrities do not have knowledge or expertise per se, Archer et al. argue that because of their credibility, they can be attributed epistemic power in public discourse. In enjoying this power, celebrities can serve as effective endorsers of any information or opinion.

The ‘epistemic’ in ‘epistemic power’ that I discuss in this section is attributed to the credible position in publicity, not to someone’s expertise. It also differs from the epistemic potential attributed to deliberation and debate. This epistemic power is primarily defined as the ability to convey information effectively to others. It does not require expert knowledge, but it does require a perceived credibility of the consignor. The act of disseminating and endorsing information performs an epistemic function in publicity, albeit as a form of manufactured publicity. If no reflection is requested but just an endorsement or transfer of a specific message, then this publicity is close to manufactured publicity and, consequently, more vulnerable to the refutation of being propaganda or mere advertisement. That being said, the personal

91 As the reader may note, this concept of epistemic power is inspired by the idea of ‘epistemic injustice’, introduced by Miranda Fricker (2007). The notion ‘epistemic power’ echoes that of ‘opinion power’ (*Meinungsmacht*), coined by Neuberger and applied by Seipp et al. Opinion power refers to “the media’s ability to influence processes of individual and public opinion formation”; accordingly, a power predominantly attributed to platforms, media infrastructures, etc. (Seipp et al. 2023). See also Neuberger (2018). I will disregard these more epistemic and technologically inspired debates in this case study.

tone that social media influencers use in their communication suggests a personal involvement and reflection on the content. In this respect, influencers are perceived as expressing their individual voices, which adds to their credibility and the power of the message.

A striking example of pre-digital influencing power is the television campaign against polio. In 1956, the rock star Elvis Presley, a proto-influencer in the broadcast era, rolled up his sleeves on television to motivate people to do the same. He received a polio vaccine live on the famous *Ed Sullivan Show*. This position of active public support or advocacy of the influencer, invited to engage in public communication and sometimes paid to do so, giving testimony or endorsing specific top-down formulated policy issues using one's epistemic power, is (in the vocabulary of Enke and Borchers) a clear illustration of 'protagonism'.

In 1972, another popular television show hosted a new vaccination programme targeting measles. As part of the public health campaign, 'Don't wait. Vaccinate', Big Bird set the example. On 26 February 1972, in a regular episode of the popular American children's television series *Sesame Street*, the character Big Bird notices a line outside Hooper's Store. That day, the store was set up as a vaccination clinic. Big Bird meets the doctor administering the measles shots and gets in line behind the children to get one of his own.

In November 2021, this Big Bird episode had a very turbulent sequel. In a thirty-minute 'Town Hall Special', a joint production by CNN and the children's series *Sesame Street*, CNN journalist Erica Hill interviewed several experts and fictional characters like six-year-old Big Bird, flanked by Granny Bird. Big Bird had the opportunity to ask the renowned Dr Sanjay Gupta questions and talk to him about his fear of needles. After a few comforting words, Big Bird goes off for his COVID-19 shot and returns several minutes later, vaccinated, relieved, and decorated with colourful plaster (CNN 2021).

Putting it mildly, this broadcast did not go unnoticed. Big Bird announced his vaccination on Twitter to his 275,000 followers (Bigbird 2021). President Biden then piggybacked on Big Bird's popularity amongst young children, congratulating him: "Good on ya, @BigBird. Getting vaccinated is the best way to keep your whole neighborhood safe" (President of the United

States 2021).<sup>92</sup> The broadcast then went on to dominate the news. Right-wing senator Ted Cruz, for example, found a new political enemy in this fictional puppet and denounced the children's programme as propaganda.<sup>93</sup> He reacted immediately: "Government propaganda... for your 5-year-old" (Cruz 2021).<sup>94</sup> The controversy drew attention in international newspapers and news programmes, from the *New York Times* to the Dutch *RTL Nieuws*. Politicians, columnists, and individual Twitter users were taking a stance on Big Bird's intervention in the vaccine debate.

The fierce online dispute between politicians and their followers regarding a children's programme illustrates increased demand for discussion in crisis times. The controversy provides a reflection of public communication, serving throughout legitimacy. However, as I will explain in the next section, an online debate on X (formerly Twitter) may not meet all the deliberative standards required for this function.

For a contribution to public deliberation, the CNN special had a remarkable cast, combining several professional expert contributors, a journalist and a doctor in their roles as experts, with fictional characters embodying the

92 Biden had 16.1 million followers at the time.

93 Ted Cruz's allegation of propaganda echoed a traditional critique, well-known among political scholars in the United States since the advent of mass media in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, criticising media coverage that is directly or indirectly subservient or promoting the government's interests Herman and Chomsky (1994). These authors claim that even so, in Western democracies, propaganda is a relevant and widespread political technique of elite domination in the media, propagating the elite's interests and marginalising dissent. Stanley concentrates on propaganda mechanisms, using speech that bypasses rational discourse, autonomous decision-making, and individual will formation. Herman and Chomsky emphasise the conglomerate of (private) media companies speaking the language of political and business elites. They argue that these elites, invited to deliver their perspectives in mass media, will conceal their private interests, portraying them as the common interest. Therefore, elite interests will be hidden as the common interest and will be advertised as such.

94 Senator Cruz had a point. Big Bird was ahead of his time, so the vaccination of young children might rightly have been perceived as controversial. Encouraging children to take the COVID-19 vaccine was internationally and scientifically controversial, at least in November 2021. At the time, the European Medicine Agency did not approve administering the vaccine to children between 5 and 11 years old. Approval for vaccinating this age group was only issued on 25 November 2021. The World Health Organisation was also hesitant to prescribe the vaccines for children under the age of 11 because there was not yet a clear health benefit. Vaccination has since proven to be primarily beneficial in countering transmission and serving public health, but was supposed to not have significant benefits for the individual protection of children (World Health Organization 2021).

representation of the public: children and their concerned parents. One could argue that Muppets might not be considered deliberative agents, but since they have social media accounts, including significant numbers of followers and publicly communicate with the President of the United States, it is hard to deny that they have a specific epistemic power: they facilely disseminate information and have their influencing position in public opinion formation. By appearing in public debate and actively supporting (or countering) government policies, even fictional characters can take the position of protagonist in publicity and contribute to public deliberation.

The concept of epistemic power explains how actors, such as social media influencers, as well as pre-digital proto-influencers and even fictional characters, although lacking conventional markers of expertise, nevertheless wield significant influence over public formation, thanks to their perceived credibility. However, if information is disseminated without a reflexive engagement of the protagonist, it might be perceived as instrumentalised messaging, and even propaganda.

Compared to the broadcast era, post-digital infrastructures unlock an unprecedented participation potential. Notably, the capacity of facilely spreading, replying, and contesting creates a context where the scope is an impactful parameter, favouring the epistemic power of media professionals with an extensive reach over experts. In addition, this interactive potential significantly contributes to the deliberative potential, further enhancing the epistemic power. Statements of endorsement may be spread, but also questioned and contested. This contesting potential generates throughput legitimacy if these questions are answered and become part of public deliberation. By redistributing epistemic powers, the post-digital infrastructures afford new epistemic potential.

## 4.6 Reflective and deliberative qualities

As discussed in Chapter 3, in professional journalism, throughput legitimacy is ensured by professional practice. This professional practice is embedded in journalistic codes and guidelines.<sup>95</sup> Throughput processes, such as verifying facts and the right to a fair hearing, occur *before* publishing. Influencers, however, do not share a professional code and mostly operate individually. As a consequence, an uncontested information flow creates an epistemic challenge. Readers and viewers cannot rely on editorial interventions, professional considerations, and similar procedures. The quality of the messages must prove itself after publication and in public discussion (Sevignani 2022, 92). Online messages are considered just a beginning, where critical consideration starts. In his post-digital communicative theory, Sevignani's does not yet clearly explain how this process should take place.

### 4.6.1 Reflected authorship

Low-threshold authoring produces a shift in the legitimacy model sketched in Chapter 2. Whereas in conventional authoring, legitimacy is assured before publication, in the platformed public sphere, throughput legitimacy potentially can be established *after* publication, in discussion with the relevant publics. An illustration hereof is the case of the Dutch influencer who initially joined the critical uprising against the COVID-19 guidelines. After several public conversations with a renowned intensive care specialist, this influencer decided to take a step back, reflect and get educated on the subject (BNNVARA 2025). This was a clear example of a publicly performed epistemic process.

The demand of public throughput procedures creates an extra epistemic effort for public debate and its contributors. It calls for an awareness of one's level of knowledge of the subject discussed. In his recent text on the digital public sphere, Habermas articulates related concerns about the new author's role in social media and the time it will take to adapt to this new situation.

95 An internationally accepted version is established in the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists (2019), a follow-up of the Code of Bordeaux (1954).

*A politically appropriate perception of the author role, which is not the same as the consumer role, tends to increase the awareness of deficits in one's level of knowledge. The author role also has to be learned; and as long as this has not been realised in the political exchange in social media, the quality of uninhibited discourse shielded from dissonant opinions and criticism will continue to suffer. (Habermas 2022b, 160)*

Habermas accurately addresses a common misunderstanding. In my own choice of words, publishing is not the same as traditional authoring. Being an author requires reflection on the subject, the material, and one's position and relation ("awareness of deficits", "level of knowledge") to the subject. According to Habermas, this form of justification is required in the traditional complete sense of authorship. This condition is not fulfilled on social media per se.

Habermas argues that an author contributes epistemic value to public debate by bringing particular expertise or at least a reflected position. In this respect, a journalist is also an author: not an expert on his or her own but subjected to professional guidelines; a considered and trained writer reflecting on his or her material and aware of deficits. In the Finnish case, the engaged influencers were provided with guidelines, though not obliged to commit to these suggestions. The strategy was aimed at convincing and respecting professional autonomy, in contrast to the Dutch approach that did not formulate guidelines but asked for pre-approval before publishing, not relying on individual authorship.

Nevertheless, I believe that by sticking to one particular traditional interpretation of authorship, Habermas' analysis is too cursory. There are different types of authorship, and Habermas rightly observes that in regular social media messaging, not all criteria to the conventional form are met. But other modes are possible.<sup>96</sup> Publishing on social media manifests

<sup>96</sup> My question resonates with the views of Michel Foucault, who in 'What is an Author?' scrutinises the relationship between text and author by characterising the mode of the message. Foucault, who did not show too much interest in the public sphere as a relevant philosophical or political problem, advances his theory of the role of the author by indicating different textual genres: a private letter has a signer, a contract has a guarantor, an anonymous text on a wall has a writer – all of these do not have an author per se (Foucault 1984, 108).

different forms of authorship, in terms of expertise, sponsorship and authentic communication. Since influencers employ a personal tone in their messages, they at least suggest a personal reflection on the content, implying throughput legitimacy, whether justified or not.

#### **4.6.2 A deliberative position**

Controversies are, in principle, an essential normative aspect of throughput processes, fulfilling a deliberative function. During the COVID-19 period, influencers sparked considerable controversy. However, not every controversy contributes to the deliberative dimension of critical publicity. There are additional conditions to be fulfilled. Wessler's analysis, building on Habermas' work, is helpful in transposing the deliberative qualities of publicity infrastructures into the post-digital context (Wessler 2018). Wessler defines the deliberative qualities of the media, measured against a set of 'deliberative standards' that can be used to empirically assess the degree of deliberativeness of media (p. 83). His criteria include inclusiveness, civility, responsiveness and justification. Inclusiveness is connected to the openness of public debate to different voices of a medium or a platform. Civility is about norms of tolerance and (dis)respect.

In assessing the communicative practices of influencers during the pandemic from an epistemic perspective, the criteria of responsiveness and justification are especially relevant to achieve an authentic deliberative position. Justification entails giving reasons for your specific approach to the news and being transparent about your motives and reasons, thus generating public accountability. Responsiveness is the willingness to engage in debate, answer questions, counter critique, and confront opposing views. It privileges two-sided communication over monologue, contributing to deliberativeness.

Reviewing these two criteria in the context of Dutch influencers during the COVID-19 pandemic, the absence of personal engagement and reflections on their motives and role in the initial campaign shows a lack of explicit justification. This, combined with the fee, might have caused controversy and exposed the influencer as a straightforward top-down extension of the government's policies.

In this respect, influencers in the campaign who did not obscure their agreements with the government showed more authentic commitment. It

adds to the perceived credibility of the content, fostering justification. In addition, responding to questions and contestation, as some influencers did, significantly contributes to the deliberative quality of their efforts. Moreover, endorsing but also publicly questioning or contesting expert claims can have an epistemic function since such contestation discusses the positions and the arguments, transforming the problem; it implies an epistemic process, contributing to the critical potential of publicity.<sup>97</sup>

#### 4.6.3 Assessing the different roles

Having explored the context and different aspects of influencing activities, I will now return to the previously sketched activities of the influencers: (1) the content creator, (2) the multiplier, (3) the moderator, and (4) the protagonist. Which roles support the influencer's deliberative position and add to epistemic procedures? Under what conditions can this contribute to critical publicity, and under what circumstances is it manufactured publicity?

We start with the role of the *multiplier*. From an epistemic point of view, a multiplier of justified information could have an epistemic function, as a distributor of relevant facts and guidelines. As the traditional flyers, posters, and advertisements of health and educational campaigns previously did, disseminating information is a relevant aspect of public communication. In the case of COVID-19, this job was partly performed by influencers as epistemic powers. Although this role has an epistemic function, it does not contribute to critical publicity. The input is unproblematically passed to the followers. Multiplication adds to the scope of information provision, not to the deliberative quality of it. I consider multiplication a digital leaflet, a non-deliberative, manufactured contribution to public discourse, and a form of non-critical publicity. Additionally, as the case of the Dutch influencers has shown, if this role is accompanied by a serious fee, influencers bear the risk of being depicted as hired mouthpieces, eroding their credible position.

97 A relevant aspect regarding controversy and contestation in the present-day public debate, which also dominated the public sphere during the COVID-19 pandemic, is the thriving of anti-government sentiments and conspiracy theories. Since this is a broader discussion on disinformation and manipulation, not specifically addressing influencers, I will leave these topics to others.

*Protagonism* is endorsing a strategic or public message without discussing it. It does partly meet the criterion of justification since endorsing means personal support of a particular message, so there should be some personal commitment. Elvis Presley wordlessly expresses his approval by rolling up his sleeves: I take the polio vaccine because I think this is relevant. However, simply underlining the importance of a specific message without any reflection or dialogue is a form of publicity, but not critical publicity. It does bring potential benefits to public debate, like attention and interest, without contribution to deliberation. Since there is no throughput involved, no contestation, deliberation, or reflection on the problem, even a Muppet can credibly fulfil this role. That speaks volumes about the critical aspect.

A *content creator* has to include at least a personal reflection or perspective in her messages. Wessler (2018) sketches different non-deliberative contributions to predigital mediated public discourse, like “drawing attention and enhancing interest” and “highlighting values” by personal narratives. These forms of mediated public discourse exert potential influence and relevance, but for Wessler, they do not contribute to the deliberative quality of the media because it does not necessarily engage in conversation (pp. 112–113). However, from a broader throughput perspective, adopting a personal position reflecting on public issues might contribute to the reflective function, reformulating or adding new perspectives to common concerns.

The same goes for translating complex information into short messages in plain language for specific publics, as for example the ‘Influencer’s Army’ did, which can be considered as a Lippmannian interpretation of intelligence work and as throughput. For example, asking experts questions about the risks of vaccination, as some American influencers did, and translating the answers into short video clips is probably not as critical as investigative journalism can be. Still, it requires the active engagement of the influencer with the subject, selecting and prioritising the issue as an editor might do. *Content creation*, then, adds to the epistemic function and throughput legitimacy. As previously mentioned, a content creator could be compared to an editor or author in traditional terms.

Finally, the *moderator’s role* is to engage followers in conversation and to react to their comments and responses. This function of responsiveness is explicitly relevant for a critical role in publicity. In his analysis of

different forms of media, Wessler assesses the “substantive engagement” of traditional media as weak (for television) or moderate (for newspapers), but also considers Twitter (now X) as weak in this aspect of responsiveness (2018, 89). This is because the interaction on Twitter is not a “broad, inclusive discussion”, as deliberation requires, and justification and civility are not prominent categories (p. 102). However, when confined to the interaction of the influencer and their followers, different social media platforms facilitate easy authoring and debate. Influencers who respond to their followers, value their questions, and engage in debates can potentially contribute to throughput legitimacy and the deliberative position of the influencer. However, there is an additional condition to be fulfilled. As discussed in Section 2.2.1, a published discussion confined to peers, according to Habermas, does not count as a public discussion. A plurality of social relations and interests is required for being considered as ‘public’. The same applies to social media discussions. When opinions can be unpolemically reproduced within the group and there is no contestation, even a publicised discussion might not contribute to critical publicity.

A final notion to discuss in analysing the role of influencers is that of potential opinion leaders. Suuronen et al. (2022), who observed the increasing societal and political role of influencers, even claim that influencers can become *opinion leaders* when they “1) intensively use social media in their communication practices, 2) collaborate with corporations to monetise their opinion leader status, 3) establish regular two-way interactions with their followers that often lead to parasocial relationships, and 4) engage in self-branding strategies to curate a consistent public persona” (p. 303).

Suuronen and colleagues do not consider monetisation to be a problem. When regarded as an effort, payment for the influencer’s work rewards a commercial service. I can agree to the ‘service’ interpretation; however, this global indication cannot differentiate between the American influencers, granted a fee, and their Dutch colleagues, considered to be extremely well-paid. In the latter case, influencers are charged with the reproach of opportunism and propaganda, detracting from their role of authorship. In addition, it is important to remember that social media platforms are commercial environments, applying a commercial logic of messaging. For communication not to be considered an advertisement or commercial promotion, an author or creator must adopt a deliberative position,

justifying her publications and, ideally, be transparent regarding the terms of agreements.

Key aspects of becoming an influencer or opinion leader and taking a clear stance in public debate, include the criteria of justification and responsiveness ('two-way interactions') and the curation of one's persona. This is achieved by not just spreading every message but creating a consistent and credible persona. For influencers, it is crucial to foster and maintain personal credibility. Being accused of uncritically spreading government messages as a hired mouthpiece compromises their claim of personal credibility.

## 4.7 Conclusion

Social media influencers have emerged as powerful agents in the post-digital public sphere. They reach young people and maintain direct, two-sided relationships with their followers. Their credibility stems not from expertise per se but from their perceived authenticity. The analysis of the role of influencers in Finland, the Netherlands, and the United States advanced the understanding of the normative preconditions of their role as epistemic agents in critical publicity.

In conclusion, exploring influencers' roles during the COVID-19 pandemic offers valuable insights into contemporary critical public discourse dynamics. Influencers, by virtue of their personal engagement and direct communication with followers, became significant agents in disseminating public health information. Their communication, which is perfectly adjusted to the social media environment and its users, empowers them to bridge the communication gap that traditional media struggled to close, particularly in reaching younger demographics who are less engaged with conventional news sources. As shown in the cases of Finland, the Netherlands and the United States, influencers acted as conduits for government messages, facilitating swift, tailored communication that was essential in a crisis that required rapid public response.

However, the evaluation of influencers as agents of critical publicity remains ambiguous. While influencers effectively amplify messages, the extent of their contribution to critical publicity – defined as an engagement in a deliberative, epistemic and reflective function – varied significantly based on factors such as autonomy, transparency and responsiveness. In Finland and the United States, influencers had relatively more freedom to interpret and convey messages utilising their own unique voices, which aligns with the requirements of critical publicity. This approach fostered professional autonomy, allowing influencers to communicate authentically with their followers, thereby enhancing throughput legitimacy. In contrast, the Dutch government's approach, which involved stringent contracts specifying message approval and content requirements, eventually led to public backlash. The influencers' role as mere disseminators of pre-approved information compromised their personal credibility and, by extension, their legitimacy as public agents.

As influencers, in times of crisis, are engaged as epistemic powers, the chapter argues for recognising the epistemic value of non-expert practices like translation, moderation, and endorsement. These roles can support deliberation by making expert knowledge more accessible for different groups. It echoes Lippmann's concept of 'intelligence work' to consider these contributions as epistemic labour.

Whereas conventional authorship presupposes expertise, training and institutionalised editorial control prior to publication, post-digital authorship might benefit from public engagement after publication. I introduce the idea of reflected authorship, which reformulates the conditions of authorship for a participatory media environment, situating authorial responsibility within dialogic and processual frameworks, rather than a fixed position. Additionally, to contribute to critical publicity and not be perceived as manufactured messaging or even propaganda, influencers have to meet certain deliberative standards (e.g. justification, responsiveness).

This chapter reframed critical publicity not as an institutional quality but as a function that can, under certain conditions, be fulfilled by diverse actors. I argue for a dynamic account of critical publicity, rooted in process rather than position. Critical publicity is not tied to institutional roles, experts or professions, but might include a wider range of authors, if complying to transparent and accountable standards, adopting a reflective position and engaging in deliberation. Under these conditions non-expert agents may exert themselves as epistemic agents, and perform a critical, public function.

# **5. Activists in media: Transforming publicity through epistemic protest**

## **5.1 Introduction**

As a second boundary case, I have selected the role of media activism as a critical voice contesting the scope and the epistemic procedures of public debate. In their protests, media activists address the depoliticisation and commodification of media, criticising editorial procedures.

The post-digital public sphere can be characterised as a highly commercialised, disorganised, and fragmented publicity context, in which traditional media organisations struggle to capture the central attention of a large population. How can socially relevant problems be effectively and fairly addressed in a dispersed and human interest-dominated publicity context? I will focus on the activities of media activists, who address and expose the allegedly inadequate information supply of traditional media, thereby exploring the boundaries between journalism and epistemic activism.

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, protest movements have had an ambivalent relationship with professional media. While they critique mainstream journalism for their selection criteria and framing, they simultaneously rely on those same institutions to amplify their dissent and reach broader audiences. In the current post-digital media environment, the relationship between activism and journalism has undergone a structural shift. Traditional gatekeepers have become increasingly ineffective in centrally coordinating or curating public debate. This produces a developing capacity among strategic actors and interest groups to address publics directly, bypassing the editorial gatekeeping of traditional media.

Protesters (unlike the influencers described in Chapter 4) have always been part of the public sphere and therefore are not new entrants to the post-digital era. However, their performance has shifted in recent years. I have chosen to include them as a boundary case, because present-day media activists represent a group of well- and swiftly-adjusted participants in the new infrastructures. Schudson and Anderson (2009) characterise the shifting media context as follows:

*Boundary lines between “insider and outsiders,” “professional and non-professional,” “journalist and blogger” are blurred today and growing ever more fuzzy. Instead of a sharply defined boundary line, we might better image a thick, poorly defined “border zone” made up of proliferating hybrids, shifting social and occupational roles, and networks of expertise. (Schudson and Anderson, 2009, 98)*

In this information landscape, journalists, bloggers, citizens and activists participate alongside each other, competing for the public’s attention.

Activists, as traditional actors in the public sphere but outsiders to journalism, skilfully exploit the post-digital, infrastructural opportunity of low-level publishing and distribution. Yet it would be mistaken to conceptualise this shift only in terms of self-publishing or amplification. To target the specific throughput aspects of this shift, it is beneficial to distinguish between activist approaches that consider media merely as tools (instrumental channels for mobilising attention) and those that view media as objects of epistemic critique. In the latter case, the activist’s effort is not just about bringing information to the stage to raise public awareness, but also about effectively problematising the role of media practices. This reflective form of activism manifests in several ways. Based on Rucht’s ‘Quadruple A’-theory (2004), I will differentiate three strategies addressing the media: creating alternatives, adaptation, and attack.

From the perspective of throughput legitimacy, the clearest form of an epistemic media-strategy is the direct public contestation of journalism’s editorial standards. This third form of protest, ‘attack’, directly addresses unjust editorial epistemic procedures and problematic definitions of common concern. These activist interventions target the throughput stage of critical publicity, not merely influencing input (new issues and voices) or output (visibility and effective mobilising), but also expose how information

is processed. This provocative intervention aims to draw attention to inadequate epistemic procedures.

The chapter undertakes a conceptual and empirical investigation of activist strategies that confront media institutions at the level of epistemic function. I argue that activists do realise an epistemic and reflective potential by offering alternative news sources, but also do so through their critical media strategy, which provides a reflection of public debate and its dynamics. By exposing bias and proposing alternatives, post-digital activists challenge media organisations to uphold their own critical standards. This shift extends norms of critical publicity to media itself, positioning activism as a vital reflective force.

I will select examples from recent protest actions, primarily those related to climate change, because these protests are widespread and appear to follow a clear media strategy. I argue that in the post-digital public sphere, activism is emerging not only as a source of alternative information but also as a critical epistemic actor. Activism can transform publicity and reinforce its critical function and repoliticisation by openly assessing 'professional' epistemic procedures of public conversations and journalistic practices.

## 5.2 An ambivalent relationship

Social movements are a modern phenomenon. Despite ancient revolts, turmoil, and rebellions, the social movement, as a vehicle for political contention, has only recently emerged (Meikle 2020, 2; Tilly and Tarrow 2015). These movements emerged at the same time as the beginnings of the modern media system of newspapers, making use of the new infrastructures of printing and distribution and, in later stages, of broadcasting. From the beginning, social movements and media have maintained a fundamental but complex, two-sided relationship (Meikle 2020, 3).

By their nature, social or protest movements striving for societal change are considered outsiders to the institutionalised political system. They organise bottom-up. As participants in public debate, protestors draw their legitimacy from something other than union membership or economic importance, as private interest groups do. They represent a particular public interest perspective, traditionally maintaining an ambivalent relationship with professional media. On the one hand, protesters critique the media, which privileges an elite perspective on reality; on the other hand, they depend on the media to spread their messages of protest (Breindl 2016).

Reviewing the history of mediated protest practices and activism, a common starting point is around 1960, with the rise of mass anti-war, civil rights, and student protests. In general, activist movements and journalism kept an appropriate distance from each other. Protest groups created their own media, such as 'free radio' and independent journals (Milan 2015, 4; Rucht 2004, 39–44). A second period, starting in the 1990s, is characterised by a proliferation of networked and self-organised blogs and websites, which tweak the infrastructure and bypass mainstream media's news coverage as much as possible. The third stage, dominated by platformed media, is defined as connecting and mobilising individuals in cloud protesting, a notion developed to analyse protest mediation, organised by social and mobile media (Milan 2015). Regarding their relation to journalism, the post-digital infrastructure offers activists more opportunities to share their stories themselves. Due to journalism's weakened gatekeeping function and the increased ability to publish and

distribute content independently, activists benefit from disintermediation, influencing the public agenda directly via their own messaging and channels (Chen et al. 2023).

This brief overview reveals that, due to infrastructural transformations, the critical and conflictual relationship between activism and the media has evolved, influencing their interaction. Initially seeking visibility, activists needed the media, but this relationship is not reciprocal. Instead, the relationship is asymmetric: “most movements need the media, but the media seldom needs the movements” (Rucht 2004, 35). Since digitisation created facilities to spread their message themselves, this has affected activism’s media strategy, reducing their dependency on media organisations.

### **5.2.1 Mobilising public attention**

Studying protest movements is also already present in Habermas’ reflections on the critical public sphere. Regarding debates on atomic energy, genetic engineering, ecological threats, colonialism, feminism and immigration, Habermas acknowledges the critical role of engaged, sometimes radical citizens in voicing these concerns publicly.

*Hardly any of these topics were initially brought up by the exponents of the state apparatus, large organisations, or functional systems. Instead, they were broached by intellectuals, concerned citizens, radical professionals, self-proclaimed ‘advocates’, and the like. [...] Only through their controversial presentation in the media do such topics reach the larger public and subsequently gain a place on the ‘public agenda’. (Habermas 1996, 381)*

Habermas praises the bottom-up engagement of social movements, reformulating issues of common concern. He accentuates this ‘dual orientation’ of new social movements as a reflective practice: influencing the political system and simultaneously revitalising public debate, thereby introducing new voices that alter and enlarge the public sphere. By introducing new perspectives, these movements contribute to the reflective function of publicity and throughput legitimacy.

The present-day, decentralised publicity infrastructures offer an increasing capacity for strategic actors and interest groups to address their publics directly, bypassing the editorial gatekeeping of traditional media (Bruns

2018, 165). Among these strategic actors are activist groups. A lot of research has been done to examine the impact of activists' media practices on agenda-setting and the dynamics of mobilising public attention (Vliegthart et al. 2016; Walgrave and Vliegthart 2012; Wouters and Lefevere 2023, Koopmans 2004). These studies primarily focus on the *effects* that social movements intend to produce through their (post-digital) media presence, as an *output* evaluation. Media are, in this perspective, considered communicative instruments for protest movements.

An appropriate example of contemporary agenda-setting is the series of protests conducted by Just Stop Oil activists, beginning in the autumn of 2022, with protesters glueing themselves to walls in museums next to famous paintings. Their actions, sometimes accompanied by the act of throwing soup, drew attention to fossil fuel policy and climate action, and were captured on film by the activists and subsequently shared via social media. In this way, they generated a massive media response. The protests went viral; the footage was screened and commented on in news programmes. However, some press blocked the videos and pictures, not wanting to become instrumental in attracting public attention to the protest.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, the protesters succeeded in dominating the news for weeks, albeit mainly prompting the derivative question, 'Are these kinds of protests morally legitimate?' Their primary question – asking why governments continue to subsidise fossil fuel industries when it is clear that they are the primary drivers of the climate crisis – was arguably less addressed.<sup>99</sup>

As in this example, protest movements are not uncritically pleased by their relationship with and their framing by professional media. Most social movements also challenge traditional media's dynamics and structures. These forms of protest not only advocate for their primary issue but also inherently contest the norms of public discourse and critical publicity. In

98 For example Lynch (2022); Mediacourant.nl (2022).

99 Nevertheless, sociological studies show that there is an effect of mediagenic protesting, especially when it comes to the agenda-setting potential of activists' presence in mainstream media: protest events result in media coverage, which leads to increased mass media attention being paid to the underlying issue. This in turn increases the political attention given to the concerns relating to the protest (Vliegthart et al. 2016). See also the research of the Social Change Lab (2025).

the next section, I will focus on activism addressing the media as '*media-activism*',<sup>100</sup> This pertains to my throughput approach as this strategy offers a reflection and evaluation of media coverage and its epistemic procedures.

The critical approach to media-framing supports the line of scholarly literature examining the media practices of social movements as part of their communicative strategy, considering media not primarily as tools but as practices that evolve in interaction with social movements (Della Porta and Pavan 2018; Pavan and Della Porta 2020; Russell 2018). As Della Porta and Pavan (2018) claim, the media and communication perspective of social movements was traditionally approached as merely instrumental to the movement's impact and consequences and not as strategies and objects of study in their own right. Communicative interventions were first conceived as instruments to gain public acceptance or to (re)frame the debate, not as communicative targets or objects of criticism themselves. The following section will formulate an approach to this critical strategy.

100 Media activism also refers to activists using (social) media as a self-governing domain to bring cases to public's scrutiny. An example is the activism around the #MeToo movement. Note that this is not the kind of activism I am referring to.

## 5.3 The epistemic dynamics of activism: Triple A

To engage with the specific throughput dynamics of media-activism, I build on Dieter Rucht's 'Quadruple A' theory (Rucht 2004). This theory outlines four distinct media strategies employed by the protest movement, often developed in response to unfair media representation. Rucht advanced his theory at the dawn of digitisation and new media; therefore, his theory predominantly refers to the traditional broadcast media, but also to some early transformations of networked publicity. Distinguishing between inward-directed (predominantly addressing the social movement) and outward-directed critical positions (primarily targeting the media), Rucht develops a theoretical framework, the 'Quadruple A', comprising four different strategies: Abstention, Attack, Adaptation, and Alternatives. I develop these notions and examine to what extent these different strategies contribute to the epistemic function of public discourse.

The first approach that I discuss entails creating *alternatives* to compensate for bias or a lack of proper and fair information in established media (an inward-directed strategy). These new 'alternative media' broaden the scope of information and ideas, while being more responsive to previously excluded voices and perspectives, thereby diversifying the input in discussions. This approach benefits from easy authoring and dissemination, as well as low-cost publishing.

Secondly, I address *adaptation* to professional media (outward-directed). This strategy primarily addresses the activities of social movements, complying with media logic, for instance, by hiring and training their people to become media professionals and manage their specific public relations. According to Rucht, this is performed by some professionalised social movements like Greenpeace (Rucht 2004, 37). This strategy encourages social movements to professionalise and tailor their protest messages to established media channels, rather than contesting or criticising their structures. Activists may serve as news sources, providing input and supplying the media with well-tailored messages.

Although the strategies of alternatives and adaptation contribute meaningfully to epistemic engagement, it is the explicit and public contestation of the media's epistemic procedures that most clearly and

forcefully advances the kind of critical throughput function that I argue is essential to a genuinely deliberative public sphere. This third strategy involves explicitly *attacking* or blaming the media for misrepresenting societal problems (an outward-directed strategy). In Rucht's theory, this strategy is most prevalent in the pre-digital context, probably because the internet enables protest movements to establish their own communication channels, reducing dependency on traditional media. Nevertheless, I will argue that the strategy of attack, aiming to expose unjust, inadequate and depoliticised editorial procedures of traditional media, is still effectively practised and serves as a repoliticisation of public debate, particularly contributing to throughput legitimacy.

I will disregard Rucht's fourth strategy, *abstention* from the media, because it merely aims to avoid media exposure and is thus not engaged in the throughput processes of critical publicity.

### **5.3.1 Alternatives: Creating new media**

The new digital and social media provide a promising infrastructure for gaining public attention beyond the scope of regular media outlets. Accordingly, activists have become less dependent on mainstream media (Tufekci 2013). Digital, self-publishing media constitute new opportunities for activists to critique mainstream voices and complement the news by providing their own perspectives on a given topic. The widespread use of social and digital media in contemporary activism has been well-studied. By creating alternative media, activists present different voices and issues that, in their view, are overlooked or suppressed on the public agenda. Through self-publishing, protest movements provide other perspectives that diversify public debate. In my model, this means enlarging the scope of the input, thereby also transforming the throughput.

In response to the 2015 United Nations Climate Summit in Paris (COP21), Adrienne Russell, an international expert on the intersection of journalism, technology, and political communication, and co-director of the Center for Journalism, Media, and Democracy, observes several examples of the strategy of creating alternatives. The COP21 Summit offers a well-documented case of climate activism in a transnational public sphere (de Moor 2018). Russell has researched various forms of protest that accompanied this international summit, performing a counter-information role. She documented a group of indigenous people in traditional attire

canoeing through the Seine, in order to draw attention to deforestation and the pollution of native territories. At other sites near the summit venue, ‘disobedient action’ Climate Games were held. Russell (2018) concludes that these mediagenic protests challenge and influence traditional news media to draw attention to alternative perspectives and stories – which, in a way, can also be considered as a form of ‘adaptation’ (see Section 5.3.2.).

Going even further, during the COP21 Summit climate activists effectively operated as autonomous news producers. The ‘PlacetoB’ media centre, housed in a youth hostel, was created as an alternative press centre, actively monitoring, producing, and disseminating political and scientific information, which would otherwise probably be neglected by conventional media. The goal was to create new narratives around climate change, expanding beyond the “perspectives of bureaucratic élites involved in the negotiations to a narrative that has science and justice in its core and to include a much wider collection of voices and formats than more mainstream coverage” (Russell 2018, 274). It was organised as a prototype of an engaged newsroom comprising journalists, activists, artists, and developers. It reported, weblogged, and broadcasted with the support of networked media and occasionally traditional media, such as television channels.

Alternative media provide new perspectives while at the same time producing a critique of established media (Rucht 2004, 41). They broaden the range of information and ideas. They offer an opportunity to voice new perspectives in public discourse. As Russell suggests, they might be more responsive to the excluded. By activating new voices in public debate, social movements foster the ideals of critical publicity for democracy, thereby transforming the discussion (as argued in Chapter 2). Including more diverse voices impacts the process of deliberation.<sup>101</sup> Alternative media aim to provide more direct and authentic information to engaged audiences on often-neglected political issues, offering an opportunity to highlight overlooked problems and perspectives (Breindl 2016).

101 A predigital example of this particular ambition is the foundation of the French newspaper *Libération*, established in 1973 by French intellectuals, giving voice to excluded discourse positions and effectively creating counter-publics (see also Rucht 2004, 37, 43).

If news coverage is inaccurate or unbalanced, creating alternative media is a suitable strategy to provide another outlet. By providing a platform for neglected voices and silenced issues, creating alternative media is an activist intervention that enlarges public debate, advances new perspectives and arguments, thereby mobilising the public agenda, and reflects on issues of common concern. It does fulfil an epistemic function, mainly focused on input and output legitimacy. Since introducing new perspectives reshapes the discussion, the strategy of creating alternatives also contributes to throughput legitimacy.

### **5.3.2 Adaptation: News sources**

There is also some (but less) literature from the perspective of journalism studies on the relationship between media and activism, for instance, examining to what extent activists can be considered news producers (Breindl 2016). From this perspective, it is not only the protest and its message that is relevant for news coverage. Rather, as Breindl argues, the social movement and its participants can be considered as relevant contributors to publicity processes, reflecting on the news coverage and its blind spots.

*Activists hold a central position in the networked public sphere, as brokers or bridges between decision-makers and citizens, similarly to the position upheld by media in democracy. (Breindl 2016, 261)*

Breindl considers activists as publicity agents who mediate between political institutions and citizens and contribute to news production. From my perspective on the epistemic function of protest movements, this results in activists' input-oriented contribution: they introduce new knowledge, perspectives, or arguments to the debate.

This approach requires an adaptive stance from activism towards professional media and its criteria. Activists collaborate with journalists to get their message across; they adopt a media-friendly style, supplying the media with potential news and scoops. A derivative strategy of directing media coverage is training your own professional spokespeople or embedded journalists.

Notably, Breindl unproblematically labels activists as knowledge brokers but does not reflect on the legitimacy of this knowledge. She depicts protest

groups as voices that take a “deliberately *critical* stance” and do not pursue “objectivity” (2016, 255). She addresses the activist’s position as something *a priori* critical to dominant issues and perspectives. However, she does not identify any consequences resulting from the epistemic contribution of the protesters, unproblematically considering them news producers or knowledge brokers.

In my view, regarding their role as news sources, activists can play a crucial part in expanding the scope of public debate by offering alternative voices and narratives, as well as critiquing dominant perspectives. These are primarily epistemic efforts aimed at improving the *input* of public debate. However, according to my definition, critical publicity requires throughput legitimacy. This legitimacy is ensured if and because procedures for throughput, contesting, epistemic function, and reflection on information are ensured. Otherwise, it becomes hard to distinguish between critical publicity, manufactured publicity and propaganda. Breindl’s approach of seeing activists as news producers does not adequately cover this.

A different strategy of adaptation, according to Rucht, is performing sensational actions. This strategy is not so much facilitating the media organisations, but intentionally complying with the media logic, namely recognition of the media’s desire for spectacle. This strategy generates attention but, as we also saw with the Just Stop Oil example, also runs the risk of subsequently being ignored or misframed. As Rucht writes about the New Left movement in the 1960s:

*[T]he movement learnt that it received wide coverage but could not use the mainstream media for its own purpose. To a large extent, these media were hostile to the ideas and activities of the movement. Therefore, the movement shifted towards ‘the attack strategy’ by analysing, criticizing, and – occasionally – directly attacking these ‘bourgeois media. (Rucht 2004, 44)*

### **5.3.3 Attack: Contesting epistemic procedures**

To explicitly contribute to the epistemic processes in critical publicity, activism can apply another transformative strategy. This third line of assessing the relationship between activism and media problematises the epistemic performance of the media. It challenges the media’s editorial procedures as a part of the presented problem, addressing this as an inherent part of the protest. In this approach, the communicative practice

of activism also reflects on media coverage. Here, activism becomes a contestation of the media.

In my cases, I will reframe and enlarge the concept of attack by 'contesting and exposing'. I argue that an activist's public performance does not merely aim at media attention and agenda setting, but *simultaneously* addresses, contests, and permeates or even infringes on the media infrastructures as part of the presented problem, offering alternative perspectives and claims for public discourse. While contributing to input and output legitimacy (by creating alternatives and influencing the public agenda), the direct public contestation of media's epistemic principles is the most clear, explicit and prototypical strategy for my throughput approach.

According to Rucht (2004), the strategy of attack seems to have lost importance as a result of facile publishing and dissemination via new digital channels. I do question this. New media do indeed make protest movements less dependent on their coverage, providing tools for self-reporting and correction. However, I believe the ultimate motivation for the attack strategy is not the public denouncement of the media for discrediting their protests, as Rucht claims in his theory. In my view, the strategy of attack has recently adopted a more ambitious goal, namely the purposeful exposure of editorial procedures based on unbalanced, unfair or commercialised protocols, that misrepresent or even distort public issues. The previously discussed deprofessionalisation and depoliticisation have given reason for concern to fair and proper reporting and have given impetus to the strategy. Additionally, the hybrid media context of broadcast, social media, and live staging amplifies the protest message, giving it extra momentum.

In the next section, I will select two examples from different protest actions, both attacking media. These are again predominantly derived from climate change activism. Since my focus is on the epistemic procedures of media dynamics, I do not discuss the primary subject of their protest, climate change, nor the claims of the protest movement; I will stick to the media performance alone.

## 5.4 Contesting the media and their editorial procedures – I

In this section, I will discuss two cases of activists who, live on stage, confronted the platforms that invited them to talk with their editorial strategies. These activists accepted an invitation, but, once on stage, did not comply with the prevailing standards set by these media establishments. They explicitly challenged the epistemic procedures of the media in their stage performances. In Rucht's 'Quadruple A' framework, these are examples of the media strategy of 'attack'.

As discussed in the previous sections, activists clearly benefit from the potential of alternative distribution. The decentralised, disintermediated publicity infrastructure reduces their dependency and presents a unique opportunity to critique the limitations of established media, while simultaneously spreading the protests across online platforms.

### 5.4.1 Stepping off the stage

The TED hybrid media environment organises live events and offers a media infrastructure of live talks and stage performances combined with a massive outreach of millions of views of filmed talks, streamed via their website and video platforms.<sup>102</sup> It presents world-famous speakers and affords access to high-end international audiences.

On 14 October 2021, TED organised a special conference on climate change in Glasgow: The Countdown Summit. Scottish climate activist Lauren MacDonald was invited to share the stage with Shell's CEO, Ben van Beurden.<sup>103</sup> MacDonald agreed to the conversation. She was informed about the format and the line-up, including the sequence in which the panellists would speak.

After van Beurden's opening statement, the floor was given to MacDonald for her statement. This was to be followed by the opportunity to pose a

102 As of 20 November 2024, TED Talks has 41.9 million subscribers on YouTube.

103 Also on stage were Christopher James, founder of Engine No. 1, an investment fund focused on long-term transformations. The discussion was chaired by Christiana Figueres, a Costa Rican diplomat who was engaged in the 2015 Paris Agreement.

question to van Beurden. After a prepared statement, which accused van Beurden's company Shell of atrocities committed on the people of Nigeria and the devastation of the climate, MacDonald posed her question. She asked whether he would "repeal the appeal" Shell made against the District Court of The Hague's ruling in May 2021, ordering Shell to reduce its worldwide aggregate carbon emissions by a net 45% by 2030. The exchange was as follows (my emphasis):

*MacDonald: It's a yes or no question.*

*Van Beurden: Well, again... you gave me some context...*

*MacDonald (swiftly interrupting him): I'm going to take that as a 'no' [...] We will never forget what you have done and what Shell has done. I hope you know that as the climate crisis gets more and more deadly, you will be to blame, **and I will not be sharing this podium with you anymore.***

*[MacDonald removes her microphone.]*

*Moderator: I would appeal to you to stay... I am definitely not the only person who truly wants to hear from you.*

*(Applause.)*

*MacDonald: **I do not agree with Shell's being given this platform** and I really appreciate that I was given the chance to come up here and speak today, but my soul cannot stand and stay here whenever I am being next to someone that's making me have this visceral reaction. Thank you for listening.<sup>104</sup>*

*[MacDonald leaves.]*

MacDonald's public protest aroused a lot of commotion in the audience, which persisted throughout the rest of the conference. The organisation was astonished by the overt accusation towards one of their guests and the public withdrawal of one of the speakers. Later that day, TED felt obliged

104 To view the entire session, see TED (2021).

to produce a public statement on their website, reflecting on their policy: “Extending an invitation to Shell’s CEO to be interviewed on stage does not represent an endorsement of Shell or their activities. We see this as part of TED’s open-tent approach to impact discussions and create a solutions-focused dialogue” (TED Staff 2021).

The organisation explicitly attributes an epistemic function to itself. On their website, they write about their Curation Guidelines. One such guideline is ‘reason’:

*Ideas must be grounded in truth. But how? The truth is notoriously elusive. Our best tool for pursuing it is reason, that enlightened method of persuasion which shuns personal bias in favor of facts, logic and evidence. This is our path to reliable knowledge and deepened understanding. Reason is also the foundation on which science is built. (TED 2021b)*

The TED organisation is a non-commercially funded platform aiming to inform and educate global audiences through their “mission of bringing great ideas to the world – for free” (TED 2021a). This specific edition of TED, The Countdown Summit, was focused on decarbonisation. It was, as the organisation underlined, “philanthropically funded, and we have deliberately avoided any corporate sponsorship” (TED Staff 2021).

In her statement, MacDonald asserts that in her opinion, giving someone the floor means that their actions are legitimatised in some manner. In her appearance, she directly attacked Shell for denying its responsibility. However, by stepping off the stage and commenting, “I do not agree with Shell’s being given this platform”, she attacks the public policy of the organisation and the epistemic affordances of live speaking to massive audiences, surrounded by an intellectual elite, that the stage and the worldwide platform provides to its speakers, and, according to MacDonald, thus legitimises the speaker’s positions.

Publicly denouncing a discussion by stepping out of it, as Macdonald did, might count as an epistemic intervention, creating awareness of the processes and agreements that host such a public conversation. However, to perform this act, she had to accept the invitation. As a result, she used the opportunity that TED presented to speak out in front of a large live audience, thus critiquing the organisation’s editorial decisions.

Obviously, a private or silent rejection never would have given her a chance to publicly call Shell to account for its policy and even bring attention to what from her perspective is Shell's greenwashing programme. She expressed her critique on stage but did not further motivate or explain her position afterwards. Therefore, this form of contesting media might rather be considered a form of primarily mobilising public attention while simultaneously critiquing the media context, attacking Shell and TED simultaneously.

#### 5.4.2 Stealing the conversation

Another case of 'attacking' professional media on its own platform is that of Dutch Extinction Rebellion activist Jelle de Graaf. De Graaf was invited to the daily talk show *Jinek* (that day presented by Beau van Erven Dorens due to the illness of the regular anchor). The interview topic was the 'Just Stop Oil' activist who threw tomato soup over van Gogh's glass-covered *Sunflowers* in the National Gallery in London a few days before (14 October 2022). After a few minutes of talking about whether the climate crisis legitimises the recent disruptive action of activists glueing themselves to paintings, de Graaf grabbed a little tube out of his pocket. Swiftly climbing onto the table and positioning himself cross-legged in front of the host, he glued himself to the talk show table, effectively taking over the conversation.

Here are some fragments of the conversation between the host and the XR-activist (XR; my emphasis and translation).<sup>105</sup>

*XR: I am stuck here on a live program, and I will talk about the climate and ecological crisis. I am going to discuss that we are talking about it now but did not discuss this when, last summer, hundreds of thousands of Pakistanis were facing massive floodings. We don't talk about the recent death of hundreds of Nigerians because of a flooding...*

*Host: But wait...*

*XR: No.*

*Host: ... Wait a minute, I will ask my guests...*

<sup>105</sup> The programme was aired on 25 October 2022.

XR: No.

Host: *You can't talk for the whole time.*

XR: **Yes, I will talk the whole time. You<sup>106</sup> do have an obligation to report honestly about climate and the ecological crisis, an obligation you do not fulfil. [...] 'Why didn't you invite a climate scientist? Why didn't you invite people from Nigeria, from Pakistan, or climate activists from the Amazon.**

Host: *I think your claim will be more convincing if I am allowed to pose a question. [...] Mrs Gordecker [director of the Van Gogh Museum] cannot have her say now. What do you think about that? [...] Can she answer this?*

XR: **Yes, but I suggest your viewers Google this subject.**

Host: *But I am running out of patience.*

XR: *I am running out of patience too, Beau. People are dying.*

Host: *Fair point.*

XR: *Yes, fair point. And, here, we are talking about fucking Donald Duck.<sup>107</sup>*

Host: *Fair point, again, but I want to hear some rebuttal.*

XR: *In the case of climate change, there is no real rebuttal. All scientists do agree that all living creatures, people, animals, plants, on the planet are in danger. [...]*

Host: ***Fair point, but you should engage in a normal conversation; otherwise, you will never be invited to a talk show again.***

106 'You', used in the plural in Dutch, therefore does not refer to the talk show host in person, but most probably refers to 'the media' in general.

107 In the same show, there was an item on the 100th anniversary of Donald Duck.

De Graaf's action generated a massive response on social media and in online discussions. The incident was widely discussed on Twitter, and the video of the action was shared, liked, and commented on – even beyond the Netherlands – giving the national media event some international reach. The protest generated both public support and criticism.

De Graaf is more outspoken in his media critique than MacDonald in her performance. De Graaf explicitly addresses the media as 'you' several times, referring to the media's obligation to inform its public fairly, and that it is not fulfilling this duty properly. In his plea, de Graaf contests the editorial choices of the programme (“‘Why didn't you invite...’; ‘we are talking about fucking Donald Duck’”). Media criticism, or more precisely, critiquing media coverage of the climate crisis, was a core message of his act of protest, perhaps even more so than climate change itself.

By effectively stealing the conversation, de Graaf contests a talk show's regular epistemological practices. In the Habermasian model, a talk show serves as the prototype of administered public debate, organising a controversy of opinions and replacing public deliberation. The administered conversation in mass media, between opinion leaders who replace the voices of the people, satisfies, to a lesser extent, the function of public contestation because it is a pre-arranged controversy of elite opinions. It serves as a substitute for public deliberation, staged and administered, reducing the public to the role of an audience of viewers. Additionally, the problem definition is also presented in a top-down manner. The programme and its team set the agenda and how and with whom it is discussed.

Public debate over common issues among central figures in leading media fulfils an epistemic function, primarily to disseminate public issues and highlight controversies. However, it does not invoke the personal commitment required for deliberation. Talk show culture thrives on the public as a passive audience. An invisible editorial team behind the scenes decides on epistemic and deliberative standards. The line-up of guests and topics to be discussed is set up according to the programme's usually undisclosed editorial standards. A 'take-over' on live television explicitly questions these standards of 'normal conversation' in media, its subject, its method, and its participants, exposing its discursive structure. It provides a reflection on the epistemic procedures of conventional publicity practices.

The commercialisation of publicity infrastructures, which has increased in the broadcast era, paved the way for trivialisation and depoliticisation. Lippmann and Habermas regretted the development that resulted in a growing interest in personality, entertainment, and the trivialisation of publicity. Talkshow formulas present a mix of public issues, popular culture, and human interest, an amalgam contested by de Graaf. His effort to repoliticise the debate includes the meta-question of critical publicity: do professional organisations adequately address issues of public and common concern?

As previously argued by Fraser (2007), in my definition, critical publicity should always include a reflection on the (probably ideological) foundation of publicity as part of the critical debate. Critical publicity should not take for granted what is public or being published as ‘issues of public interest’. It should constantly question the limitations of public debate and be aware of the self-fulfilling prophecy it potentially embodies. Fraser underlined the legitimising aspect of rhetoric classifications: once an issue is labelled a public affair, that issue becomes a public affair. As relative outsiders to the political and publicity process, activists have a position that enables them to critique the foundations and the dominant perspectives of critical publicity.

The effects of this ‘talk show take-over’ were, as to be expected, two-sided. It attracted a lot of attention and added to the agenda-setting of the Just Stop Oil activists. On the other hand, renowned journalists and politicians were denouncing the glue protesters in museums, as well as de Graaf himself climbing on the talk show table on live television, as ‘klimaatgekkies’ (‘climate morons’),<sup>108</sup> or even worse ‘terrorists’.<sup>109</sup> Denouncing activists as ‘terrorists’ (albeit with a question mark in the original text) or ‘climate morons’ is a clear example of distorting or nullifying the activists’ actions,

108 For example, consider Townhall reporter and independent journalist Chris Aalberts on Twitter, commenting on the ‘Just Stop Oil’ protestors glueing themselves to Vermeer’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*: “Well. And we just say that the radical right should play by the rules and not undermine them. This also applies to climate geeks. [As long as people can’t pay their bills, this isn’t going to help people]” (Aalberts 2022). Translation mine.

109 Charles Groenhuijsen, an anchor on the daily talk show *Op1* wrote on Twitter: “Tonight in the talk shows we will probably speak of shame about those climate activists who defaced a painting. But we do exactly what activists (terrorists?) hope for: lots of free publicity. Shouldn’t we just settle for a short message without a photo? Opinions?” (Groenhuijsen 2022). Translation mine.

previously described as the ‘epistemic downgrading’ of protest movements (Medina 2022). As Medina argued, one of the problems is the disruption of the uptake of the protesters’ message by undermining their credibility, assigning them as mentally incompetent, and attempting to nullify the protest itself, or at least distracting from the key message.

The theory of Medina, explained in the next section, is also an attempt to repoliticise epistemic dynamics. In contrast to the Quadruple A theory, it does not focus on the protesters but on the media’s role, as well as reflecting on the role of the public in this complex triangular relation.

## 5.5 (Re)politicising epistemic dynamics

Critical race theorist José Medina developed the concept of epistemic activism, arguing that in protesting unjust practices, such as racism, it is not enough to protest, raise awareness, and oppose the issue; a truly critical intervention also needs to address and change the racist epistemologies that cultivate the unjust practices. In highlighting the epistemic dimension of protest, Medina articulates a dual relation of activist interventions and philosophy. He argues that activism is a philosophical, intellectual, and epistemological responsibility. That aspect of the theory will not be explored in this study. However, Medina also draws attention to the epistemological function of protest acts and movements, which can be applied to my approach of media-activism as well, serving as a critical lever for repoliticisation. A protest, in the words of Medina, is defined as

*... a communicative act, which contains four different dimensions or functions: expressive-performative, testimonial, evaluative, and prescriptive. A protest act expresses public dissent and performs opposition to or resistance against injustice (the expressive-performative function). Public protest is also a way of bearing witness to injustice and of sharing experiences with the public through testimonial acts (the testimonial function). Public protests also articulate public criticisms, make evaluative claims, and sometimes develop evaluative arguments (the evaluative function). And protests very often, implicitly or explicitly, make demands and lay out paths for social change (the prescriptive function). (2022, 124)*

In Medina's theory, epistemic protest involves arguing, publicly articulating experiences, criticism and evaluations.

Inspired by powerful protest movements such as the Black Freedom Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, Medina developed a theoretical framework to analyse the mechanisms that culminate in the silencing of protest acts and the epistemic downgrading of protest movements. Displaying silencing and downgrading strategies, predominantly towards anti-racist protest movements, Medina determines these to be forms of

‘epistemic injustice’.<sup>110</sup> Denouncing these unjust strategies, together with a colleague, they introduce the concept of ‘epistemic activism’, explained as follows:

*... transgressive forms of epistemic interaction that call attention to, and potentially disrupt, contexts, intercontextual relations, and patterns of interaction that contribute to epistemic injustice. Specifically, epistemic activism can augment the epistemic agency of unfairly disadvantaged subjects, amplifying their voices and facilitating the development and exercise of their epistemic capacities. It can also wake up potential audiences from their epistemic slumbers, inviting them to attend to contexts of epistemic marginalization and to the voices that come from those contexts, stimulating new and improved epistemic attitudes and habits across contexts, potentially leading to more-just dynamics. (Medina and Whitt 2021, 22)*

Developing an epistemology of protest and resistance, Medina and Whitt aim to give voice to and promote the expressive agency of silenced and neglected perspectives, while exposing silencing and denouncing mechanisms.

Medina’s approach to protest is, in my view, an exemplification of a critical evaluation of throughput procedures. Reviewing the processing of speech acts in public debate is part of the public uptake and interaction of publicity. Additionally, as a precondition for augmenting the epistemic agency of marginalised voices, Medina rightly addresses the role of the audience’s uptake of protest acts. Supported by Robert Gooding-Williams’s book *Look, A Negro!* (2006), he analyses the media coverage after the exoneration of the Los Angeles police officers who, in 1992, had brutally beaten up a black man, Rodney King. Medina indicates an apparent demonstration of ‘epistemic downgrading’ in the subsequent reporting. Protestors were predominantly depicted as rioters (in the conservative media) or out-of-need-rioters (in the liberal media). Both modes of description conceal the radical message of the protesting, or, as Medina says, “publics become incapable of recognising what people taking to the streets say and do as protesting” (Medina 2022, 126). In addition, undermining the credibility

<sup>110</sup> This concept has been borrowed from political epistemologist Miranda Fricker (2007).

of the protest will lead to a defective uptake of the message. The protest can be nullified by reports undercutting the protester's epistemological agency. According to Medina, it is an important part of epistemic activism "to denounce silencing strategies of this kind as illegitimate, propagandistic ways of closing audiences' ears and hearts to dissenting voices" (p. 130).

In his theory, Medina also addresses the public's account of epistemic activism, involving more than merely listening but also "answering the call to justice by becoming actively involved" (2022, 131). He reflects on the complex relationship of protest, media and the public, addressing the public uptake in this triangle and calling them to action.

In the last section, I will present a final illustration of an attack strategy of activism connected to public interaction on social media platforms.

## 5.6 Contesting the media and their editorial procedures – II

In recent years, Extinction Rebellion has established a short track record of contesting and exposing media strategies as a part of their protests. In the United Kingdom, they have staged a series of demonstrations against professional, mainstream media, disputing their policies in reporting on climate change. Their main targets have been newspaper publishers, in particular News UK (owned by billionaire Rupert Murdoch), *The Daily Telegraph* (a British daily, considered to be a politically conservative newspaper), and the *Daily Mail* (a traditional right-wing tabloid and website). On 22 March 2023, climate activists sprayed the London buildings of News UK, the *Telegraph* headquarters, and the *Daily Mail* with green (washable) paint. In a declaration, Extinction Rebellion accused these publishing houses of unfair reporting on climate change and of downplaying the recent IPCC report, published on 23 March 2023 (Calvin et al. 2023): "with the *Telegraph* suggesting, for example, that the IPCC report was 'nothing but confected hysteria' and *The Daily Mail* accused the authors of using 'hysterical language'. *The Sun* [another conservative tabloid] devoted less than half a column on page two to the report" (Extinction Rebellion, 2023).

This contestation of the editorial practice, underlining the responsibility of the professional press in telling the truth and providing honest reporting, is not the first Extinction Rebellion action exposing particular media houses as dishonest, unfair, and irresponsible in their publishing strategies. In 2020, Extinction Rebellion activists blocked News UK's printing presses used for printing (amongst others) *The Sun* and the *Daily Mail* for 13 hours to condemn their role in the climate debate.<sup>111</sup> These recent protests explicitly assault media powers regarding their responsibility to fairly inform the public.

111 This action, clearly an illustration of the strategy of attack, resonates the student action in 1968, blocking the doors of Springer Press in Berlin, to provide distribution of the newspaper. This was a reaction to unfair report of student demonstrations (depicted as 'long-hair apes'), and supposedly creating the breeding ground for the assault on student leader Rudi Dutschke (example derived from Rucht 2004, 42).

An interesting criticism, addressing the responsibility aspect but simultaneously reflecting the reporting and editorial practices themselves, is contained in the protest where the windows of the News UK offices were smashed. This was an objection to coverage (on 19 July 2022) regarding an ongoing heat wave. Activists chalk sprayed ‘Tell the truth’ and ‘40 degrees = death’ on the front of the building, pasting recent copies *The Sun* onto the windows, illustrating news on the heatwave with sunny pictures of beach activities. In an associated statement, Extinction Rebellion rejects the editorial decision to accompany the announcement of a heatwave with images of “women in bikinis, beachgoers and happy toddlers with ice creams”, thereby downplaying the severity of the situation.

Social media reports from all over heat-stricken Western Europe accompanied the Extinction Rebellion protest. These reports described the cheerful beach pictures accompanying the news stories as misrepresenting the severe risks of extreme weather. These messages expressed public discontent by using pleasant images of beaches to illustrate alarming headlines. On Twitter, Dutch news agencies NOS and RTL-Nieuws were heavily criticised for their reporting, depicting toddlers in swimsuits while simultaneously warning of extreme heat and smog.

In the days following the protest, several news media publishers issued statements on their strategies. For example, in the Netherlands, statements were made by the influential news organisations RTL-Nieuws and Nu.nl (RTL Nieuws 2022; van Hoek 2022).<sup>112</sup> The internationally renowned Nieman Journalism Lab, a website reporting on digital media and innovation to promote and elevate standards of journalism, published an article with the following proposition: “Maybe don’t illustrate your stories about lethally hot weather with fun beach pics” (Scire 2022).

However, while explicating and adjusting their editorial strategies, these articles did not mention the protest at the News UK offices – despite being published in the same week. Two of the three statements also failed to mention online criticism (the exception is RTL-Nieuws). To explain their position, the Neiman Lab referred to a preprint article written by Saffron O’Neill and already hosted online for two and a half months (and at that

112 RTL-Nieuws and Nu.nl published their statements on 19 July and 24 July respectively.

time, the reason that *The Guardian* adjusted their policy a few months before the heatwaves and the protest (O'Neill 2022). However, given the timing and the widespread commentary on these pictures, it is not audacious to suggest a connection between the XR protest, the social media protest, and the editorial adjustment.

This transformation of editorial processes incited by (public) activism is, in my view, an illustrative example of successfully exposing, critiquing, and intervening in the epistemic procedures of media companies. The discussion of adequate reporting and accurate illustrations of the risks of climate change, as well as the contestation of editorial choices, was transferred to editorial boards, leading to the adjustment of editorial guidelines. By contesting and exposing inadequate and unfair procedures, activists contributed to throughput legitimacy by transforming the information-providing processes. In this case, this was partly achieved by activists as epistemic sources in the publicity process and critical public debate.

## 5.7 Conclusion

Activists can be part of the epistemic process, not only by extending input to new voices, new perspectives and new narratives, but also by contesting traditional media practices. They are thus able to produce a reflection on journalistic and editorial choices. As outsiders to the political and publicity process, activists can criticise and sometimes even infiltrate media, exposing potential epistemic malfunctioning.

This chapter has explored how activists influence publicity. They are sources of information and critical agents contesting the media's epistemic processes, by actively questioning, exposing, and transforming the dynamics of public discourse.

To analyse the different approaches of activism towards professional media, I discerned three distinct media strategies: creating alternatives, adapting to professional media, and attacking existing media structures. The creation of alternative media provides marginalised voices with direct access to the public, circumventing traditional gatekeepers. Digital tools and social platforms have enabled activists to establish independent media networks that present issues and perspectives often neglected by mainstream news outlets. This expansion of the media landscape has strengthened democratic debate by diversifying the range of publicly available narratives. The adaptation strategy involves activists engaging with mainstream media by tailoring their message to fit journalistic norms or by recognising the media's attention to spectacular action. This might lead to increased media attention on activist issues but also risks co-optation, misframing, or neglect.

Attacking media structures may be the most explicit, confrontational and clear form of media activism. Activists not only protest media misrepresentation but also expose editorial biases, challenge the epistemic responsibility of media institutions, and demand structural changes. Activist groups hold media institutions accountable for their reporting practices and their public assignment regarding climate change. These confrontational tactics highlight the media's role in shaping public discourse and emphasise the need for greater scrutiny of journalistic practices. Fraser (2007) argues that critical publicity must engage in a continual dialectical reflection on its

ideological foundations, resisting the tendency to treat publicly designated issues as inherently legitimate. As participants operating in the margins, activists interrogate and deconstruct dominant discourses, repoliticising publicity.

As a final approach to scrutinising the relationship between activism, media, and the public, I introduced the notion of epistemic activism, as conceptualised by José Medina, to critically review problematic patterns of epistemic interaction in media reports. This notion encourages the public's potential to engage, critique, and intervene in editorial procedures.

Protests can complement and adjust the epistemic dimension since these acts direct the public's attention, broaden the scope of issues and perspectives, and include neglected, silenced, and dissenting voices. Throughput legitimacy is generated by contesting and reflecting the epistemic procedures of media practices. Exposing and contesting discursive structures produces a critique of the epistemic affordances of live stage performance or talk show epistemologies. Publicly challenging the editorial policies of reporting and illustrating provides a reflection of editorial procedures, potentially even transforming those procedures.

The chapter argues that in the post-digital era, media organisations are publicly held to meet their own critical standards. They are being called upon to do so by activists who expose bias, question epistemic selections, propose alternative modes of discourse, and hold traditional media accountable for their reporting. This reconceptualisation reaffirms the continued relevance of critical publicity, but its standards also become applicable to the media organisations themselves. As a result, activism fulfils a reflective role.

# **6. Networked journalism: Reinventing epistemic legitimacy**

## **6.1 Introduction**

As a third case, I have selected the role of networked journalism. Historically, journalism was intrinsically linked to the infrastructures of (mostly private) media companies, which managed the entire news lifecycle – from production to distribution. However, the networked and highly commercialised public sphere has dismantled this cycle and dispersed the processes among various companies. The previously outlined developments of platformization and the dislocation of news have, to a certain extent, decoupled news services from media organisations, and enabled new actors, practices, and technologies to engage in information provision and challenge its boundaries. In the previous chapters, I explored the potential of alternative competitors, like influencers and activists, welcoming the new publishing opportunities, and taking up their role in the arena.

This chapter is dedicated to the self-understanding and reinvention of journalism as an epistemic agent, as a response to the blurred boundaries between news organisations and other news suppliers. As Carlson (2015) argues, since journalists' exclusive authority over news diminishes, they must reassess what, if anything, distinguishes them from other actors. They feel forced to address 'questions of boundaries' as a reconceptualisation of their profession (p. 9).

The platformization of the news industry has created a delicate situation: digital news distribution attracts new advertising, but the lion's share of the revenues from these ads go to the platform companies, which contributes to the economic problems of media companies (Pew Research Center 2023). The precarisation has produced conditions under which

journalism struggles to fulfil its traditional roles of providing information and facilitating critical public debate. It must develop “a sustainable *modus operandi* that suits this chaotic, complex and constantly evolving media landscape; once a dominant species, professional journalism now needs to find a habitable niche in the new media ecology” (Bruns 2018, 14).

Habermas (2022) warns that the platformisation of the public sphere and economic pressures have led to the decline of journalism’s influence on public opinion formation and democracy. He identified two key challenges: the already mentioned precarisation of professional journalism and the depoliticisation of journalistic practices due to digitisation. Traditional journalism, once a political and investigative force, is increasingly reduced to data coordination and attention management, diluting its critical function. Newsrooms, previously spaces for political debate, have become coordination centres for content production and distribution, further depoliticising journalism.

This chapter critically examines alternative economic models for journalism, such as foundation-funded journalism and networked journalism, which exemplify innovative responses to the economic and institutional challenges of the post-digital era. I argue that while media companies have historically supported journalism, their decline does not necessarily equate to journalism’s de-professionalisation and depoliticisation. New networked journalistic practices, less dependent on traditional media, collaborate on complex issues and adapt to post-digital infrastructures. Foundation-funded initiatives such as ProPublica, and globally networked collaborations represented by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), provide examples of how journalism adapts to these disruptions. These models, characterised by their independence from traditional media structures and reliance on philanthropic support, may be more adequate, albeit not sufficient, to restore the traditional epistemic and political function of journalism.

The chapter further explores altered throughput procedures in some of the networked journalistic research, largely relying on citizens’ engagement and open-source intelligence, as exemplified by the investigative collective Bellingcat. The open-source research collectives encourage transparency and citizens’ participation, emancipating news reporting from media enterprises and traditional newsrooms to a collective online process. In

doing so, they redefine the boundaries of journalism and its procedures, shifting epistemic legitimacy away from authority derived from institutional reputation to one founded on methodological transparency. This chapter critically interrogates how these emergent models navigate the tensions between traditional professional standards and new participatory approaches, reconceptualising journalism's role in the digital age.

The infrastructural transformation implies challenges and opportunities for journalism, allowing for investigative and data-driven innovations beyond mere content production. I argue that new journalistic initiatives that apply open source and networked modes of operation define and establish epistemic authority in a new way: not merely by their professional reputations but by their working method, based on open-source values and continuous, day-to-day publishing and transparency in particular.

## 6.2 Averting newsroom-centricity

In Chapter 3, I explored the rise of professional journalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as newspapers shifted from economic tools to platforms for political debate. This evolution was driven by economic growth, advances in printing, and legal protections. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, media ownership became concentrated, raising commercialisation concerns but increasing journalistic independence. The expansion into radio and television introduced new formats and wider audiences. Mass media brought commercial pressures, leading to infotainment and reduced depth. Still, whether in print or broadcast, journalism continued to serve as a gatekeeper, responsible for news selection and presentation.

Traditional newsroom-based journalism also has certain limitations. In the first place, gatekeeping processes presumably suffer from subjective biases. This argument was advanced at first by journalism scholar David Manning White, who, in 1949, researched the specific criteria used in the selection of daily stories. His research was aimed at routines in the newsroom. By studying people who worked there, he created a prototype of a 'gatekeeper', Mr Gates: "a man in his middle 40s, who after approximately 25 years of experience as a journalist (both as a reporter and a copy editor) is now the wire editor of a morning newspaper" (1950, 384). The prototype immediately displays the problem with gatekeeping theory, as the traditional newsroom selection has been based on class- and gender-biased criteria.

Theories on gatekeeping might sound a little outdated and pre-digital, but White's study sparked a debate on defining the 'news perspective', which expresses criteria for screening, judging, and selecting the news and finally presenting it (DeFleur and DeFleur 2016, 193). Gatekeeping involves filtering, researching, reworking, prioritising and editing, in other words, the throughput procedures, responsible for the route from the input (voices, preferences, data) to the output (presentation). The normative requirements for these processes produce the organisation, orchestration and curation of public conversation. In the interpersonal setting of a newsroom, gatekeeping is a process of applying journalistic standards. Gatekeeping intentionally directs the selection and limitation of voices in the mass media context, frequently prioritising institutional, elite and expert perspectives.

The traditional debate on gatekeeping has lately been replaced by the notion of news curation, which enables a more complex and nuanced view on post-digital public debate (Bruns 2018).<sup>113</sup> Traditional gatekeeping, long associated with professional journalism, entails a hierarchical model in which editors and journalists control access to public discourse by selecting which issues, sources, and perspectives are included in the media agenda. This model rests on institutional authority and editorial filtering. The present-day *curation of public debate* is distributed across a multiplicity of users, media, as well as citizens, bloggers, influencers, and algorithms, who retweet, share, comment, and link to content. This reflects a post-institutional publicity infrastructure, where authority is decentralised. While it potentially offers greater inclusivity and diversity, it also complicates epistemic filtering. As discussed in Section 3.4, the erosion of the gatekeeper paradigm due to the rise of digital media poses the problem of disintermediation, undermining the threefold epistemic functions of journalism: filtering truth-biased claims before they reach the public, exposing false claims that bypass this filter, and offering provenance signals to help audiences assess evidence independently (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga 2020, 710). This leaves critical publicity increasingly vulnerable to malformations of misinformation and noise.

Nonetheless, the digitised and networked infrastructural context also inspired new journalistic alternatives aimed at restoring some of the classic epistemic functions of editing. Recent networked forms of journalism, interconnecting professionals all over the world to each other, but also to databases and citizens, offer a broader perspective on journalism. These networks are more advantageously adjusted to the technological, international, and social transformation of the post-digital infrastructures and offer a response to de-professionalisation. Emerging from an alternative economic model and predominantly supported by foundations, this model is an emancipation of news reporting from media enterprises and traditional newsrooms.

113 Bruns (2018) also introduces the notion ‘gatewatching’, mainly addresses amplification of previously published, non-monitored content (by non-journalistic participants), republishing it on other platforms. Since this mainly addresses non-monitored republication, I will mostly disregard it in this chapter on the role of journalism.

This type of networked news reporting (which I will address in Section 6.3) averts the focus on the (obscured) professional processes in the newsroom, known as newsroom-centricity (Wahl-Jorgensen 2009). It reformulates authorship and throughput legitimacy by suggesting new standards of networked collaboration. Additionally, these networked models pave the way for ‘boundary work’, providing a reflection of the profession, its practices and its expertise, as Carlson (2015) argues: “Professional journalists’ claims to exclusivity over news production and distribution have weakened, forcing them to confront how it is they differ from other social actors – if it all. Understanding various responses to this environment requires careful attention to how questions of boundaries shape the future of news” (p. 9).

In the next section I will explore the potential of networked journalism as a first step towards rethinking new journalistic forms, applying new techniques and procedures made possible by digitised and worldwide networked infrastructures. Thereafter, I will explore a further step in networked collaboration: implementing open-source intelligence and citizens’ contributions, encouraging epistemic editing.

## 6.3 Networked journalism

As discussed in Chapter 3, the increasing commercial forces accompanying several transformations of the public sphere impacted the publishing and broadcasting industry and its processes. Although digitisation enables low-cost publishing and easy worldwide distribution, it did not counter that trend. Platformisation even made it worse by introducing a preference-based data-behaviouristic and obscure algorithmic distribution of media content, cultivating a consumer-capitalist refeudalised public sphere (Staab and Thiel 2022).<sup>114</sup>

Though there have always been initiatives to support non-commercial media, recent developments gave impetus to alternatives for the ongoing commercialisation and increased dependency on advertising, audience ratings, click-baiting, and platform power, including several new, self-governing journalistic initiatives supported by foundations and charities (Browne 2010; Scott, Bunce and Wright 2019). These newly emerged collaborations do not stem from (private) media companies and are not regulated, governed, or controlled by the publishing industry. These journalistic consortia, like ProPublica, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ) and Bellingcat, are based on an alternative funding model and primarily work independently from mainstream media companies. They fill in a gap, especially in international journalism, that has arisen due to platformisation. This gap created precariousness for traditional media and the publishing industry. In addition, they advantageously apply all the opportunities that the networked and platformed internationally interconnected media offer them.

I will use the notion of ‘networked journalism’ as a form of journalism that is more advantageously adjusted to technologically, internationally, socially and commercially transformed publicity. The concept was coined by journalist and journalism professor Jeff Jarvis (2006) as a better word for ‘citizen journalism’. A few years later, *The Guardian* defined the term

114 There is a lot of interesting literature on this subject. An exciting, early critical voice in this debate is Jodi Dean, who critiqued the intensification of information and communication networks as ‘communicative capitalism’ (2003).

‘networked journalism’ as “the idea that traditional journalism opens itself up to the public. It shares the production process from start to finish. It uses new technologies to include the citizen in every aspect of news-gathering, production, and publication” (Beckett 2008). Heinrich (2012) took up the concept in the scholarly literature. Journalism scholar Adrienne Russell defines networked journalism as a practice characterised by “the new diversity of collaborations taking shape between newsroom employees and everyone else, all digitally connected” (2016, 150).

The first notable characteristic of these networked organisations is that they are predominantly foundation-funded. The non-commercial initiatives, which since 2006 have come to comprise an increasing worldwide trend, form a present-day movement responding to the vulnerability of journalistic autonomy.<sup>115</sup> Being less dependent on clicks, advertisers and subscribers contributes to their authority. As commercialisation in the 19th century added to its emancipation from the party press, in the 21st century, funding from foundations contributed to increasing professional independence.

However, the scholarly debate on foundation-funded journalism addresses the challenges that this form of financial support poses to the legitimacy of journalism as an autonomous practice. While it may offer partial solutions to the economic pressure on media and journalism, discussions of transparency and the nature of funding are legitimate. There are sensible questions regarding whether it is clear to readers which sources of support are granted and whether ideological or even hidden agendas drive these philanthropic supporters themselves (Browne 2010; Scott, Bunce and Wright 2017; 2019).

A striking recent example of a promising but also contested initiative is the archetype of foundation-funded journalism, ProPublica. According to its website, the New York-based independent, non-profit news organisation strives for “investigative Journalism in the public interest” (Propublica 2024). The organisation was founded in 2007 and was initially directed by the journalist and former managing editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, Paul Steiger.

115 See, for instance Foundation Center (2024), providing the figures.

ProPublica has a history in independent, non-profit news reporting, which has resulted in six Pulitzer Prizes. (It was the first online news source to win one.) However, in its early days, the organisation, which was partly sponsored by the (Jewish) Sandler family, was accused of biased news reporting, working “within traditional ideological constraints”, and endorsing an “unqualified support for Israel” (Browne 2010, 896). ProPublica also receives funding from the Open State Foundation, which gave conservative critics a stick to beat its credibility as a journalistic institution, accusing it of a left-wing bias (Kennedy and Vincent 2023).

Discrediting journalistic initiatives by exposing them as favouring particular interests or the perspectives of their donors, is a common allegation against philanthropically funded journalism (Scott, Bunce and Wright 2017). Private financial support raises issues of the transparency of donorship and the motives of philanthropic donors. However, in their study on foundation-funded journalism, Scott et al. (2019) argue that endangering journalistic autonomy is not the primary concern or the most significant effect of foundation funding. The most significant consequence of this new form of funding is a shifting perception of what constitutes a professional journalistic practice. It incites a critical reflection on the boundaries of journalism and how it is understood, valued, and practised; it prompts questions about who counts as a journalist, what a news organisation is, and how it should be organised.

In addition to its funding model, networked journalism is characterised by several typical infrastructural aspects, namely that of (1) being interconnected to technological design, such as databases and information networks; (2) being related to other participants, such as citizens, amateurs, activists, and whistleblowers; (3) expanding geographical focus and being globally connected; (4) occurring in a hybrid environment and interacting with potentially contesting publics; and (5) working partly independently of traditional media companies. These five infrastructural characteristics afford a transformation of throughput procedures. Supporting Bruns (2018) in his shift from ‘gatekeeping’ to ‘curation’, the transformation reorganises the epistemic function, distributing the effort among a complex network of participants, publics and databases.

Additionally, as for the fifth criterion, this reorganises the relationship between journalism and media companies. Journalistic expertise is no

longer confined to professional media companies or publishing houses, which are dependent on subscribers and advertisers, but is also emerging in alternative contexts. This observation is not about ‘good’ or ‘bad’ journalism, but rather an exploration under which conditions journalistic practices can benefit from other financing models.

I will analyse two, rather different cases that reinvent journalistic practices in a post-digital public sphere using globally interconnected and networked technologies. These present-day pioneers in new journalistic partnerships use interactive and databased forms of information provision and reporting, that explore journalism’s borders and epistemologies in a post-digital context.

In the case of the ICIJ, the networked organisation predominantly relies on traditional journalistic procedures. I will demonstrate that the alternative funding model serves as an incentive for teamwork, countering the antagonistic forces of mutual competition and rivalry. Foundation funding empowers collaborative productions and enables (international) cooperation: “Foundation funding ultimately encourages journalists to focus on producing longer-form, off-agenda news coverage about topics broadly aligned with the priorities of the most active foundations” (Scott, Bunce and Wright 2019, 2035).

The case of Bellingcat (Section 3.6) goes step further. New interactions between individual journalists, connected to international research consortia, databases, whistleblowers, citizens, technological researchers and open-source intelligence, redefine the connection between journalism and media and may create altered authoritative processes. But no longer relying on the renowned codes and procedures of traditional news brands, the question is how to establish epistemic legitimacy. This question will be addressed in Section 6.7.

My first example is an international research project conducted by the ICIJ. This is a prototypical illustration of a foundation-funded, networked, globally collaborative journalistic organisation that establishes authority by producing high-impact news stories.

## 6.4 Case 1: The International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ)

On 3 October 2021, a centrally-managed, worldwide publication uncovered the financial interests of (former) political world leaders and public elites. On that same day, Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky, former British prime minister Tony Blair, Dutch Minister of Finance Wopke Hoekstra, and many of their colleagues made it onto the covers of their national newspapers with stories on tax-avoiding financial machinations. In various nationally-tailored news stories, journalists reported on the obscure monetary transactions of their political leaders. These examples were not even the most profound stories. The financial secrets of the King of Jordan, the prime minister of the Czech Republic, and several billionaires from the United States, Russia, and Turkey were also revealed in detail.<sup>116</sup> The information was based on data from offshore companies, predominantly located in the British Virgin Islands, that provide tax evasion strategies.

The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), who managed the simultaneous publication of the worldwide scoop known as the Pandora Papers, obtained these financial records through a massive leak of over 11 million documents. The processing and conversion of these data resulted in the “biggest journalism partnership in history” (ICIJ 2021a). For almost half a year, 600 individual journalists worldwide worked on their stories, focusing on their national political elites and researching the enormous database of leaked records. The unstructured data was remodelled into searchable files and consequently added to a previously built graphical visualisation: *The Power Players*, an interactive database available to journalists and the public, showing political links between more than 300 high-profile politicians in more than 90 countries worldwide.

The journalists, all connected to news organisations in their home countries, had a few months for their research, writing their stories in completely confidential conditions until the predetermined global release date. Their task was to transform the raw data into breaking news stories worldwide. And so it came to be that later that month, the Dutch Minister of

<sup>116</sup> For a detailed report, see ICIJ (2021b).

Finance Wopke Hoekstra faced a series of parliamentary questions due to his former investment in a letterbox company.

The ICIJ is a transnational, networked, foundation-funded journalistic organisation that does not employ the traditional economic media model of advertisers or subscriptions. It is a nonprofit newsroom and network of journalists uncovering the infiltration of finance into global politics, known from previous journalistic investigations such as the Panama Papers and the Paradise Papers. Thanks to the technological infrastructures of leaked documents and an enormous searchable database containing over 11 million documents, a networked structure of individual journalists worldwide produced dozens of nationally-tailored news stories. It resulted in a very impactful journalistic event, producing cover stories in renowned media outlets throughout the world.

A vital element of this journalistic endeavour was the publication of all the required data in a searchable, interactive database. Since this database, which contains all the documents, was released after publication, there was little contestation about the data on which this research was based. Because of this transparent approach, there only were debates over the *interpretation* of the data. In the Netherlands, for example, questions were raised: for example, do we need more legal constraints on offshore investing for the political elite? Debates concentrated on the *significance* of the findings. The data itself was not contested. The ICIJ approach supports two of the three lines of epistemic authority (further discussed in Section 6.5) that Ekström and Westlund (2019a) identify for journalism: authority can be attributed through assessing the quality of journalistic outputs, in this case the internationally coordinated high-impact productions and the interactive accessible database. Alternatively, authority can be derived from the process of knowledge production, which encompasses the norms, routines, and institutional procedures through which journalists select sources and determine what to publish, ensuring throughput legitimacy. Publishing all available data in an interactive database adds to the second form of authority: the transparency of open processing.

The ICIJ is a typical example of a new journalistic collaboration that does not emanate from the classic private media companies; it is a donor-supported medium. A mix of numerous individual donors, private foundations, and

public charities sponsored the investigations.<sup>117</sup> The ICIJ was established in 1997 by investigative journalist Charles Lewis. In their own words, the ICIJ is “driven by the belief that citizens have the right to be better informed, that access to independently-sourced facts is not only essential for democracy but is also a fundamental human right” (ICIJ 2024b). Their investigative journalism focuses on cross-border corruption issues, tax havens, and public accountability.

Journalism researcher Peter Berglez delineates the practices of ICIJ “as a natural and expected journalistic response to the existence of a post-Westphalian condition”, referring to Fraser’s critique of the Habermasian initial concept (Berglez and Gearing 2018, 4584; see also Fraser 2007). According to Berglez and Gearing, the practice of this internationally networked investigative journalism should be understood as a form of “global network journalism, viewed as a potential synthesis of the concepts of global journalism and network journalism” (p. 4575). Global network journalism, in their words, is “a networked and discursive journalistic practice that is geared toward the global world for domestic purposes” (p. 4581). The authors claim that the ICIJ provides evidence of the “emergence of a ‘global network journalism’ characterised by a particular epistemology (a global outlook on social reality) that is embedded in a networked rationale” (p. 4573).

The workflow of the ICIJ is a partly transformed journalistic approach adapted to the new networked reality. It is organised in a top-down manner, supplying input for news stories from a central research team and harvesting and analysing raw data into readable graphics. The output of this research, consisting of nationally customised reports on the harvested data, is predominantly published in traditional media outlets and relies on these media’s procedures. However, the processes in between – the collaborative research, the judging and modifying of the material – occur in international networks of independently associated journalists. The ‘particular epistemology’, differing from traditional journalistic practices, refers to an international, globally interconnected partnership of individual journalists, information technologists, and technical assets such as databases and visualisation, providing news reporting for domestic publics. The ICIJ,

117 For an accurate list, see ICIJ (2024).

as a globally organised, cross-border consortium, chooses to work with professionals who are their members, not with the news brands. Over 290 investigative journalists, both fully employed and freelance, form a global network that decides on the approach and the stories. News brands and media organisations are engaged via the reporters, as publishing platforms and cooperative partners, but do not have a say in the ICIJ, safeguarding the network from market or commercial discussions.

A prominent aspect of networked journalism is the choice of collaboration instead of competition for new scoops. The ICIJ chooses to share new information with a group of independent journalists, thereby working towards a simultaneous publication worldwide. Another characteristic element of their journalistic practice is translating big data into social knowledge claims, thereby participating in the cross-institutional combination of networked and data journalism.<sup>118</sup>

*What makes ICIJ's practices networked are primarily (1) the transformation of networked big data into publicly accessible media content in a global context; (2) the adaptation to as well as development of methods for secure use of networked information and digital technology; and (3) the dynamic development of new networked forms of collaborative work (cyberforums; global virtual news rooms, the Global I-Hub). (Berglez and Gearing 2018, 4582)*

In addition to my definition based on Russell (2016) in Section 6.3, Berglez and Gearing underline the beneficial aspect in the ICIJ example, where the mutual collaboration is enabled through networking. The ICIJ case does not employ citizens' or amateurs' input. It is a networked practice among professionals, globally and technologically interconnected with databases and information technology. I will address the contribution of amateurs in my second case, that of Bellingcat, in Section 6.6.

118 I will not go further into this subject, but for a discussion see Fink and Anderson (2015), Hermida (2019), and Lewis and Westlund (2015).

## 6.5 The epistemic authority of networked journalism

Scott et al. (2019) argue that the most significant consequence of a new form of foundation-funded journalism is a reflection on “what constitutes professional journalistic practice” (p. 2050). They claim that it is essential to ensure journalism’s ‘epistemic authority’ by protecting autonomy and maintaining professional standards of the boundary between ‘journalism’ and ‘non-journalism’. To provide professional autonomy, interference with the editorial decision-making of donors should be avoided (p. 2042).

The legitimacy of journalism as an epistemic authority – a knowledge-producing institution with high claims of providing verified and accurate knowledge - is extensively researched and debated (Carlson 2022; Ekström 2018; Ekström and Westlund 2019a; Lewis and Westlund 2015; Usher 2020). In a comprehensive encyclopaedia article (2019a), Ekström and Westlund analyse the framework of journalistic epistemology, which leads to constructing its epistemic authority along three lines. The first line of attributing authority is assessing the outcome of *journalistic products* like texts, interviews and reports. Many recent examples of journalistic features are interactive, searchable databases and in-depth long-reads and podcasts. Epistemic authority is derived from the qualitative requirements of output, the journalistic products. The second area is the *process of knowledge production*, shaped by journalistic practices, norms, and routines and ensured by journalistic *modus operandi*. How, according to institutionalised standards or procedures, do journalists decide on their sources, verify facts, and decide whether or not to publish? The professional practice of journalism, generally laid down in a specific code of professional standards, ensures its authority. This is predominantly an input and throughput evaluated characteristic.

The third line of establishing authority is *public acceptance of knowledge claims*: does the public consider these claims as authoritative assertions? Here, the legitimacy of journalism is validated in public interaction, resonating with the function of contestation and deliberation in my throughput model. According to Lewis and Westlund (2015), this aspect of journalistic authority has always been a contested notion, because of the legitimate question whether journalists are experts ‘in something’.

Journalists are 'interactional' experts: "Their expertise lies in their ability to work with and among other types of experts, ultimately synthesizing and translating others' specialized knowledge for non-experts" (p. 455).<sup>119</sup> Concerning public acceptance, journalists have no way of ensuring that the information they provide is believed or even noticed, unlike other epistemic authorities (e.g., the judiciary). This is a challenge to their knowledge claims: "While classical knowledge professions are able to use control over knowledge to maintain jurisdictional control, journalism has no built-in protections. It is perennially open to competition for other forms of public account" (Carlson 2017, 21). Journalists do not have specific expertise but rather social expertise. In news reporting, however, journalists can count on their social position of privileged access: journalists are present and the audience is not, establishing asymmetrical authoritative relations (p. 13).

Adopting Ekström and Westlund's conceptual framework of journalistic authority, I argue that the recent infrastructural transformations have altered the three foundations that generate legitimacy. First, it has changed the product: reports and stories are supplemented with interactives and databases. Secondly, it has modified practices since the networked public sphere is socially and technologically interrelated with various new participants and elements, changing processes, norms and routines. Thirdly, the relation to public acceptance has changed. The social expertise and the privileged position of being present or having access to unique sources are increasingly contested. In the post-digital context, a wide range of observers and communicators challenge this perspective of first-hand experience.

In sum, epistemic authority is established along three lines: the quality of the products, a professional practice, and the effective public uptake of journalism. From my throughout perspective, focusing on the epistemic authority of journalism defined in institutionalised journalistic practices and the relation between journalism and the public is productive. The subject of my exploration is not the outcome but rather the working process and the public uptake.

In the case of the ICIJ, the selection, filtering, and production of news stories, summarised as the second line of 'journalistic practices and codes',

119 For a discussion, see also Reich (2012).

are to a certain degree similar to the traditional journalistic process. Sources, confidential data, research, fair hearing, production, embargo, and publication in renowned media outlets are modelled on the conventional publishing process, but supplementing these productions with a full and transparent report on the underlying sources in a public database. The publication strategy, the third line of authority, is mainly organised via regular journalistic outlets: newspapers and magazines, affiliation with renowned titles (in the Dutch case *Trouw*, *Het Financieele Dagblad*, and *De Groene Amsterdammer*). Regarding the publication, the ICIJ relies on the reputation of news brands. Largely persisting in the same journalistic procedures and public interaction, in throughput perspective, the ICIJ builds on a conventional epistemic authority of established brands.

For my final case, I will focus on new, international networks that apply a radical transformed publicity strategy. I will explore the boundary work of research networks, applying open-source intelligence and deploying the efforts of citizens as the realisation of alternative models of journalism. Originating as a reply to the epistemic vulnerability of a digitised media landscape that is flooded with noise and disinformation, their open-source method of interconnected peer-to-peer-information redefines journalism's epistemic authority. I will address the participation of the public in journalism, which is also a frequent characteristic of networked journalism. Various authors have reviewed this democratisation of media participation as a new development in journalism, conceptually and empirically termed citizen journalism or participatory journalism (Bruns 2008; Deuze, Bruns and Neuberger 2007; Domingo et al. 2008; Lewis, Kaufhold and Lasorsa 2010).

Regarding journalistic authority, I want to address how the citizen's contribution alters the legitimacy of the journalistic process. According to Sue Robinson, the new participatory practice shifts the professional claim of journalism from a news-producing institution to a process. She calls for "an end to thinking about news as a discrete product and the beginning of considering news production as a shared, distributed action with multiple authors, shifting institution-audience relationships and altered labour dynamics for everyone involved" (2011, 138). Reconsidering journalistic output as an indiscrete product enables a transformed journalist-public relationship that shapes not only input and output but transforms the throughput of a continuous news production along the way.

Taking a closer look at the final case, the independent investigative collective Bellingcat can support the analysis of an adjusted notion of the epistemic function of journalism, remodelling the journalistic working process and its relation to the public. In the case of Bellingcat, I will explore a research process that produces its results during all stages of research, publishing semi-complete reports and corresponding with Robinson's notion of "the end of thinking about news as a discrete product". The ongoing public process of publishing and tracking more information is an "endless struggle towards truth", as Jay Rosen characterises the collective's practice (Pool 2018). Bellingcat is an example of a foundation-funded, networked, internationally journalistic organisation collaborating with citizens, establishing authority with high-impact news stories and not relying on traditional publishers or media reputations.

In the final section, I will question how epistemic legitimacy can be established in a horizontal relationship between researchers, publishers and the public.

## 6.6 Case 2: Investigative collective Bellingcat

On 17 July 2014, a Malaysia Airlines flight travelling from Amsterdam to Kuala Lumpur was shot down while flying over eastern Ukraine. All passengers and crew, almost 300 people, were killed. The brutal assault immediately became a worldwide breaking news story. From the start, reporting the incident was accompanied by a voluminous flow of disinformation – in retrospect, confirmed to be distributed by Russian trolls operating social media accounts. As a propaganda strategy, during the first 24 hours, numerous false claims about the crash and the missile's origin were distributed. This has become a well-known case of a deliberate misinformation campaign.<sup>120</sup> Due to the circulation of so many somewhat bizarre theories, it seemed impossible to uncover the actual cause of the attack.

However, two years after the incident, Bellingcat, an online investigative team, was the first to prove that a Russian Buk TELAR missile took down the MH17 flight. By following a digital trail of videos and photos published online a few days before the crash, the investigative collective spotted and identified a Buk missile system on the back of a Russian truck on its way to the launching spot. By merely using open source tools, traces on social media, geolocation techniques, and Google Earth, Bellingcat managed to reconstruct the attack. Combining the efforts and skills of dozens of researchers and data scientists around the world, Bellingcat provided the evidence of the Russian assault, publishing all their information online in an extensive report titled *A Birdie is Flying Towards You: Identifying the Separatists Linked to the Downing of MH17*.

The report was not their first nor final conclusion of their investigations. Regularly publishing their results online, including their methods and their sources in extensive reports, is part of Bellingcat's policy of transparency. Their reports do not present a final conclusion, but instead contribute to a shared and unfinished, imperfect process, regularly supplemented

<sup>120</sup> Steve Bannon, the former head of radical right platform *Breitbart News* and later chief strategist for Donald Trump, coined an expression to describe this strategy: 'to flood the zone with shit'.

with new research. This evolving process serves as new material for other journalistic and crime researchers, becoming part of a body of online research data. In the case of the shooting down of MH17 airplane, the Bellingcat findings on the Buk TELAR missile were verified by the Joint Investigative Team (JIT), the official international criminal team. They had access to much more information than that available to Bellingcat, such as phone taps and intelligence services data. In a press conference on 17 July 2019, four weeks after the publication of the Bellingcat report, the JIT presented its results, mainly confirming the Bellingcat findings.

The Bellingcat Collective, founded in 2014 with the help of private donations, is another example of foundation-funded journalism.

*Bellingcat is an independent investigative collective of researchers, investigators and citizen journalists brought together by a passion for open source research. Founded in 2014, we have pioneered the use of open source research methods to investigate a variety of subjects of public interest. (Bellingcat 2024)*

In 2023, Bellingcat received grants from Porticus, Adessium, the National Endowment for Democracy, the Dutch Postcode Lottery, Auxilium, and Zandstorm CV. Bellingcat says around 35% of its budget is raised from workshops held worldwide (Müller and Wiik 2023, 191). Its core team consists of a relatively small group of paid investigators, researchers, and editors, but much of its investigative work is supported by a broader network of volunteers and collaborators. Individuals become involved primarily by contributing independently to investigations or engaging with Bellingcat's training programs. The collective incorporates non-professional contributors and expert volunteers, bypassing institutional media hierarchies, though a core team of researchers monitors the epistemic quality.

One of the main characteristics of the Bellingcat method is self-publication. The collective has no connection to traditional news brands or media companies. Not being constrained by editorial guidelines regulating conciseness or reader-friendly requirements, Bellingcat publishes its semi-finished results in extensive reports online when it thinks there is relevant research to share. Their reports include many details. They do not and cannot rely on the publication strategies of well-known

news brands. In their cooperative model, globally connected individual journalists, researchers and technical experts collaborate, sharing their information with the public: citizen journalists and amateurs may join the investigations. Based on open source research, this form of investigative journalism reinforces “the collaborative turn in journalism” (Müller and Wiik 2023, 193).

As a prototypical illustration of the networked and globalised public sphere, assisted by advanced technologies, the Bellingcat collective allows people to unite in new and unconstrained ways, combining the investigative power of individual researchers located on different continents: “So someone in Finland and someone in the US and someone in the UK can work together to figure out what happened to MH 17. And that would have been impossible before” (Bellingcat founder Eliot Higgins quoted in Müller and Wiik 2023, 200).

The Bellingcat method, better adjusted to the networked public sphere than traditional journalism, uses open resources methods, social media footage, video pictures, and so on, to reconstruct claims of public interest frequently related to war crimes and assaults. They claim that media organisations no longer monopolise information in a digitised media environment. Hence, every individual connected to a network can do their reconstructive truth-tracking research. This method is also known as the use of open-source intelligence (OSINT), the collection and analysis of data gathered from open sources and publicly available information to produce new intelligence. Typical of the Bellingcat method is that they do not have privileged access to particular knowledge or positions. They do not rely on unrevealed sources, Deep Throats, or favoured access to experts or elites. In most cases, expertise is crowdsourced: by encouraging knowledgeable readers from their community to contribute insights, critique methods, or verify findings. They also sometimes invite experts to contribute. In that respect, the core team is guiding and directing the research; it is not a fully bottom-up process. That being said, Bellingcat relies entirely on openly accessible digital information. Every step is open to public participation, check and contestation.

The academic debate on open-source intelligence has many technological and empirical references. It also includes more conceptual and normative contributions. Media scholars Usher and Lewis (2013) conclude that

applying open-source intelligence provides a new normative framework for professional journalism.

*Open source offers the opportunity for technologists and journalists together to think about traditional journalism as espousing new values – not diminishing longstanding virtues, but instead providing a new framework that makes journalism more relevant in a participatory, digital culture. These values of iteration, tinkering, transparency, and participation, each embedded in the open-source ethic, can be brought into the newsroom as architecture and culture - as a structural retooling of news technologies and user interfaces, and as a normative re-articulation of what journalism means in a networked media setting. (Lewis and Usher 2013, 615)*

These values of open-source ethics are well-explained in the documentary *Bellingcat: Truth in a Post-Truth World* (Pool 2018). The film portrays the collective and its founder, Eliot Higgins, as a prototypical example of the new journalistic approach of open-source investigations and self-publishing, described as the 'Bellingcat method'. In the documentary, the approach is commented on by journalism professor Jay Rosen, who argues that the traditional tools of the media, like publishing infrastructures and publication strategies, are no longer in the hands of media organisations. According to Rosen, this culminates in the emancipation of “the people, formerly known as the audience” as active self-publishers. His expression resonates with a critique on the classic vertical, centralised media system, propagating the horizontal flow of citizen-to-citizen information (Rosen 2012). It welcomes adjusted horizontalised epistemic procedures.

In traditional journalism, the journalist relies on the reputation of the news brand (for example, the BBC). Their professional, institutional standards guarantee its epistemic authority to a certain degree. Citizen investigative journalists do not have that reputation. As practised by the Bellingcat collective, they reformulate the epistemic authority of journalism. Rosen summarises this new paradigm of transparency, set against the traditional perspective: “What the journalist says is not: ‘Trust me, I’m with the BBC.’ It is: ‘Don’t believe me? Here’s the evidence’” (ibid.). In other words, and according to their website, the Bellingcat collective believes in transparency and accountability as its central values, legitimising their authority.

It is not adequate to describe Bellingcat's relation to the public as a group of researchers connected with some participating members of an audience, co-creating some new report. Moreover, their relation to the public lacks the conventional asymmetry. All research, all sources, and all semi-final results are public. Going public is not the end of the process but part of the research process. Except for interactions between the researchers, the process occurs in public and is supervised by the public.

Thanks to their process of publishing while researching and creating, working as independent professionals, and not being restricted by editorial guidelines of storytelling or conciseness, the Bellingcat method of publishing transforms public relations more than any traditional news brands in co-creation with citizen and amateur journalists do. Moreover, the open-source practice is based on principles of participation from multiple sources, collaborative community building and increased transparency. Just like foundation-funded journalism, open-source intelligence encourages a new articulation of what journalism is. Their participatory logic includes crowdsourcing, transparency, and open methodological publication, allowing readers and experts to engage. This replaces the *Problemverarbeitung*, the transformation and interpretation of issues, traditionally conceived as editorial work, from the editorial desk to online discussions in the public arena, bypassing institutional media hierarchies.

However, a network-based investigation model raises questions about the epistemic authority of its research, results and reports, traditionally defined in vertical relations. This epistemic authority of the research collective is redefined in procedural norms.

## 6.7 From epistemic authority to epistemic legitimacy

The alleged de-professionalisation of journalism demands a reconceptualisation of epistemic authority. Professional journalism's influence is declining, and its authority is contested. New journalistic initiatives are inventing novel ways of establishing alternative authoritative relationships using new digital sources and data technologies. These new initiatives, predominantly outside traditional media companies, must reinvent their methods and develop their journalistic authority. Some do so closely with conventional news brands, as the ICIJ does. Others prefer to create a new research method, embedding new values and new procedures of legitimacy, such as the Bellingcat collective.

The second line of collectives, which work with open-source data and include amateurs in their process, establishes a different relation to the public. This is not the traditional asymmetrical, authoritative relation of experts to the public but a more horizontally defined relation. These collectives do not rely on or closely cooperate with traditional news organisations. Instead, they have to establish their epistemic legitimacy in another way. It is not the brand's reputation that authorises the message; instead, the transparent, imitable process authorises it. As the Bellingcat investigation of the downing of MH17 shows, authority is not derived by a trusted consigner; the transparency and accountability of the process ensure it, addressing questions such as: How is this report produced? Where does the information come from? Can I track down all the original traces leading to the reconstruction or the information in the original records? Can I contribute new perspectives to the (ongoing) research? This method of working contributes to a new normative theory of epistemic authority.

The alternative post-digital perspective on epistemic authority is outlined nicely by the philosopher Noortje Marres. In an article dedicated to respect for facts and knowledge in a public discourse dominated by social media (2018), Marres perceives a nostalgic reflex in the normative debate. This nostalgia refers to the epistemic authority of experts and journalistic procedures and suggests a return to the supremacy of facts. This nostalgic strategy is supported by editorial and technical instruments like fact-checkers and technological fixes to counter disinformation. In discussing

this claim, Marres argues that this strategy is at risk of “re-instating an outdated strategy for securing the role of facts in public debate, one in which public respect for knowledge is based on authority” (p. 424). In today’s post-digital public sphere, authority cannot be derived by rehabilitating a traditional epistemic hierarchy. Conversely, authority can only be acquired ‘the hard way’, through epistemic diversity:

*... it is no longer self-evident that public respect for facts can be secured through an appeal to the authority of experts or grounded in the authority of statements that are validated outside the public domain. Indeed, as long as factual knowledge derives its authority from an inaccessible realm beyond the public, it is all too likely to remain the target of anti-elite movements. In today’s dynamic and diverse public spheres, epistemic authority will also have to be earned the hard way, through an exchange between epistemically diverse viewpoints. (Marres 2018, 441)*

In contrast to the fact-checking expert strategy rejected by Marres, an alternative strategy is proposed by journalism scholars Müller and Wiik (2023). They define the new role of the journalist as changing from a gatekeeper to a gate-opener, bringing together epistemically diverse viewpoints that accentuate today’s participative and interactive aspect of journalism: “The open-source investigators thus transform the traditional role of the journalist as ‘controller’ and ‘gatekeeper’ into an enabler of free collaboration, opening ‘gates’ towards new spaces and actors” (p. 189).

The articulation of journalism does not merely focus on disclosing news or new facts but underscores the impact of unlocking, interpreting and curating the accumulated information. Digitisation undeniably altered journalism, but even so, it expanded the profession, re-exploring its epistemic function.

Journalism’s role in post-digital publicity undergoes a shift from content control to process curation. As the case of Bellingcat shows, open-source technology and networks can include experts and highly specialised expertise in an effective way, combining regional and language experts, data scientists, technical and forensic experts with the observations and research of ‘normal citizens’. The epistemic dynamics are not organised in a ‘nostalgic’ top-down order but in a networked infrastructure connecting citizens, databases and experts, exchanging observations. The transparency

of its practice ensures its procedural legitimacy, open-source research and respect for facts.

For journalism, rearticulating its relationship with the public by attributing the public aspect of journalism as a productive part of *Öffentlichkeit* will encourage an ongoing debate challenged by epistemically diverse viewpoints. Reporting is a process of going public, being transparent, and producing continuous self-publication based on open-source intelligence that is interconnected with citizen researchers. Considering the active participation and the more horizontal relationship between researchers and amateurs, the notion of epistemic legitimacy is more adequate than that of epistemic authority. The legitimation of journalistic authority shifts from professionalism as a property of a trusted consigner to a transformed, trusted and transparent practice and an interactive relationship between researchers and publics.

## 6.8 Conclusion

The evolution of journalism in the context of post-digital infrastructures underscores the dynamic interplay between technological innovation, institutional transformation, and societal expectations. As this chapter has demonstrated, the post-digital age has profoundly disrupted traditional journalistic paradigms, challenging the epistemic authority of established practices while offering new opportunities for legitimacy and innovation.

Traditional journalism relied on gatekeeping, where editors selected, filtered, and shaped news based on importance, proximity, and prominence. Digital media has disrupted gatekeeping, reducing editorial control and increasing misinformation risks. Networked journalism offers an alternative, connecting professionals worldwide to restore credibility. This model moves beyond newsroom-centricity, but the question is how to maintain journalism's epistemic role of filtering truth, exposing falsehoods, and ensuring reliable public discourse.

The characteristics of networked foundation-funded journalism discussed in this chapter, some of which is working with open-source tools, converge in the tendency towards collaboration instead of competition. As I have argued here, the ICIJ and Bellingcat, prototypes of foundation-funded, networked journalism, can encourage a longer-form, off-agenda, internationally interconnected type of news reporting. However, this specific economic model, being independent of private media companies, might be more adequate (albeit not sufficient) to restore the traditional epistemic function of journalism.

Bellingcat's use of open-source intelligence and participatory approach to investigative reporting illustrates the potential of transparency and collaboration to redefine journalism's epistemic function. These practices shift the locus of legitimacy from institutional reputation to a commitment to methodological transparency.

The implications of these shifts extend beyond the operational dynamics of journalism. They challenge us to reconsider the relationship between journalism and its publics. The post-digital era demands a more interactive and participatory engagement model that embraces the horizontal interplay

between journalists, citizen contributors, and networked publics. This reconfiguration not only democratizes the production of knowledge but also enhances the epistemic legitimacy of journalism by fostering diverse perspectives and collaborative research, shifting from a vertical relation, into one defined by procedural norms.

In conclusion, the post-digital era challenges journalism to transcend its historical limitations in professional media infrastructures and innovate to reaffirm its relevance and authority. As journalism loses exclusive control over news, the discipline must rethink what sets it apart from other actors, redefining its boundaries. Foundation-funded and networked journalism, as examples of such boundary work, are initiatives that are better adjusted to the new technological networked infrastructures and have been able to establish epistemic legitimacy and contribute to critical publicity.

The chapter proposes a reconceptualisation of the normative requirements for critical publicity as a response to the platformised, fragmented, and participatory nature of the post-digital public sphere. In this rearticulation, legitimacy is no longer granted by brand or reputation, but is earned through transparent practices, collaborative processes, and a pluralistic engagement with epistemic diversity. Journalism's role in critical publicity is preserved by a shift from content control to process curation: journalism becomes not a discipline of reporting, but a public epistemic practice.

# 7. Final reflections

*A democratic system is damaged as a whole when the infrastructure of the public sphere can no longer direct the citizens' attention to the relevant issues that need to be decided and, moreover, ensure the formation of competing public opinions – and that means qualitatively filtered opinions. (Habermas 2022b, 167)*

For these final reflections, I first would like to share a few personal thoughts on my engagement with the research topic: public opinion formation and critical publicity.

As described in Chapter 3, by the late 20th century and the early stages of digitisation, the commercialised mass media-dominated public sphere began shifting toward a networked model. This transformation initially sparked optimism among scholars and the public alike. Drawing on Manuel Castells' concept of the 'network society' (1996), the networked public sphere was understood as a space enabled by media infrastructures that connected citizens both to one another and to a global flow of information and communication technologies. This interconnected environment was celebrated for its deliberative potential. Benkler (2006) highlighted the internet's evolution as both a challenge and an opportunity, stressing its capacity to foster public participation and broaden access to information. Digitisation and networking reduced communication barriers, allowed global interaction, and opened up new avenues for knowledge exchange. Importantly, low-cost, accessible digital tools were seen as a possible counterbalance to increasing media commercialisation.

As a student, I experienced this transformation firsthand. Looking back, it was a time of innovation aimed at embedding public values into digital infrastructures. In 1994, Dutch technology and design pioneers (including philosophy students) launched The Digital City in Amsterdam. Around the same time, the internet provider XS4ALL emerged (Stikker 2019). The Digital City was a Dutch 'freenet', an open, accessible online community.

Its city metaphor was intentionally chosen to foster a sense of public engagement and communication.<sup>121</sup>

From 1995, when I started working as a student at the recently established *Filosofie Magazine*, I followed these experiments with great interest. Obviously, these inventions were damn handy – suddenly, we had a line at our disposal with which to send our files, which was much faster than taking a floppy disk to the graphic designer by car. But mainly because of their enormous democratising potential, these evolutions captured my attention.

With the internet, the early pioneers thought, Habermas’ deliberative ideal seemed to become attainable for the first time at a large scale. Of course, these innovators saw potential risks of easy exchange of information – this would also be exploited by criminal networks, for example. But the feeling of constructing a new, unparalleled public dimension prevailed: the Digital City was going to serve as a real public realm, a free space for information and exchange, to which everyone could gain access worldwide.<sup>122</sup>

In a way, my inspiration for this thesis started here.

Since then, over the past decades, three distinct professional experiences have been particularly relevant to my perspective on public opinion formation. Though I never thought of these distinctions before writing the thesis, I can divide my engagement in public debate into three relevant positions, centralised around the paradigms of input, output and throughput.

In my years as editor-in-chief (2001-2015), I was foremostly concerned with cultivating and expanding public debate with various philosophical interventions. My daily work consisted of inviting, developing, acquiring, curating, editing, interviewing, moderating, and selecting philosophical voices and perspectives, as well as creating new publication forms. In hindsight, and in the terms developed in this thesis, most of my work was developing and taking care of proper *throughput* processes, as I described

121 For a first-hand report of this fascinating history, and its continuation, see Stikker (2019).

122 As also reflected in the name of the one of the first Amsterdam-based internet providers, xs4all – ‘access for all’.

these in the chapters: processing information and voices, filtering, and deciding on their quality.

Secondly, from 2019 to 2021, I was appointed a Thinker Laureate of the Netherlands. That position provided a platform for me to contribute to public opinion formation as a prominent voice in various media, public stages, podcasts, newspapers, radio, television, etc. Though trying to stay away from actual opinioning and focusing on making philosophical interventions to public debate, I mainly contributed to the *input* side: adding a view, another (philosophical) perspective.

Third, and most recently, in 2023 I was elected as a member of the Senate. I am involved in parliamentary decision-making and, in that sense, primarily engaged in the *output* of public debate. Consulting public opinion and opinion polls is (sometimes to maddening levels) part of our daily morning routine, but mainly as an outcome, a result that serves as a start to the day and a compass for the subsequent political process of ‘winning a majority’.

These three paradigms can be distinguished to a certain extent, but in all these experiences, I noticed a great dependence, mostly hidden from view, on the machinery of critical publicity. The filtering, the framing, and the curation do, to a great extent, determine the more apparent presence and outcomes. This is why I, also in my scholarly approach, underline the relevance of ‘the how’: the *making* of public debate. In addition, due to digitisation, the throughput perspective has become even more obscured and increasingly challenged. As I argued in Chapter 2, a decline of throughput procedures – through corruption, incompetence, exclusion, or whatever may be the case – can critically undermine legitimacy and collapse public credibility like a house of cards. As put forward in this thesis, I think that platformisation, through increased obscurantism and driven by highly capitalist logic, might do just that.

These personal experiences and observations may at least partially explain my interest in and commitment to the role of critical publicity in public opinion formation. Informed by my previous experiences, with this dissertation, I have investigated and deepened this problem with a scholarly approach. Having witnessed a technological, but also social and economic transformation, that simultaneously promised to realise new public ideals –

which it only did by degrees, and over a short period of time – I have come to think about the interconnection of infrastructures and normative processes of publicity. To get a more philosophical grip on this topic, I foregrounded the normative, philosophical perspective on publicity, thinking of what publicity *could* ideally be. This brought me to the question of the normative requirements of critical publicity, which provide the standards against which actual communicative practices, or a potential deformation of these, can be evaluated.

### **Throughput as the missing dimension**

This prompts a return to my central question: Are the normative requirements for the role of critical publicity, mostly developed in the predigital era, still applicable after the digitisation of media infrastructures? Can these criteria be met by alternative publishing features, or do they need to be reconceptualised?

In this thesis, I have developed a normative framework that critically reassesses the normative requirements for the role of critical publicity in public opinion formation. Dissecting critical publicity into processes and the infrastructures affording those processes, allows me to foreground the normative dimension, which I evaluate along lines of input, output and throughput legitimacy. I identify throughput legitimacy as a an overlooked, but crucial dimension of critical publicity.

Traditional legitimacy models have relied primarily on input legitimacy, which emphasises representation and inclusion, and output legitimacy, which focuses on effectiveness and policy outcomes. However, as demonstrated throughout this analysis, these perspectives are insufficient for understanding the complexities of public opinion formation, especially in the post-digital era. Instead, I argue that throughput legitimacy – ensured by the processes through which public discourse is generated, contested and refined – is an essential normative paradigm for assessing the critical qualities of democratic communication. I argue that public opinion formation fosters democracy as a supporting pillar if and because it is generated by critical publicity that has input, output and throughput legitimacy. This means assuring a representational dimension (input: voices), a presentational dimension (output: efficacy, mobilisation of opinions on an agenda), and a procedural dimension (throughput: tested in controversy, epistemic function, and problem definition).

Part I engages with the works of Nadia Urbinati and Jürgen Habermas to construct a model of public opinion formation that moves beyond aggregative and proceduralist approaches. The question is: Which theoretical framework offers a thorough understanding of public opinion formation as an ongoing process rather than a final outcome? Urbinati's diarchic model of democracy, which distinguishes between the domains of will and opinion, provides a useful structural lens for understanding the interrelation of political institutions and public discourse. However, as I have argued, Urbinati's emphasis on fair procedures and the institutional mediation of distinct opinions on a 'forum' under-theorises the deliberative dynamics shaping public opinion, and is insufficient to explain *how* a majority comes to be a majority, which is fundamental for my normative approach to public opinion *formation*.

By contrast, Habermas' deliberative model emphasises the epistemic and reflective qualities of public discourse. Yet Habermas' traditional model does not sufficiently account for the evolving mechanisms of publicity in a digital and networked media environment. The primary limitation of both perspectives is their relative neglect of the processes, structured by media organisations, that shape and sustain public debate – the very processes that define throughput legitimacy. I claim that in Habermas' framework, throughput legitimacy is not very well developed, as he essentially relies on professional institutions to take care of establishing proper procedures. This professional practice is endowed to 'the media system', which is mainly conceived of as a black box, leaving its processual requirements implicit.

By incorporating throughput legitimacy into the normative evaluation of public discourse, I present a revised model that addresses the shortcomings of traditional frameworks. Throughput legitimacy captures three key functions: the deliberative, epistemic and reflective quality of public discourse.

Firstly, *public controversy and contestation* are deliberative functions confronting distinct and competing preferences in a plurality of viewpoints. Publicity must not merely disseminate and aggregate opinions but facilitate rigorous debate and challenge dominant narratives. The second function is *epistemic processing*, conceiving public debate as a process of continuous collective reasoning. It entails engaging with information and arguments, thereby activating the cognitive potential that makes deliberation a

meaningful contribution to opinion formation. As I argued in Chapter 1, the epistemic potential grants normativity to the potential of collective learning; it does not guarantee a correct outcome, but it establishes a process of revision. Thirdly, the *reflective function*: public debate must be ever open to correcting itself and to new problem definitions, critically reflecting on issues of common concern. Publicity should not only discuss pre-existing issues but actively shape new frameworks and perspectives for understanding public concerns, advancing a continuous cycle of learning and adaptation.

I argue that the introduction of throughput legitimacy as a critical component of public opinion formation is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary media transformations. One of the problems of digitisation is that it tends to primarily spotlight the input ('who') and output ('what') of publicity, while obscuring the throughput ('how'), traditionally sustained by professional practices. This is increasingly significant, as digitisation contributes to the precarisation of professional journalism, disrupting its essential processes. Additionally, the digitisation of the public sphere has disordered traditional models of media intermediation, shifting the balance of power away from institutional gatekeepers toward networked forms of communication, algorithmic intermediation and editing, further obfuscating the throughput procedures. While this shift has democratised access to public discourse, it has also introduced new vulnerabilities, such as the proliferation of unchecked information, the rise of algorithmic gatekeeping and intermediation, and the fragmentation of discourse.

If critical publicity is to retain its legitimacy in a digital age, it must be evaluated not only by who participates (input legitimacy) or by what effects it produces (output legitimacy) but also by how it processes, refines, and contests information (throughput legitimacy). With regard to the epistemic function, the processing of information and arguments is now largely carried out by opaque, commercially-driven algorithms that lack transparency and pre-arranged guidelines and do not assess content based on epistemic quality. As easy participation in public discourse is encouraged, so too have the demands placed on this epistemic function. The growing disparity in participants' information access and understanding calls for a greater epistemic effort in shaping public opinion. In the digital environment, moderation and the dissemination of information increasingly overlap – and both are primarily handled through

technological systems. Additionally, critical publicity should not take for granted what is public or being published as ‘issues of public interest’, but should rather continuously interrogate the boundaries of public debate. As I have outlined using the term *Problemverarbeitung*, an inclusive and well-functioning public sphere produces new descriptions of public and political issues, including the identification of new or overlooked issues or perspectives that should be addressed. This approach underscores the importance of supporting publicity infrastructures that enhance the three key functions of public controversy, epistemic effort, and reflectivity.

The arguments presented in Part I converge on a fundamental insight: public opinion formation cannot be reduced to a static aggregation of individual preferences or an outcome-oriented procedural mechanism. Instead, it must be understood as an ongoing, reflective, and epistemically driven process that is continually shaped by critical publicity processes. The introduction of throughput legitimacy into this framework provides a necessary corrective to the limitations of previous models, ensuring that democratic legitimacy is assessed not only by the inclusivity of participation or the efficacy of outcomes, but also by the integrity of the communicative processes that mediate between them.

This revised model of public opinion formation highlights the importance of a deliberative, epistemic and reflective approach, positioning throughput legitimacy at the core of democratic theory. As media infrastructures continue to evolve, fulfilling their public role requires fostering a form of critical publicity that is not merely transparent and inclusive but also substantively engaged with the enhancement of public knowledge and the redefinition of common concerns. It must provide an alternative to gatekeeping, in addition to filtering and correcting claims. Only through such an approach can democratic legitimacy be sustained in an era of rapid technological and societal transformation.

### **The boundary cases**

The Habermasian notion of critical publicity appeared to provide a mainly infrastructural approach, fostered by professional media infrastructures that are supposed to ensure a resilient public sphere. However, the transformation of the media landscape resulted in a decline of professional journalism’s influence and increasing contestation of its authority. Against this backdrop, the Habermasian, newsroom-centred approach to media

falls short. Analytically distinguishing the infrastructures from the processes, as I did in the first part of this thesis, allows me to identify new critical potential in the recently transformed context.

In Part II, I critically discussed the emergence of alternative publicity potential. The cases that I have selected all emerge at the margins of traditional journalistic practices, exploring, challenging and transcending these, and potentially contributing to a critical publicity. These examples were chosen for their strong and sometimes provocative roles in contemporary media, often questioning and reshaping the boundaries and procedures of public debate. By actively engaging in information dissemination, they evolve into alternative publishing powers that compete with conventional journalism, further decoupling information services from established media institutions. I investigated whether in a platformed media sphere alternative agents or networks could adopt critical processes. I focused on three types of 'boundary work' of traditional journalism – influencers, activism and networked journalism – that represent both threats and potentials for critical publicity. I aimed to assess whether these emerging publishing practices truly support or undermine critical publicity in today's post-digital media sphere.

*In the first case*, I examined the role of social media influencers during the COVID-19 crisis, who were asked to perform a role in the crisis infrastructure of public communication. By informing their followers about actual advice from experts and the government, they operated as epistemic powers, catering for a young public that was beyond the reach of traditional journalism and professional media. In Finland, the Netherlands, and the United States, governments engaged influencers to facilitate the rapid circulation of public health messages. While this strategy expanded reach and increased epistemic accessibility, its implications for throughput legitimacy varied.

This case illustrated that throughput legitimacy, as established in Part I, requires more than the mere transmission of messages; it demands an interactive, contestatory, and reflective public process where information and arguments are tested, debated, and refined. The influencers' role, in many instances, was limited to amplifying pre-approved messages rather than critically engaging with them, resulting in a form of manufactured publicity. The Dutch model, where influencer contracts constrained

content autonomy, exemplified a failure of throughput legitimacy, reducing influencers to mere conduits of state communication. By contrast, the Finnish and American approaches allowed for greater adaptation of messages, maintaining a level of authenticity and engagement with followers.

This case showed that publishing is not the same as authoring. For influencers to productively contribute to critical publicity, they need to adopt a justified and deliberative position, follow a transparent sponsor strategy and go beyond simple message dissemination. When engaged in reflective, two-way discussions that challenge dominant narratives and encourage deliberative interaction, their contribution to controversies and epistemic functioning can be beneficial. Ultimately, the case shows that critical publicity is not confined to institutions, experts, or professional roles. Instead, it can include a broader range of contributors – provided they adhere to transparent and accountable standards, adopt a reflective stance, and engage in deliberation. Under these conditions, non-experts can act as epistemic agents and fulfil a critical public function.

*The second case* underscored the potential of activism to challenge epistemic norms and restructure publicity practices. Activists, particularly in the digital era, function as critical agents who expose the deficiencies of conventional media's epistemic procedures. They do not merely seek to introduce new voices into public discourse (input legitimacy) or influence policy outcomes (output legitimacy); instead, they actively contest the procedural dynamics of public debate itself.

This epistemic activism is exemplified by movements that directly challenge editorial and journalistic norms. As explored in the case of climate activism, media protests such as the Extinction Rebellion actions against News UK demonstrated the potential of activist interventions to transform media practices. By contesting the editorial choices that framed climate change in trivialising ways, activists engaged in a form of throughput legitimacy – generating controversy, demanding justification, and instigating self-reflection within journalistic institutions. Their ability to hold media accountable and to expose the structural biases within journalistic epistemologies illustrates how throughput can serve as an essential parameter for maintaining the integrity of critical publicity.

The case argues that in the post-digital era, media organisations are publicly held to meet their own critical standards. They are being called upon doing so by activists who expose bias, question epistemic selections, propose alternative modes of discourse, and hold traditional media accountable for their reporting. By publicly challenging the epistemic responsibility of media institutions, activists interrogate, deconstruct, broaden or shift the scope of dominant discourses, repoliticising publicity.

*The final case* on networked journalism explored how the decline of professional media structures and the rise of collaborative, foundation-funded investigative journalism reshape throughput legitimacy. The traditional role of journalism as a professionalised gatekeeper of truth claims has been eroded by digitisation, which simultaneously fostered new epistemic vulnerabilities – ranging from misinformation to the algorithmic curation of news.

However, initiatives such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ) and Bellingcat exemplify how networked journalism can restore throughput legitimacy by supporting collaboration, transparency, and methodological reflectivity. Their strength lies in networking, cooperation, and their capacity to integrate diverse international and technological sources, thereby enhancing the epistemic quality of journalism. Unlike traditional newsroom-centric models, some of these forms of journalism emphasise procedural openness and the use of open-source intelligence, allowing citizen investigators to contribute to the epistemic legitimacy of reporting.

Moving away from viewing news as a discrete, standalone product, networked initiatives recognise news production as a collaborative, distributed process involving multiple contributors. This continuous news production, based on open-source values and day-to-day publishing along the way, ever open to correction and supervised by the public, represents a reflective function of publicity. Here, epistemic authority, traditionally defined in vertical relations, is redefined in procedural norms.

Using continuous self-publication, networked journalism can spark an ongoing debate shaped by socially, internationally, and epistemically diverse perspectives, redefining its relationship with the public by recognising its role as a vital component of *Öffentlichkeit*. However, the balance between

curation, expertise and participatory engagement must be carefully managed. If successfully implemented, however, networked journalism can contribute to a more epistemically robust and accountable public debate.

The examination of the case proposes a reconceptualisation of the normative requirements for critical publicity as a response to the platformised, fragmented, and participatory nature of the post-digital public sphere. In this rearticulation, legitimacy is no longer granted by position or profession, but is earned through transparent practices, collaborative processes, and a pluralistic engagement with epistemic diversity. Journalism's role in critical publicity is preserved by a shift from content control to process curation: journalism becomes not a discipline of reporting, but a public epistemic practice.

### **A reconceptualisation**

In conclusion, when bringing these three cases into dialogue with the theoretical framework developed in Part I, it becomes clear that a focus on throughput legitimacy (by assessing the quality of public deliberation, epistemic effort and reflective potential) is indispensable in a post-digital public sphere. Throughput cannot merely be understood as a procedural mechanism between input and output; instead, it is the very condition that determines whether public discourse remains epistemically robust, reflective, and contestatory.

The transformation of media infrastructures – from mass media to digital platforms, from professional journalism to networked collaboration and influencer-driven communication – necessitates a recalibration of how we assess legitimacy in public opinion formation. Without throughput legitimacy, public discourse risks devolving into an uncritical dissemination of messages, as seen in the case of influencers. Therefore, the ideal of critical publicity must be reconceptualised not merely as a function of accessibility (input) or efficacy (output), but even more urgently as a commitment to the continuous interrogation, refinement, and transformation of public knowledge.

To this end, I propose a rearticulated model of critical publicity that foregrounds three key functions of throughput legitimacy. Contestation is, as already discussed in Chapter 3, easily realised in a digital context. However, as Wessler (2018) rightly argued, the type of contestation found

on social media platforms is not a deliberative form of contestation per se, since it is not meeting other deliberative criteria, such as responsiveness, as the case of the influencers showed. Moreover, due to fragmentation, opinions are easily disseminated, but do not encounter criticism and a plurality of viewpoints. Supporting two-sided communication ensures that claims are subject to scrutiny and reconsideration.

Regarding the epistemic function, the boundary cases demonstrated that introducing new voices and perspectives, which is facilitated thanks to digitisation, enhances the epistemic process. Contesting editorial procedures as a part of a media-activist strategy, might even transform and improve these procedures. Recent initiatives that adjusted their research approach to the networked context recast the traditional vertically-defined epistemic authority of journalism in terms of procedural, accountable, transparent legitimacy norms. These cases illustrate that epistemic value does not lie in establishing a 'correct view', but in maintaining a continuous openness to revision and improvement. Therefore, if carefully managed by continuous revision, citizens' participation can contribute to the epistemic effort, encouraging collective reasoning and research.

Concerning the reflective function, the boundary cases (especially the one on activism) showed that exposing editorial biases performs a constitutive role in reshaping public issues. By inciting a continuous dialectical reflection on ideological foundations and editorial strategies, post-digital activism interrogates and deconstructs dominant discourses, repoliticising publicity. By scrutinising its focus, its borders and its procedures, new critical voices generate novel frameworks for understanding and addressing public concerns.

A post-digital publicity, structured by opaque, commercially- or politically-driven algorithms and lacking transparency, requires additional procedures to achieve throughput legitimacy, especially to strengthen its epistemic and reflective functions. By centring throughput legitimacy as a normative criterion for assessing media and publicity processes, we can move beyond simplistic infrastructural media critique and towards a more nuanced understanding of how public opinion formation can be supported in the post-digital age. To preserve throughput legitimacy in the digital public sphere, we must develop mechanisms that reinforce epistemic standards while embracing the participatory potential of new media. This requires

institutional awareness and adjustment, encouraging deliberative qualities, and the stimulation of skilled and reflective authoring that balances free expression with epistemic integrity.

In this thesis, I advanced a more processual understanding of authorship and epistemic authority. By rethinking and adjusting the normative structures of critical publicity, we can foster a public sphere that remains reflective, inclusive, and resilient against epistemic threats.

To conclude, over the last seven years conducting my scholarly research, I have mostly disregarded my professional intertwining with journalism, public debate and politics, but, evidently, I brought it with me. I have aimed to write a philosophical dissertation that contributes to the philosophical and scholarly discussions on public opinion formation and critical publicity. But, to be honest, not only that. Given my initial adherence to democratic ideals of public deliberation of the nineties, and my journalistic and political work, I have even aspired to contribute to the encouragement of a robust and resilient public sphere itself, stirring the debate on the normative requirements of public opinion formation, needed to maintain and foster our present-day liberal democracy.

# Reference List

- Aalberts, Chris (@chrisaalberts). 2022. “Tja. En wij maar zeggen dat radicaal rechts zich aan de regels moet houden en die niet moet ondermijnen. Dst geldt dus ook voor klimaatgekkies. [zolang mensen hun rekeningen niet kunnen betalen, gaat dit niet helpen mensen”. X (formerly Twitter). 27 October 2022.
- Archer, Alfred, Amanda Cawston, Benjamin Matheson, and Machteld Geuskens. 2020. “Celebrity, Democracy, and Epistemic Power.” *Perspectives on Politics* 18 (1): 27–42. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592719002615>.
- Balkin, Jack. 2020. “How to Regulate (and Not Regulate) Social Media: Keynote Presentation.” In *CSLAW ‘19: Proceedings of the Symposium on Computer Science and Law*. New York, NY: Association for Computing Machinery. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3379921.3379923>.
- Barnhurst, Kevin G., and John Nerone. 2009. “Journalism History.” In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch, 17–28. International Communication Association Handbook Series. New York: Routledge.
- Beam, Michael A., and Gerald M. Kosicki. 2014. “Personalized News Portals: Filtering Systems and Increased News Exposure.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 91 (1): 59–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699013514411>.
- Beckett, Charlie. 2008. “Networked Journalism.” *The Guardian*, 3 May 2008. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/may/03/networkedjournalism>.
- Bellingcat. 2024. “Who We Are.” <https://www.bellingcat.com/about/who-we-are/>.

- Benhabib, Seyla. 1992. "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig J. Calhoun, 73-98. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press
- Benkler, Yochai. 2006. *The Wealth of Networks*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Benkler, Yochai, Robert Farris, and Hal Roberts. 2018. *Network Propaganda : Manipulation, Disinformation, and Radicalization in American Politics*. New York NY: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, W. Lance, and Robert M. Entman. 2001. *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Berglez, Peter, and Amanda Gearing. 2018. "The Panama and Paradise Papers: The Rise of a Global Fourth Estate." *International Journal of Communication (Online)* 12 (October), 4573–4593.
- Bernstein, Richard J. 2012. "The Normative Core of the Public Sphere." *Political Theory* 40 (6): 767–778. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591712457666>.
- Bigbird (@Bigbird). 2021. "I got the COVID-19 vaccine today!". X (formerly Twitter), 6 November.
- Bimber, Bruce, and Homero Gil de Zúñiga. 2020. "The Unedited Public Sphere." *New Media & Society* 22 (4): 700–715. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819893980>.
- Blommaert, Jan. 2020. "Political Discourse in Post-Digital Societies." *Trabalhos Em Linguística Aplicada* 59 (1): 390–403. <https://doi.org/10.1590/01031813684701620200408>.
- BNNVARA. 2025. "Famke Louise doet weer mee, laat zich bijpraten door Diederik Gommers." BNNVARA. <https://www.bnnvara.nl/joop/artikelen/famke-louise-doet-weer-mee-laat-zich-bijpraten-door-diederik-gommers> accessed 14 June 2025.

- Bokhorst, Meike. 2014. *Bronnen van legitimiteit: Over de zoektocht van de wetgever naar zeggenschap en gezag*. Gravenhage: Boom Juridische Uitgevers
- Bonnevie, Erika, Sarah D. Rosenberg, Caitlin Kummeth, Jaclyn Goldberg, Ellen Wartella, and Joe Smyser. 2020. "Using Social Media Influencers to Increase Knowledge and Positive Attitudes toward the Flu Vaccine." *PLoS ONE* 15 (10): e0240828. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0240828>.
- Boyce, George, James Curran, and Pauline Wingate. 1978. *Newspaper History from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day*. London: Constable for the Press Group of the Acton Society.
- Braatz, Kurt. 2011. *Friedrich Nietzsche – Eine Studie zur Theorie der Öffentlichen Meinung*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110862539>.
- Breindl, Yana. 2016. "Activists as News Producers." In *The SAGE Handbook of Digital Journalism*, edited by Tamara Witschge, C. W. Anderson, David Domingo, and Alfred Hermida. London: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957909>.
- Browne, Harry. 2010. "Foundation-funded Journalism: Reasons to Be Wary of Charitable Support." *Journalism Studies* 11 (6): 889–903. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2010.501147>.
- Brunner, Otto (ed.). 2004. *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Burns, Alex. 2008. "Select Issues with New Media Theories of Citizen Journalism." *M/C Journal* 10 (6). <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2723>.
- Bruns, Axel. 2018. *Gatewatching and News Curation*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Budak, Ceren, Brendan Nyhan, David M. Rothschild, Emily Thorson, and Duncan J. Watts. 2024. "Misunderstanding the Harms of Online Misinformation." *Nature* 630 (8015): 45–53. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-024-07417-w>.

- Calvin, Katherine, Dipak Dasgupta, Gerhard Krinner, Aditi Mukherji, Peter W. Thorne, Christopher Trisos, José Romero, et al. 2023. "IPCC, 2023: Climate Change 2023: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change." Edited by H. Lee and J. Romero. Geneva: Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). <https://doi.org/10.59327/IPCC/AR6-9789291691647>.
- Carlson, Matt. 2015. "The Many Boundaries of Journalism." In *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices and Participation*, edited by Matt Carlson and Seth C. Lewis, 1-18. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315727684>.
- . 2017. *Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2022. "Journalists, Epistemology, and Authority." In *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, edited by Stuart Allan, 54-64. Abingdon, New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.
- Castells, Manuel. 2008. "The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (1): 78-93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311877>.
- Celikates, Robin, and Jeffrey Flynn. 2023. "Critical Theory (Frankfurt School)." *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/critical-theory/> accessed 12 December.
- Chadwick, Andrew. 2013. *The Hybrid Media System : Politics and Power*. Oxford Studies in Digital Politics. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Chambers, Simone. 2017. "Balancing Epistemic Quality and Equal Participation in a System Approach to Deliberative Democracy." *Social Epistemology* 31 (3): 266-276. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2017.1317867>.

- . 2018. *Reasonable Democracy: Jürgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse*. New York: Cornell University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501722547>.
- . 2021. “Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere?” *Political Studies* 69 (1): 147–163. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0032321719890811>.
- Chambers, Simone, and Jeffrey Kopstein. 2022. “Wrecking the Public Sphere: The New Authoritarians’ Digital Attack on Pluralism and Truth.” *Constellations* 30: 225-230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12620>.
- Chen, Kaiping, Amanda L. Molder, Zening Duan, Shelley Boulianne, Christopher Eckart, Prince Mallari, and Diyi Yang. 2023. “How Climate Movement Actors and News Media Frame Climate Change and Strike: Evidence from Analyzing Twitter and News Media Discourse from 2018 to 2021.” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 28 (2): 384–413. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221106405>.
- CNN. 2021. “Big Bird Talks to Dr. Gupta about Covid-19 Vaccine Fears.” <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2021/11/06/big-bird-rosita-sesame-street-covid-19-vaccine-fears-newday-vpx.cnn> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Coleman, Renita, Maxwell McCombs, Donald Shaw, and David Weaver. 2009. “Agenda Setting.” In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch, 147–160. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Cramer, Florian. 2014. “What Is ‘Post-Digital?’” *A Peer-Reviewed Journal About* 3 (1): 10–24. <https://doi.org/10.7146/aprja.v3i1.116068>.
- Cruz, Ted (@Tedcruz). 2021. ““Government propaganda... for your 5-year-old” X (formerly Twitter), 6 November 2021.
- Curry Jansen, Sue. 2021. “Informing the Public Sphere: Walter Lippmann on Democracy and News, with a Coda on Jürgen Habermas.” In *Research Handbook on Information Policy*, edited by Alistair Duff, 415–30. Cheltenham, Northampton MA: Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781789903584.00046>.

- Czington, Claudia, Aletta Diefenbach, and Victor Kempf. 2020. "Moral Universalism at a Time of Political Regression: A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas about the Present and His Life's Work." *Theory, Culture & Society* 37 (7-8): 11-36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420961146>.
- Daalmeijer, Joop. 2004. "Public Service Broadcasting in The Netherlands." *Trends in Communication* 12 (1): 33-45. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427439tc1201\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15427439tc1201_4).
- Dean, Jodi. 2003. "Why the Net Is Not a Public Sphere." *Constellations* 10 (1): 95-112. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.00315>.
- de Dijn, Annelien. 2020. *Freedom: An Unruly History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- DeFleur, Melvin, and Margaret H. DeFleur. 2010. *Mass Communication Theories*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education
- de Jonge, Léonie. 2019. "The Populist Radical Right and the Media in the Benelux: Friend or Foe?" *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 24 (2): 189-209. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161218821098>.
- Della Porta, Donatella, and Elena Pavan. 2018. "The Nexus between Media, Communication and Social Movements. Looking Back and the Way Forward." In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Activism*, edited by Graham Meikle, 29-37. Abingdon, New York: Routledge.
- Deuze, Mark, and Tamara Witschge. 2018. "Beyond Journalism: Theorizing the Transformation of Journalism." *Journalism* 19 (2): 165-181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916688550>.
- Deuze, Mark. 2005. "What is journalism? Professional identity and ideology of journalists reconsidered." *Journalism* 6 (4): 442-464. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884905056815>.
- Deuze, Mark, Axel Bruns, and Christoph Neuberger. 2007. "Preparing for an Age of Participatory News." *Journalism Practice* 1 (3): 322-38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780701504864>.

- Dewey, John. 2016. *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*. Edited by Melvin L. Rogers. Athens, OH: Swallow Press.
- Domingo, David, Thorsten Quandt, Ari Heinonen, Steve Paulussen, Jane B. Singer, and Marina Vujnovic. 2008. "Participatory Journalism Practices in the Media and Beyond." *Journalism Practice* 2 (3): 326–342. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780802281065>.
- Domingues Aguiar, T., and E. van Reijmersdal. 2018. *Influencer Marketing*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam Stichting Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Commerciële Communicatie.
- Donsbach, Wolfgang, and Michael Traugott. 2008. *The SAGE Handbook of Public Opinion Research*. Edited by Wolfgang Donsbach and Michael Traugott. London: SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848607910>.
- Douglas, Heather. 2021. "The Role of Scientific Expertise in Democracy." In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*, edited by Michael Hannon and Jeroen de Ridder, 435–445, London: Routledge.
- Ecker, Ullrich, Jon Roozenbeek, Sander van der Linden, Li Qian Tay, John Cook, Naomi Oreskes, and Stephan Lewandowsky. 2024. "Misinformation Poses a Bigger Threat to Democracy than You Might Think." *Nature* 630 (8015): 29–32. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-024-01587-3>.
- Ekström, Mats. 2018. "Journalistic Authority: Legitimizing News in the Digital Era." *Digital Journalism* 6 (10): 1349–51. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2018.1490659>.
- Ekström, Mats, and Oscar Westlund. 2019a. "Epistemology and Journalism." In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.806>.
- . 2019b. "The Dislocation of News Journalism: A Conceptual Framework for the Study of Epistemologies of Digital Journalism." *Media and Communication* 7 (1): 259–270. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v7i1.1763>.

- Eley, Geoff H. 1994. "Nations, Publics, and Political Cultures: Placing Habermas in the Nineteenth Century." In *Culture/Power/History: A Reader in Contemporary Social Theory*, edited by Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff H Eley, and Sherry B Ortner, 12: 297–335. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691228006-013>.
- Elster, Jon. 2005. "The Market and the Forum." In *Debates in Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Anthology*, edited by Derek Matravers and Jon Pike, 325–341. Abingdon, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203986820-27>.
- Enke, Nadja, and Nils S. Borchers. 2019. "Social Media Influencers in Strategic Communication: A Conceptual Framework for Strategic Social Media Influencer Communication." *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 13 (4): 261–77. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1620234>.
- Estlund, David M. 2008. *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Fink, Katherine, and C. W. Anderson. 2015. "Data Journalism in the United States: Beyond the 'Usual Suspects.'" *Journalism Studies* 16 (4): 467–481. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.939852>.
- Fischer, Renate, and Otfried Jarren. 2024. "The Platformization of the Public Sphere and Its Challenge to Democracy." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 50 (1): 200–215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01914537231203535>.
- Flyvbjerg, Bent. 2006. "Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research." *Qualitative Inquiry* 12 (2): 219–245. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363>.
- Foucault, Michel. 1984. *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Foundation Center. 2024. Foundation Maps. <https://maps.foundationcenter.org> accessed 22 May 2025.

- Fraser, Nancy. 1992. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig J. Calhoun, 109–142. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press
- . 2007. "Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post Westphalian World." In *Identities, Affiliations, and Allegiances*, edited by Seyla Benhabib, Ian Shapiro, and Danilo Petranovich, 45–66. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511808487.003>.
- . 2017. "The Theory of the Public Sphere: The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962)." In *The Habermas Handbook*, edited by Hauke Brunkhorst, Regina Kreide, and Cristina Lafont, 245–255. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/brun16642-029>.
- Freberg, Karen, Kristin Graham, Karen McGaughey, and Laura A. Freberg. 2011. "Who Are the Social Media Influencers? A Study of Public Perceptions of Personality." *Public Relations Review* 37 (1): 90–92. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2010.11.001>.
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Friedland, Lewis, Thomas Hove, and Hernando Rojas. 2006. "The Networked Public Sphere." *Javnost – The Public* 13 (December). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2006.11008922>.
- Gillespie, Tarleton. 2010. "The Politics of 'Platforms.'" *New Media & Society* 12 (3): 347–364. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444809342738>.
- Gledhill, James. 2015. "The Ideal and Reality of Epistemic Proceduralism." *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20 (4): 486–507.
- Graham, Todd S. 2009. "What's Wife Swap Got to Do with It? Talking Politics in the Net-Based Public Sphere." PhD Thesis <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.1.3413.0088>.

Groen-Reijman, Eva. 2018. "Deliberative Political Campaigns: Democracy, Autonomy and Persuasion." PhD Thesis

Groenhuijsen, Charles (@chgroenhuijsen). 2022. "Vanavond gaan we in de talkshows vast schande spreken van die klimaatactivisten die een schilderij bekladden. Maar we doen precies waar activisten (terroristen?) op hopen: heel veel gratis publiciteit. Moeten we het niet gewoon met kort berichtje zonder foto afdoen? Opinies?" X (formerly Twitter). 27 October 2022.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Translated by Thomas Burger and Frederick G. Lawrence. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

—. 1990. *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

—. 1992a. *Faktizität und Geltung: Beiträge zur Diskurstheorie des Rechts und des demokratischen Rechtsstaats*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

—. 1992b. "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere." In *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, edited by Craig J. Calhoun, 421–461. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

—. 1994. "Three Normative Models of Democracy." *Constellations* 1 (1): 1–10.

—. 1996. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

—. 2004. *The Theory of Communicative Action* (reprint). Translated by Thomas McCarty. Cambridge MA: Polity Press.

—. 2006. "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research." *Communication Theory* 16 (4): 411–426. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x>.

—. 2009. *Europe: The Faltering Project*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.

- . 2021. “Überlegungen Und Hypothesen Zu Einem Erneuten Strukturwandel Der Politischen Öffentlichkeit.” In *Ein Neuer Strukturwandel Der Öffentlichkeit?*, edited by Martin Seeliger and Sebastian Seignani, 470–500. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748912187-470>.
- . 2022a. *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit und die deliberative Politik*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- . 2022b. “Reflections and Hypotheses on a Further Structural Transformation of the Political Public Sphere.” *Theory, Culture & Society* 39 (4): 145–171. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221112341>.
- Habermas, Jürgen, Sara Lennox, and Frank Lennox. 1974. “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964).” *New German Critique*, 3: 49–55. <https://doi.org/10.2307/487737>.
- Harper, Tael. 2017. “The Big Data Public and Its Problems: Big Data and the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.” *New Media & Society* 19 (9): 1424–1439. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444816642167>.
- Harrison, Jackie. 2009. “Gatekeeping and News Selection as Symbolic Mediation.” In *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*, edited by Stuart Allan, 191–201. Routledge. Abingdon, New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis.
- Heikkilä, Melissa. 2020. “Finland Taps Social Media Influencers during Coronavirus Crisis.” *Politico*. 31 March. <https://www.politico.eu/article/finland-taps-influencers-as-critical-actors-amid-coronavirus-pandemic/> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Heinrich, Ansgard. 2012. “What Is ‘Network Journalism?’” *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy* 144 (August): 60–68.
- Helberger, Natali. 2020. “The Political Power of Platforms: How Current Attempts to Regulate Misinformation Amplify Opinion Power.” *Digital Journalism* 8 (6): 842–854. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2020.1773888>.

- Helmond, Anne. 2015. "The Platformization of the Web: Making Web Data Platform Ready." *Social Media + Society* 1 (2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115603080>.
- Henley, Jon. 2020. "Finland Enlists Social Influencers in Fight against Covid-19." *The Guardian*, 1 April. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/01/finland-enlists-social-influencers-in-fight-against-covid-19> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Herman, Edward S., and Noam Chomsky. 1994. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. London: Vintage.
- Hermida, Alfred. 2019. *Data Journalism and the Regeneration of News*. London: Routledge.
- Hesmondhalgh, David. 2021. "The Infrastructural Turn in Media and Internet Research." In *The Routledge Companion to Media Industries*, edited by Paul McDonald, 132–142. London: Routledge.
- IATP. 2024. "Full Text of Clinton's Speech on China Trade Bill." Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. [https://www.iatp.org/sites/default/files/Full\\_Text\\_of\\_Clinton's\\_Speech\\_on\\_China\\_Trade\\_Bi.htm](https://www.iatp.org/sites/default/files/Full_Text_of_Clinton's_Speech_on_China_Trade_Bi.htm) accessed 13 October 2024.
- ICIJ. 2021a. "Panama Papers Journalists and Media Partners." <https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers/pandora-papers-journalists-and-media-partners/> accessed 22 May 2025.
- . 2021b. "Offshore Havens and Hidden Riches of World Leaders and Billionaires Exposed in Unprecedented Leak – ICIJ." <https://www.icij.org/investigations/pandora-papers/global-investigation-tax-havens-offshore/> accessed 22 May 2025.
- . 2024a. "About: Our Supporters." <https://www.icij.org/about/our-supporters/> accessed 22 May 2025.
- . 2024b. "About." <https://www.icij.org/about/> accessed 22 May 2025.

- Influencerregels. 2025. "Homepage." <https://influencerregels.com/> accessed 14 June 2025.
- Iyengar, Shanto, and Kyu S Hahn. 2009. "Red Media, Blue Media: Evidence of Ideological Selectivity in Media Use." *Journal of Communication* 59 (1): 19–39. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.01402.x>.
- Jarren, Otfried, and Renate Fischer. 2021. "Die Plattformisierung von Öffentlichkeit Und Der Relevanzverlust Des Journalismus Als Demokratische Herausforderung." In *Ein Neuer Strukturwandel Der Öffentlichkeit?*, edited by Martin Seeliger and Sebastian Seignani, 365–382. Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9783748912187-365>.
- Jarvis, Jeff. 2006. "Networked Journalism." *BuzzMachine*, July 5. <https://buzzmachine.com/2006/07/05/networked-journalism/> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Katz, Elihu. 1964. *Personal Influence: The Part Played by People in the Flow of Mass Communications*. New York, NY: The Free Press of Glencoe.
- Kennedy, Dana, and Isabel Vincent. 2023. "'Moral Force' ProPublica under Fire for Taking Millions from Secret Donors." 9 June. <https://nypost.com/2023/06/09/moral-force-propublica-under-fire-for-taking-millions-from-secret-donors/> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Kont, Jülide, Wim Elving, Marcel Broersma, and Çiğdem Bozdağ. 2024. "What Makes Audiences Resilient to Disinformation? Integrating Micro, Meso, and Macro Factors Based on a Systematic Literature Review." *Communications* 2025; 50(2): 534–555. <https://doi.org/10.1515/commun-2023-0078>.
- Koopmans, Ruud. 2004. "Movements and Media: Selection Processes and Evolutionary Dynamics in the Public Sphere." *Theory and Society* 33 (3/4): 367–391.
- Landes, Joan B. 1988. *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Larkin, Brian. 2013. "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 42: 327–343.
- Lee, Charlotte, and Kjeld Schmidt. 2018. "A Bridge Too Far? Critical Remarks on the Concept of 'Infrastructure' in CSCW and IS." *Socio-Informatics: A Practice-based Perspective on the Design and Use of IT Artifacts*: 177–217. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Lewandowsky, Stephan, and Sander van der Linden. 2021. "Countering Misinformation and Fake News Through Inoculation and Prebunking." *European Review of Social Psychology* 32 (2): 348–384. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10463283.2021.1876983>.
- Lewis, Seth C. 2019. "Journalism." In *The International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*, edited by Tim P. Vos and Folker Hanusch, 1–7. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0001>.
- Lewis, Seth C., Kelly Kaufhold, and Dominic L. Lasorsa. 2010. "Thinking About Citizen Journalism." *Journalism Practice* 4 (2): 163–179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700903156919>.
- Lewis, Seth C, and Nikki Usher. 2013. "Open Source and Journalism: Toward New Frameworks for Imagining News Innovation." *Media, Culture & Society* 35 (5): 602–619. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443713485494>.
- Lewis, Seth C., and Oscar Westlund. 2015. "Big Data and Journalism: Epistemology, Expertise, Economics, and Ethics." *Digital Journalism* 3 (3): 447–466. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2014.976418>.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt Brace and Co.
- . 1925a. *The Phantom Public*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.
- . 1925b. *The Phantom Public*. <https://www.abebooks.com/signed-first-edition/Phantom-Public-LIPPMANN-Walter-Harcourt-Brace/31264105491/bd> accessed 22 May 2025.
- . 1993. *The Phantom Public*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

- . 2010. *Public Opinion: A Classic in Political and Social Thought*. Blacksburg, VA: Wilder.
- . 2021. *Liberty and the News*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400824496>.
- Lorenz, Taylor. 2021. "To Fight Vaccine Lies, Authorities Recruit an 'Influencer Army.'" *The New York Times*, 1 August. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/01/technology/vaccine-lies-influencer-army.html> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Lynch, Michael. 2022. "Ignore Soup Throwing Climate Activists." *Forbes*, 22 November. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/michaelylynch/2022/11/22/ignore-soup-throwing-climate-activists/> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Marres, Noortje. 2018. "Why We Can't Have Our Facts Back." *Engaging Science, Technology, and Society* 4: 423–443. <https://doi.org/10.17351/ests2018.188>.
- Matsa, Katerina Eva. 2018. "News Use Across Social Media Platforms 2018." *Pew Research Center's Journalism Project* (blog), 10 September 10. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2018/09/10/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2018/> accessed 25 May 2025.
- Mattoni, Alice. 2012. *Media Practices and Protest Politics: How Precarious Workers Mobilise*. Farnham: Routledge.
- Mediacourant.nl. 2022. "Op1-ster Charles Groenhuijsen wil 'klimaatteroristen' doodzwijgen." *Mediacourant.nl*, 28 October. <https://www.mediacourant.nl/2022/10/op1-ster-charles-groenhuijsen-wil-klimaatteroristen-doodzwijgen/> accessed 25 May 2025.
- Medina, José. 2022. "Philosophy of Protest and Epistemic Activism." In *A Companion to Public Philosophy*, edited by Lee McIntyre, Nancy McHugh and Ian Olasov, 123–133. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119635253.ch13>.
- Medina, Jose M., and Matt S. Whitt. 2021. "Epistemic Activism and the Politics of Credibility: Testimonial Injustice Inside/Outside a North

- Carolina Jail.” In *Making the Case: Feminist and Critical Race Theorists Investigate Case Studies*, edited by Heidi Grasswick and Nancy Arden McHugh. New York, NY: SUNY Press.
- Meikle, Graham. 2020. *The Routledge Companion to Media and Activism*. London: Routledge.
- Milan, Stefania. 2015. “When Algorithms Shape Collective Action: Social Media and the Dynamics of Cloud Protesting.” *Social Media + Society* 1 (2): 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305115622481>.
- Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap. 2023. “Rapport Adviescollege Publieke Omroep – Rapport – Rijksoverheid.nl.” Ministerie van Algemene Zaken, 25 September. <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/documenten/rapporten/2023/09/25/rapport-adviescollege-publieke-omroep>.
- Moor, Joost de. 2018. “The ‘Efficacy Dilemma’ of Transnational Climate Activism: The Case of COP21.” *Environmental Politics* 27 (6): 1079–1100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2017.1410315>.
- Müller, Nina C., and Jenny Wiik. 2023. “From Gatekeeper to Gate-Opener: Open-Source Spaces in Investigative Journalism.” *Journalism Practice* 17 (2): 189–208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2021.1919543>.
- Negt, Oskar, Alexander Kluge, and Peter Labanyi. 1988. “‘The Public Sphere and Experience’: Selections.” *October* 46: 60–82. <https://doi.org/10.2307/778678>.
- Neuberger, Christoph. 2018. “Meinungsmacht im Internet aus kommunikationswissenschaftlicher Perspektive.” *UFITA* 82 (1): 53–68. <https://doi.org/10.5771/2568-9185-2018-1-53>.
- Nickel, Rainer. 2018. “Legality, Legitimacy, and Legitimation.” In *The Habermas Handbook*, edited by Hauke Brunkhorst, Regina Kreide, and Cristina Lafont, 586–589. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/brun16642-066>.

- Noelle-Neumann, Elisabeth. 1974. "The Spiral of Silence A Theory of Public Opinion." *Journal of Communication* 24 (2): 43–51. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00367.x>.
- O'Neill, Saffron. 2022. "Fun in the Sun' Photos Are a Dangerous Distraction from the Reality of Climate Breakdown." *The Guardian*, 14 May. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/14/sun-photos-climate-breakdown> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Oxford. 2024. "Definition of 'infrastructure.'" Oxford Learner's Dictionary. <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com> accessed 17 July 2024.
- Pavan, Elena, and Donatella Della Porta. 2020. "Social Movements, Communication and Media." In *Routledge Handbook of Digital Media and Communication*, edited by Leah Lievrouw and Brian Loader, 301–318. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315616551>.
- Peters, Bernhard. 2005. "Public Discourse, Identity and the Problem of Democratic Legitimacy." In *Making the European Polity*, edited by Erik Oddvar Eriksen, 96–136. London, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203013229-12>.
- Peters, Bernhard, Hartmut Wessler, and Jürgen Habermas. 2007. *Der Sinn von Öffentlichkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Surhkamp Verlag.
- Peters, John Durham. 2001. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pew Research Center. 2023. "Digital News Fact Sheet." Pew Research Center (blog), 10 November. <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/digital-news/> accessed 16 July 2025.
- Pew Research Center. 2024. "Fact Sheet (17 September)." <https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/social-media-and-news-fact-sheet/> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Plato. 1977. *Protagoras and Meno*. Translated by W.K.C. Guthrie. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

- Poell, Thomas, and José van Dijck. 2015. *Social Media and Activist Communication*. London: Routledge.
- Poell, Thomas, David Nieborg, and José van Dijck. 2019. "Platformisation." *Internet Policy Review* 8 (4): 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.14763/2019.4.1425>.
- Pool, Hans, dir. 2018. *Bellingcat: Truth in a Post-Truth World*. Submarine Amsterdam.
- President of the United States of America (@POTUS). 2021. "Good on ya, @BigBird. Getting vaccinated is the best way to keep your whole neighborhood safe." X (formerly Twitter), 8 November.
- ProPublica. 2025. "Homepage." <https://www.propublica.org/> accessed 22 May.
- Raad Voor Cultuur. 2025a. "Council for Culture: English." <https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/english> accessed 14 June 2025
- . 2025b. "Advies omroeperkenningen." <https://www.raadvoorcultuur.nl/documenten/adviezen/2021/04/28/raad-voor-cultuur-adviseert-positief-over-publieke-omroepen> accessed 14 June 2025
- Rasmussen, Terje. 2013. "Internet-Based Media, Europe and the Political Public Sphere." *Media, Culture & Society* 35 (1): 97–104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443712464563>.
- . 2014. "Internet and the Political Public Sphere." *Sociology Compass* 8 (12): 1315–1329. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12228>.
- Rau, Thomas, and Sabine Oberhuber. 2022. *Material Matters : Developing Business for a Circular Economy*, first edition. Oxford: Taylor & Francis.
- Rauchfleisch, Adrian, Daniel Vogler, and Mark Eisenegger. 2021. "Public Sphere in Crisis Mode: How the COVID-19 Pandemic Influenced Public Discourse and User Behaviour in the Swiss Twitter-Sphere." *Javnost – The Public* 28 (2): 129–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1923622>.

- Reich, Zvi. 2012. "Journalism as Bipolar Interactional Expertise." *Communication Theory* 22 (4): 339–358. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2012.01411.x>.
- Rijxman, Shula. 2016. Publieke omroep gaat leren van Trump. *De Volkskrant*, 14 Nov. 2016.
- Robinson, Sue. 2011. "‘Journalism as Process’: The Organizational Implications of Participatory Online News." *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 13 (3): 137–210. <https://doi.org/10.1177/152263791101300302>.
- Rodrigo, Olivia. 2021. "Olivia Rodrigo: Let's Get Vaccinated!". The Biden White House. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LHmIr19UuQ><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8LHmIr19UuQ> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Rosen, Jay. 2012. "The People Formerly Known as the Audience." In *The Social Media Reader*, edited by Michael Mandiberg, 13–16. New York: New York University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814763025.003.0005>.
- Rossiter, Clinton, and James Lare, eds. 1982. *The Essential Lippmann: A Political Philosophy for Liberal Democracy*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. 1997. *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*. Translated by Jean Vache and Philip Stewart. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, and Donald A. Cress. 2011. *Basic Political Writings*, second edition. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- RTL Nieuws. 2022. "Passen Vrolijke Strandfoto's Bij Verhalen over Extreme Hitte? (Spoiler: Nee)." *RTL Nieuws*, 19 July. <https://www.rtl.nl/rtl-nieuws/artikel/5321973/vrolijke-fotos-extreme-hitte-klimaatverandering> accessed 22 May 2025.

- Rucht, Dieter, 2004. "The Quadruple 'A.'" In *Cyberprotest: New Media, Citizens and Social Movements*, edited by Wim van de Donk, Brian D. Loader, Paul G. Nixon and Dieter Rucht, 29-56. London: Routledge.
- Russell, Adrienne. 2016. "Networked Journalism." In *The SAGE Handbook of Digital Journalism*, edited by Tamara Witschge, C. W. Anderson, David Domingo, and Alfred Hermida. London: Sage. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473957909>.
- . 2018. "Climate Justice, Hactivist Sensibilities, Prototypes of Change." In *The Routledge Companion to Media and Activism*, edited by Graham Meikle, 271-279. Abingdon, New York: Routledge.
- Saffon, Maria Paula, and Nadia Urbinati. 2013. "Procedural Democracy, the Bulwark of Equal Liberty." *Political Theory* 41 (3): 441-481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591713476872>.
- Scharpf, Fritz W. 1999. *Governing in Europe: Effective and Democratic?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 2001. "Notes Toward a Theory of Multilevel Governing in Europe." *Scandinavian Political Studies* 24 (1): 1-26. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.00044>.
- Scharpf, Fritz Wilhelm. 1970. *Demokratietheorie Zwischen Utopie Und Anpassung*. Konstanz: Druckerei u. Verlagsanst. Universitätsverl.
- Schmidt, Vivien A. 2013. "Democracy and Legitimacy in the European Union Revisited: Input, Output and 'Throughput.'" *Political Studies* 61 (1): 2-22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2012.00962.x>.
- Schneiders, Pascal, Daniel Stegmann, and Birgit Stark. 2023. "Social Cohesion in Platformized Public Spheres: Toward a Conceptual Framework." *Communication Theory* 33 (2-3): 122-131. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtad002>.
- Schudson, Michael. 2003. *Sociology of News*. New York, NY: Norton.

- Schudson, Michael, and Chris Anderson. 2009. "Objectivity, Professionalism, and Truth Seeking in Journalism." In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch, 88-101. International Communication Association Handbook Series. New York: Routledge.
- Scire, Sarah. 2022. "Maybe Don't Illustrate Your Stories about Lethally Hot Weather with Fun Beach Pics." 26 July. [www.niemanlab.org/2022/07/maybe-dont-illustrate-your-stories-about-lethally-hot-weather-with-fun-beach-pics/](http://www.niemanlab.org/2022/07/maybe-dont-illustrate-your-stories-about-lethally-hot-weather-with-fun-beach-pics/) accessed 22 May 2025.
- Scott, Martin, Mel Bunce, and Kate Wright. 2017. "Donor Power and the News: The Influence of Foundation Funding on International Public Service Journalism." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 22 (2): 163–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161217693394>.
- . 2019. "Foundation Funding and the Boundaries of Journalism." *Journalism Studies* 20 (14): 2034–2052. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2018.1556321>.
- Seeliger, Martin, and Sebastian Sevignani, eds. 2021. *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit?* Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Seipp, Theresa Josephine, Natali Helberger, Claes de Vreese, and Jef Ausloos. 2023. "Dealing with Opinion Power in the Platform World: Why We Really Have to Rethink Media Concentration Law." *Digital Journalism* 11 (8): 1542-1567. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2161924>.
- Sevignani, Sebastian. 2022. "Digital Transformations and the Ideological Formation of the Public Sphere: Hegemonic, Populist, or Popular Communication?" *Theory, Culture & Society* 39 (4): 91–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221103516>.
- Shoemaker, Pamela J., Tim P. Vos, and Stephen D. Reese. 2009. "Journalists as Gatekeepers." In *The Handbook of Journalism Studies*, edited by Karin Wahl-Jorgensen and Thomas Hanitzsch, 73–87. International Communication Association Handbook Series. New York: Routledge.

Simpson, Christopher. 1996. "Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's 'Spiral of Silence' and the Historical Context of Communication Theory." *Journal of Communication* 46 (3): 149–173. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1996.tb01494.x>.

Social Change Lab. 2025. "Research." [www.socialchangelab.org/research](http://www.socialchangelab.org/research) accessed 14 June 2025.

Sprangers, Simone. 2021. "The Controversial 'ik Doe Niet Meer Mee' Hashtag." *Diggit Magazine*, 4 January. <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/controversial-i-no-longer-participate-hashtag> access 22 May 2025.

Staab, Philipp, and Thorsten Thiel. 2022. "Social Media and the Digital Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere." *Theory, Culture & Society* 39 (4): 129–143. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764221103527>.

Stanley, Jason. 2017. *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Star, Susan Leigh. 1999. "The Ethnography of Infrastructure." *American Behavioral Scientist* 43 (3): 377–391. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027649921955326>.

Starr, Paul. 2020. "The Flooded Zone: How We Became More Vulnerable to Disinformation in the Digital Era." In *The Disinformation Age*, edited by Steven Livingston and W. Lance Bennett, 67–92. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108914628.003>.

Steel, Ronald. 1980. *Walter Lippmann and the American Century*. Boston: Atlantic Little, Brown Books.

Stewart, Evan, and Douglas Hartmann. 2020. "The New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere." *Sociological Theory* 38 (2): 170–191. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275120926205>.

Sunstein, Cass R. 2017. *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Suuronen, Aleksi, Hanna Reinikainen, Nils S. Borchers, and Kim Strandberg. 2022. "When Social Media Influencers Go Political: An Exploratory Analysis on the Emergence of Political Topics Among Finnish Influencers." *Javnost – The Public* 29 (3): 301–317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1983367>.
- TED. 2021a. "Decarbonizing Fossil Fuels." [https://www.ted.com/talks/countdown\\_summit\\_decarbonizing\\_fossil\\_fuels?subtitle=enhttps://www.ted.com/talks/countdown\\_summit\\_decarbonizing\\_fossil\\_fuels?subtitle=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/countdown_summit_decarbonizing_fossil_fuels?subtitle=enhttps://www.ted.com/talks/countdown_summit_decarbonizing_fossil_fuels?subtitle=en) accessed 22 May.
- TED. 2021b. "TED's Curation Guidelines." <https://www.ted.com/about/our-organization/how-ted-works/ted-s-curation-guidelines> accessed 22 May 2025.
- TED Staff. 2021. "Decarbonizing Fossil Fuels: An Unedited Discussion from TED Countdown Summit." <https://blog.ted.com/decarbonizing-fossil-fuels-an-unedited-discussion-from-ted-countdown-summit/> accessed 22 May.
- Telegraaf. 2020. "BN'ers verzetten zich tegen coronaregels." *Telegraaf*, 21 September 2020. <https://www.telegraaf.nl/entertainment/1006239036/bn-ers-verzetten-zich-tegen-coronaregels> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Tilly, Charles, and Sidney G. Tarrow. 2015. *Contentious Politics*, second edition. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Tufekci, Zeynep. 2013. "'Not This One': Social Movements, the Attention Economy, and Microcelebrity Networked Activism." *American Behavioral Scientist* 57 (7): 848–870. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479369>.
- Urbinati, Nadia. 2014. *Democracy Disfigured: Opinion, Truth, and the People*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . 2015. "A Revolt against Intermediary Bodies." *Constellations* 22 (4): 477–486. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8675.12188>.
- Usher, Nikki. 2020. "News Cartography and Epistemic Authority in the Era of Big Data: Journalists as Map-Makers, Map-Users, and

- Map-Subjects.” *New Media & Society* 22 (2): 247–263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819856909>.
- van Dijck, José. 2018. *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- van Dijck, José, and Donya Alinejad. 2020. “Social Media and Trust in Scientific Expertise: Debating the Covid-19 Pandemic in The Netherlands.” *Social Media + Society* 6 (4): 2056305120981057. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120981057>.
- van Hoek, Colin. 2022. “Waarom NU.Nl niet alleen maar ‘vrolijke’ hittefoto’s plaatst.” *Van de Hoofdredeactie* (blog). 24 juli 2022. <https://www.nu.nl/blog/6213826/waarom-nunl-niet-alleen-maar-vrolijke-hittefotos-plaatst.html> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Vliegenthart, Rens, Stefaan Walgrave, Ruud Wouters, Swen Hutter, Will Jennings, Roy Gava, Anke Tresch, et al. 2016. “The Media as a Dual Mediator of the Political Agenda–Setting Effect of Protest: A Longitudinal Study in Six Western European Countries.” *Social Forces* 95 (2): 837–859. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sow075>.
- Wahl-Jorgensen, Karin. 2009. “On the Newsroom-Centricity of Journalism Ethnography.” In *Journalism and Anthropology*, edited by S. E. Bird, 21–35. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Walgrave, Stefaan, and Rens Vliegenthart. 2012. “The Complex Agenda-Setting Power of Protest: Demonstrations, Media, Parliament, Government, and Legislation in Belgium, 1993-2000.” *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 17 (2): 129–156. <https://doi.org/10.17813/maiq.17.2.pw053m281356572h>.
- Wessler, Hartmut. 2018. *Habermas and the Media*. Cambridge, MA: Polity Press.
- White, David Manning. 1950. “The ‘Gate Keeper’: A Case Study in the Selection of News.” *Journalism Quarterly* 27 (4): 383–390. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769905002700403>.

- Winkel, Tim de. 2023. "Fringe Platforms: An Analysis of Contesting Alternatives to the Mainstream Social Media Platforms in a Platformized Public Sphere." PhD Thesis, Utrecht University. <https://doi.org/10.33540/1921>.
- Winston, Brian. 2020. *The Roots of Fake News Objecting to Objective Journalism*. London : Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
- World Health Organization. 2021. "Interim Statement on COVID-19 Vaccination for Children and Adolescents." 24 November. <https://www.who.int/news/item/24-11-2021-interim-statement-on-covid-19-vaccination-for-children-and-adolescents> accessed 22 May 2025.
- Wouters, Ruud, and Jonas Lefevere. 2023. "Making Their Mark? How Protest Sparks, Surfs, and Sustains Media Issue Attention." *Political Communication* 40 (5): 615-632. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2023.2188499>.
- Yeşilgöz-Zegerius, D. 2022. "Antwoorden Kamervragen over de Inzet van Influencers Tijdens de Coronacrisis." Minister van Justitie en Veiligheid. Ref. No. 4026690.
- Yurieff, Kaya. 2018. "TikTok Is the Latest Short-Video Social Network Sensation." CNN, 21 November. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/11/21/tech/tiktok-app/index.html> accessed 22 May 2025.

# Critical Publicity and its Epistemic Challenges

A Philosophical Approach to Public Opinion Formation in a Post-Digital Public Sphere

## Summary

This dissertation explores the normative requirements of critical publicity in public opinion formation within a post-digital media environment. The central research question asks whether the standards for critical publicity, developed largely in a pre-digital era, remain applicable today or need to be redefined. It argues that, alongside input and output legitimacy, ‘throughput legitimacy’ is an essential and underappreciated dimension of democratic communication that deserves renewed attention.

In this thesis, I have developed a normative framework that critically reassesses the normative requirements for the role of critical publicity in public opinion formation. Dissecting critical publicity into processes and the infrastructures affording those processes, allows me to foreground the normative dimension, which I evaluate along lines of input, output and throughput legitimacy. I identify throughput legitimacy as an overlooked but crucial dimension of critical publicity.

Traditional legitimacy models have relied primarily on input legitimacy, which emphasises representation and inclusion, and output legitimacy, which focuses on effectiveness and policy outcomes. However, as demonstrated throughout this analysis, these perspectives are insufficient for understanding the complexities of public opinion formation, especially in the post-digital era. Instead, I argue that throughput legitimacy – ensured by the processes through which public discourse is generated, contested and refined – is an essential normative paradigm for assessing the critical qualities of democratic communication. I argue that public opinion formation fosters democracy as a supporting pillar if and because it is generated by critical publicity that has input, output and throughput legitimacy. This means assuring a representational dimension (input: voices), a presentational dimension (output: efficacy, mobilisation of

opinions on an agenda), and a procedural dimension (throughput: tested in controversy, epistemic function, and problem definition).

Part I engages with the works of Nadia Urbinati and Jürgen Habermas to construct a model of public opinion formation that moves beyond aggregative and proceduralist approaches. The question is: Which theoretical framework offers a thorough understanding of public opinion formation as an ongoing process rather than a final outcome? Urbinati's diarchic model of democracy, which distinguishes between the domains of will and opinion, provides a useful structural lens for understanding the interrelation of political institutions and public discourse. However, as I have argued, Urbinati's emphasis on fair procedures and the institutional mediation of distinct opinions on a 'forum' under-theorises the deliberative dynamics shaping public opinion, and is insufficient to explain *how* a majority comes to be a majority, which is fundamental for my normative approach to public opinion *formation*.

By contrast, Habermas' deliberative model emphasises the epistemic and reflective qualities of public discourse. Yet Habermas' traditional model does not sufficiently account for the evolving mechanisms of publicity in a digital and networked media environment. The primary limitation of both perspectives is their relative neglect of the processes, structured by media organisations, that shape and sustain public debate – the very processes that define throughput legitimacy. I claim that in Habermas' framework, throughput legitimacy is not very well developed, as he essentially relies on professional institutions to take care of establishing proper procedures. This professional practice is endowed to 'the media system', which is mainly conceived of as a black box, leaving its processual requirements implicit.

By incorporating throughput legitimacy into the normative evaluation of public discourse, I present a revised model that addresses the shortcomings of traditional frameworks. Throughput legitimacy captures three key functions: the deliberative, epistemic and reflective quality of public discourse.

Firstly, *public controversy and contestation* are deliberative functions confronting distinct and competing preferences in a plurality of viewpoints. Publicity must not merely disseminate and aggregate opinions but facilitate rigorous debate and challenge dominant narratives. The second function

is *epistemic processing*, conceiving public debate as a process of continuous collective reasoning. It entails engaging with information and arguments, thereby activating the cognitive potential that makes deliberation a meaningful contribution to opinion formation. As I argued in Chapter 1, the epistemic potential grants normativity to the potential of collective learning; it does not guarantee a correct outcome, but it establishes a process of revision. Thirdly, the *reflective function*: public debate must be ever open to correcting itself and to new problem definitions, critically reflecting on issues of common concern. Publicity should not only discuss pre-existing issues but actively shape new frameworks and perspectives for understanding public concerns, advancing a continuous cycle of learning and adaptation.

I argue that the introduction of throughput legitimacy as a critical component of public opinion formation is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary media transformations. One of the problems of digitisation is that it tends to primarily spotlight the input ('who') and output ('what') of publicity, while obscuring the throughput ('how'), traditionally sustained by professional practices. This is increasingly significant, as digitisation contributes to the precarisation of professional journalism, disrupting its essential processes. Additionally, the digitisation of the public sphere has disordered traditional models of media intermediation, shifting the balance of power away from institutional gatekeepers toward networked forms of communication, algorithmic intermediation and editing, further obfuscating the throughput procedures. While this shift has democratised access to public discourse, it has also introduced new vulnerabilities, such as the proliferation of unchecked information, the rise of algorithmic gatekeeping and intermediation, and the fragmentation of discourse.

If critical publicity is to retain its legitimacy in a digital age, it must be evaluated not only by who participates (input legitimacy) or by what effects it produces (output legitimacy) but also by how it processes, refines, and contests information (throughput legitimacy). With regard to the epistemic function, the processing of information and arguments is now largely carried out by opaque, commercially-driven algorithms that lack transparency and pre-arranged guidelines and do not assess content based on epistemic quality. As easy participation in public discourse is encouraged, so too have the demands placed on this epistemic function. The growing disparity in participants' information access

and understanding calls for a greater epistemic effort in shaping public opinion. In the digital environment, moderation and the dissemination of information increasingly overlap – and both are primarily handled through technological systems. Additionally, critical publicity should not take for granted what is public or being published as ‘issues of public interest’, but should rather continuously interrogate the boundaries of public debate. As I have outlined using the term *Problemverarbeitung*, an inclusive and well-functioning public sphere produces new descriptions of public and political issues, including the identification of new or overlooked issues or perspectives that should be addressed. This approach underscores the importance of supporting publicity infrastructures that enhance the three key functions of public controversy, epistemic effort, and reflectivity.

The arguments presented in Part I converge on a fundamental insight: public opinion formation cannot be reduced to a static aggregation of individual preferences or an outcome-oriented procedural mechanism. Instead, it must be understood as an ongoing, reflective, and epistemically driven process that is continually shaped by critical publicity processes. The introduction of throughput legitimacy into this framework provides a necessary corrective to the limitations of previous models, ensuring that democratic legitimacy is assessed not only by the inclusivity of participation or the efficacy of outcomes, but also by the integrity of the communicative processes that mediate between them.

This revised model of public opinion formation highlights the importance of a deliberative, epistemic and reflective approach, positioning throughput legitimacy at the core of democratic theory. As media infrastructures continue to evolve, fulfilling their public role requires fostering a form of critical publicity that is not merely transparent and inclusive but also substantively engaged with the enhancement of public knowledge and the redefinition of common concerns. It must provide an alternative to gatekeeping, in addition to filtering and correcting claims. Only through such an approach can democratic legitimacy be sustained in an era of rapid technological and societal transformation.

The Habermasian notion of critical publicity appeared to provide a mainly infrastructural approach, fostered by professional media infrastructures that are supposed to ensure a resilient public sphere. However, the transformation of the media landscape resulted in a decline of professional

journalism's influence and increasing contestation of its authority. Against this backdrop, the Habermasian, newsroom-centred approach to media falls short. Analytically distinguishing the infrastructures from the processes, as I did in the first part of this thesis, allows me to identify new critical potential in the recently transformed context.

In Part II, I critically discussed the emergence of alternative publicity potential. The cases that I have selected all emerge at the margins of traditional journalistic practices, exploring, challenging and transcending these, and potentially contributing to a critical publicity. These examples were chosen for their strong and sometimes provocative roles in contemporary media, often questioning and reshaping the boundaries and procedures of public debate. By actively engaging in information dissemination, they evolve into alternative publishing powers that compete with conventional journalism, further decoupling information services from established media institutions. I investigated whether in a platformed media sphere alternative agents or networks could adopt critical processes. I focused on three types of 'boundary work' of traditional journalism – influencers, activism and networked journalism – that represent both threats and potentials for critical publicity. I aimed to assess whether these emerging publishing practices truly support or undermine critical publicity in today's post-digital media sphere.

*In the first case*, I examined the role of social media influencers during the COVID-19 crisis, who were asked to perform a role in the crisis infrastructure of public communication. By informing their followers about actual advice from experts and the government, they operated as epistemic powers, catering for a young public that was beyond the reach of traditional journalism and professional media. In Finland, the Netherlands, and the United States, governments engaged influencers to facilitate the rapid circulation of public health messages. While this strategy expanded reach and increased epistemic accessibility, its implications for throughput legitimacy varied.

This case illustrated that throughput legitimacy, as established in Part I, requires more than the mere transmission of messages; it demands an interactive, contestatory, and reflective public process where information and arguments are tested, debated, and refined. The influencers' role, in many instances, was limited to amplifying pre-approved messages rather

than critically engaging with them, resulting in a form of manufactured publicity. The Dutch model, where influencer contracts constrained content autonomy, exemplified a failure of throughput legitimacy, reducing influencers to mere conduits of state communication. By contrast, the Finnish and American approaches allowed for greater adaptation of messages, maintaining a level of authenticity and engagement with followers.

This case showed that publishing is not the same as authoring. For influencers to productively contribute to critical publicity, they need to adopt a justified and deliberative position, follow a transparent sponsor strategy and go beyond simple message dissemination. When engaged in reflective, two-way discussions that challenge dominant narratives and encourage deliberative interaction, their contribution to controversies and epistemic functioning can be beneficial. Ultimately, the case shows that critical publicity is not confined to institutions, experts, or professional roles. Instead, it can include a broader range of contributors—provided they adhere to transparent and accountable standards, adopt a reflective stance, and engage in deliberation. Under these conditions, non-experts can act as epistemic agents and fulfil a critical public function.

*The second case* underscored the potential of activism to challenge epistemic norms and restructure publicity practices. Activists, particularly in the digital era, function as critical agents who expose the deficiencies of conventional media's epistemic procedures. They do not merely seek to introduce new voices into public discourse (input legitimacy) or influence policy outcomes (output legitimacy); instead, they actively contest the procedural dynamics of public debate itself.

This epistemic activism is exemplified by movements that directly challenge editorial and journalistic norms. As explored in the case of climate activism, media protests such as the Extinction Rebellion actions against News UK demonstrated the potential of activist interventions to transform media practices. By contesting the editorial choices that framed climate change in trivialising ways, activists engaged in a form of throughput legitimacy – generating controversy, demanding justification, and instigating self-reflection within journalistic institutions. Their ability to hold media accountable and to expose the structural biases within journalistic epistemologies illustrates how throughput can serve as an essential parameter for maintaining the integrity of critical publicity.

The case argues that in the post-digital era, media organisations are publicly held to meet their own critical standards. They are being called upon doing so by activists who expose bias, question epistemic selections, propose alternative modes of discourse, and hold traditional media accountable for their reporting. By publicly challenging the epistemic responsibility of media institutions, activists interrogate, deconstruct, broaden or shift the scope of dominant discourses, repoliticising publicity.

*The final case* on networked journalism explored how the decline of professional media structures and the rise of collaborative, foundation-funded investigative journalism reshape throughput legitimacy. The traditional role of journalism as a professionalised gatekeeper of truth claims has been eroded by digitisation, which simultaneously fostered new epistemic vulnerabilities – ranging from misinformation to the algorithmic curation of news.

However, initiatives such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ) and Bellingcat exemplify how networked journalism can restore throughput legitimacy by supporting collaboration, transparency, and methodological reflectivity. Their strength lies in networking, cooperation, and their capacity to integrate diverse international and technological sources, thereby enhancing the epistemic quality of journalism. Unlike traditional newsroom-centric models, some of these forms of journalism emphasise procedural openness and the use of open-source intelligence, allowing citizen investigators to contribute to the epistemic legitimacy of reporting.

Moving away from viewing news as a discrete, standalone product, networked initiatives recognise news production as a collaborative, distributed process involving multiple contributors. This continuous news production, based on open-source values and day-to-day publishing along the way, ever open to correction and supervised by the public, represents a reflective function of publicity. Here, epistemic authority, traditionally defined in vertical relations, is redefined in procedural norms.

Using continuous self-publication, networked journalism can spark an ongoing debate shaped by socially, internationally, and epistemically diverse perspectives, redefining its relationship with the public by recognising its role as a vital component of *Öffentlichkeit*. However, the

balance between curation, expertise and participatory engagement must be carefully managed. If successfully implemented, however, networked journalism can contribute to a more epistemically robust and accountable public debate.

The examination of the case proposes a reconceptualisation of the normative requirements for critical publicity as a response to the platformised, fragmented, and participatory nature of the post-digital public sphere. In this rearticulation, legitimacy is no longer granted by position or profession, but is earned through transparent practices, collaborative processes, and a pluralistic engagement with epistemic diversity. Journalism's role in critical publicity is preserved by a shift from content control to process curation: journalism becomes not a discipline of reporting, but a public epistemic practice.

In conclusion, when bringing these three cases into dialogue with the theoretical framework developed in Part I, it becomes clear that a focus on throughput legitimacy (by assessing the quality of public deliberation, epistemic effort and reflective potential) is indispensable in a post-digital public sphere. Throughput cannot merely be understood as a procedural mechanism between input and output; instead, it is the very condition that determines whether public discourse remains epistemically robust, reflective, and contestatory.

The transformation of media infrastructures – from mass media to digital platforms, from professional journalism to networked collaboration and influencer-driven communication – necessitates a recalibration of how we assess legitimacy in public opinion formation. Without throughput legitimacy, public discourse risks devolving into an uncritical dissemination of messages, as seen in the case of influencers. Therefore, the ideal of critical publicity must be reconceptualised not merely as a function of accessibility (input) or efficacy (output), but even more urgently as a commitment to the continuous interrogation, refinement, and transformation of public knowledge.

To this end, I propose a rearticulated model of critical publicity that foregrounds three key functions of throughput legitimacy. Contestation is, as already discussed in Chapter 3, easily realised in a digital context. However, as Wessler (2018) rightly argued, the type of contestation found

on social media platforms is not a deliberative form of contestation per se, since it is not meeting other deliberative criteria, such as responsiveness, as the case of the influencers showed. Moreover, due to fragmentation, opinions are easily disseminated, but do not encounter criticism and a plurality of viewpoints. Supporting two-sided communication ensures that claims are subject to scrutiny and reconsideration.

Regarding the epistemic function, the boundary cases demonstrated that introducing new voices and perspectives, which is facilitated thanks to digitisation, enhances the epistemic process. Contesting editorial procedures as a part of a media-activist strategy, might even transform and improve these procedures. Recent initiatives that adjusted their research approach to the networked context recast the traditional vertically-defined epistemic authority of journalism in terms of procedural, accountable, transparent legitimacy norms. These cases illustrate that epistemic value does not lie in establishing a 'correct view', but in maintaining a continuous openness to revision and improvement. Therefore, if carefully managed by continuous revision, citizens' participation can contribute to the epistemic effort, encouraging collective reasoning and research.

Concerning the reflective function, the boundary cases (especially the one on activism) showed that exposing editorial biases performs a constitutive role in reshaping public issues. By inciting a continuous dialectical reflection on ideological foundations and editorial strategies, post-digital activism interrogates and deconstructs dominant discourses, repoliticising publicity. By scrutinising its focus, its borders and its procedures, new critical voices generate novel frameworks for understanding and addressing public concerns.

A post-digital publicity, structured by opaque, commercially- or politically-driven algorithms and lacking transparency, requires additional procedures to achieve throughput legitimacy, especially to strengthen its epistemic and reflective functions. By centring throughput legitimacy as a normative criterion for assessing media and publicity processes, we can move beyond simplistic infrastructural media critique and towards a more nuanced understanding of how public opinion formation can be supported in the post-digital age. To preserve throughput legitimacy in the digital public sphere, we must develop mechanisms that reinforce epistemic standards while embracing the participatory potential of new media. This requires

institutional awareness and adjustment, encouraging deliberative qualities, and the stimulation of skilled and reflective authoring that balances free expression with epistemic integrity.

In this thesis, I advanced a more processual understanding of authorship and epistemic authority. By rethinking and adjusting the normative structures of critical publicity, we can foster a public sphere that remains reflective, inclusive, and resilient against epistemic threats.

Ultimately, the dissertation offers both a theoretical framework and practical orientation for evaluating and enhancing critical publicity in the context of contemporary media transformations. By bringing together normative democratic theory, media critique, and empirical case studies, it contributes to the philosophical and societal debate on how to sustain democratic legitimacy in a digitised public sphere.

# De epistemische uitdagingen van kritische publiciteit

Een filosofische benadering van publieke-opinievorming in een post-digitale publieke sfeer

## Samenvatting

In dit proefschrift onderzoek ik de normatieve en epistemische voorwaarden voor een kritisch publiek debat in een (post-)digitaal medialandschap. De centrale onderzoeksvraag is of de normatieve criteria voor een kritische publieke sfeer uit het pre-digitale tijdperk nog steeds adequaat zijn of opnieuw moeten worden gedefinieerd.

Voor ik inga op het onderwerp van mijn proefschrift – de normatieve vereisten voor een kritische publieke sfeer – geef ik eerst een paar persoonlijke overwegingen die mijn betrokkenheid bij dit onderwerp mogelijk verhelderen.

Door de snel ontwikkelende digitalisering veranderde het gecommmercialiseerde en door massamedia gedomineerde medialandschap eind vorige eeuw geleidelijk in een netwerkinfrastructuur. Aanvankelijk wekte deze ontwikkeling optimisme, bij wetenschappers én bij het publiek. Voortbouwend op het idee van ‘de netwerksamenleving’ van Manuel Castells (1996) zagen velen de nieuwe ‘genetwerkte publieke sfeer’ als een interactieve technologie die burgers met elkaar en met een wereldwijde informatie- en communicatiestroom verbond. De nieuwe netwerkomgeving werd geprezen om haar communicatieve en deliberatieve mogelijkheden. Benkler (2006) benadrukte dat het internet zowel een uitdaging als een kans bood. Het internet zou volgens hem de participatie aan het publieke debat en de toegang tot informatie kunnen bevorderen. Digitalisering en netwerken slechtten communicatiebarrières, maakten wereldwijde interactie mogelijk en openden nieuwe manieren van kennisuitwisseling. Goedkope en toegankelijke digitale hulpmiddelen boden mogelijk een tegenwicht tegen de toenemende commercialisering van de traditionele media.

Als student maakte ik deze ontwikkeling van dichtbij mee. Achteraf gezien richtte deze transformatie zich destijds vooral op het verankeren van publieke waarden in de digitale infrastructuur. In 1994 lanceerden Nederlandse technologiepioniers en ontwerpers (waaronder voormalig filosofiestudenten) De Digitale Stad, een open, toegankelijke online gemeenschap. De metafoor van de stad was bewust gekozen om een gevoel van publieke betrokkenheid en communicatie te bevorderen. Rond dezelfde tijd ontstond ook de internetprovider XS4ALL (Stikker 2019).<sup>1</sup>

Vanaf 1995 – ik was toen net als stagiaire begonnen bij het pas opgerichte *Filosofie Magazine* – volgde ik deze initiatieven met grote belangstelling. Natuurlijk waren deze ontwikkelingen verdomd handig. Opeens beschikten we over een digitale lijn waarmee we onze bestanden konden versturen. Dat was veel sneller en efficiënter dan met de auto een floppydisk naar de grafisch ontwerper brengen. Maar de ontwikkelingen trokken vooral mijn aandacht door hun enorme democratische potentieel.

Met de komst van het internet, meenden de pioniers, leek Habermas' deliberatieve ideaal voor het eerst op grote schaal bereikbaar. Uiteraard zagen zij potentiële risico's van laagdrempelige informatie-uitwisseling. Zo zouden criminele netwerken die bijvoorbeeld ook kunnen benutten. Maar het gevoel van bouwen aan een nieuwe, onbegrensde toegankelijke en publieke dimensie overheerste: de Digitale Stad zou dienen als een echt publiek domein, een vrije ruimte voor uitwisseling en debat, waartoe iedereen wereldwijd toegang zou hebben.<sup>2</sup>

In zekere zin begon mijn inspiratie voor dit proefschrift hier.

Sedertdien hebben drie uiteenlopende professionele ervaringen mijn perspectief op het publieke debat en publieke opinievorming gevormd. Hoewel ik dit onderscheid nooit eerder heb gemaakt voordat ik deze dissertatie schreef, kan ik mijn betrokkenheid bij het publieke debat in mijn opeenvolgende functies van hoofdredacteur, Denker des Vaderlands en senator, beschrijven aan de hand van de drie paradigma's *input*, *output* en *throughput*.

- 1 Voor een verslag uit eerste hand van deze fascinerende geschiedenis, en het vervolg ervan, zie Stikker (2019) .
- 2 Zoals ook blijkt uit de naam van een van de eerste Amsterdamse internetproviders, xs4all - 'access for all': toegang voor iedereen.

In mijn jaren als hoofdredacteur van het publiekstijdschrift *Filosofie Magazine* (2001-2015) was ik vooral bezig met het voeden en verrijken van het publieke debat aan de hand van filosofische interventies. Mijn dagelijks werk bestond uit het uitnodigen, ontwikkelen, verwerven, cureren, redigeren, interviewen, modereren en selecteren van filosofische stemmen en perspectieven, evenals het onwikkelen van nieuwe publicatievormen. Achteraf gezien, en in de terminologie van dit proefschrift, bestond mijn werk hoofdzakelijk uit het verzorgen van goede *throughput*-processen, zoals ik die in de voorgaande hoofdstukken heb beschreven: het verwerken en selecteren van stemmen, argumenten en perspectieven, het filteren, en het beslissen over de kwaliteit ervan.

Vervolgens was ik van april 2019 tot april 2021 Denker des Vaderlands. Deze positie bood mij twee jaar lang een platform om, als prominente stem, in verschillende media, publieke podia, podcasts, kranten, radio en televisie bij te dragen aan publieke meningsvorming. Hoewel ik probeerde weg te blijven van het echte opiniëren en me voornamelijk richtte op filosofische analyses droeg ik bij aan de *input*-zijde van publieke debatten: het toevoegen van een visie vanuit een ander (filosofisch) perspectief.

Ten slotte ben ik sinds 2023 lid van de Eerste Kamer. Ik ben onderdeel van de parlementaire besluitvorming en in die zin vooral betrokken bij de *output* van het publieke debat. Het consulteren van de publieke opiniepeilingen behoort (soms op het absurde af) tot ons dagelijks ritueel, en dan gaat het vooral om de publieke opinie als uitkomst, een resultaat van een discussie. En die dient weer als kompas voor het daaropvolgende politieke besluitvormingsproces.

Deze drie paradigma's (input, output en throughput) zijn tot op zekere hoogte van elkaar te onderscheiden. In deze verschillende functies bemerkte ik echter steeds een sterke afhankelijkheid van de *machinerie* van het publieke debat, de throughput-processen, ook al is die niet altijd even zichtbaar. Het filteren, framen en cureren bepalen in grote mate de stemmen en perspectieven (input) en de presentatie (output) daarvan. Daarom benadruk ik, ook in mijn wetenschappelijke benadering, de relevantie van 'het hoe': van *the making of* een publiek debat. Door de digitalisering wordt dit throughput-perspectief nog meer aan het zicht onttrokken en staat het in toenemende mate onder druk. Gedreven door een vergaande kapitalistische logica heeft de 'platformisering' van het

medialandschap gezorgd voor een alsmaar grotere verdoezeling van throughput-processen. Met als gevolg dat de legitimiteit van een kritische publieke sfeer en het vertrouwen daarin als een kaartenhuis in elkaar storten.

In dit proefschrift heb ik een conceptueel kader ontwikkeld dat de normatieve vereisten voor het kritische publieke debat herijkt. Ik heb daartoe het begrip 'kritische publiciteit' van Jürgen Habermas opgesplitst in enerzijds de processen in het kritische debat zelf (de discussies tussen mensen aan talkshow tafels en op social media, en de manier waarop deze verlopen) en anderzijds de infrastructuren die deze processen mogelijk maken (denk aan kranten, uitgeefconcerns, omroepuizen, digitale platforms, maar ook aan regelgeving, commerciële contracten, glasvezelkabels et cetera). Dat onderscheid stelde mij in staat om normatieve dimensie op de voorgrond plaatsen en die te evalueren aan de hand van drie typen legitimiteit: input-, output- en throughput legitimiteit. Het is de throughput legitimiteit die volgens mij een verwaarloosde, maar cruciale dimensie van een kritische publieke sfeer vormt.

Traditionele legitimiteitsmodellen zijn voornamelijk gebaseerd op input-legitimiteit, die de nadruk legt op vertegenwoordiging en inclusie, en op output-legitimiteit, die zich richt op effectiviteit en (beleids)resultaten. In mijn onderzoek toon ik aan dat deze perspectieven ontoereikend zijn om de complexiteit van de publieke opinievorming te begrijpen. Dat geldt des te meer in het post-digitale tijdperk. Ik beargumenteer dat throughput-legitimiteit – gewaarborgd door de processen waarmee het publieke discours wordt georganiseerd, betwist en verfijnd – een essentieel normatief paradigma is om de kritische kwaliteiten van een publiek debat en publieke opinievorming te kunnen beoordelen. Verder laat ik zien dat de vorming van de publieke opinie als een steunpilaar voor de democratie fungeert, op voorwaarde dat zij wordt gegenereerd door een kritisch publiek discours met input-, output- én throughput legitimiteit. Dit betekent dat er drie dimensies van het publieke debat moeten worden gewaarborgd: de dimensie van *representatie* vindt zijn legitimatie in een pluraliteit van stemmen en perspectieven (de input); de dimensie van *presentatie* wordt gelegitimeerd door een effectieve mobilisatie van opvattingen en de beïnvloeding publieke agenda; en de *procedurele dimensie* wordt gewaarborgd door ruimte te bieden aan controversie, epistemische ontwikkeling en een reflectieve functie die de probleemdefinitie bevrucht.

Om een model van publieke opinievorming te ontwikkelen dat verder gaat dan kwantitatieve en empirische benaderingen, onderzoek ik in deel I het werk van Nadia Urbinati en Jürgen Habermas. De vraag is: welk theoretisch kader biedt een uitgewerkt begrip van publieke opinievorming als continu proces in plaats van slechts als eindresultaat? Urbinati's diarchische model van democratie steunt op twee pilaren, die van het domein van de 'wil' en die van 'opinie'. Dat biedt een nuttige structuur om de onderlinge relatie tussen politieke instituties en het publieke discours te begrijpen. Zoals ik heb betoogd, benadrukt Urbinati met name het belang van eerlijke procedures en institutionele bemiddeling van verschillende meningen, maar blijft de deliberatieve dynamiek die de publieke opinie vormt onderbelicht. Daardoor is deze benadering onvoldoende om te verklaren *hoe* een meerderheid tot een meerderheid komt, wat fundamenteel is voor mijn normatieve benadering van publieke-opinievorming.

Het deliberatieve model van Habermas daarentegen benadrukt de epistemische en reflectieve kwaliteiten van het publieke discours zelf. Het traditionele model van Habermas houdt echter onvoldoende rekening met de veranderende mechanismen in het publieke debat en de digitale en genetwerkte mediaomgeving die dat faciliteren.

Dat beide benaderingen relatief weinig aandacht besteden aan processen die het publieke debat vormgeven en aan mediaorganisaties die deze processen in stand houden, vormt de belangrijkste beperking van deze modellen. Juist die processen bepalen de throughput-legitimiteit bepalen. Ik beargumenteer dan ook dat throughput-legitimiteit in het werk van Habermas niet goed is uitgewerkt; in wezen vertrouwt hij er op dat professionele instituties zorgdragen voor de juiste procedures. Deze professionele verantwoordelijkheid wordt met andere woorden toevertrouwd aan 'het mediasysteem', dat voornamelijk als een black box fungeert. Hierdoor blijven de procesmatige normatieve vereisten buiten beschouwing. Door throughput-legitimiteit op te nemen in de normatieve evaluatie van het publieke discours, formuleer ik een herzien model dat de tekortkomingen van traditionele kaders wegneemt.

Throughput-legitimiteit omvat drie belangrijke functies: het waarborgt de deliberatieve, epistemische en reflectieve kwaliteit van het publieke discours. Ten eerste zijn *publieke controversen en dispuut* deliberatieve functies die verschillende rivaliserende opvattingen met elkaar confronteren. Een

kritisch publiek discours verspreidt en bundelt niet louter meningen, maar faciliteert een grondig debat en stelt dominante opvattingen ter discussie. De tweede functie is *epistemische verwerking van standpunten*, waarbij het publieke debat wordt opgevat als een continu proces van gezamenlijke argumentatie, dat enerzijds de verspreiding van kennis en informatie (*dissemination*) en anderzijds de uitwisseling van argumenten (*deliberation*) waardeert, waardoor de epistemische kwaliteit toeneemt. Dit maakt een publiek debat, in potentie, tot een gezamenlijk leerproces. Dit proces garandeert geen correct eindresultaat, maar het genereert in ieder geval een voortdurende herziening van opvattingen en inzichten. Ten derde is er de *reflectieve functie*: het publieke debat moet altijd openstaan voor zelfcorrectie en nieuwe probleemdefinities, en kritisch reflecteren op kwesties van gezamenlijk belang. Het moet niet alleen bestaande kwesties agenderen, maar ook actief nieuwe kaders en perspectieven ontwikkelen om publieke kwesties beter te begrijpen en hanteerbaar te maken. Op die manier wordt het publieke debat zelf onderwerp van reflectie.

De introductie van throughput-legitimiteit is cruciaal om publieke opinievorming te kunnen beoordelen in het huidige, getransformeerde medialandschap. Problemamitsch aan de digitalisering is dat die vooral de input ('wie') en output ('wat') van publiciteit benadrukt, terwijl de throughput ('hoe') – traditioneel in handen van professionele instituties – naar de achtergrond verdwijnt. Dit is in toenemende mate van belang, aangezien digitalisering bijdraagt aan de marginalisering van de professionele journalistiek. Bovendien heeft de digitalisering van de publieke sfeer traditionele vormen van publieke communicatie ontregeld. Daardoor is de machtsbalans verschoven van professionele poortwachters zoals de journalistiek, naar genetwerkte vormen van communicatie en algoritmische interventies. Hoewel deze verschuiving de toegang tot het publieke debat heeft gedemocratiseerd, heeft zij ook voor nieuwe kwetsbaarheden gezorgd zoals de proliferatie van ongecontroleerde informatie, de opkomst van algoritmische selectie en redactie, en de fragmentatie van het discours.

Als kritische publiciteit haar legitimiteit in het digitale tijdperk wil behouden, moet ze niet alleen worden beoordeeld op basis van wie aan publieke debat deelneemt (input-legitimiteit) of welke effecten het heeft (output-legitimiteit); ook h<sup>o</sup>e deze publiciteit informatie verwerkt, verfijnt en betwist (throughput-legitimiteit) moet worden gewogen.

Wat de epistemische functie betreft, wordt de verwerking van informatie en argumenten nu grotendeels uitgevoerd door ondoorzichtige, commercieel gedreven algoritmen die geen transparantie en vooraf vastgestelde richtlijnen kennen en de informatie niet beoordelen op basis van kennigerelateerde criteria. Naarmate de laagdrempelige deelname aan het publieke debat wordt aangemoedigd, nemen echter ook de eisen aan deze epistemische functie toe. De daarmee samenhangende toegenomen ongelijkheid in toegang tot en begrip van informatie onder deelnemers vraagt om een grotere cognitieve inspanning van een kritisch publiek debat. In de digitale omgeving lopen moderatie en de verspreiding van informatie steeds meer in elkaar over – en beide worden voornamelijk georganiseerd door technologische systemen. Daarbij komt dat we datgene wat in een kritisch publiek discours als ‘kwestie van algemeen belang’ geldt, niet als vanzelfsprekend mogen beschouwen. De grenzen van het publieke debat dienen voortdurend onderwerp van gesprek te zijn. Zoals ik met de term *Problemverarbeitung* heb geschetst, produceert een inclusieve en goed functionerende publieke sfeer nieuwe beschrijvingen van publieke en politieke kwesties door andere perspectieven aan te boren. Deze benadering van publieke opinie laat zien waarom de drie sleutelfuncties van publieke controverse, epistemische inspanning en reflectiviteit cruciaal zijn voor de normatieve beoordeling van mediaprocessen.

De argumenten die in deel I worden aangevoerd, komen samen in een fundamenteel inzicht: de vorming van de publieke opinie kan niet worden gereduceerd tot een statische optelsom van individuele voorkeuren of tot de organisatie van een uitkomst-gericht procedureel forum. In plaats daarvan moet dit worden opgevat als een continu deliberatief, reflectief en epistemisch gedreven proces. De introductie van throughput-legitimiteit biedt een noodzakelijke correctie op de beperkingen van eerdere modellen. Democratische legitimiteit wordt op die manier niet alleen beoordeeld op basis van de inclusiviteit van de deelnemers of de doeltreffendheid van de resultaten, maar ook op basis van de integriteit van de communicatieve processen die tussen input en output bemiddelen.

Dit herziene model van publieke opinievorming benadrukt het belang van een deliberatieve, epistemische en reflectieve benadering, waarbij throughput-legitimiteit centraal staat in de democratische theorievorming. Naarmate media-infrastructuren zich verder ontwikkelen, moeten zij in hun publieke rol niet alleen een kritische publiciteit bevorderen die

transparant en inclusief is; zij dienen ook de verbetering van de publieke kennis (epistemisch) en de herdefiniëring van gemeenschappelijke aandachtspunten (reflectief) te stimuleren. Alleen zo kan democratische legitimiteit in stand worden gehouden in een tijdperk van snelle technologische en maatschappelijke veranderingen.

Het Habermasiaanse begrip 'kritische publiciteit' leek een voornamelijk infrastructurele benadering te bieden, gevoed door professionele mediaorganisaties die een vitale en veerkrachtige publieke sfeer moeten waarborgen. De transformatie van het medialandschap heeft echter geleid tot een geringere invloed van de professionele journalistiek en een toenemende betwisting van haar autoriteit. Tegen deze achtergrond schiet de Habermasiaanse, op nieuwsredacties gerichte benadering tekort. Door een analytisch onderscheid te maken tussen infrastructuren en processen, zoals ik in het eerste deel van dit proefschrift heb gedaan, kan ik nieuw kritisch potentieel identificeren in het nieuwe gedigitaliseerde medialandschap.

In deel II bespreek ik de opkomst van nieuwe kritische publicitaire alternatieven. Hiervoor heb ik drie casussen gekozen die allemaal in de marge van de traditionele journalistieke praktijken ontstaan. Ze verkennen, dagen uit en overstijgen deze, en kunnen mogelijk bijdragen aan een kritische publiciteit. De drie voorbeelden zijn interessant om hun sterke en soms provocerende rol in de hedendaagse media, waarbij ze vaak de grenzen en procedures van het publieke debat bevragen en hervormen. Door actief betrokken te zijn bij de verspreiding van informatie, ontwikkelen ze zich tot alternatieve publicitaire machten die concurreren met de conventionele journalistiek. Hierdoor worden informatiestromen verder losgekoppeld van gevestigde media-instellingen. Ik heb onderzocht of alternatieve initiatieven in een platform gebaseerde mediasfeer kritische processen kunnen waarborgen. Het gaat daarbij om drie soorten 'grenswerk' van de traditionele journalistiek – influencers, activisme en netwerkjournalistiek – die zowel een bedreiging als een kans vormen voor kritische publiciteit. Ik wilde nagaan of deze opkomende publicatiepraktijken kritische publiciteit in de huidige post-digitale mediasfeer daadwerkelijk ondersteunen of ondermijnen.

*In de eerste casus* heb ik de rol van social media influencers onderzocht, die tijdens de COVID-19-crisis werd gevraagd een rol te spelen in de crisisinfrastructuur van de publiekscommunicatie. Door hun volgers te

informereren over de adviezen van deskundigen en de overheid, fungeerden zij als ‘epistemische krachten’ die zich richtten op een jong publiek dat buiten het bereik van de traditionele journalistiek en professionele media viel. In Finland, Nederland en de Verenigde Staten schakelden regeringen influencers in om de snelle verspreiding van gezondheidsadviezen te vergemakkelijken. Hoewel deze strategie het bereik vergrootte en de toegankelijkheid van informatie verbeterde, waren de gevolgen voor de throughput-legitimiteit uiteenlopend.

Deze casus illustreert dat throughput-legitimiteit, zoals gedefinieerd in deel I, meer vereist dan alleen het overbrengen en verspreiden van berichten; het vraagt ook om een interactief, deliberatief en reflectief publiek proces waarin informatie en argumenten worden getoetst, bediscussieerd en verfijnd. De rol van de influencers bleef in veel gevallen beperkt tot het versterken van vooraf goedgekeurde boodschappen in plaats van deze kritisch te benaderen, wat resulteerde in het verwijt van manipulatieve berichtgeving en propaganda. Het Nederlandse model, waar de contracten met influencers hun autonomie beperkten, illustreert het ontbreken van throughput-legitimiteit, waarbij influencers werden gereduceerd tot louter doorgeefluiken van overheidscommunicatie. In de Finse en Amerikaanse benaderingen daarentegen behielden de influencers een sterkere invloed op hun eigen berichtgeving, waardoor een zekere mate van authenticiteit en betrokkenheid bij de volgers behouden bleef.

Deze casus toont aan dat publiceren niet hetzelfde is als schrijven. Om een productieve bijdrage te kunnen leveren aan kritische publiciteit, moeten influencers een gemotiveerde en deliberatieve positie innemen, een transparante sponsorstrategie volgen en verder gaan dan het simpelweg doorplaatsen van berichten. Wanneer zij deelnemen aan reflectieve, tweezijdige discussies die dominante paradigma’s ter discussie stellen en weloverwogen interactie aanmoedigen, kan hun bijdrage aan controverses en epistemische processen behulpzaam zijn. Uiteindelijk laat deze casus zien dat kritische publiciteit niet beperkt is tot instellingen, deskundigen of professionele rollen. In plaats daarvan kan een breder scala aan deelnemers een rol spelen, mits zij zich houden aan transparante normen, bereid zijn zich te verantwoorden, een reflectieve houding aannemen en openstaan voor discussie. Onder deze omstandigheden kunnen niet-deskundigen optreden als epistemische actoren en een kritische publieke functie vervullen.

*De tweede casus* onderstreept het potentieel van activisme om epistemische normen ter discussie te stellen en media-praktijken te herformuleren. Activisten fungeren, met name in het digitale tijdperk, als kritische actoren die de tekortkomingen van de epistemische procedures van conventionele media aan de kaak stellen. Ze streven niet alleen naar het introduceren van nieuwe stemmen in het publieke discours (input-legitimiteit) of het beïnvloeden van beleidsresultaten en de publieke agenda (output-legitimiteit), maar betwisten actief de procedurele dynamiek van het publieke debat zelf.

Dit epistemisch activisme wordt geïllustreerd door bewegingen die redactionele en journalistieke normen rechtstreeks aanvechten. Zoals blijkt uit de casus van klimaatactivisme, hebben mediaprotesten, waaronder de acties van Extinction Rebellion tegen News UK, aangetoond dat activistische interventies mediapraktijken kunnen veranderen. Door de redactionele keuzes aan de kaak te stellen die klimaatverandering op een bagatelliserende manier frameden, benadrukten activisten het belang van throughput-legitimiteit: ze genereerden controverses, ze eisten rechtvaardiging en zetten journalistieke instellingen aan tot zelfreflectie. Hun vermogen om de media verantwoordelijk te houden en structurele vooringenomenheid binnen journalistieke kennisframes bloot te leggen, illustreert dat throughput een essentiële parameter is voor het waarborgen van de integriteit van kritische publiciteit.

De casus laat zien dat mediaorganisaties in het postdigitale tijdperk publiekelijk worden opgeroepen om aan hun eigen kritische normen te voldoen. Activisten bekritisieren vooringenomenheid, trekken epistemische keuzes in twijfel, stellen alternatieve discouursvormen voor en houden traditionele media verantwoordelijk voor hun berichtgeving. Zij ondervragen, deconstrueren, verbreden of verschuiven de reikwijdte van dominante discoursen door de epistemische verantwoordelijkheid van media-instellingen aan de kaak te stellen en publiekelijk te bediscussiëren.

*De laatste casestudy* over netwerkjournalistiek laat zien hoe de crisis van professionele mediastructuren en de opkomst van samenwerkende, door stichtingen gefinancierde onderzoeksjournalistiek de werking van throughput-legitimiteit kan hervormen. De traditionele rol van de journalistiek als professionele poortwachter van waarheidsclaims is door de digitalisering gemarginaliseerd. Dit heeft tegelijkertijd nieuwe

epistemische kwetsbaarheden gecreëerd – variërend van de verpreiding van desinformatie tot de algoritmische curering van nieuws.

Initiatieven zoals het International Consortium of Investigative Journalism (ICIJ) en Bellingcat laten echter zien hoe netwerkjournalistiek throughput-legitimiteit kan herstellen. Hun kracht ligt in netwerken, samenwerking en hun vermogen om diverse internationale en technologische bronnen te integreren, waardoor de epistemische kwaliteit van de journalistiek verbetert. In tegenstelling tot traditionele, op nieuwsredacties gerichte modellen, leggen sommige journalistieke netwerken de nadruk op procedurele openheid en het gebruik van open-source-informatie. Zo kunnen burgers, als amateur-journalisten, bijdragen aan de epistemische legitimiteit van de berichtgeving.

Netwerkinitiatieven zien nieuws niet langer als een afzonderlijk, op zichzelf staand product, maar erkennen dat nieuwsproductie een gezamenlijk, gedistribueerd proces is waarbij meerdere onderzoekers en auteurs betrokken zijn. Deze continue nieuwsproductie, gebaseerd op open-sourcewaarden en dagelijkse publicatie, is open voor correctie en wordt continu gecontroleerd door het publiek. Ze vertegenwoordigt een reflectieve functie van publiciteit. Hier wordt epistemische autoriteit, traditioneel gedefinieerd in verticale relaties en gebaseerd op de autoriteit van het nieuwsmiddeel, geherdefinieerd in procedurele normen.

Aan de hand van voortdurende zelfpublicatie kan netwerkjournalistiek een onophoudelijk debat op gang brengen dat wordt gevormd door sociaal, internationaal en epistemisch diverse perspectieven. Het kan de relatie met het publiek herdefiniëren door haar rol als essentieel onderdeel van *de Öffentlichkeit* te erkennen. Het evenwicht tussen cureren, expertise en participatieve betrokkenheid moet echter zorgvuldig worden beheerd. Als dit adequaat wordt geïmplementeerd, kan netwerkjournalistiek bijdragen aan een epistemisch robuuster en verantwoordelijker publiek debat.

De analyse van de casus stelt een herdefiniering voor van de normatieve vereisten voor kritische publiciteit en biedt zo een antwoord op het geplatformiseerde, gefragmenteerde en participatieve karakter van de post-digitale publieke sfeer. In deze herformulering wordt legitimiteit niet langer verleend door positie of professie, maar toegekend op basis van transparante praktijken, samenwerkingsprocessen en procedurele

autoriteit. De rol van de journalistiek in kritische publiciteit blijft behouden, maar verschuift van het controleren van de content, naar curatie van het proces: journalistiek is niet langer de discipline van verslaggeving, maar een publieke epistemische praktijk.

De confrontatie van het theoretische kader, ontwikkeld in deel I, met deze drie casussen legitimeert de conclusie dat een focus op throughput-legitimiteit onmisbaar is in een post-digitale publieke sfeer. Throughput kan niet louter worden opgevat als een procedureel mechanisme tussen input en output, maar is juist de voorwaarde die bepaalt of het publieke discours epistemisch robuust, reflectief en open voor controversie blijft.

De transformatie van media-infrastructuren – van massamedia naar digitale platforms, van professionele journalistiek naar op netwerk gebaseerde samenwerking en door influencers aangestuurde communicatie – maakt een herijking noodzakelijk van de manier waarop we legitimiteit in de publieke opinievorming beoordelen. Zonder throughput-legitimiteit dreigt het publieke discours te vervallen in een kritiekloze verspreiding van boodschappen, zoals we zien in de casus van influencers. Daarom moet het ideaal van kritische publiciteit niet alleen worden geherdefinieerd als een functie van toegankelijkheid (input) of doeltreffendheid (output), maar nog dringender als een opdracht tot voortdurende bevraging, verfijning en transformatie van het publieke discours.

Daartoe stel ik een nieuw model van kritische publiciteit voor dat drie essentiële functies van throughput-legitimiteit op de voorgrond plaatst. Wat de eerste functie – openstaan voor controverses – betreft: zoals reeds besproken in hoofdstuk 3, zijn controverses in een digitale context gemakkelijk te realiseren. Wessler (2018) heeft echter terecht betoogd dat controverses op sociale mediaplatforms vaak nog geen deliberatieve vorm van betwisting zijn, aangezien die niet voldoen aan andere deliberatieve criteria, zoals het geval was bij de casus van influencers. Bovendien worden meningen door fragmentatie gemakkelijk verspreid, maar komen ze niet per se in aanraking met kritiek en rivalsierende standpunten en daardoor worden ze niet onderworpen aan de noodzakelijke kritische toetsing en heroverweging.

Ten tweede, wat de epistemische functie betreft hebben de casussen aangetoond dat het introduceren van nieuwe stemmen en perspectieven

(wat dankzij de digitalisering gemakkelijker is) het epistemische proces versterkt. Het betwisten van redactionele procedures als onderdeel van een media-activistische strategie kan deze procedures zelfs transformeren. Recente initiatieven die hun onderzoeks aanpak hebben aangepast aan de netwerk-context, herdefiniëren de traditionele, verticaal gedefinieerde epistemische autoriteit van de journalistiek in termen van procedurele, verantwoorde en transparante legitimiteitsnormen. Deze voorbeelden illustreren dat epistemische waarde niet ligt in het vaststellen van een 'juiste visie', maar in het handhaven van een voortdurende openheid voor herziening en verbetering. Daarom kan participatie van burgers, mits zorgvuldig beheerd door voortdurende correctie, bijdragen aan het epistemische proces en gezamenlijk onderzoek stimuleren.

Wat de derde, reflectieve functie betreft, hebben de casussen (met name die over activisme) aangetoond dat het blootleggen van redactionele vooringenomenheid een constitutieve rol speelt bij het hervormen van publieke kwesties. Door het continu aanjagen van dialectische reflectie op ideologische grondslagen en redactionele strategieën, stelt post-digitaal activisme dominante discoursen aan de kaak, en maakt deze weer onderwerp van publiek debat. Door de focus, de grenzen en de procedures ervan kritisch te bekijken, genereren nieuwe kritische stemmen hernieuwde kaders voor het begrijpen en hanteren van publieke kwesties.

Post-digitale publiciteit, die wordt gestructureerd door ondoorzichtige, commercieel of politiek gemotiveerde en niet transparante algoritmen, vereist aanvullende procedures voor throughput-legitimiteit, met name om de epistemische en reflectieve functies te waarborgen. Door throughput-legitimiteit centraal te stellen als normatief criterium voor de beoordeling van media- en publiciteitsprocessen, kunnen we verder kijken dan de eenvoudige infrastructuurkritiek op 'de media'; we kunnen een genuanceerder begrip krijgen van de mogelijkheden om de vorming van de publieke opinie te ondersteunen in het post-digitale tijdperk. Om throughput-legitimiteit te behouden, moeten we mechanismen ontwikkelen die de epistemische functie versterken en tegelijkertijd het participatieve potentieel van nieuwe media omarmen. Dit vereist het stimuleren van deliberatieve kwaliteiten en het bevorderen van bekwaam en reflectief auteurschap dat vrije meningsuiting in evenwicht brengt met epistemische integriteit.

In dit proefschrift heb ik een meer procesmatige opvatting van auteurschap en epistemische autoriteit ontwikkeld. Door de normatieve structuren van een kritisch publiek discours te heroverwegen en aan te passen, kunnen we een publieke sfeer bevorderen die reflectief, inclusief en veerkrachtig blijft en minder vatbaar is voor epistemische kwetsbaarheden.

Uiteindelijk biedt het proefschrift zowel een theoretisch kader als een praktische oriëntatie voor het evalueren en verbeteren van kritische publiciteit in het hedendaagse post-digitale medialandschap. Door normatieve democratische theorie, mediakritiek en empirische casestudy's samen te brengen, hoop ik een bijdrage te leveren aan het filosofische en maatschappelijke debat over de vraag hoe we democratische legitimiteit in een gedigitaliseerde publieke sfeer kunnen behouden.

Tot slot, tijdens mijn zeven jaar academisch onderzoek heb ik mijn professionele betrokkenheid bij journalistiek, publiek debat en politiek grotendeels buiten beschouwing gelaten, maar het heeft op de achtergrond overduidelijk een rol gespeeld. Ik heb een filosofisch proefschrift geschreven dat bijdraagt aan de filosofische en academische discussies over de vorming van de publieke opinie en kritisch publiek debat. Maar eerlijk gezegd was dat niet mijn enige doel. Gezien mijn betrokkenheid bij de democratische idealen van het publieke discours uit de jaren negentig en mijn journalistieke en politieke werk, heb ik hiermee ook willen bijdragen aan het stimuleren van een robuuste en veerkrachtige publieke sfeer. Ik heb gepoogd een debat op gang te brengen over de normatieve vereisten voor de vorming van de publieke opinie; de noodzakelijke mogelijksvoorwaarden om onze huidige liberale democratie in stand te houden en te koesteren.

# Acknowledgements

My reflections on public conversation have been deeply shaped by the many people with whom I have engaged over the years. Because I believe in (public) philosophy as a practice of critical dialogue, my first and most heartfelt thanks go to all those who have taken part in that ongoing conversation. Your questions, disagreements, and insights have continually challenged and refined my thinking.

Through years of teaching and public speaking, I have had the privilege of meeting countless people whose curiosity and engagement have left their mark on me. I am especially grateful to my students, first at the University of Amsterdam since 2013, and later at Erasmus University Rotterdam from 2020 onward. Your critical questions and intellectual openness have sharpened my ideas and kept me intellectually alive. I also wish to thank the participants in the many places where I had the pleasure of teaching – especially Gombitelli, Crete, the ISVW, the Rode Hoed, and the Vlieland group. The conversations in these diverse settings were invaluable to developing my thoughts.

I am truly grateful to my supervisors. From the very beginning, Yolande Jansen showed confidence in the ambitious plan of an external, somewhat headstrong doctoral candidate who wanted to write a philosophical dissertation on public opinion formation. She actively encouraged me not to confine myself to philosophy alone but to broaden my scope and seek a co-supervisor in media studies. Markus Stauff, my co-supervisor, has my profound gratitude for his rigorous and meticulous reading, as well as for his incisive questions. His analytical precision challenged me to continuously clarify and refine my ideas. Throughout the process, both Yolande and Markus stimulated me to make my arguments more explicit and precise, and they remained purposefully engaged in critically discussing my work.

I also wish to thank my academic colleagues and authoring friends who have offered professional, substantive, and at times personal support. Among them: Eva, Jeroen, Thomas, Harriet, Eloë, Jaap, Henriëtte, Gerrit, Lodi, Roman, Kate, Tanny, and Thijs. Your expertise and advice have been invaluable.

Most of my professional life takes place outside academia. I am fortunate to be part of a community of journalists, public intellectuals, and, more recently, fellow politicians. I am happy to have been able to draw on their expertise. In addition, I have been part of various think tanks and conversation circles - a contemporary variant of the Habermasian salons and deliberative communities - such as het mediagenootschap, het genootschap, Het Filosofisch Kwintet (including, warmly, Clairry), the writing retreat group, and Nederland in 2040. These circles of thought and debate continue to inspire me, and I look forward to the discussions that still lie ahead.

My sincere thanks also go to Barry, Regine, Anja, and Renske for their assistance in the last stages, preparing the manuscript, and to Jan and Geerte, dear friends and paronyms, not only for their support in preparing the ceremony ;-).

A big, big thank you to all my friends - you know who you are- for your company and your patience. As one of you expressed at my day of submission: “Zo, dit nooit meer!” Sharing coffee, wine, or pizza, doing sports, playing games, enjoying music, and walking in the park have given me leisure, joy, and the warm support I needed.

Finally, and most profoundly, my family. I am proud of our sons, Isaac and Daniël, who have bravely navigated their school careers during these years. I am deeply grateful to witness these smart and funny boys grow into beautiful, bright and autonomous minds, who bring me so much laughter every day. And lastly, my loving partner Marc, who unwaveringly supported me through these years of writing, from day one to the last line. Sharing your life with someone who is writing a dissertation “in her spare time” must have been very demanding. Without your confidence and perseverance, I would never have been able to bring this to a successful end. For that, I will always be grateful. You three men make my life; you are definitely the best people to share my life with.







ISBN 978-90-90-41201-6



9 789090 412016