

Social Media a critical introduction

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Twitter and Democracy: A New Public Sphere?

Key questions

- What is a public sphere?
- Does Twitter contribute towards the creation of a public sphere?
- How has Twitter been criticized?
- What are the political economic limits of Twitter?
- Is Twitter emancipatory? What are the limits of political communication on Twitter?
- Can the 2011 rebellions (Arab spring, Occupy etc) be called Twitter revolutions and Twitter protests?

Key concepts

Public sphere
Jürgen Habermas's concept of the public sphere
Political communication
Public sphere as immanent critique
Private sphere
Communicative capitalism

Slacktivism and clicktivism
Visibility on Twitter
Pseudo public sphere
Manufactured public sphere
Technological determinism
Social revolution
Social media revolutions

Overview

A blog is a website that features periodically published postings that are organized in reverse chronological order so that the newest postings are shown first. A microblog is a further development of the blog concept: one shares short messages with the public and each user has a contact list of persons who are following these messages. Microblogging is like sending SMS online to a large number of people. A microblog is “an Internet-based service in which: (1) users

have a public profile where they broadcast short public messages/updates [...] (2) messages become publicly aggregated together across users; and (3) users can decide whose messages they wish to receive, but not necessarily who can receive their messages” (Murthy 2013, 10). The two most popular microblogs in the world are Twitter and Weibo. The Chinese company SINA owns Weibo, which was created in 2009. Twitter was created in 2006. It is owned by Twitter Inc., a company founded by Jack Dorsey that is based in San Francisco.

Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, Pearce and boyd (2011) analyzed 168 663 tweets from the Tunisian revolution and 230 270 from the Egyptian one. They found that journalists and activists were the main sources of retweets and that bloggers and activists were the most active retweeters. However, it is hard to see why the presented evidence should support the authors’ claim that “the revolutions were, indeed, tweeted” (1401). The analysis says nothing about what role these tweets had in mobilizing activists on the streets and how relevant Twitter was for street activists. In contrast to surveys and interviews with Egyptian activists, the analysis of tweets cannot provide conclusive evidence about the role of social media in the revolution. In March 2011, only 0.00158% of the Egyptian population used Twitter (Murthy 2013, 107). It is therefore likely that “much of Twitter’s prominence in relation to the ‘Arab Spring’ arose from individuals in the West tweeting and retweeting” (Murthy 2013, 112), which may have helped to “raise global awareness” (113), but cannot be considered to have caused a revolution. Lotan et al.’s assumption that the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions were tweeted is characterized by the “self-absorption and parochialism” of much Western media research (Curran and Park 2000, 3) that assesses what is happening in non-Western countries from a Western perspective and through the lenses of Western technology. Daya Thussu (2009, 24) has, in this context, called for the “decolonization of thoughts and theory”.

Twitter revolution claims imply that Twitter constitutes a new public sphere of political communication that has emancipatory political potentials. This chapter questions these assumptions. It asks the question: Is Twitter a political public sphere? Lindgren and Lundström (2011, 1015) argue that Twitter and the Internet have “a particularly strong potential” to create a space for what Ulrich Beck terms subpolitics: politics that are not “governmental, parliamentary, and party politics”, but take place in “all the other fields of society” (Beck 1997, 52). This chapter asks the question how large this potential is and what its limits are. Its analysis belongs to the field of political Twitter research, in which the topic of the public sphere has thus far been rather neglected.

Concepts of the public sphere are strongly connected to Jürgen Habermas’s theory (see Calhoun 1992a; Roberts and Crossley 2004a). Dealing with the posed research question requires, therefore, a close engagement with Habermas’s concept of the public sphere and a discussion of its relation to the Internet (section 8.1). Section 8.2 discusses how some scholars conceive the impact of social media on the public sphere. I will discuss the approaches of Clay Shirky, Zizi Papacharissi, Jodi Dean, Malcolm Gladwell and Evgeny Morozov and argue that the public sphere has two main aspects: political communication and political economy. Based on the theory framework, I present in section 8.3 an empirical

analysis of the role of Twitter and social media in the public sphere's political communication, and in section 8.4 how Twitter and social media's political economy impact the public sphere. Section 8.5 connects these results to Habermas's theory and section 8.6 draws some conclusions.

8.1. Habermas's Concept of the Public Sphere

What is the Public Sphere?

Habermas has defined the notion of the public: "We call events and occasions 'public' when they are open to all, in contrast to close or exclusive affairs" (Habermas 1989c, 1). Habermas (1989c, 6) argues that the concept of the public is related to the notion of the common that is associated with ideas like *Gemeinschaft* (German), community, the common use of resources like a marketplace or a fountain, and communal organization (in German: *genossenschaftliche*, Organisation) (Habermas 1989c, 6).

Habermas characterizes some important dimensions of the public sphere (Habermas 1989b, 136, 1989c, 27):

- Formation of public opinion.
- All citizens have access.
- Conference in unrestricted fashion (freedom of assembly, freedom of association, freedom to expression and publication of opinions) about matters of general interest.
- Debate over the general rules governing relations.

Habermas's original concept of the public sphere is grounded in Marxian political theory (see Habermas 1989c, 122–129). In his discussion of Marx's relevance for the concept of the public sphere, Habermas stresses:

- Private property and skills are required for participating in the public sphere, but wageworkers have been excluded from these resources.
- The bourgeois class serves and advances particular interests (its own profit interests), not the general interests of society.
- Marx imagined alternatives to the bourgeois state that serves class interests when he described the Paris Commune (March–May 1871) as a specific kind of public sphere.

The Working-class Critique of the Public Sphere Concept

There have been two common critiques of Habermas's theory of the public sphere. The *working-class critique* stresses that Habermas focuses on the

bourgeois movement and neglects other popular movements that existed in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such as the working-class movement. Oskar Negt's and Alexander Kluge's (1972) notion of a proletarian (counter) public sphere can be read as both a socialist critique and a radicalization of Habermas's approach (see Calhoun 1992b, 5; Jameson 1988).

Such criticism should, however, see that Habermas acknowledged in the preface of *Structural Transformation* the existence of a "plebeian public sphere", like in the Chartist movement or the anarchist working class (Habermas 1989c, xviii), and that he pointed out that the "economically dependent masses" would only be able to contribute "to the spontaneous formation [. . .] of opinion [. . .] to the extent to which they had attained the equivalent of the social independence of private property owners" (Habermas 1992, 434).

The Feminist Critique of the Public Sphere Concept

The feminist critique points out that the public sphere has been a sphere of educated, rich men, juxtaposed to the private sphere that has been seen as the domain of women. Women, gays and lesbians, and ethnicities would have been excluded from the public sphere. It would therefore today be more promising that struggles against oppression take place in multiple subaltern counter publics than in one unified sphere. The criticism also stresses that an egalitarian society should be based on a plurality of public arenas in order to be democratic and multicultural (Eley 1992; Fraser 1992; Roberts and Crossley 2004b). Habermas agrees that his early account in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989c), published in 1962, has neglected proletarian, feminist and other public spheres (Habermas 1992, 425–430).

The danger of pluralistic publics without unity is, however, that they will in social struggle focus on mere reformist identity politics without challenging the whole, which negatively affects the lives of all subordinated groups, and that in an egalitarian society common communication media are needed for guaranteeing cohesion and solidarity and a strong democracy. Postmodernists and post-Marxists are so occupied with stressing difference that they do not realize that difference can become repressive if it turns into a plurality without unity. One needs unity in diversity in order to struggle for participatory democracy and for maintaining this condition once it is reached. It is preferable and more effective to have a few widely accessible and widely consumed broad critical media than many small-scale special interest media that support the fragmentation of struggles. Nicholas Garnham argues in this context for the need of a single public sphere and says that the postmodernists risk "cultural relativism" if they do not see that democracy is in need of "some common normative dimensions" and "more generalized media" (Garnham 1992, 369).

The Public Sphere: Political Communication and Political Economy

In discussions about the Internet and the public sphere, many authors have stressed the potential or limit of the Internet to advance political communication (for example, Benkler 2006; Dahlberg 2001, 2004; Dahlgren 2005, 2009; Papacharissi 2002, 2009), whereas a smaller number have also stressed that aspects of the political economy of the media and the Internet relate directly to the concept of the public sphere (for example, Garnham 1992; Sparks 2001).

It is important to see that Habermas stresses both aspects of (a) political communication and (b) political economy as being constitutive for the public sphere. So he stresses (a) that the proper task of the public sphere is that “society [is] engaged in critical public debate” (Habermas 1989c, 52). But Habermas also points out (b) that the public sphere is a question of the command of resources (property, intellectual skills) by its members: “But even under ideally favorable conditions of communication, one could have expected from economically dependent masses a contribution to the spontaneous formation of opinion and will only to the extent to which they had attained the equivalent of the social independence of private property owners” (Habermas 1992, 434).

Habermas stresses that Marx’s work is especially relevant for the second dimension of the public sphere. Marx’s “critique demolished all fictions to which the idea of the public sphere of civil society appealed. In the first place, the social preconditions for the equality of opportunity were obviously lacking, namely: that any person with skill and ‘luck’ could attain the status of property owner and thus the qualifications of a private person granted access to the public sphere, property and education. The public sphere with which Marx saw himself confronted contradicted its own principle of universal accessibility” (Habermas 1989c, 124).

Habermas: No Idealization of the Public Sphere, but rather Public Sphere as Concept of Immanent Critique

Habermas does not idealize the bourgeois public sphere, but rather applies an elegant dialectical logic to show that the bourgeois ideals and values find their own limits in the existence of stratification and class. Habermas showed, based on Marx (critique of the political economy: class character of the public sphere) and Horkheimer (ideology critique: manipulated public sphere), how the very principles of the public sphere are stylized principles that in reality within capitalist society are not realized due to the exclusory character of the public sphere and the manipulation of the public sphere by particularistic class interests.

Habermas’s theory of the public sphere is an ideology-critical study in the tradition of Adorno’s (1951/2003) method of immanent critique that confronts the ideals of the public sphere with its capitalist reality and thereby uncovers its

ideological character. The implication is that a true public sphere can only exist in a participatory society.

Liberal ideology postulates individual freedoms (of speech, opinion, association, assembly) as universal rights, but the particularistic and stratified class character of capitalism undermines these universal rights and creates inequality and therefore unequal access to the public sphere. There are specifically two immanent limitations of the bourgeois public sphere that Habermas discusses:

- The limitation of freedom of speech and public opinion: individuals do not have the same formal education and material resources for participating in public sphere (Habermas 1989c, 227).
- The limitation of freedom of association and assembly: big political and economic organizations “enjoy an oligopoly of the publicistically effective and politically relevant formation of assemblies and associations” (Habermas 1989c, 228).

The bourgeois public sphere creates its own limits and thereby its own immanent critique.

For discussing whether the Internet or certain Internet platforms constitute a public sphere, one should take both the level of political communication and the level of political economy into account. This allows asking specific questions that can help to determine whether we can speak of the existence of a public sphere.

1) Analysis of the political economic dimension of mediated communication:

1(a) Ownership:

Is there a democratic ownership of the media organization and resources?

1(b) Censorship:

Is there political and/or economic censorship?

1(c) Exclusion:

Is there an overrepresentation of viewpoints of corporate elites or of uncritical and pro-capitalist viewpoints? To which degree are critical viewpoints present?

1(d) Political content production:

Who can produce content? How visible, relevant and influential is the produced content?

2) Analysis of political communication:

2(a) Universal access:

How relevant/frequently used are political communication sites or political communication forums/features/contents within more general platforms? Who has access and who uses the sites for political communication (income, education level, age, gender, ethnicity,

origin, etc.)? How relevant is political communication in relation to other forms of communication (for example, as pure entertainment)? Who has access and who uses the sites for political communication (income, education level, age, gender, ethnicity, origin, etc.)?

2(b) Independence:

How independent are the sites and discussions from economic and state interests?

2(c) Quality of political discussion:

How valid (right, true, truthful, understandable), inclusive, attentive, sincere, reflexive and inclusive is political online discussion?

8.2. Twitter, Social Media and the Public Sphere

The rise of blogs (e.g. Wordpress, Blogspot, Tumblr), social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn, Diaspora*, VK), microblogs (e.g. Twitter, Weibo), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia) and content sharing sites (e.g. YouTube, Flickr, Instagram) has resulted in public discussions on the implications of these media for the political realm. There are, on the one hand, more optimistic and, on the other hand, more sceptical views. This section introduces five approaches that have in common that they focus on discussing the role of social media in politics.

Clay Shirky: Social Media as Radically New Enhancers of Freedom

Clay Shirky argued in 2008 that the political use of “social media” ultimately enhances freedom: “Social tools create what economists would call a positive supply-side shock to the amount of freedom in the world. [. . .] To speak online is to publish, and to publish online is to connect with others. With the arrival of globally accessible publishing, freedom of speech is now freedom of the press, and freedom of the press is freedom of assembly” (Shirky 2008, 172).

Whereas one assumption in this discourse is that new media have predominantly positive effects, another one is that they bring about radical change: “Our social tools are dramatically improving our ability to share, co-operate, and act together. As everyone from working biologists to angry air passengers adopts those tools, it is leading to an epochal change” (Shirky 2008, 304).

Zizi Papacharissi: The Idealization of Individualization – The Private Sphere

Papacharissi (2010, 21) has advanced an approach that is comparable to the one by Shirky, in which she argues that political activities that were in former times

“activities pursued in the public realm” are today practised in the private realm “with greater autonomy, flexibility, and potential for expression”. Social media like Twitter would make the private sphere “a sphere of connection and not isolation, as it serves primarily to connect the personal to the political, and the self to the polity and society” (Papacharissi 2010, 164).

New forms of politics would include tweeting, “participating in a MoveOn.org online protest, expressing political opinion on blogs, viewing or posting content on YouTube, or posting a comment in an online discussion group” (Papacharissi 2010, 131). Such online activities would constitute “an expression of dissent with a public agenda. [. . .] these potentially powerful acts of dissent emanate from a private sphere of interaction, meaning that the citizen engages and is enabled politically through a private media environment located within the individual’s personal and private space” (Papacharissi 2010, 131).

Papacharissi assumes that social media like Twitter have resulted in a collapse of the boundaries between the private sphere and the political public sphere so that the private sphere becomes the realm of the political. She overlooks that co-presence and physicality matter also in a networked world. A huge mass of people gathering in physical places is a visible threat to those in power and it can have material effects (like blocking streets, occupying squares and buildings, etc.).

It is no surprise that the main protests during the new global capitalist crisis have been associated with physical spaces: Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt; Syntagma Square in Athens, Greece; Puerta del Sol in Madrid, Spain; Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona, Spain; Zuccotti Park (Liberty Plaza Park) in New York, USA. Physical spaces allow an agglomeration of individuals that gives them a visibility that those in power likely perceive as a threat. They also provide opportunities for building and maintaining interpersonal relations that involve eye contact, communication of an emotional aura, and bonding activities (like drinking a beer or coffee together) that are important for the cohesion of a political movement and can hardly be communicated over the Internet.

Papacharissi reduces collective action to individual action and the public sphere to the private sphere. She ignores the materiality of protest action. Her approach is individualistic, reductionist and philosophically idealistic. I thereby do not say that social media never matter. I rather want to stress that social media cannot replace collective action that involves spatio-temporal presence. Social media can, given a good organization, high interest and a lot of resources, serve as protest co-ordination and organization tools. However, the reality of protests shows that they cannot replace collective protest action and experience.

Online activism can cause material and symbolic harm and be a threat to the powerful, as the hacking activities of the Anonymous group (e.g. blocking of the sites of Amazon, MasterCard, PostFinanc, PayPal and Visa as revenge for the companies’ blocking of payments to WikiLeaks, blocking of government websites in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria in solidarity with the Arab Spring, the hacking of sites by Koch Industries that supported anti-union groups as part of the 2011 Wisconsin protests) show, but a lot of “online politics” is harmless (writing a blog,

posting a tweet or YouTube video, signing an online petition, joining a Facebook group, etc.) and can simply be ignored by the powerful.

danah boyd (2010, 39) defines a networked public as “(1) the space constructed through networked technologies and (2) the imagined collective that emerges as a result of the intersection of people, technology, and practice”. Expressions in networked publics would be persistent (recorded, archived), replicable, scalable and searchable. Audiences in these publics would often be invisible, social contexts collapsed and the boundary between public and private would often blur. For boyd, Facebook and Twitter are prototypes of networked publics. Whereas Papacharissi idealizes private individuals’ political use of social media as new forms of the public sphere, boyd generalizes the notion of the public from a political context to the whole realm of social media so that the notion of the public (sphere) loses any critical dimension. The notion of the networked public is not only an apolitical concept; it is at the same time one that idealizes corporate social media: the notions of being public and being networked create a purely positive image of human activity without conceptualizing potential problems. As a consequence, the concept of social media as “networked publics” predominantly creates positive associations; it lacks any critical dimension that addresses power asymmetries, the exploitation of digital labour, asymmetric visibility, commercial culture and targeted advertising, corporate and state surveillance and other problems that manifest themselves on dominant social media platforms.

Jodi Dean: Social Media Politics as Ideology

Jodi Dean (2005) argues, therefore, that the Internet has in the context of communicative capitalism become a technological fetish that advances post-politics. What Papacharissi (2010) calls the emergence of a political private sphere is, for Dean, the foreclosure of politics proper. “File sharing is political. A website is political. Blogging is political. But this very immediacy rests on something else, on a prior exclusion. And, what is excluded is the possibility of politicization proper” (Dean 2005, 65).

Busy people can think they are active – the technology will act for them, alleviating their guilt while assuring them that nothing will change too much. [. . .] By sending an e-mail, signing a petition, responding to an article on a blog, people can feel political. And that feeling feeds communicative capitalism insofar as it leaves behind the time-consuming, incremental and risky efforts of politics. [. . .] It is a refusal to take a stand, to venture into the dangerous terrain of politicization. (Dean 2005, 70)

Malcolm Gladwell: Social Media – No Natural Enemies of the Status Quo

In response to the techno-euphoria about social media, Malcolm Gladwell (2010) argued that activists in revolutions and rebellions risk their lives and

risk becoming victims of violence conducted by the police or the people their protest is directed at. Taking the courage to face these dangers would require strong social ties and friendships with others in the movement. Activism would involve high risks. “The kind of activism associated with social media isn’t like this at all. The platforms of social media are built around weak ties” (Gladwell 2010, 45).

Facebook and Twitter activism would only succeed in situations that do not require people “to make a real sacrifice” (Gladwell 2010, 47), such as registering in a bone-marrow database or getting back a stolen phone. “The evangelists of social media”, such as Clay Shirky, “seem to believe that a Facebook friend is the same as a real friend and that signing up for a donor registry in Silicon Valley today is activism in the same sense as sitting at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro in 1960” (Gladwell 2010, 46). Social media would “make it easier for activists to express themselves, and harder for that expression to have any impact” (Gladwell 2010, 49). Social media “are not a natural enemy of the status quo” and “are well suited to making the existing social order more efficient” (Gladwell 2010, 49).

Evgeny Morozov: Social Media and Slacktivism/Clicktivism

Evgeny Morozov (2009) speaks in line with Gladwell’s argument of slacktivism as:

feel-good online activism that has zero political or social impact. It gives those who participate in “slacktivist” campaigns an illusion of having a meaningful impact on the world without demanding anything more than joining a Facebook group. [. . .] “Slacktivism” is the ideal type of activism for a lazy generation: why bother with sit-ins and the risk of arrest, police brutality, or torture if one can be as loud campaigning in the virtual space?

Morozov (2010) argues that the notion of “Twitter revolution” is based on a belief in cyber-utopianism – “a naive belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside” (Morozov 2010, xiii) that, combined with Internet-centrism, forms a techno-deterministic ideology

Shirky’s Response to Gladwell and Morozov

In an article that can be read as a kind of response to criticism, Clay Shirky (2011b, 29), mentioning both Gladwell and Morozov, acknowledges that the use of social media “does not have a single preordained outcome”. Social media would be “coordinating tools for nearly all of the world’s political movements, just as most of the world’s authoritarian governments (and, alarmingly, an increasing number of democratic ones) are trying to limit access to it” (Shirky 2011b, 30). Shirky admits that there are attempts to control, censor and

monitor social media, but argues at the same time that these attempts are unlikely to be successful in the long run and that social media are “long-term tools that can strengthen civil society and the public sphere” (Shirky 2011b, 32).

Social media would facilitate shared awareness and result in “the dictator’s dilemma”/“the conservative dilemma” (Shirky 2011b, 36):

The dilemma is created by new media that increase public access to speech or assembly; with the spread of such media, whether photocopiers or Web browsers, a state accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech finds itself called to account for anomalies between its view of events and the public’s. The two responses to the conservative dilemma are censorship and propaganda. But neither of these is as effective a source of control as the enforced silence of the citizens. The state will censor critics or produce propaganda as it needs to, but both of those actions have higher costs than simply not having any critics to silence or reply to in the first place. But if a government were to shut down Internet access or ban cell phones, it would risk radicalizing otherwise pro-regime citizens or harming the economy. (Shirky 2011b, 36f)

Shirky sees two sides of social media, but argues that the positive side over-determines the negative one and that in the last instance social media have positive effects on democracy. So although acknowledging contradictions in order to make his argument more complex, Shirky postulates the techno-deterministic equation: social media = more democracy = more freedom. Shirky (2011b, 38) argues that the slacktivism argument is irrelevant because “the fact that barely committed actors cannot click their way to a better world does not mean that committed actors cannot use social media effectively”.

In a response to Shirky, Gladwell wrote that Shirky “has to convince readers that in the absence of social media, those uprisings would not have been possible” (Gladwell and Shirky 2011, 153). Shirky answered that “social media allow insurgents to adopt new strategies” that are crucial, “allow committed groups to play by new rules” and that “as with the printing press”, social media “will result in a net improvement for democracy” (Gladwell and Shirky 2011, 154). So, asked for clarification, Shirky confirmed the view that, although acknowledging complexity, the formula remains in the last instance “the Internet = increase of democracy”.

Clay Shirky and Zizi Papacharissi, on the one hand, and Jodi Dean, Malcolm Gladwell and Evgeny Morozov, on the other hand, have opposing views on the question of whether Twitter and other social media, under the given societal context, advance or harm the political public. For readers of this book, it will be obvious that I am sceptical of the first position and have sympathies with the second one. But one can only give a definitive answer to this question by empirical inquiries that cover aspects of both political communication and political economy.

8.3. Political Communication on Twitter

The Stratification of Twitter and Microblog Usage

The typical Twitter user was, in 2013, between 18 and 34 years old, held a university degree and had no children.¹ The relative majority of users came from the USA (20.9%, *ibid.*). In contrast, 92.4% of Weibo's users are located in China.² In the United States, the typical Twitter user was, in 2013, part of a younger age group of up to 34 years (62%), white (67%) and earned more than US\$100 000 per year (58%).³

Stratification patterns that are created by age, ethnicity and class shape the use of Twitter and microblogs in general. The hypothesis of the end of information inequality (what is in a misleading way often called the "digital divide") due to the rapid adoption of the Internet (for example, as claimed by Compaine 2001) is a myth. Stratification no longer so much concerns physical access to the Internet, but rather the use of this technology and the skills required for this use. As long as there is a stratified society, information inequality will exist.

This pattern is not only specific to Twitter use in Western countries; as already mentioned, 93.4% of all Weibo users live in China. The typical user is 25–34 years old, has attended university and has no children.⁴ Just like in the West, the urban middle-class also dominates microblogging in China, whereas workers, farmers, old people and others are rather excluded. Inequality in China and the West is a feature that shows that a similar neoliberal logic shapes both systems (Zhao 2008).

The Asymmetrical Power of Visibility on Twitter

In 2009, only 7% of the top Twitter trend topics were political topics and 38% were entertainment-oriented topics. In 2010, only 3% were about politics, 28% about entertainment and 40% about hashtags (#). An analysis of the most-used hashtags in 2010 shows that politics was marginal and that music and dating were the most used hashtag topics.⁵ Table 8.1 documents the top Twitter trends in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012. The statistics show that Twitter topics are dominated by entertainment. Politics is not a particularly important topic in contrast to entertainment. Table 5.4 in Chapter 5 of this book shows a ranking of Twitter users ordered by number of followers. Celebrities from the entertainment business, particularly pop stars, dominate attention measured by number of Twitter followers. Politics is much less represented and mainly in the form of influential political actors, such as Barack Obama, CNN and *The New York Times*, that dominate the political field in terms of influence, resources and reputation. Alternative political figures, such as political documentary producer Michael Moore, have far

1 www.alexa.com/siteinfo/twitter.com, accessed on March 4, 2013.

2 www.alexa.com/siteinfo/weibo.com, accessed on March 4, 2013.

3 www.quantcast.com/twitter.com, accessed on March 4, 2013.

4 www.alexa.com/siteinfo/weibo.com, accessed on March 3, 2013.

5 <http://mashable.com/2010/12/22/top-twitter-trends-2010-charts/>, accessed on August 20, 2011.

Table 8.1 Top trends on Twitter (C = crisis, E = entertainment, I = instrument, T = technology, P = politics, EV = event)

#	2012 top Twitter trends		2011 top Twitter trends		2010 top Twitter trends		2010 top hashtags		2009 top Twitter hashtags		Type
	Type	Trends	Type	Trends	Type	Trends	Type	Hashtags	Type	Hashtags	
1	EV	Olympics	E	Justin Bieber	E	Gulf Oil Spill	C	#rememberwhen	E	#musicmonday	E
2	P	Election 2012	E	Soccer/Sport	E	FIFA World Cup	E	#slapyourself	E	#iranelection	P
3	E	Justin Bieber	E	Lady Gaga	E	Inception	E	#confessiontime	E	#sxsxw	E
4	C	Hurricane Sandy	E	NBA	E	Haiti Earthquake	C	#thingsimiss	E	#swineflu	C
5	E	MTV Music Awards	E	Jonas Brothers		Vuvuzela	I	#ohjustlikeme	E	#nevertrust	E
6	EV	Euro 2012	EV	Christmas	EV	Apple iPad	T	#wheniwastitle	E	#mm	E
7	EV	Super Bowl	E	Super Junior	E	Google Android	T	#haveever	E	#rememberwhen	E
8	E	Whitney Houston	E	Britney Spears	E	Justin Bieber	E	#cantlivewithoutit	E	#3drunkwords	E
9		Kony	C	Japan Earthquake	C	Harry Potter & the Deathly Hallows	E	#thankful	E	#unacceptable	E
10	E	One Direction	E	One Direction	E	Pulpo Paul	E	#2010disappointments	E	#iwish	E

Data sources: 2012: <http://blog.hootsuite.com/twitter-trends-2012/>; 2011: <http://mashable.com/2011/12/06/top-twitter-trends-2011/>; 2010: <http://mashable.com/2010/12/13/top-twitter-trends-2010/>; <http://yearinreview.twitter.com/trends/>; 2009: http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_14cEenKeR04/Sygi8Gp0F9I/AAAAAAAAAADY/hELPQB1mQKo/s1600-h/2009trends_large.png.

fewer followers, which is an expression of the asymmetrical political attention economy of capitalism that discriminates critical voices by lack of resources and attention: Those who have a lot of reputation, fame, money or power tend to have many more followers than everyday people. Their tweets also tend to be much more often re-tweeted than common people's tweets.

Dhiraj Murthy (2013, 31) argues that "the influence of ordinary people on Twitter" may be minimal, but that "the medium can potentially be democratizing in that it can be thought of as a megaphone that makes public the voices/conversations of any individual or entity". The important question is, however, how society needs to be changed so that asymmetrical visibility disappears. Capitalist structures of accumulation operate not just in the economy, but also in culture, where they result in the accumulation of reputation, visibility and attention of a few. Murthy continues to argue that tweets circulate in the form of re-tweets and that as a result a single individual's voice "can potentially be amplified exponentially" if other users pick up their tweets and re-tweet them (Murthy 2013, 21). This potential does not, however, mean that Twitter is a democratic medium because the power of amplification is also stratified: highly visible users determine what gets amplified and what does not. Twitter's reality is one of asymmetric visibility; its democratic potentials are limited by the reality of stratified attention and the visibility characteristic for a capitalist culture.

The Degree of Interactivity of Political Communication on Twitter

For analyzing the degree of information, communication and interactivity of political Twitter use, I have selected two cases: WikiLeaks and the Egyptian revolution. WikiLeaks was in the news media all over the world in December 2010 after it had released the diplomatic cables on November 28 and a European-wide arrest warrant was issued against Julian Assange on December 6. I collected 985 667 tweets that have the hashtag #wikileaks from the archive <http://twapperkeeper.com> (time period: November 28, 2010, 00:00:00–January 1st, 2011, 00:00:00).

The revolution in Egypt began on January 25, 2011, with mass protests in Cairo and other cities. On February 11, President Mubarak resigned. I collected 73 395 tweets with the hashtag #25jan (time period: January 25th, 2011, 00:00:00–February 12th, 2011, 00:00:00) from Twapper Keeper. Twitter users employed this hashtag for communication about the Egyptian revolution.

For addressing other users, it is common that one uses the "@" symbol followed by the username in tweets. There are two types of addressing: the re-posting of a Twitter message ("re-tweet") and the commenting on another posting. Twitter does not allow making downloadable archives of its posts. Twapper Keeper outputs a maximum of 25 000 results on screen. I manually generated these lists and copied them into Excel files that were then further analyzed. I analyzed the Twitter streams by identifying all tweets that address somebody ("@"). Then I decided for

Table 8.2 Levels of information and communication for tweets relating to WikiLeaks and the Egyptian revolution

Hashtag	Number of tweets	Time period	Comment	Re-tweets	Information
#wikileaks	985 667	11-28-2010, 00:00:00 – 01-01-2011 00:00:00	23.1%	51.3%	25.6%
#25jan	73 395	time period: 01-25-2011, 00:00:00 – 02-12-2011, 00:00:00	12.9%	54.4%	32.7%

each of these tweets whether it was a re-tweet or not by looking for the identifier “RT @”, which signifies a re-tweet in the output generated by Twapper Keeper. This procedure allowed me to identify which average share of postings is purely informational, a re-tweeting of another post or a comment on another tweet. The results are displayed in Table 8.2.

The results show that more than 50% of the postings are re-tweets in both cases and there is a low level of commenting (23.1% and 12.9% respectively). As re-tweeting is also a form of information, the total level of information provision was 76.9% in the WikiLeaks case and 87.1% in the Egyptian case.

Communication can be one-way or two-way (McQuail 2010, 552). In the first case, one person talks to the other, who does not talk back or does not have the means to do so. In two-way communication (interaction; McQuail 2010, 560), there is mutual meaningful symbolic interaction. In order to get a first idea of the quality of communication of postings, I analyzed all postings in the #wikileaks stream that were posted in the time period November 28, 2010, 00:00:00–01:00:00 that mentioned other users. There were a total of 110 postings, of which there were 44 re-tweets (40%), one mutual interaction consisting of two postings (1.8%), and 64 informational postings (58.2%). This sample is an indication that mutual symbolic interaction is rare in political Twitter communication and that Twitter communication mostly consists of one-way comments. Single messages like the following ones were typical interactions:

@userA @userB A large number of your countrymen would disagree with you. Most humans disagree with you. <http://bit.ly/i7pJy0>
#wikileaks Sun Nov 28 00:27:26

@userC @userD <-----#Racist #idiot #wikileaks Sun Nov 28 00:00:43

@userE @userF <-----SPAM Don't retweet #wikileaks #SPAM Sun Nov 28 00:58:52

Re-tweets typically contained links or information that users assessed as important. For example:

@userG RT @userH: #Wikileaks next release contains 251,287 diplomatic cables: report [ibtimes] <http://j.m> ... Sun Nov 28 00:45:17

@userI RT @userF: UK Sunday papers have got it all wrong about #wikileaks #embassy cables. Not worth reading. Wait for the #guardian! Sun Nov 28 00:56:00

The only mutual interaction in the analyzed stream section of #wikileaks was a short dialogue:

@userJ @userK #Assange is a traitor to whom? He is not a citizen of the US. He is a whistle blower #wikileaks Sun Nov 28 00:07:10

@userK @userJ You misunderstood my tweet.... #Assange #wikileaks Sun Nov 28 00:19:28

The 2011 Protests and Revolutions: Twitter and Facebook Revolutions?

The question of whether the 2011 revolutions and protests were Twitter or Facebook revolutions also has to do with Internet access rates. Since 2008 the Internet access rate in the countries where such protests took place varies between 3.1% (Mauritania) and 97.8% (Iceland), and the Facebook usage rate varies between 2.6% of the population (Yemen) and 69.1% (Iceland) (see Table 8.3). Given such different conditions of Internet usage, the question arises as to whether one can really so easily generalize, as some observers do, that the Internet and social media created and amplified revolutions and rebellions. Data on media use in the Egyptian revolution show that the revolutionaries considered phone communication and face-to-face talk were much more important for spreading information than “social media” (Wilson and Dunn 2011). In December 2011, 26.4% of the Egyptian population had access to the Internet and in June 2012, 13.6% of the Egyptian population were Facebook users (data source: internetworldstats.com, accessed on October 28, 2012). The Facebook page **كلنا خالد سعيد** (“We are all Khaled Said”), which has been moderated by Wael Ghonim (see Ghonim 2012), is said to have played a role in spreading the protests after Khaled Said was beaten to death by Egyptian police forces on June 6, 2010. It had 2.5 million likes (Arab version; English version: 278 000) on December 8, 2012. However, it is unclear how many of the likes come from Egyptian users who participated in the Tahrir Square occupation and protests.

eMarketing Egypt conducted a survey about the Internet and the revolution in Egypt.⁶ Of the respondents, 71% said that Facebook was the prime medium “used to tie up with events and news”. The problem is, however, that the survey only focused on Egyptian Internet users, who make up a minority of the population

6 For more details, see www.emarketing-egypt.com/1st-study-about-the-Internet-and-the-Egyptian-Revolution:-Survey-Results/2/0/18, accessed on December 12, 2012.

Table 8.3 Internet penetration rate and Facebook usage rate (relative to the entire population) in selected countries that witnessed revolutions or rebellions in 2011

Country	Internet access rate (%)	Facebook usage rate (% of population)
Algeria	13.4%	9.5%
Bahrain	77%	30.0%
Egypt	26.4%	13.6%
Greece	46.9%	33.1%
Iceland	97.8%	69.1%
Jordan	38.1%	38.1%
Kuwait	74.2%	31.2%
Lebanon	52.0%	38.0%
Libya	5.9%	10.0%
Mauritania	3.1%	2.7%
Morocco	49.0%	14.2%
Oman	68.8%	16.9%
Portugal	50.7%	38.8%
Saudi Arabia	49.0%	20.9%
Spain	65.6%	33.5%
Sudan	9.3%	n/a
Syria	22.5%	n/a
Tunisia	36.3%	28.9%
United Arab Emirates	70.9%	38.6%
United Kingdom	84.1%	48.6%
United States	78.1%	46.4%
Western Sahara	n/a	n/a
Yemen	14.9%	2.6%

Data source: www.internetworldstats.com, accessed on October 30, 2012; n/a = not available.

(26.4%, see Table 8.3), and not on the Egyptian population as a whole. The results are therefore necessarily techno-centric.

The Role of Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution

The Tahrir Data Project (<http://tahrirdata.info>) conducted a survey with Tahrir Square activists (N = 1056). Wilson and Dunn (2011) present some results from the survey that focused on activists' media use. Interestingly, Castells (2012) ignores Wilson and Dunn's results, in his techno-deterministic analysis of social media in the Arab spring, although they were published in the *International Journal of Communication* that he co-founded. The survey shows that face-to-face interaction (93%) was the most important form of activists'

protest communication, followed by television (92%), phones (82%), print media (57%), SMS (46%), Facebook (42%), email (27%), radio (22%), Twitter (13%) and blogs (12%). Interpersonal communication, traditional media and telecommunications were more important information sources and communication tools in the revolution than social media and the Internet. Another part of the survey showed that Egyptian revolutionaries perceived phone communication followed by face-to-face talk as most important for their own protest, most informative and most motivating for participating in the protests. Facebook, eMail and Twitter were considered to be less important, less informative, less used and less motivating. The study illustrates that “digital media was not as central to protester communication and organization on the ground as the heralds of Twitter revolutions would have us hyperbolize” (Wilson and Dunn 2011, 1252). James Curran (2012, 53) argues that the Arab Spring has “deep-seated economic, political and religious causes”. Digital media “contributed to the build-up of dissent, facilitated the actual organisation of protests, and disseminated news of the protests across the region and to the wider world. If the rise of digital communications technology did not cause the uprisings, it strengthened them” (Curran 2012, 54).

The Role of Social Media in the Occupy Wall Street Movement

Table 8.4 shows results from the Occupy General Survey that was conducted among Occupy Wall Street activists (see www.occupyresearch.net/2012/10/18/orgs-data-facet-browser/): face-to-face communication and the Internet were activists’ most important means for obtaining information about the movement. In particular, Facebook, word of mouth, websites and email played an important role (for a detailed empirical analysis of social media in the Occupy movement, see my book *OccupyMedia! The Occupy movement and social media in crisis capitalism*, Fuchs 2013). Twitter was a relevant medium used by 41.9% of the respondents for informing themselves politically, but it was less important than many other online and offline media. These results show that both direct face-to-face interaction and mediated interaction have been crucial news sources for Occupy activists. Broadcasting and newspapers had a much less important role than the Internet. Facebook was a very popular source of information, although older online media (email, websites) played a much more important role than YouTube, blogs, Twitter and Tumblr, which shows that one should not overestimate the role of what some have called “web 2.0” in protests. This data is certainly limited because it does not take into account the use of non-commercial platforms (such as or N-1, Occupii) and non-commercial social movement media (such as the Occupied Wall Street Journal, the Occupied Times, Occupy News Network, etc.). There may also be a difference between activists’ media use as information source and as mobilization tool and co-ordination tool during demonstrations, which is not reflected in the survey. This shows that further empirical research on the media use of Occupy is needed. However, the results allow us

Table 8.4 Share of respondents in the Occupy Wall Street movement who answered that they used a specific medium for informing themselves about the movement at least once a week or more frequently

Media dimension of the survey question “These are some sources that you might or might not use for news and information about the Occupy movement. Please indicate whether you used these sources for news and information about the Occupy movement”	Share of respondents who used the specific medium at least once or more often in the past week for informing themselves about the Occupy movement	N
Email	79.1%	1132
Occupy websites	83.4%	1127
Facebook	89.7%	1126
Word of mouth	85.2%	1125
Discussions face-to-face or at Occupy camps	51.9%	1117
YouTube	72.2%	1113
Livestreams	61.4%	1109
Local newspapers	52.4%	1099
National or international newspapers	58.5%	1099
Local radio	52.4%	1099
Blogs	62.8%	1090
Twitter	41.9%	1078
Local television	33.1%	1073
National or international television	45.1%	1064
Chat rooms/IRC	21.2%	1057
Tumblr	20.5%	1052

Data source: Occupy General Survey, www.occupyresearch.net/orgs, accessed on December 7, 2012.

to conclude that the Occupy movement makes use of multiple communication channels and that the alleged newness of “social media” should not blind us to the importance of interpersonal face-to-face communication and older online media when analyzing the information structures of social movements.

Available data indicates that in the Egyptian revolution, interpersonal communication, broadcasting and the phone were more important communication tools than the Internet. Data from the Occupy General Survey indicates that interpersonal communication and online communication were important information and news sources for activists. These data are certainly limited and could/should be extended by studies that ask further and more detailed questions. However, they are sufficient for falsifying Castells’ hypothesis that contemporary social movements emerged from and are largely based on the Internet and live and act through digital media. These empirical results deconstruct the myth that the Arab Spring was a Twitter revolution, a Facebook revolution, a social media revolution or revolution 2.0. Social media and the Internet played a role as one among several media (especially interpersonal communication), but empirical evidence does not sustain the assumption that

social media were necessary conditions of the revolution. The Arab revolutions and other protests (such as the ones by Occupy) were not tweeted, blogged or liked. Social media played a role in protest communication, but it was one role among different media types.

8.4. Twitter's Political Economy

Twitter's Terms of Service and Targeted Advertising

Twitter started as a profit-oriented corporation without a business model. At first it did not use advertising. In September 2009, it revised its terms of use, so that advertising and targeted advertising became possible. But advertising was not used. In April 2010, Twitter announced that advertising would be introduced in the near future.⁷ Twitter's terms of use significantly grew in length and complexity, and set out the company's ownership rights with respect to user-generated content. In 2011, Twitter's business model that is based on targeted advertising came into full effect.

Capital Accumulation on Twitter

Twitter's capital accumulation model uses three mechanisms: *promoted tweets*, *promoted trends*, *promoted accounts*. Promoted tweets are advertising tweets that appear at the top of search result lists for searches conducted by specifically targeted user groups. "Use Promoted Trends to drive conversations and interest around your brand or product by capturing a user's attention on Twitter".⁸ "The Promoted Account is featured in search results and within the Who To Follow section. Who To Follow is Twitter's account recommendation engine and identifies similar accounts and followers to help users discover new businesses, content, and people on Twitter."⁹

When one searches on Twitter for content or a hashtag, current tweets, people results/accounts and worldwide Twitter trends are displayed. Twitter's advertising strategy manipulates the selection of Twitter search results, displayed accounts and trends. Not those tweets, accounts and trends that attain most attention are displayed, but preference is given to tweets, accounts and trends defined by Twitter's advertising clients. Twitter advances a class-structured attention economy that privileges economically powerful actors over everyday users. If you are a large company with a huge advertising budget, then it is easy for you to buy attention on Twitter. If you are an everyday user without an advertising budget and without much time, you will, in contrast, have a much harder time promoting your tweets and your accounts as trend on Twitter.

Users who tweet constitute an audience commodity (Smythe 1977, 1981/2006) that is sold to advertisers (see Chapter 5 in this book). The difference between the

⁷ See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8617031.stm>, accessed on April 13, 2010.

⁸ <http://business.twitter.com/advertise/promoted-trends>, accessed on March 4, 2013.

⁹ <http://business.twitter.com/advertise/promoted-accounts>, accessed on March 4, 2013.

audience commodity on traditional mass media and on Twitter is that in the latter case the users are also content producers; there is user-generated content and the users engage in permanent creative activity, communication, community building and content-production (Fuchs 2010c). The fact that the users are more active on Twitter than in the reception of TV or radio content is due to the decentralized structure of the Internet, which allows many-to-many communication. Due to the permanent activity of the recipients and their status as prosumers, we can say that in the case of the Internet the audience commodity is a prosumer commodity. The category of the Internet prosumer commodity does not signify a democratization of the media towards a participatory or democratic system, but the total commodification of human creativity. Twitter users work for free, without payment; they generate surplus value by creating tweets and log data that are sold as commodity to advertisers that then target their ads to specific user groups. In order that capital accumulation can work on Twitter, the economic surveillance of user data is needed (Fuchs 2011a). Twitter surveillance is subsumed under the capitalist political economy.

8.5. @JürgenHabermas #Twitter #PublicSphere

The Public Sphere and Political Communication on Twitter

Habermas argues that political communication and political economy are two important aspects of the public sphere. According to Habermas (1989b, 1989c), the public sphere is a sphere of political debate. It is therefore important to test how communicative political Twitter use is. What is the role of political communication on Twitter? Twitter is dominated by the young, educated middle class and excludes other groups, such as workers, farmers and elderly people. Those with higher incomes and better education, who are more politically interested and informed, dominate political communication. The result is “a rather homogenous climate of opinion” (Habermas 1989c, 213).

Politics is a minority topic on Twitter, which is dominated by entertainment. Twitter is predominantly an information medium, not a communication tool. It is predominantly about entertainment, not about politics. Celebrities from the entertainment industry have the most-followed profiles on Twitter. Concerning political profiles, mainly established high-profile political actors with a lot of resources have a large number of followers, whereas critical political actors have much less visibility and fewer followers. An analysis of a large number of tweets from two political events (discussions about WikiLeaks in 2010, the Egyptian revolution in 2011) has shown that political tweets tend to be primarily information-based postings, especially re-tweets, and not conversations. The interactive postings are mainly one-way comments and not two-way interactions.

There is a limitation of freedom of speech and public opinion on Twitter: individuals do not have the same formal education or material resources for

participating in the public sphere (Habermas 1989c, 227). The proper task of a public sphere, a “society engaged in critical public debate” (Habermas 1989c, 52) about politics, is not achieved on Twitter in the current societal context. One important question arises in this context: Can meaningful political debates be based on 140-character short messages? Short text may invite simplistic arguments and be an expression of the commodification and speeded-up nature of culture.

The Public Sphere and the Visibility of the Powerful on Twitter

In 2013 Twitter had around 180 million unpaid users and a rather small number of waged employees that together create surplus value. Twitter’s political economy is stratified in two ways:

- a) Twitter users and waged employees are exploited, which generates a dispossessed and non-owning class that is opposed to the Twitter-owning class. Given these circumstances, it is no surprise that Twitter’s 2010 revenue of US\$45 million¹⁰ grew to \$139.5 million in 2011¹¹ and \$ 288.3 in 2012.¹²
- b) Twitter is a profit-oriented commercial company that stratifies visibility of tweets, profiles and trends in favour of advertising clients and at the expense of everyday users in order to accumulate capital.

The analysis of Twitter’s political economy shows that Twitter’s stratified economy is detrimental to the character of a public sphere. On Twitter, the powerful (especially entertainers and celebrities) “enjoy an oligopoly of the publicistically effective and politically relevant formation of assemblies and associations” (Habermas 1989c, 228). There is a limitation of freedom of association and assembly.

The Pseudo- and Manufactured Public Sphere

These results allow no other conclusion than the one that Twitter is not a public sphere. Twitter shows the continued importance of Habermas’s argument that the bourgeois public sphere has created, as Marx has already observed, its own limits and thereby its own immanent critique. “The public sphere with which Marx saw himself confronted contradicted its own principle of universal accessibility” (Habermas 1989c, 124). Habermasian public sphere analysis with the help of the epistemological method of immanent critique compares an actual public sphere (political economy and political communication) to

10 <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703716904576134543029279426.html?KEYWORDS=twitter>, accessed on July 3, 2013.

11 <http://www.emarketer.com/newsroom/index.php/strong-2011-twitter-ad-revenues-grow-86-259-million-2012/>, accessed on July 3, 2013.

12 <http://www.emarketer.com/newsroom/index.php/strong-2011-twitter-ad-revenues-grow-86-259-million-2012/>, accessed on July 3, 2013.

the ideal and values of the public sphere that bourgeois society promises (freedom of speech, freedom of public opinion, freedom of association, freedom of assembly). The immanent analysis conducted in this chapter found that Twitter's reality contradicts the promises of bourgeois society. Twitter is a "pseudo-public sphere" (Habermas 1989c, 162) and a "manufactured public sphere" (Habermas 1989c, 217).

8.6. Conclusion

Critical voices have warned about the claims that Twitter constitutes a new public sphere. Evgeny Morozov (2010) argues that the notion of "Twitter revolution" is based on a belief in cyber-utopianism – "a naive belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on a stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside" (Morozov 2010, xiii). Christian Christensen (2011) argues that the logic of technological determinism that ignores societal contexts, such as "the political-economic, historical or sociological implications of social media use in relation to development or political change" (Christensen 2011, 248), frequently shapes policy and academic discourses about Twitter.

Politicians and mainstream media have made a claim related to the myth of Twitter revolutions in the context of the UK riots in August 2011, namely that Twitter results in violence and riots. They invented the notions of "Twitter mobs" and "Blackberry mobs". "Rioting thugs use Twitter to boost their numbers in thieving store raids. [...] THUGS used social network Twitter to orchestrate the Tottenham violence and incite others to join in as they sent messages urging: 'Roll up and loot'. [...] Gang members used Blackberry smart-phones designed as a communications tool for high-flying executives to organise the mayhem" (*The Sun*, August 8, 2011; *The Telegraph*, August 8, 2011).

Whereas the notion of Twitter revolution is a belief in cyber-utopianism and in the power of Twitter to strengthen the political public sphere, the notion of Twitter mob is an expression of techno-pessimism, the assumption that the Internet in all contexts has necessarily bad consequences for society and that it is the Internet or specific platforms that are the cause of negative phenomena. Both are expressions of technological determinism.

Technological Determinism

One of the reasons why critical theory is important for analyzing media, technology and information is that it allows us to question and provide alternatives to technological determinism and to explain the causal relationship of media and technology, on the one hand, and society, on the other hand, in a complex way that avoids one-dimensionality and one-sidedness. Technological determinism is a kind of explanation of the causal relationship of media/technology and society that assumes that a certain medium or technology has exactly one specific effect on society and social systems (see Figure 8.1). In the case that this effect is assessed positively, we can speak of techno-optimism. In the

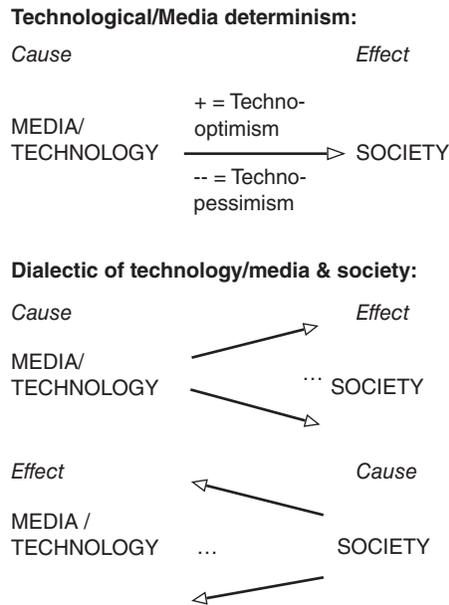


Figure 8.1 Two logics of the relationship between media technology and society

case that the effect is assessed negatively, we can speak of techno-pessimism. Techno-optimism and techno-pessimism are the normative dimensions of technological determinism.

The problem of techno-optimistic and techno-pessimistic arguments is that they are only interested in single aspects of technology and create the impression that there are only one-sided effects (see Figure 8.1). They lack a sense of contradictions and the dialectics of technology and society and can therefore be described as technological deterministic forms of argumentation. Technological determinism is a fetishism of technology (Robins and Webster 1999), “the idea that technology develops as the sole result of an internal dynamic, and then, unmediated by any other influence molds society to fit its pattern” (Winner 1980/1999, 29).

Technological determinism overestimates the role of technology in society; it ignores the fact that technology is embedded into society and that it is the people living under and rebelling against power relations, not the technology, who conduct unrest and revolutions. The rise of new technologies often creates an “eruption of feeling that briefly overwhelms reason” (Mosco 2004, 22). Technological determinism ignores the political economy of events. Social media determinism is an expression of the digital sublime, the development that “cyberspace has become the latest icon of the technological and electronic sublime, praised for its epochal and transcendent characteristics and demonized for the depth of the evil it can conjure” (Mosco 2004, 24).

An alternative that avoids technological and social determinisms is to conceptualize the relationship of technology and society as dialectical (see Figure 8.1):

society conditions the invention, design and engineering of technology and technology shapes society in complex ways. Technology is conditioned, not determined by society, and vice versa. This means that societal conditions, interests and conflicts influence which technologies will emerge, but technology's effects are not predetermined because modern technologies are complex wholes of interacting parts that are to certain extents unpredictable. Technology shapes society in complex ways, which means that frequently there are multiple effects that can stand in contradiction with each other. Because society and technology are complex systems, which means that they have many elements and many interactions between these elements, it is unlikely that the interaction of the two complex systems of technology and society will have one-dimensional effects. Technology is a medium (enabling and constraining) and outcome of society.

A Dialectical Concept of Technology and Society

A critical theory of media and technology is based on dialectical reasoning (see Figure 8.1). This allows us to see the causal relationship of media/technology and society as multidimensional and complex: a specific media/technology has multiple, at least two, potential effects on society and social systems that can co-exist or stand in contradiction to each other. Which potentials are realized is based on how society, interests, power structures and struggles shape the design and usage of technology in multiple ways that are also potentially contradictory. Andrew Feenberg says in this context that Critical Theory "argues that technology is not a thing in the ordinary sense of the term, but an 'ambivalent' process of development suspended between different possibilities" (Feenberg 2002, 15).

The revolution in Egypt was not a Twitter revolution, but related to the context of a highly stratified society. Real wages have been decreasing over 20 years, strikes were forbidden, there has been repression against the political left and unions, the gap between the rich and the poor has been large, poverty has constantly increased, wages in industry have been low, the global economic crisis has resulted in mass lay-offs and a food crisis, Mubarak – together with the army – controlled Egyptian politics and bureaucracy since 1981, the illiteracy rate has been high, and there has been a contradiction between Islamic traditions and the values of modernization (Björklund 2011).

Pierre Bourdieu (1986b) distinguished between economic capital (money), political capital (power) and cultural capital (status, skills, educational attainments). Egypt was, under Mubarak, a society with a highly stratified class structure: there was a class that controlled the political-economic-military complex and accumulated economic, political and cultural capital at the expense of the masses of Egyptian people. The Egyptian revolution was a revolution against capitalism's multidimensional injustices, in which social media were used as a tool of information and organization, but were not the cause of the revolution.

The UK riots were not a Twitter mob, but related to the societal structure of the UK. The latter has a high level of income inequality; its Gini level was 32.4 in

2009 (0 means absolute equality, 100 absolute inequality), a level that is only topped by a few countries in Europe and that is comparable to the level of Greece (33.1) (data source: Eurostat). Of the UK population, 17.3% had a risk of living in poverty in 2009 (data source: Eurostat). In early 2011, the youth unemployment rate in the UK rose to 20.3%, the highest level since these statistics started being recorded in 1992.¹³ The UK is not only one of the most advanced developed countries today, it is at the same time a developing country with a lot of structurally deprived areas. Is it a surprise that riots erupted, especially in East London, the West Midlands and Greater Manchester? The UK Department of Communities and Local Government reported in its analysis, *The English Indices of Deprivation 2010*:¹⁴ “Liverpool, Middlesbrough, Manchester, Knowsley, the City of Kingston-upon-Hull, Hackney and Tower Hamlets are the local authorities with the highest proportion of LSOAs amongst the most deprived in England. [...] The north east quarter of London, particularly Newham, Hackney and Tower Hamlets, continue to exhibit very high levels of deprivation” (1, 3). Decades of UK capitalist development, shaped by deindustrialization and neoliberalism, have had effects on the creation, intensification and extension of precariousness and deprivation. Capitalism, crisis and class are the main contexts of unrests, uproar and social media today.

Social media are not the causes of revolutions and violence; they are rather a mirror of the power structures and structures of exploitation and oppression that we find in contemporary society.

A Model of (Social) Media and Revolution

Especially the dialectical philosophies of Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch allow conceiving the relationship of human subjects (agents) and societal objects (structures) as dialectical so that existing structures enable and constrain human action and open up a field of possible developments for society and social systems, based on which humans reproduce existing structures or create new structures (Fuchs 2011b, chapter 2). The possibilities and the likelihood of fundamental social change are therefore based on existing power structures. The subject–object dialectic of Marcuse and Bloch is a viable alternative to structuralist–functionalist forms of dialectic that underestimate the importance of humans in the dialectic of society and reduce societal development to automatic processes without human subjects. Dialectical philosophy allows conceptualizing the relationship of media and society, the relationship of a different type and organization of media to each other, and the relationship of movements and the media as contradictory and grounded in the contradictions of contemporary antagonistic societies (Fuchs 2011b).

A theoretical model that I suggest for conceiving the relationship of media and revolution conceptualizes the relationship between rebellions and (social) media as dialectical: in the form of contradictions. Figure 8.2 shows a dialectical model of revolts and the media.

13 www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jan/19/youth-unemployment-heads-towards-1-million.

14 www.communities.gov.uk/documents/statistics/pdf/1871538.pdf.

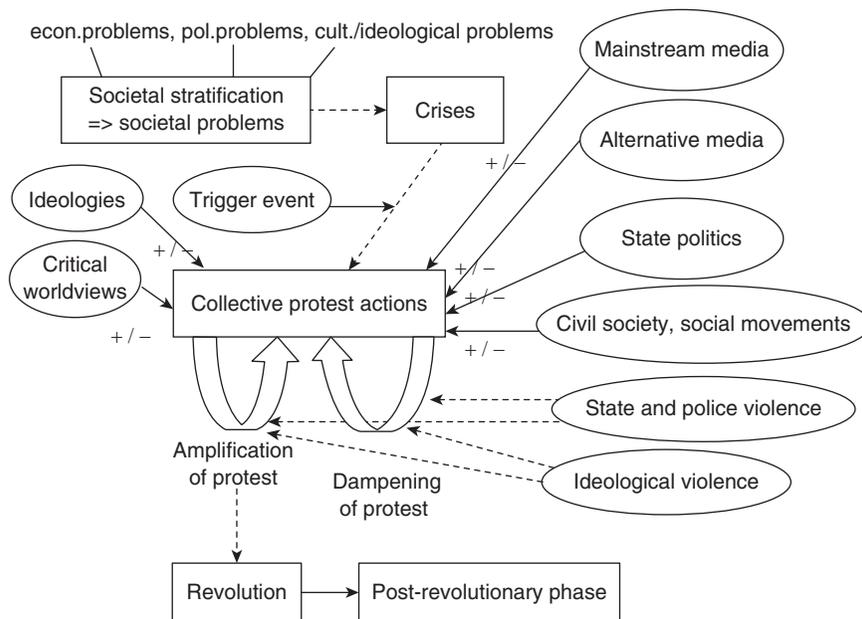


Figure 8.2 A model of protests and revolutions and the role of crises, the media, ideology and politics

Protests have an objective foundation that is grounded in the contradictions of society, i.e. forms of domination that cause problems that are economic, political and cultural in nature. Societal problems can result in (economic, political, cultural/ideological) crises¹⁵ if they are temporally persistent and cannot be easily overcome. Crises do not automatically result in protests, but are an objective and necessary, although not sufficient, condition of protest. If crisis dimensions converge and interact, then we can speak of a societal crisis. Protests require a mass of people's perception that there are societal problems, that these problems are unbearable and a scandal and a sign that something needs to be changed. Often actual protests and movements are triggered and continuously intensified by certain events (such as the arrest of Rosa Parks in the US civil rights movement, the public suicide of Mohamed Bouazizi in the 2011 Tunisian revolution, the police's killing of Khaled Mohamed Said in Egypt, the pepper-spraying of activists by New York Police Department officer Anthony Bologna and the mass arrest of Occupy activists on Brooklyn Bridge in the Occupy Wall Street movement, etc.).

It is precisely here that Castells' (2012) focus on the emotions of outrage and hope plays a role – in the potential transition from crises to protests. Subjective

¹⁵ There are of course also ecological crises that can threaten the existence of humankind. For social theory, the question is how nature relates to society. Humans have to enter into a metabolism with nature in order to survive. They have to appropriate parts of nature and change it with their activities in order to produce use-values that serve the needs of society. This means that the process where the interaction of nature and society is directly established takes place in the economy. We therefore do not discern ecological crises separately, but see them as one specific subtype of economic crises.

perceptions and emotions are, however, not the only factor because they are conditioned and influenced by politics, the media and culture/ideology. The way state politics, mainstream media and ideology, on the one hand, and oppositional politics/social movements, alternative media and alternative worldviews, on the other hand, connect to human subjects influences the conditions of protests. Each of these factors can have either amplifying or dampening effects on protests. So, for example, racist media coverage can advance racist stereotypes and/or the insight that the media and contemporary society are racist in-themselves. It can also advance both views, namely in respect to different individuals or groups that then enter into an antagonism with each other.

The media – social media, the Internet and all other media – are contradictory because we live in a contradictory society. As a consequence, their effects are actually contradictory, they can dampen/forestall or amplify/advance protest or have not much effect at all. Also, different media (e.g. alternative media and commercial media) stand in a contradictory relation and power struggle with each other. The media are not the only factors that influence the conditions of protest – they stand in contradictory relations with politics and ideology/culture that also influence the conditions of protest. So whether protest emerges or not is shaped by multiple factors that are so complex that it cannot be calculated or forecast whether protest will emerge as result of a certain crisis or not. Once protests have emerged, media, politics and culture continue to have permanent contradictory influences on them and it is undetermined whether these factors have rather neutral, amplifying or dampening effects on protest. Protests in antagonistic societies often call forth policing and police action. In this case, the state reacts to social movements with its organized form of violence. State violence against protests and ideological violence against movements (in the form of attacks of delegitimization conducted by the media, politicians and others) can again have amplifying, dampening or insignificant effects on protests.

If there is a protest amplification spiral, protest may grow to larger and larger dimensions, which can eventually, but not necessarily, result in a revolution – a breakdown and fundamental reconstitution/renewal of the economy, politics and worldviews caused by a social movement's overthrow of society that puts the revolutionary forces into power and control of the major economic, political and moral structures (see Goodwin 2001, 9). Every revolution results in a post-revolutionary phase, in which the reconstruction and renewal of society begins and the legacy of conflict and the old society can pose challenges and new contradictions.

Social media in a contradictory society (made up of class conflicts and other conflicts between dominant and dominated groups) are likely to have a contradictory character: they do not necessarily and automatically support/amplify or dampen/limit rebellions, but rather pose contradictory potentials that stand in contradictions with influences by the state, ideology and capitalism.

Summary

We can summarize the main results of this chapter as follows:

- Habermas's concept of the public sphere stresses that a public sphere is (a) a space of political communication and (b) that access to resources that allow citizens to participate in the public sphere is crucial.
- Habermas's notion of the public sphere is a critical concept that helps to analyze whether modern society lives up to its own expectations. It allows testing if the freedom of speech and public opinion are realized or rather limited by the distribution of educational and material resources. Furthermore, it enables the same test for the values of freedom of association and assembly by analyzing whether there are powerful actors that dominate visibility and influence.
- Twitter is not a public sphere. It should neither be the subject of hope for the renewal of democracy and publication, nor the cause of concerns about violence and riots. What should first and foremost concern us is inequality in society and how to alleviate inequality. Habermas's notion of the public sphere has not primarily been about the media, but about the creation of a concept that allows the criticism of structures that lack public concerns about common goods and limit the availability of the commons for all people.
- Social media do not cause revolutions or protests. They are embedded into contradictions and the power structures of contemporary society. This also means that in society, in which these media are prevalent, they are not completely unimportant in situations of uproar and revolution. Social media have contradictory characteristics in contradictory societies: they do not necessarily and automatically support/amplify or dampen/limit rebellions, but rather pose contradictory potentials that stand in contradiction with influences by the state, ideology, capitalism and other media.

Contemporary societies are today experiencing highly damaged common goods and services as the result of decades of neoliberalism. The result has been a global crisis of capitalism that allows us to also think about the possibility of strengthening the commons. Strengthening the commons requires common struggle, which also involves, among other things, common communication. The struggle for a commons-based society that overcomes neoliberalism should also be the struggle for communication commons. The stratified structures of Twitter are an expression of the limits of the public sphere. Another society is possible. Is another Twitter possible?

RECOMMENDED READINGS AND EXERCISES

For critically understanding Twitter, it is useful to engage with works by Jürgen Habermas and debates about Twitter's role in politics.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1989. *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Jeffrey, Stuart. 2010. A rare interview with Jürgen Habermas. *Financial Times Online*, April 30, 2010.

There are many myths about Habermas's famous book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. I therefore recommend that you read the entire book in order to understand its content and the notion of the public sphere. Ask yourself:

- What is the public sphere according to Habermas? How has it developed historically?
- What are characteristics and limits of the bourgeois public sphere?
- How is the notion of the public sphere connected to Karl Marx's thinking?
- What does Habermas mean by refeudalization of the public sphere?
- Think of social media in contemporary politics and society: which aspects of political communication, limits of the public sphere and refeudalization are there? Try to find examples.
- How do you interpret the fact that a fake Habermas posted about the public sphere on Twitter under Habermas's name and caused some irritation? What are the implications for the public sphere?

Morozov, Evgeny. 2009. The brave new world of slacktivism. http://neteffect.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/19/the_brave_new_world_of_slacktivism, accessed on July 3, 2013.

Gladwell, Malcolm. 2010. Small change. Why the revolution will not be tweeted. *The New Yorker*, October: 42–49.

Morozov, Evgeny. 2010. *The net delusion: How not to liberate the world*. London: Allen Lane. Chapter 7: Why Kierkegard hates slacktivism.

Shirky, Clay. 2011. The political power of social media. *Foreign Affairs* 90 (1): 28–41.

Gladwell, Malcolm and Clay Shirky. 2011. From innovation to revolution: Do social media make protests possible? *Foreign Affairs* 90 (2): 153–154.

These readings focus on a debate between Clay Shirky, Malcolm Gladwell and Evgeny Morozov concerning the question of whether digital media help to liberate the world and strengthen democracy or not.

- Summarize and compare the basic arguments of Shirky, Gladwell and Morozov about social media's role in politics.
- Try to find logical, theoretical and empirical evidence to describe what the relationship between social media, politics and protests looks like.

Identify Twitter hashtags for a current political event and a current entertainment event. Observe, collect and store all postings for these two hashtags for one day. Conduct a content and discourse analysis that focuses on the topics of discussion and their frequency, the interactivity of the tweets (the degree of re-tweeting/information/communication), the overall number of tweets, the number of participants, the number of postings per participant and the share of tweets for each participant in the total number of tweets, the use of emoticons, abbreviations and affects. If there are disagreements, how are they expressed? Are these disagreements further discussed? Observe also how the number of followers of the most active participants changes during the day. How many new followers does s/he gain?

- Interpret the results of your small study in the light of Habermas's public sphere theory.