INVITED PAPER

The transformations of "public sphere" category, and the contemporary debate about digital citizenship

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1. *Digital turn* and the metamorphosis of democratic society

The *digital turn* has shaken at its foundations the «mass society», the label that entered the lexicon of social sciences in the Twentieth century, accompanying advanced industrial societies for a long time (Gili, 1990), before their transformation into post-industrial ones (Touraine, 1969). The new context in which the increasingly important role assumed by telematic technologies and Information and communication technologies has opened a profound debate around the redefinition of the concepts and practices of democracy, as well as – gradually more and more – of citizenship. The Network society, firstly described by Manuel Castells, constitutes the background (and, partially, the accelerator) of a change in the social morphology of liberal-representative democracies. The network society constantly encourages and supports the processes of individualization and subjectivization, together with those of political personalization (Calise, 2000), «vetrinizzazione» (Codeluppi, 2021) and celebrification (Marshall, 2014). Thus, the tendency towards self-communication (Castells, 2002), has become generalized, amplified by the technological conditions of permanent connection and digital convergence, with the widespread diffusion on a very large scale and democratization of what we can call the "means of communicative production".

A scenario whose fundamental path is that indicated by the considerations on the media of Neil Postman in his book of 1985, and which led Western societies towards the horizon of public democracy (Manin, 2010) typical of «communicative abundance» (Keane, 2013), starting with the «commercial deluge» of private television networks (Blumler, 1992) and «neo-televisione» as Umberto Eco had named it. This multiplication of channels and networks has led to the revision of some characteristics of audience democracy in the direction of post-broadcast democracy (Prior, 2007). Individual users are meaningfully part of this landscape; in the «postmodern condition» (Lyotard, 1979) and its stages they are consumers of goods and content increasingly leaning towards a personalized media diet and a "do-it-

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yourself' schedule (ensured by the horizontal media) but also at the same time producers. That is to say «consumattori», and «prosumers», according to the definition coined at the beginning of the Eighties by Alvin Toffler (Toffler, 1980), whose field of application has gradually extended to confirm a social process from considerable range.

The citizen-voters of the digital age have become «netizens», who carry out more or less assiduously, or even just casually in most cases, a series of online political participation and mobilization activities (Vaccari, 2012). Or who carry out even just episodic activation and speaking with reference to facts and events of associated and collective life or to issues of public discourse. It is one of the aspects that contribute to delineating the sphere of digital citizenship, within which a fundamental component of reflection is directed towards the transformations of the mechanisms of public opinion. Public opinion (and public sphere) became the subject, in the light of the upheavals produced by the digital turn and digital mediation (which can also be defined as re-mediation), of great attention from sociology and communication sciences – also according to the sensitivities of non-western scholars and belonging to the Global South (Shankar Pandey, 2019), as well as the "prophecies" of some media operators and professionals, such as the «end of the public debate» predicted by Mark Thompson (2016). Communication disintermediation (Ceccarini, 2015) and mass self-communication are powerful impulses that push towards disengaging public opinion, which in recent years has been increasingly involved in the process of platformization of the public sphere. The vocation and the pedagogical function of politics towards the community and the electoral body (Diamanti, 2014) are ultimately dismissed. Nevertheless, the normative model of citizenship at the origins of liberal-representative democracy – the one that can be summed up, in its evolutions, in the paradigm of the «good citizen» as an «informed citizen» (Schudson, 2010) – continues to constitute an ideal reference also within the postmodern condition and the changes in its «constellation» (Bernstein, 1994).

Claimed – often in an instrumental or "idealistic" (and "renouncing") way – by various sectors of the political classes, highly revised and subject to considerable review by scholars in the current context of the hybrid media ecosystem (Chadwick, 2013), the category of public opinion identifies a relevant issue also with reference to the metamorphoses connected to the digital transition. In this category, however, currently it is possible to identify shifts in the meaning of some essential notions that are placed at its foundation, until the emptying of the original meaning. Linguistic and conceptual shifts so marked as to configure, at times, those that can be considered as authentic postmodern paradoxes.

2. Paths of public sphere and public discourse

Indeed, it can be said that «publicity» (inseparably linked to that of public opinion) constitutes precisely one of the most polysemic – as well as ambivalent – cultural and linguistic category of modernity. It accompanies the genesis of which, placing itself at the very sources of the "unfinished" «modern Project» (Habermas, 1962). Publicity is a foundation and an attribute of public opinion, "invented" and codified in the Age of Enlightenment, with the decisive contributions of Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (and formerly the influential theoretizions by John Locke and David Hume). A notion that, observed in the many manifestations of political communication – from electoral advertising to political journalism, from debates and television talk-shows to political-electoral marketing – has involved a variety of analysis, studies and methodological approaches, from political science to philosophy, from Michel Foucault's lectures at Collège de France, in the 1970s, on the relationship between «discourse, truth and power» (Foucault, 1966) to Umberto Eco's reflections on the media and mass culture (Eco, 1965), passing through the deconstructionism developed on the basis of the Heideggerian and Derridian theses.

With the affirmation of the bourgeoisie as a social class that aspired to hegemony, during the eighteenth century, an intense theoretical debate developed on the rights enjoyed by individuals and on the limits of State power. That is absolutist State, object of Thomas Hobbes' anticipatory doctrine, which based its action on the rule of «silence and secrecy» (Rolando, 2011), destined in fact to identify a long-term permanence in the history of public administrations and to distinguish a topic which has gradually become more relevant in the discussion around the prerogatives of citizenship. Public opinion – also to be understood as a system of beliefs about public affairs (confirming its nature as an eminently polysemic category) – was essentially born in conjunction with the modern notion of a democratic and representative political regime, which the English philosopher John Locke defined as «government of opinion». It was the development and continuation of that «government of laws» which Locke has identified as one of the main ideas of the conceptual apparatus of liberalism; criticism of the cultural order and privileges determined by the status of birth also developed on his thrust.

Interests and opinions thus gradually ceased to be attributed to the class of belonging to be attributed to individuals, opening the way to the condition of bearers of individual rights, and of concepts of life and the world that were not unitary and not attributable to a grouping static and unchangeable along the time. Before these theoretical and political acquisitions, a nucleus of public opinion was discernible in the academic communities of the savants (the reference, as

a matter of course, is to extremely small and small numbers of people), who acquired, in the second half of the seventeenth century, of new editorial tools through which the linguistic monopoly of Latin was broken (Pettegree, 2015). One of the first reflections on the subject was the one developed by Locke in *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690), where he attributed to public opinion a function of control within society, establishing the existence of a distinction between the «moral law» (of which public opinion was the depositary) and the «civil law», an emanation of political power. In this way, the importance of publicity – the function of controlling citizens with regard to the established power – began to assert itself. In the *Essay*, Locke stated the existence of a law of opinion and reputation that united all individuals by regulating their attitudes and behaviors. In his thinking, in this way, the conception of the limitation of power coming from constitutionalism and the long-standing one of good governance (the one practiced by the rulers of the community who knew how to be just and upright) met with the extremely original idea – conceived in the age of modernity – of the importance of the consent of the people. It was the new dimension of democratic legitimacy that will identify the source of inspiration and the thrust placed at the foundation of the eighteenth-century liberal revolutions, with which the category of public opinion, definitely formulated by the Enlightenment, will enter fully into Western political theory (also throwing a theoretical seed of future political communication). Reflections that were taken up and continued, in a perspective favorable to the privileged role of elites and optimates, by another prominent exponent of Anglo-Saxon empiricism, the skeptical and radical philosopher of the Scottish Enlightenment David Hume (1711-1776), according to the which the public sphere coincided with the space (and forum) of the excellence. Just Hume – considered by some scholars the initiator of the modern doctrine of political legitimacy (Pupo, 2020) – was the creator of the famous principle according to which «every government is based on opinion» which, under the banner of some revision, will result the conceptual background of the doctrine of the founding fathers of the United States of America. It was during the decades preceding the French Revolution, as argued by Giovanni Sartori (Sartori, 1987), that the category of public opinion was defining and structuring itself for a twofold reason. On the one hand, engaged in the program of propagation and diffusion of the *Lumières*, the Enlightenment thinkers and supporters worked to form and influence the ways of thinking (the «opinions») of a smaller audience (the bourgeois classes) and, on the other hand (in very wide and extremely vast), the revolutionary ruling groups proposed, after 1789, to give life to a democratic nation and, therefore, inhabited by a people able to express their opinion (especially in political matters and public affairs). And it is precisely this cultural and political context that prepares and lays the foundations of the category of public opinion, a construction that takes place in a "concordant" way starting from different sensibilities and approaches. From the «spirit of the laws» of Montesquieu (where «spirit» referred to the «spirit of the constitution», without any reference to that of the «people» and its metaphysical and irrationalistic structure which will dominate Romanticism) to the *volonté générale* (the general will) of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (the first to use the phrase *opinion publique*), which found its ideal declination ground within communities of a limited dimensional scale (marked by methods of direct democracy) and, nevertheless, again, it did not possess any metaphysical attributes, revealing itself on the contrary to be markedly rational, abstract and intellectualized, and clearly distant from any form of "vitalistic voluntarism". As Sartori noted, the conception of public opinion was thus fully produced (and for the first time in the proper sense), since the two attributes of «dissemination among publics» and «reference to public affairs» were given together and at the same time.

The Locke's differentiation was taken up by Immanuel Kant with reference to the public use of reason in all fields and spheres. In the famous paper *What is the Enlightenment* (1784), Kant was part of an intense controversy that developed in the cultural world of the time, and described the advent of the Enlightenment as the exit of humanity from the "state of minority" that it had inflicted on itself. The German philosopher asked for freedom for the public use of reason, which is not declined in the fact that decisions are taken collectively, but in the use of rational opinion that is autonomous and independent of any conditioning coming from authority. The idea of Kantian publicity was not identified with the pure saying something in public because, in a context of divergence of faculties and opportunities, the holders of power are in a position to make any declaration and announcement without having to pay consequences. Instead, he wanted to establish a public sphere of communicative action and a model of ideal communion of knowledge and discussion whose protagonists would prove to be equally autonomous (and rational); a paradigm that will form the foundation of the different visions of communicative rationality developed by Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel. Kant reflected on publicity not in terms of a criterion of political orientation, but as opposed to politics. In another famous and subsequent text – *Perpetual peace* (1795) –, having meanwhile witnessed the epochal rupture of the French Revolution, the philosopher placed the formal character of the rules of public law in publicity. In Kant's thought, public opinion thus ended up identifying a pillar of democracy, without coinciding entirely or tout court with representative institutions, and instead proposing itself towards them in terms of stimulus and in the name of a critical role (as evidence,

once again, of the distrust of bourgeois civil society towards the legacies of the absolutist State). Once configured as a hegemonic class, and once a paradigm and model of society had been established, it was the bourgeoisie itself that multiplied the ambivalences and ambiguities of the polysemic (and, one might add, "polypolitical") category of publicity. As in the case of the Panopticon's "public" and transparent prison, the easily and permanently controlled prison stemming from an idea by Jeremy Bentham - and carefully studied in terms of an original surveillance device by Foucault (Foucault, 1975). A manifestation, referring to the category of publicity, of that «logic of paradoxes» (Bencivenga, 2022) that runs through the thinking of modernity and identifies, above all, one of the most evident components of the current late phase of postmodernity.

Scientific and academic literature has systematized the link between the publicity of politics and the birth (and, subsequently, consolidation) of the public sphere; and, under the banner of different accentuations and declinations that reflect the various disciplinary approaches and methodologies, it has widely emphasized the juxtaposition in its genesis between bourgeois social classes, Enlightenment thought and political journalism (Rospocher, 2013).

In this regard, we could cite the work, significant for the communicative sciences, of the sociologist Judith Lazar (Lazar, 1995), who has identified three stages of development of public opinion throughout the history of the West (always underlining the controversial nature of this concept.

The first era coincides with the Enlightenment and the spread of its message of tension towards progress and the struggle against the obscurantism of the Ancien régime; it was the stage of formation of the bourgeois public sphere; hence the assimilation of this category to a multiplicity of concepts and narratives, from a pillar of democracy to a forum for criticism of power, and its presentation as the embodiment of the underlying values (starting from individualism and universalism) of liberal revolutions. A phase in which public opinion identifies itself *tout court* with the bourgeois classes and their galaxy of gazettes and periodicals (with the media par excellence engaged in publicity public affairs and issues worthy of note for public discourse), lounges, cafés, clubs and clubs, where dense discussions and "necessary conversations" intertwined (to use the expression of Sherry Turkle, 2016) from which the French Revolution of 1789 arose. It was a context in which the typology of interactions and relationships turned out to be typically interpersonal.

It should be noted that with reference to the philosophical profile of the relationship between democracy and public opinion – the union of the terms "opinion" and "public" as a single political concept occurs within the liberal doctrine – some scholars have made a subdivision in the course of the Eighteenth century between two traditions (Grossi, 2004) which ended up being conflicting and incompatible. The first, expressed by English and French Eighteenth-Nineteenth-century liberal thought (and to which physiocratic economists are also attributable), considered public opinion as an essential component of the process (and flows) of democracy as an intermediate space between the electorate and the legislative power and as an area of mediation for representation (source of legitimacy for the institutions of Parliament and the government). The second tradition was a direct offspring of the Enlightenment of the philosophes (in particular of its radical orientation) and of the Revolution of 1789, and identified public opinion with an "enlightened public" and a narrow intellectual class that performs a critical and pedagogical guide in the direction of general emancipation, oriented both towards the state and the popular classes.

To return to the Lazar tripartition, the second stage, temporally located between the Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries, saw the consolidation of collective movements (trade unions and mass parties) and the correlated structuring of a popular and class public opinion, in which communication was once again of an interpersonal type, while the main form of expression of politics (and that par excellence of a "community" type of publicity) coincided with the demonstration in the square (and the rally). The last phase outlined by Lazar, whose original characteristics were already visible during the first half of the twentieth century, and which then became unstoppable with the second, is that of the «mediatization of public opinion», the result of the progressive strengthening of cultural industry and the expansion of a collective imagination largely oriented by the logic of the vertical and top-down mass media. The media (and, in the first place, generalist television) take on an incontrovertible force in orienting and directing ideas and judgments, while at the same time a process of professionalization of the specialists in the formation of public opinion takes shape (from the commentators of the newspapers – the "pundit" – to the pollsters). Another interpretative key in the academic literature that observes public opinion as the recipient of the communicative actions of politics is – which has become classic – the study in taxonomic and classifying terms of the typologies of electoral campaigning. Among most relevant works in thies field are those (considered as classics) by Pippa Norris (2000) – with the tripartition in pre-modern, modern, and postmodern electoral campaigns – and by Jay G. Blumler and Dennis Kavanagh (1999), and valid above all for the analysis of the long pre-Internet period and before the extension of the use of digital media as a function of consensus-building. A historical phase dominated, in terms of *longue durée*, by the so-called «premodern» electoral campaign, which developed from the mid-nineteenth century to 1950. It was a phase characterized by a static electorate, within a general context marked

by stable voting behavior linked to social and group divisions and political cleavages and subcultures deeply rooted in time flow and geographical space. A collective condition characterized by exchanges of opinions and unidirectional and circumscribed flows of information, strongly verticalized (often according to an ex-cathedra pedagogical logic that inspired the officials of mass political organizations and formations) and inserted within the framework of the deep crystallization of ideological narratives and political cultures. Then it was the turn of the so-called «modern» electoral campaign, in which generalist television plays a central role (from the 60s to the 80s). In general, the communicative revolution of the Twentieth century also makes itself, in part considerable, co-responsible for the more general process of mediatization of politics (Bennet & Entman, 2000), which redefines its forms and contents. The politician finds himself unable (and willing) to disregard the attention of the mass media and the visibility that they guarantee him in a phase of crumbling of traditional social classes and irreversible abandonment of ideologies, and consequently – increasingly accentuated – construction of consensus for means of personal image. The appeal to public opinion as a modality of legitimation assumes from here on a variety of formulas that gradually break away from the usual representative forms of liberal democracy to oscillate in the direction of models of neoplebiscitarism and (self-defined) "direct democracy", inspired from the nineties of the twentieth century to the paradigm of disintermediation.

3. The platformization of public sphere

In the cultural debate of the last twenty years, the reading of neoliberalism and its paradigm of «individualistic ideology» (Urbinati, 2012) has spread as the result not exclusively of the anthropological ideal of the homo œconomicus elaborated by the doctrines of rational choice, but of an overall interpretation based on the notion of «Hyper-Enlightenment». Its roots lie in that component of the period of the Enlightenment in which – according to scholars such as Armand Mattelart (2002) – the public sphere was formed in a substantial association with the "ideology of information", determined by the affirmation of statistics and mathematics as tools capable of guaranteeing impartial reasoning for the management of societies. And, also, on the impulse of that utopian component of the modern project, which Mattelart has defined as the «geometric utopia of the revolutionaries».

Niklas Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation of European societies (Luhmann, De Giorgi, 1996) describes public opinion as an extremely numerous and potentially endless succession and chain of communications. In this interpretation it is the development of an autonomous political functional subsystem (which the German scholar identifies with the modern State) that gives rise to the public political sphere. The decisive element therefore does not coincide with an increase in the rationality rate of public opinion, but with the increasing level of contingency of the totality of subsequent communication. The basic Luhmannian postulate is that the formation of functional subsystems is found to be based on communication and observation of the first and second level of intrasystemic communication. Thus, there were a plurality and a multiplicity of pre-modern public spheres, which somehow return, under the banner of that return of certain aspects of premodernity within postmodernity underlined by various scholars – or within «neo-modernity», as they prefer to argue others (Mordacci, 2017). Modernity was characterized by connected public spheres, which in the phase of digital capitalism (Srnicek, 2017) marked by platforms and social networks find themselves separated and fragmented as before the Enlightenment.

The technological evolutions that led to the de facto hegemony of social media (Bianco, 2019) and the increasingly accentuated logic of contamination of the hybrid media system have considerably questioned the notion of the Habermasian public sphere in the direction of its «platformization» (Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal, 2018; Sorice, 2020). In addition to a sequence of transformations that have overturned its boundaries – it should be remembered in this regard that the public sphere is precisely a spatial type metaphor (Dahlgren, 2000) – and several of the same constitutive characteristics. The current "fourth phase" of media studies (Sorice, 2020) – which investigates the forms of web 3.0, the platform society and the condition of post-truth – has analyzed the paths of the massive transition from legacy media to the fragmentation of broadcasters and of the publics at the various stages of development of the Web. It has highlighted phenomena that have a global diffusion and value similar to the increasingly horizontalized information and communication technologies that are supplanting the hitherto mainstream mass media in the preferences of use and fruition (and that are activating re-intermediation methods frequently not perceived by the public in all their scope and extent as well as in their final implications). In the wake of the spread of the effects of what was still called by some observers the "digital revolution", literature at the turn of the decade of the 2000s highlighted the dilution and incessant fragmentation of the public sphere (Nieminen, 2008), and outlined the notion of "public horizons" (Volkmer, 2014) which, in the age of "reflective interdependence", would open up the possibility of dynamic flows in the direction of building a «global public sphere». A conception, according to some scholars, characterized by veins of optimism to which is juxtaposed – and contrasted with – the nowadays

prevalent reading of the birth, within the fourth phase of communication of a "post-public sphere" (Davis, 2019; Schlesinger, 2020), with a pronounced transitional character (and, therefore, characterized by high instability). The hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013) has imposed a major twist in the direction of post-representative politics (Keane, 2013), a scenario in which the media directly encompass various mechanisms of representation. An ambivalent context, in which the structural crisis of political organizations and intermediary agents gives space to innovative and original ways of political surveillance (and monitoring democracy) and, at the same time, intensifies without interruption (and without stopping) the decline of public participation and democratic mobilization as well as distrust in representative institutions; both processes associated with the evolution of communication technologies. The challenge of building digital citizenship must necessarily deal with this ambivalence.

Liberal-representative democracies thus entered «the third era of public debate» (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021), after that of institutionalization and that of spectacularization: the stage of disintermediation. Within which public democracy is converted into public democracy, characterized by the intensification of segmented communication oriented by individual preferences and personalized media diets. Some scholars (Palano, 2020) believe that the result is a "bubble democracy" that increases the level of incommunicability and polarization and the self-referentiality of individuals, making the idea of shared digital citizenship highly problematic. Nevertheless, the plural publics as central components of a multiplicity of spaces and spheres of communicative interaction, according to various sociologists of communication (Bentivegna & Boccia Artieri, 2021), are not irreducible to each other from the communicative point of view. Even in the face of the abundance of information and an increasingly personalized offer, a common space remains, determined by hybridization and media convergence and the model of affective public (Papacharissi, 2015). A space, also, for a pedagogical (Marinelli, 2021) and sociological re-conceptualization of the contemporary forms of public opinion and citizenship along the unceasing metamorphoses of the digital age.

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