Democracy and (Mis)Understanding in the Digital Age: On the transformation of mediated space

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Purpose of the paper: This is my dissertation proposal adapted into article format. The plan is to use this as a blueprint for my dissertation in which the different chapters will work through, clarify, and elaborate on different themes in this paper. I am unsure if I want to publish this as a standalone piece, as its scope is too broad (a published paper should "get to the point", so to speak, better than this paper). However, I am not closing publication off as a possibility. Disclaimer: the last section, specifically, needs more thinking and theoretical grounding.

"Every language is located in a space"
– Henri Lefebvre

Introduction

In an etymological paper, Josiah Ober has argued that the original meaning of democracy was not "majority rule" but was rather the capacity of a public to "do things" (Ober, 2008).[1] Following this etymology, it is fitting to define democracy as a *social action*. Defining democracy in this way is helpful because it enables those who study the concept to look closely at the widely theorized *preconditions* of social action. These preconditions include, but are not limited to, collective intentionality (see Gilbert, 1990), plurality (see Arendt, 1958), a joint focus of attention (see Goffman, 1983), and the capacity to reach understanding (see Habermas, 1984).

In this paper, I look primarily at a combination of the latter two – joint focus of attention and the capacity to reach understanding – and discuss them in conjunction with digital communication technologies. In the 20th century, as I will show, joint focus of attention and the capacity to reach understanding were theorized as preconditions of democratic activity. While plurality was also established as a necessary component of democratic action, democratic actors must additionally,

[1] Ober makes this case by arguing that the suffix *kratos*, of *demokratia*, original meant "power" not in the sense of "rule" but rather in the sense of "strength", "ability", or the "capacity to do things". Additionally, *demos*, the word's prefix, did not mean "majority" but rather a specific "public" acting together.

using Hannah Arendt's words, be able to perceive a "common world" or discern the "sameness of the object" (Arendt, 1958: 57-58).

Although this precondition of democratic activity (what I will call *mutual understanding*) seems somewhat straightforward, achieving it on a widescale has never been so. Erving Goffman, as a micro-sociologist, has displayed clearly how mutual understanding can be achieved in small groups and in face-to-face interactions – through rituals, ceremonies, frames, presentations, institutions, rules, norms, spaces, etc.[2] But widescale democracies do not benefit from co-presence or face-to-face interaction. Widescale democratic activity thus requires something to fill the role of co-presence and face-to-face interaction as a means towards achieving mutual understanding.

For many, the answer of how face-to-face interaction can be supplemented as a means to mutual understanding is through the use of communication technologies. As John Dewey argues, mutual understanding, or "conjoint communicated experience" (Dewey, 1916: 83), is achievable only "due to the consequences of technology employed so as to facilitate the rapid and easy circulation of opinions and information, and so as to generate constant and intricate interaction far beyond the limits of face-to-face communities" (Dewey, 1927: 114). While people cannot easily have face-to-face communication with a mass public across wide distances, technology can, at least metaphorically, compress space as a means towards mutual understanding.

But are digital communication technologies actually resulting in a metaphorical compression of space as a means towards widespread mutual understanding? In this paper, I will argue that, while digital technologies *do* compress space in that they allow people to have repeated interaction beyond physical boundaries, they also create new boundaries which further the complexity and differentiation of the media system.

[2] For a summary of Goffman's contributions to the study of interaction, see Fine and Manning, "Erving Goffman", in *The Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists*, 2003.

To make this argument, I will begin by showing how mutual understanding was theorized in the 20th century as a precondition of democratic action. Mutual understanding is primarily a linguistic category; it is not just about access to news and information but is also about how people make meaning from news and information, or how they *interpret* facts, symbols, meanings, events, problems, and solutions (Woodly, 2015: 23). But the way people make meaning together is dependent in part by material structures which shape interaction. As Henri Lefebvre writes in the epigraph above: "Every language is located in a space" (Lefebvre, 1991: 132).

Thus, after discussing how mutual understanding was theorized in the 20th century, I will then move on to discuss how material structures were theorized as part of the puzzle. In the second section, I will show that, around the time mutual understanding was being theorized as a precondition of democratic action, democratic theorists were also contending with the problem of scale. Multiple theorists, as a solution to the problem of scale, presented communication technologies as a means towards widespread mutual understanding. As a result, the media was theorized as a fundamental piece of a democratic system. As Deva Woodly writes today: "mass-mediated communication is the principal kind of communication that actually influences politics" (Woodly, 2015: 21).

After discussing how the media was theorized in the 20th century – as a solution to the problem of scale – I will then turn to the 21st century to discuss how today's communication technologies hold up against this framework. While both pessimists and optimists have discussed the digital arena as *boundless* space, I will show, using works that compare digital space to physical space (Forestal, 2022; Galloway, 2004; Castells, 1996; Brubaker, 2023), that the digital arena is not boundless but is rather *differently bounded.* Although digital technologies allow for repeated interaction beyond physical boundaries, through code they have also established new spatial differentiations within the media system.

After showing how the digital arena is not boundless but is rather differently bounded, I will finish this paper by discussing the implications of this idea for the democratic capacity to reach

mutual understanding. The idea that the digital arena is spatially differentiated could lead to pessimism or optimism about its democratic potential. On the one hand, it complicates the idea that digital technologies unite people in understanding beyond territoriality. But, on the other hand, many have found that structures and boundaries can be both constraining and enabling (see Giddens, 1984: 169-174; Arendt, 1958: 243-247; Goffman, 1982: 5). Rather than unwavering optimism or critique, then, what this argument provides is a framework for analyzing the multiplicity of democratic transformations that have engendered in the digital age.

Instead of assessing the democratic potential of the digital arena through the assumption that it is a boundless space, those studying the digital arena should rather assess the ways it *is* bounded differently than the physical arena, and what the implications of this new type of boundness are for interaction and democratic communication. In this paper, I will only begin to touch upon these implications, but I hope that this framework helps those who study the democratic effects of the digital arena assess the space with deserved complexity.

Mutual understanding as a precondition of democratic action

If democracy can be defined in terms of social action, what is it that enables people to act together in democratic ways? In other words, what facilitates *democratic agency*? I find a similar answer in three of the most influential figures for contemporary democratic theory: John Dewey, Hannah Arendt, and Jürgen Habermas. Read together, these thinkers established a dominant paradigm in democratic theory which maintains that to be democratic agents, people must straddle the line between plurality and some sort of commonality. Below, I discuss how these authors theorized commonality through the idea of mutual understanding.

Dewey is perhaps the easiest thinker to pull the democratic necessity of mutual understanding out of. Rather than defining democracy as a form of government or a set of procedures, he defines democracy broadly as a way of life. As he writes: “A democracy is more than a form of government;

it is primarily a mode of associated living, of *conjoint communicated experience*" (Dewey, 1916: 83, my italics). For him, a community capable of fostering democratic life and action must be established through some sort of commonness. As he writes elsewhere:

> Persons do not become a society by living in physical proximity, any more than a man ceases to be socially influenced by being many feet or miles removed from others. A book or a letter may institute a more intimate association between human beings separated thousands of miles from each other than exists between dwellers under the same roof… If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, then they would form a community (Dewey, 1916: 5).

This ability for democratic actors to share common ends and to be establish an actionable democratic community is facilitated, for Dewey, through language. Events, information, and news are only given significance because their meanings are shared through signs and symbols (Dewey, 1927: 153). These shared meanings transform "into desires and purposes, which, since they implicate a common or mutually understood meaning, present new ties, converting conjoint activity into a community of interest and endeavor" (Dewey, 1927: 153). For Dewey, then, language establishes common desires, purposes, and ends, as well as actionable democratic communities. Democratic life and agency, for him, is facilitated by mutual understanding generated by shared meaning.

Dewey's conceptualization of mutual understanding, however, considers democratic activity too homogenously. Especially after World War II, a "Great Community" (see Dewey, 1927) in which all participants are cognizant of a common end and act in that end's interest seems impossible today and, due to its potential for hegemony and totalitarianism, is not desirable. Thus, the rest of the 20th century, post-Dewey, was geared towards establishing *plurality* as a precondition of social action.

Arendt is the theorist most associated with the idea of plurality. For her, social action, or *action in concert*,[3] is impossible without uniqueness. As she writes: "The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is

[3] "Social action" is not the best phrase to use to explain Arendt's work due to the fact that she is weary of what she calls "the social". Still, "action in concert" is closely aligned with what I mean by "social action", which differs from what Arendt means by "the social".

infinitely improbable. And this again is possible only because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world" (Arendt, 1958: 178). Plurality, for her, is a necessary precondition of action.

But even Arendt – *the* theorist of plurality – does not give up on the idea of some sort of commonality facilitated by language. For her, language pulls people out of radical isolation. Language, for Arendt, is one of the many things that establishes what she calls the *human artifice*, or the political construct which unites people behind a common reality. She writes: "Without being talked about… the world would not be a human artifice but a heap of unrelated things" (Arendt, 1958: 204). Elsewhere, Arendt refers to the idea of the human artifice as a "common world" (Arendt, 1958: 57-58), which can be defined as a combination of plurality and commonality. A long passage should be helpful to explicate Arendt's concept of a common world and how it enables action:

> Under the conditions of a common world, reality is not guaranteed primarily by the "common nature" of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object. If the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men, least of all the unnatural conformism of a mass society, can prevent the destruction of the common world, which is usually preceded by the destruction of the many aspects in which it presents itself to human plurality. This can happen under conditions of radical isolation, where nobody can any longer agree with anybody else, as is usually the case in tyrannies. But it may also happen under conditions of mass society or mass hysteria, where we see all people suddenly behave as though they were member of one family, each multiplying and prolonging the perspective of his neighbor (Arendt, 1958: 57-58).

The significance of this passage is that, for Arendt, action is not only enabled through plurality, but also commonality, or mutual understanding. If all people share the same perspective, then there is no other perspective to bring about anything different than what already is, and thus people cannot *act*. Lack of plurality thus leads to mass society and resulting totalitarianism. But, still, when people can no longer discern the sameness of the object they can no longer understand or relate to anyone else in any tangible way, and thus people cannot act *together.* The inability to discern the sameness of the object thus leads to radical isolation and is a precondition for tyranny. The problem is that both of these poles lead to seeing the world as a singularity:

> In both instances, men have become entirely private, that is, they have been deprived of seeing and hearing others, of being seen and being heard by them. They are all imprisoned in the subjectivity of their own singular experience, which does not cease to be singular if the same experience is multiplied innumerable times. The end of the common world has come when it is seen only under one aspect and is permitted to present itself only in one perspective (Arendt, 1958: 58).

Both poles, lack of plurality and lack of a type of commonality (mutual understanding), lead to a breakdown of the common word and thus the ability to act. Thus, even for Arendt, *the* theorist of plurality, mutual understanding facilitated through language remains a precondition for action.

While Arendt establishes mutual understanding as a complement to plurality, she remains somewhat vague in terms of how mutual understanding can come to be. Habermas, in his idea of *political autonomy*, shares Arendt's vision of uniting difference and sameness,[4] but is a bit clearer about how this can occur – through communication. For Habermas, unless one is communicating for strategic or manipulative purposes, reaching understanding is always embedded in the structure of communication. Essentially, in order to make sense to their interlocutor and thus to communicate successfully, one must be oriented not only to grammatical rules, but also to intersubjectivity (see Habermas, 1976). To be oriented to intersubjectivity, for him, means that one is orientated to reaching understanding.

Just like Goffman, however, the necessity for communicative actors to be oriented towards reaching understanding is only obvious in small group interaction. Things become more complex when theorizing social action beyond face-to-face communication. How is social order possible; or how is it possible that action is coordinated on a large-scale (i.e. the use of money, walking on the socially

[4] Habermas argues that private autonomy (a doctrine about difference, or plurality) and public autonomy (a doctrine about the general will, or sameness) have a connection which "lies in the normative content of the very *mode of exercising political autonomy*, a mode that is not secured simply through the grammatical form of general laws but only through the communicative form of discursive processes of opinion- and will-formation" (Habermas, 1996: 103). Essentially, while sharing Arendt's focus on uniqueness and sameness as complementary, he argues that they can be integrated through discourse.

acceptable side of a sidewalk, or any other 'social facts')? To discuss this matter, Habermas develops his theory of *communicative action*, which he defines as…

> …that form of social interaction in which the plans of action of different actors are coordinated through an exchange of communicative acts, that is, through a use of language (or of corresponding extra-verbal expressions) oriented towards reaching understanding. To the extent that communication serves mutual understanding (and not merely mutual influencing), it can take on the role in interaction of a mechanism for coordinating action, and thus make possible communicative action (Habermas, 1982: 234).

Communicative action is any social action that is coordinated through communication oriented towards understanding and not towards manipulation, coercion, or other types of influence (strategic action). The idea, very simply, is that in order to act together legitimately, intentionally, consensually, or democratically, actors must first reach understanding.

Ideally, for Habermas, social order on a widescale is determined through communicative action, and thus through mutual understanding. For him, society-wide social ordering can be coordinated through two mediums – through the *system-world* and through the *life-world*. The system-world coordinates social action through means of institutional power, i.e. through the economy or through bureaucracy and by the means of strategic action. The life-world, on the other hand, coordinates social action through mutual understanding, which can include "shared cultural systems of meaning, institutional orders that stabilize patterns of action, and personality structures acquired in family, church, neighborhood, and school" (Bohman and Rehg, 2014). Legitimately coordinated social action is enabled on the background of the life-world which, for Habermas, is the medium of mutual understanding and is enacted through the means of *communicative action*.

What this means, however, is that there must be some means for acting communicatively beyond face-to-face communication, if communicative action is to be the medium for social order. In the next section, I discuss how Habermas and others conceptualize the ability for communication to transcend locality.

Before moving on, however, I should note that the idea of mutual understanding has remained influential in contemporary democratic theory. Today, this ideal still takes central stage in the theories of epistemic democracy (see Anderson, 2006; Estlund, 2007; Landemore, 2012), which takes sharing knowledges to be a prime democratic activity, as well as in deliberative democracy (see Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; Chambers, 1996; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012), which centers talk as a means towards reaching understanding. This ideal of mutual understanding has also been highlighted within the problem-based approach to the study of democracy in the key function of "collective agenda and will formation" (Warren, 2017), and even in more affective approaches to the study of democracy that take common-sense (*sensus communis*) to be constitutive of political action (Woodly, 2015; Zerilli, 2016).

Still, achieving mutual understanding on a widescale remains a puzzle. Below, I show how this puzzle is often solved theoretically – through technology and mediation.

Technology and the compression of space

In the last section we saw how mutual understanding was theorized in the 20th century as a precondition of democratic action. In this section, I show how widespread mutual understanding beyond physical locality was theorized around the same time through technological advancements which transcend, or compress, locality.

Before I begin, I should note that the idea that technology transcends space has rarely been presented without hesitancy. The added complexity that results from the compression of space, as well as the possibility for widespread social control, have always been part of the story. However, while the thinkers I will present in this section worry about the anti-democratic effects of the media, I will show that they also believe that the media's ability to enable widespread communication beyond locality has vast democratic potential and may even be necessary for democratic agency. In the next section, this idea will be critically assessed with regards to the digital arena.

The thinker who is perhaps the most adamant about the role of technology in transcending physical boundaries is Marshall McLuhan, a pioneering figure in the field of media studies. For him, technology represents the "extensions of man" (McLuhan, 1964). As he writes:

> Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended out nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned. Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extensions of man – the technological simulation of consciousness, when the creative process of knowing will be collectively and corporately extended to the whole of human society (McLuhan, 1964: 3).

These extensions of man, for McLuhan, have the potential to establish a "global village" based on the expansion of collective process of knowing (McLuhan, 1989). McLuhan is, of course, too hyperbolic in the statement that technology is rapidly approaching a total *abolishment* of space and time, but this sentiment was not on the fringes of the 20th century. Others shared this idea, albeit with potentially less exaggeration and with some more hesitancy.

The introduction to this paper included a quote from Dewey which stated that widespread conjoint communicated experience is possible only "due to the consequences of technology employed so as to facilitate the rapid and easy circulation of opinions and information, and so as to generate constant and intricate interaction far beyond the limits of face-to-face communities" (Dewey, 1927: 114). He continues this quote: "*The elimination of distance*, at the base of which are physical agencies, has called into being the new form of political association" characterized by integration (Dewey, 1927: 114-115: my italics). For Dewey, however, this idea is more two-sided than for McLuhan. The possibility of a great community requires the technological elimination of distance, but this elimination of distance does not automatically result in a great community.

Instead of unwavering optimism, the compression of space through technological advancements presented a puzzle, for Dewey. On the one hand, technology has allowed a "genuine state" to exist beyond personal acquaintances, something that Dewey argues Plato and Rousseau could not even have imagined (Dewey, 1927: 114). But Dewey also finds that technological advancements have brought forth increased complexity and thus the public "cannot identify and

distinguish itself" as a result (Dewey, 1927: 126). The problem for him is "not that there is no public, no large body of person having a common interests un the consequences of social transactions", but that there "is too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition" (Dewey, 1927: 137). While there is potential in the technological compression of space, for Dewey, at the time he is writing he does not yet see that potential enacted due to increased complexity.

Dewey's solution, though, is not to give up on the idea that technology can result in widespread mutual understanding but is rather to theorize how it can be better facilitated. His solution is to restore the local as a *complement* to the elimination of distance that has occurred in the technological age. He argues that while the technological elimination of distance creates the potential of facilitating widespread mutual understanding, how this is done can only be achieved "in the degree in which local communal life becomes a reality" (Dewey, 1927: 217-218). As he writes: "Systematic and continuous inquiry into all the conditions which affect association and their dissemination in print is a precondition of the creation of a true public. But it and its results are but tools after all. Their final actuality is accomplished in face-to-face relationships by means of direct give and take" (Dewey, 1927: 218). Essentially, while technology can transcend the local, it can only do so in a meaningful way if it continues in a dialogue with and does not totally eliminate the local.[5]

What we find in Dewey, then, is a belief in the democratic potential of technology's compression of space, but with some hesitancy. We see similar hesitant optimism in Habermas, but for different reasons. For Habermas, it was only with the development of the printing press in which a public consisting of private persons (persons not associated with the church or the state) was able to come to be (see Habermas, 1962: 27-56). The development of the bourgeois class during the European transition from feudalism to capitalism enabled the establishment of a group of educated people with leisure time. Along the same time there was the creation of salons and coffee houses in

[5] One might see a similarity here with Seyla Benhabib's concept of democratic iterations (see Benhabib, 2006).

which this class of people came together to discuss art, theater, economics, and politics. But it was only when the use of print was expanded that these people were able to create a new political realm – the realm of public opinion (Habermas, 1962: 31).

Through the expansion of the use of print, discussions and debates that were occurring primarily in salons and coffee houses were able to expand throughout the reading public. Through the use of print, this class of people, the bourgeois class, "formed the public sphere of a rational-critical debate in the world of letters" and "by communicating with itself, attained clarify about itself" (Habermas, 1962: 51). In effect, print allowed private persons to communicate far beyond private localities – it allowed for the transcendence space. This, for Habermas, created the public sphere, a necessary piece of the democratic system.

Again, however, Habermas does not discuss the media in full optimism. While the media initially sparked an arena of rational-critical debate beyond locality, this also created the possibility, for Habermas, of immense social control by powerful private interests. After painting the idealized picture of what the media could be for the establishment and power of the public, Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), then vehemently critiques the increasing influence of commercialization on the media. As he writes:

> Ever since the marketing of the editorial section became interdependent with that of the advertising section, the press (until then an institution of private people insofar as they constituted a public) became an institution of certain participants in the public sphere in their capacity as private individuals; that is, *it became the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere* (Habermas, 1962: 185; my italics).

When the press became commercialized, a shift occurred from the media being an institution for fostering and circulating of public argumentation towards being an institution for that public debate to be shaped by just a few. Others have also noted the fact that Habermas's "public" merely consisted of the bourgeois, showing that publics (and counter-publics) have a connection to wealth and power asymmetries (Fraser, 1990; Negt and Kluge, 1993).

Still, just like Dewey, Habermas does not give up on the idea that the media is a necessary component of a functioning democratic system. As he has argued recently: "the media are *the* intermediary which, in the diversity of perspectives of social situations and cultural forms of life, whittle out an *intersubjectively shared core* from among the competing interpretations of the world and validate it as generally rationally accepted" (Habermas, 2022: 163; my italics). In whittling out an intersubjectively shared core of interpretation, the media, for Habermas, is *the* institution most conducive to establishing the type of mutual understanding that can be conducive to communicative action and resulting democratic activity.

Using Luc Boltanski's words, the media is an institution in the fact that it serves the semantic function of establishing and regulating social meanings (see Boltanski, 2011: xi; see also Woodly, 2015 for a similar idea of the role of the media). This establishment and regulation of social meanings, for Habermas, is dangerous but also necessary for democratic activity. As he writes further: "the overall influence that the will of the citizens, hence of the sovereign, acquires over the decisions of the political system depends essentially on the enlightening quality of the contribution of the mass media to this formation of opinion" (Habermas, 2022: 151). The media system remains crucial, for Habermas, for satisfying the "standards of deliberative politics" (Habermas, 2022: 157).

Habermas does not always use the spatial metaphor, but like McLuhan and Dewey, he shares the sentiment that, while face-to-face communication can be conducive to action, action on a wide scale (democracy) also requires some institution to regulate social meanings beyond and with territoriality. The media, for Habermas, remains a primary institution to achieve this task, even if it can be co-opted.

The spatial character of the digital arena

So far, we have established the framework developed in the 20th century that mutual understanding is a key component to democratic action and that media technologies have the

potential compress space as a means to widespread mutual understanding. In this section I will leave the 20th century to discuss how contemporary communication technologies hold up against the framework discussed in the last two sections.

I begin by looking at a common framework for theorizing the democratic potential of the digital arena. As I will show, both optimists and pessimists about digital communication technologies have followed the assumption that the digital arena is boundless and largely unregulated. As a response, I will argue that, while the digital arena is boundless and unregulated based on traditional standards, it has created new forms of binding and regulating that must be understood in their own right in order to best evaluate the democratic implications of the digital arena.

Digital technologies and the dissolution of space

The construction of the Internet as a new arena of political communication initially sparked an immense line of optimism. For Peter Dahlgren, the Internet destabilizes older patterns of communication which have "outlived their utility" and "extends and pluralizes" the public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005: 147). James Bohman, too, argued that the Internet "preserves and extends the dialogical character of the public sphere in a potentially cosmopolitan form" (Bohman, 2004: 152). Early-on, then, it was common to think of the Internet as potentially serving the democratic purpose of extending mutual understanding beyond locality.

Today, some have remained optimistic about the boundless nature of digital communications. Hélène Landemore, for example, has argued that the digital arena results in a "dematerialization of face-to-face deliberations" and can thus enable a "vast expansion of the number of people involved" in democratic deliberative activities (Landemore, 2021). For the most part, however, today the line of optimism about the democratic potential of the digital arena has reversed course. As Joshua Cohen and Archon Fung write: "The bloom is off the digital rose" (Cohen and Fung, 2021: 23).

Still, even some who have grown pessimistic remain focused on the idea that the digital arena is boundless in some way, but from a critical lens. Habermas, specifically, has recently taken up the effects of digital technologies on what he calls a "further" transformation of the public sphere (Habermas, 2022). In this text, he argues that digital communication technologies have resulted in a "global dissolution of spatial and temporal boundaries" and that "these flows have simultaneously become condensed, their functions and contents have been differentiated and have multiplied, and that they have been generalized across cultural and class-specific divisions" (Habermas, 2022: 158). But, for Habermas, this does not result in the democratic benefits that may be expected, but rather presents a problem for democratic activity.

For him, the dissolution of spatial boundaries through digital technologies increases the complexity of sources of news and information and has made the media system more and more difficult to navigate. As he writes: "The boundless communication networks that spontaneously take shape around certain topics or individuals can spread centrifugally while simultaneously condensing into communication circuits that dogmatically seal themselves off *from each other*" (Habermas, 2022: 160). Habermas blames the complexity of the media system that has occurred in the digital age as the source of contemporary political polarization: "The technological advance of digitalised communication initially fosters trends towards the dissolution of boundaries, but also towards the fragmentation of the public sphere" (Habermas, 2022: 146).

In addition to the boundless character of digital communications, Habermas also blames the fragmentation of the public sphere on the fact that digital communications are unregulated. Without boundaries in the digital arena, there is also a difficulty with regulating it. For Habermas, the dissolution of space in the digital arena has not only led to increased complexity, but also led to dissolved professional filters for publication. As he argues, traditional media benefit from professional filters which limit the *scope* and determine the *quality* of media offerings (Habermas, 2022: 157). The dissolution of barriers on the Internet has dissolved these professional filters and,

now, “digitalisation is making everyone into a potential author” (Habermas, 2022: 160). For Habermas, this is leading to an increase in detrimental authorship practices, including the spread of misinformation.

Both optimists and pessimists, then, have discussed digital communication technologies based on the assumption that they are boundless and as a result largely unregulated. Below, I show why I find that this is not exactly right before elaborating upon the implications the ways the digital arena is bounded for the democratic necessity of mutual understanding.

Digital technologies and a new built environment

There is certainly something to the idea that the digital arena is boundless and somewhat unregulated, but this framework also misses something key. Dahlgren and Habermas are both right to say that the digital arena has destabilized older structures of mediated communication, and Landemore is right to say that it has dematerialized face-to-face deliberations and enabled people to deliberate beyond physical locality. However, these texts ignore the fact that, in tearing down previous barriers for communication, the digital arena has built new ones.

First of all, while the Internet *is* unregulated in the fact that there are less professional filters to acts as a sieve for publication, it is heavily regulated in less visible ways. As Alexander Galloway argued in a pioneering text in digital media studies: “control exists after decentralization” through code and protocol (Galloway, 2004). Galloway describes the effect of computer protocols by using the highway system as an analogy:

> Many different combinations of roads are available to a person driving from point A to point B. However, en route one is compelled to stop at red lights, stay between the white lines, follow a reasonably direct path, and so on. These conventional rules that govern the set of possible behavior patterns within a heterogenous system are what computer scientists call protocol… protocol is a technique for achieving voluntary regulation within a contingent environment (Galloway, 2004: 7).

Action on the Internet is not unregulated. Rather, software designers regulate the Internet with the creation of new red lights, green lights, white lines, yellow lines, paths, corners, intersections, etc. These protocols determine what is possible on the internet, what is not, and thus have an extreme ability to regulate digitalized behavior.

One should notice that the analogy between the highway system and the digital arena is an analogy between digital and physical space. While many democratic theorists see the digital arena as unregulated, what they do not recognize is that is regulated, but in a different way – through the construction of protocols as infrastructures which influence behavior. Jennifer Forestal has recently keyed into this idea in democratic theory. For her, democratic theorists must "take seriously the role of software architectures in structuring users' activity" (Forestal, 2017: 159). Just as walls, streets, cities, and borders orient people in space and determine possibilities for meaning making and collective action, so does the built environment of the digital arena. Digital technologies have developed new spaces for (mediated) dwelling and repeated interaction.

The Facebook "Wall" is a good example, as well as Reddit's "Subreddits", which Forestal describes as user-created groups which act as "clearly bounded spaces" that "generate communal attachments in users" and "make it immediately evident to Redditors that they hold interests in common with others in the subreddits they visit" (Forestal, 2022: 117). Algorithms, too, orient people in one direction or another like walls or paths by determining what is visible, what is not, and which direction to take next. The digital arena is also saturated with design choices which give preference to certain behaviors over others, including "like" buttons or other reactions which favor a limited set of possible responses (Forestal, 2021: 26), as well as "dark patterns" such as the choice to "display an opt-in option more prominently than the opt-out alternative" which keep people opted into advertisements and cookie-gathering (Forestal, 2022: 15).

Others, too, have made this analogy between physical and digital space. Manuel Castells wrote already in 1996 that new information technologies have "created a new material basis for the

performance of activities through the social structure" (Castells, 1996: 471). Rogers Brubaker has also recently argued that digital connectivity has today taken on a "universal infrastructure of contemporary life" and argued that it has become its own environment, terrain, landscape, or ecology of communication (Brubaker, 2022: 6). Mark Deuze has even gone so far as to say that in the digital era, "[o]ur life is lived in, rather than with, media" (Deuze, 2011: 138).

I find that, instead of looking at the digital arena in terms of the assumption that it is boundless, we should look at it in terms of how it is newly bounded. In the next and last section, I provide some preliminary thoughts on how the digital arena's boundedness affects interaction and thus mutual understanding and resulting democratic action.

Mutual understanding and the spatial structure of the digital arena

For Forestal, the fact that the digital arena has a spatial structure means that digital spaces have the potential to establish actionable democratic communities (Forestal, 2022: 8). For me, the significance of the comparison between digital and physical space lies in the idea that software design shapes interaction, and thus the way people make meaning, or reach understanding together. In this section I conclude by discussing a few implications of the idea that the digital arena is spatially bounded.

To begin, the main implication of the idea that the digital arena is not boundless but is rather differently bounded is the fact that this complicates the ability for digital communication technologies to result in widespread mutual understanding. If the digital arena is divided up into a multiplicity of clearly bounded spaces, whether they be specific websites, subreddits, algorithmic paths, or Facebook "walls", then the media system is not extending the public sphere as was to be expected. Yes, the media system is extending the ability to have repeated interaction beyond physical territoriality, but it has also developed into yet another bounded and divided landscape that democratic actors must contend with. *The territorial constraints that the media was intended to*

transcend have been recreated within the digital arena. In effect, the digital arena might be more conducive to widespread *mis*understanding than understanding, as each person, still, has their own locality, even if mediated.

One can think of the alternative social media sites like Truth Social, Parler and Gab that developed after Donald Trump was banned from Twitter (see Fung, 2021) as paradigmatic cases of the effects of digital locality on the process of reaching understanding. These sites seem to have their own way of speaking and acting that differs from other digital spaces. The top posts on Gab, as I am writing this paper, include primarily posts in praise of Trump, claiming the 2020 election was rigged, and other right-wing USA talking points. This is a stark difference from the top posts on Twitter (now X), which include multiple posts from Greta Thunberg, as well as, unsurprisingly, Elon Musk (see Statista, 2023). Just like specific physical spaces, these digital spaces seem to engender specific and distinct ways of making meaning of and understanding the political world. To go back to Arendt, it may be that the "object" is being seen differently in these spaces, and that the spatial differentiation of the media system threatens capacity to perceive a "common world" (Arendt, 1958: 57-58).

Another example is the recommendation algorithm. If we take the spatial metaphor to its fullest extent, we can argue that algorithms act as walls or even paths which favor certain actions, or directions to take, in digital space. In effect, as Taina Bucher has argued, algorithms come to have an immense impact on the "distribution of the sensible" by producing "the set of horizons and modalities of what is visible and audible as well as what can be said, thought, made, or done" (Bucher, 67; Ranciére, 85). What this might result in is the ability for software engineers to have too much social control and control over discourses. As Ugur Ayteç argues, the ability for social media companies to design protocols in such a way gives them a power to regulate communication in the public sphere which results in a novel type of domination. As he writes: "since social media companies can partially dictate the terms of citizens' political participation in the public sphere, they can arbitrarily interfere with the choices individuals make *qua citizens*" (Aytec, 2022: 1).

But, while I do think that the spatial metaphor leads to new ways to critique the digital arena, the news is not all bad. There is nothing wrong with locality – even Dewey argues that, in order to get the most out of technology's ability to transcend space, we must foster lively democratic localities. But, also, boundaries and constraints can be both enabling and constraining. Jane Mansbridge, for example, has argued that social enclaves can have democratic benefits (Mansbridge, 1999). Within enclaves, people "discover through empathy, intuition, logic, and trial and error which ideas move another to change their own ideas and behavior and which do not" and thus these spaces foster political and ideational innovation (Mansbridge, 1999: 418). This is Forestal's point when she writes that digital spaces can establish actionable democratic communities *through* their boundaries.

I do not disagree with Forestal, but I also believe that the bounded character of the digital arena complicates the ability for democratic agents to be able to discern the sameness of the object (Arendt, 1958: 57-58). If the creation of new localities within the digital arena is to have the democratic effects we hope, it must be coupled with the creation of structures which help people have the capacity to come to mutual understanding beyond either physical or digital localities. The jury is still out about whther or not this coupling *is* occurring in digital space.

To conclude, I do not think this argument – that the digital arena is spatially differentiated and thus threatens the capacity for mutual understanding – should lead to full critique or optimism about the democratic potential of the digital arena. But, I do believe that if we analyze the digital arena's democratic potential based on the interplay between digital space and the capacity for democratic actors to reach understanding, we will be able analyze the digital arena with deserved complexity. I save a more detailed analysis for a future work.

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