

# Democracy and Data Capitalism It Is Time to Reevaluate the Relationship between Media and Power

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Democracy, the shaping of political opinion and the development of media have always been closely interconnected. The most famous investigation of this relationship was Benedict Anderson's study into the origins of nationalism and the nation state. According to Anderson, it was "print capitalism" – the link between printing technology, the newspaper as an early industrial mass product and the publisher's capital – that facilitated the emergence of transregional linguistic communities and markets for newspaper. These in turn gave rise to geographically broader public spheres, out of which developed "imagined communities" and national sovereignty.

But the mass ceremony described by Anderson – millions of citizens reading the morning newspaper simultaneously – may soon be a relic of the past. Print capitalism is in decline, and we are seeing the formation of a new data capitalism with a new and lucrative business model: trading in personal information, a currency which no one has ever been short of. What ramifications does this shift pose for the democratic public? And how do democratic traditions and practices impact digital transformation?

Strangely, we know little about the relationship between the new digital media, public transformation, and democracy. This is odd because recent democratic theory has given much weight to the formation and exertion of communicative power in the public realm. According to democracy theorist Nadia Urbinati, citizens have two forms of power at their disposal: the right to vote and the freedom of political expression. The fundamental right to freedom of speech is thus essential to democracy. Democracy researcher Pierre Rosanvallon posits a similar argument, observing a decrease in the importance of voting in favor of other forms of political engagement. Independently of the electoral cycle, society will continually claim for itself the power of political judgment over governmental action. Even the school of deliberative democratic theory inspired by Jürgen Habermas stresses how vital public discourse is for democracy.

## New forms of communicative power

Digitalization did not exactly initiate the transformation of political engagement and the public sphere, but it has accelerated this shift and given it a specific technical and economic form, which is directly relevant to the conditions of democratic self-determination. The rise in social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube plays a particular role in this context. The trademark feature of social networking sites is the way in which they curate and share user – generated content, which are a new type of digital information asset and can range from videos of cats to professional blogs and Wikipedia.

Platforms like Facebook and YouTube have become important transnational infrastructures for the societal expression of opinion. In 2016, over one billion people worldwide used Facebook every day; even in Germany, a country somewhat skeptical of Facebook, the number was still over twenty million. In a public sphere traditionally dominated by professional mass media, these platforms give citizens a political voice and thus generate a new form of communicative power. While this development was initially celebrated as a more pluralistic way

**Summary:** The morning ritual of reading the newspaper is a thing of the past. Social media are increasingly shaping the public discourse, with far-reaching consequences for democracy. Social networks provide citizens with a new form of communicative power and simultaneously exploit their communication behavior as a data source. The paradox of strengthening and undermining human rights is a central point of friction in the relationship between democratic self-determination and digital business models.

to form political opinion and to enable a grassroots push for democratization, a noticeable sense of disillusionment has since set in. And where to look for the cause of this but in the business models of the social media networks themselves, and in the way in which they influence the public sphere?

Since the mid-2000s we have observed an increasing and reciprocal permeation of old and new media. The old media cite and operate blogs. They refer to Tweets and tweet their articles. And since social networks have established themselves as full – fledged news sources, the old media have even been forced to follow their readers onto Facebook. Recent surveys show that the younger generation in particular have turned their backs on traditional media formats and increasingly turn to Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook for their news. This process of relocation is also reflected in public discourse.

## Users have become producers

Current studies into the politics of digital platforms stress that users are indeed producing, evaluating, and circulating more and more content, but that this stream of information is not controlled by its producers, but by the operators of the social networking sites. The rise of new media is accompanied by a rise in the power of their algorithms, which – in the case of Facebook – currently work to categorize, filter and hierarchize around 500,000 comments per minute. This process works according to rules which are not publicized but which effectively determine and manipulate the whole stream of communication.

It became clear in the context of the US election campaign that Facebook gives primary position in the newsfeed to those posts which have the greatest chances of being shared most widely, and which thus guarantee advertising revenue as well as high levels of interest. This radical separation of the quality and popularity of political news explains why it is targeted pieces of fake news which are often shared most extensively on social networking sites.

In contrast to daily newspapers and radio and television broadcasters, which are also financed through advertising, social networks offer a personalized approach towards its users. It is assumed that the value of advertising rises according to the extent to which it can be tailored to individual preferences and intentions. So the algorithmically curated streams of information, or “news-feeds,” address us not as political citizens, but as a data source whose presence on the platform needs to be retained, so that continually updated information on our interactive behavior can be harvested.

The flip side of personalized advertising is the emergence of “personal publics” (Jan-Hinrik Schmidt). These are characterized by the sorting of information not according to its journalistic news value, but primarily according to its calculated relevance to the individual. Complex ranking procedures now compete with the sovereignty of journalistic talent. A consequence of these individualized news streams is the formation of so-called “filter bubbles” or “echo chambers,” which disproportionately often contain news and comments which validate our own political orientation and world views.

Another consequence is that our actions within digital environments are subjected to practically constant observation and analysis. Paradoxically, this loss of anonymity and the practice of opaque profiling undermine those very rights to freedom that were initially strengthened by the invention of social media. If we cannot know what information third parties have about us, and if we are afraid that we will face political, social or economic disadvantage because of our personal preferences, then it is quite possible that we have – subconsciously – given up our own democratic rights.

If print capitalism contributed to the emergence of national public spheres, then data capitalism and digital communication services are now paving the way for a structural shift which puts some of their defining features up for negotiation. Changes occurring include the blurring of boundaries between private and pub-

lic spheres, between publication and conversation, between production and consumption, as well as the programming and fragmentary specialization of different groups, and the accumulation of the powers of knowledge and communication in the hands of a few global companies.

However, the consequences of digital transformation for the expression of civil rights and liberties do not remain unchallenged. Many parties use digital communication services in equal measure as an empirical resource and as a mouthpiece with which to critically address their mechanisms and technologies. The field of sociological and legal research also plays a considerable role in this task, aiming to understand the technically and contractually normalized structures of social networks and to gain a conceptual grasp over them. An international research community has formed under the umbrella of “new media studies” and “critical data studies,” working towards an empirically based critique of algorithms and platform policy. Researchers are examining the ways in which technical code is used to recommend new logics of communitization, how societal groups are categorized and discriminated against, and how their future behavior is computed.

And even users themselves have taken a critical stance. Frequent changes to terms of use and restrictions on informational self-determination have sparked protest. Artists have defended themselves against the terms of publication of their works on YouTube. Twitter users have scrutinized the rules of the “trending” algorithm, which prioritizes certain themes while ignoring others. Facebook users have been protesting against censorship for years, and more recently against the deletion of content. The Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten*’s protest against the deletion of an award-winning anti-Vietnam War photograph attracted international attention in summer 2016. Facebook argued that the image of a naked fleeing child, whose skin had been burned by napalm, was an infringement of the network’s rules of publication.

This incident became so widely discussed not least because it symbolized a conflict that had been brewing for a long time: that between the right to free speech, including freedom of the press, and the terms and conditions of a commercially run communication infrastructure. Contractual freedom allows operators to define the terms of use of their services at their own discretion, within the framework of national laws. Conversely, private and professional users refer to human rights as a normative frame of reference for their demands for free speech and data protection.

Human rights are rights of defense which democratic states grant to citizens as protection against the asymmetry of power between state and individual. In the wake of digitalization, this vertical imbalance in power has been joined by a horizontal one between citizens and digital platforms. In reaction against this trend, over the past few years new attempts have been made to extend the scope of fundamental rights to encompass parts of the economic sphere. Even in the field of digital rule-making, a growing readiness to take the relevant human rights principles into account has emerged since the revelations of Edward Snowden. The next generation of digital infrastructures, the internet of things, which is equipping more and more of our everyday objects with digital interfaces, will no longer be judged solely according to efficiency criteria, but increasingly according to its consequences for individual and collective self-determination.

The endangerment, active defense, and discursive reinterpretation of fundamental rights is today the realm in which the tension between digital business models and democratic values is perhaps at its most evident.



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