

# Digitalized democracy

Jeanette Hofmann

The rise of populist movements and parties over the last decades has brought the issue of “digitalization and democratic change” to the attention of a wider audience. This is no coincidence, given that it is primarily the violation of rules and the deliberate transgressions on digital platforms that make us aware of the fact that an extended period of democratic normality has reached an end, thus putting us in a phase of transition.

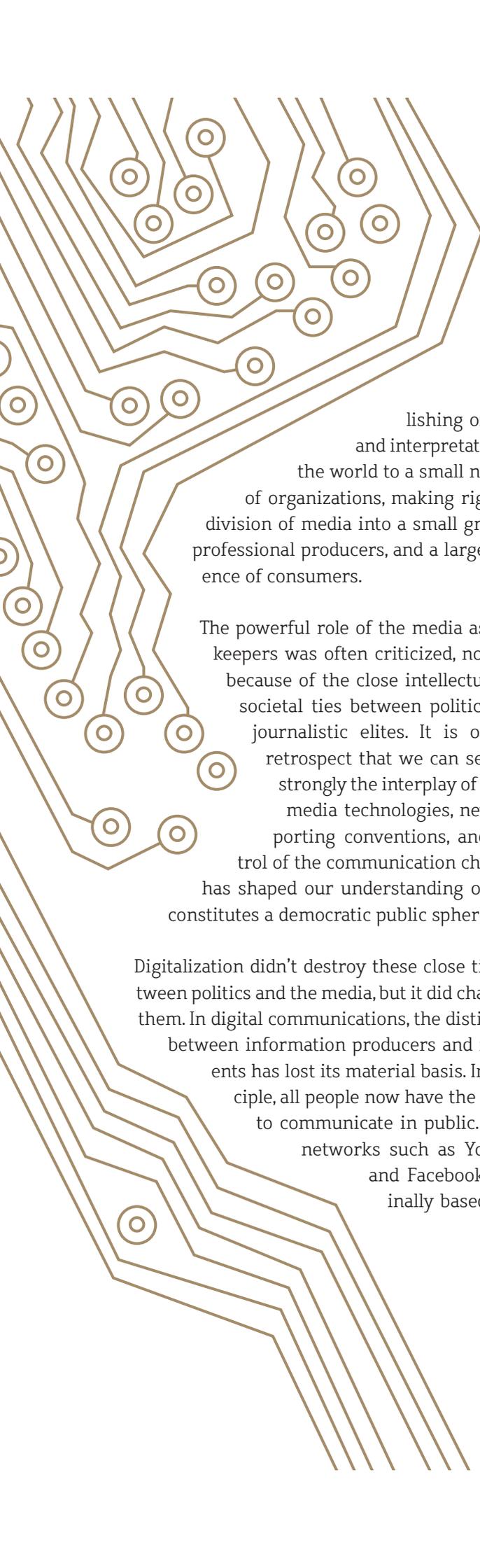
One aspect creating some skepticism about the public discussion, is the way in which roles are implicitly distributed between democracy and digitalization. Whereas democratic institutions are portrayed as weak victims, digital technology is pictured as a driving, menacing force. This dichotomy of autonomously acting technology and vulnerable democracy is not helpful for understanding the structural changes occurring. After all, democracy and media technologies do not act independently of each other, but are interconnected in fundamental ways.

Without mass media such as newspapers, radio, and television, a public conversation beyond people’s immediate physical surroundings would not be possible. Without a geographically expanded public sphere, there would be no such thing as representative democracy. Public discourse, after all, is indispensable in the formation of the political will of the people, which is a key component in the modern concept of democratic self-determination. Without the media, it would be impossible to run

an election campaign, watch parliamentary debates, or voice public criticism. The media not only serve as professional observers of politics, but also create a public space for societal debates. With all of that said, if communication media are an indispensable part of the democratic process, shouldn’t we expect the transformations we are currently witnessing to have an effect on democratic practice as well?

The widespread view of democracy under siege can be countered by the argument that what we are observing is not a destabilization of democracy as such, but rather a disruption of its forms of organization. Characteristically, this disruption is particularly visible at the interfaces between democratic institutions, the public, and political communication.

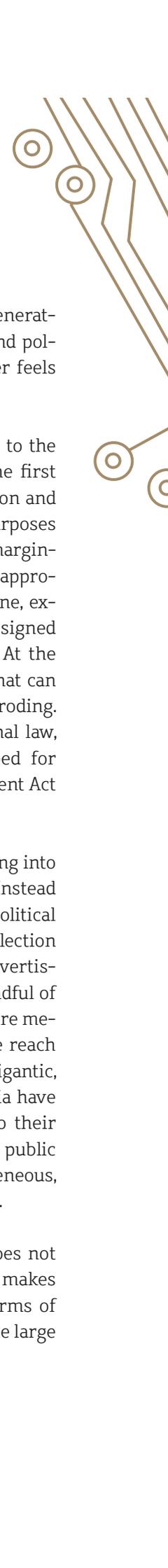
Until the turn of millennium, mass media in western democracies held an almost unchallenged monopoly over political reporting. They determined the relevance and import of actors, ideas, and programs, and shaped the political reality to be experienced through the media. The interplay of politics and the media was further fueled by capital-intensive media technology, which restricted the pub-



lishing of news and interpretations of the world to a small number of organizations, making rigid the division of media into a small group of professional producers, and a large audience of consumers.

The powerful role of the media as gatekeepers was often criticized, not least because of the close intellectual and societal ties between political and journalistic elites. It is only in retrospect that we can see how strongly the interplay of analog media technologies, news reporting conventions, and control of the communication channels has shaped our understanding of what constitutes a democratic public sphere.

Digitalization didn't destroy these close ties between politics and the media, but it did challenge them. In digital communications, the distinction between information producers and recipients has lost its material basis. In principle, all people now have the means to communicate in public. Social networks such as YouTube and Facebook originally based their



business model specifically on this user-generated content. A new generation of speakers and politicians has entered the stage that no longer feels bound to the old rules of public speech.

The digital publishing platforms gave wings to the civil right of freedom of speech. Among the first political forces to recognize this new situation and make use of it effectively for their own purposes was the new right, which had been largely marginalized by the mass media. The extreme right appropriates the internet as a propaganda machine, experimenting with political interventions designed to create attention, now a scarce resource. At the same time, the old informal standards of what can and cannot be said and done in public is eroding. The new red line is moving closer to criminal law, which German legislators recently equipped for this task by adopting the Network Enforcement Act (Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz).

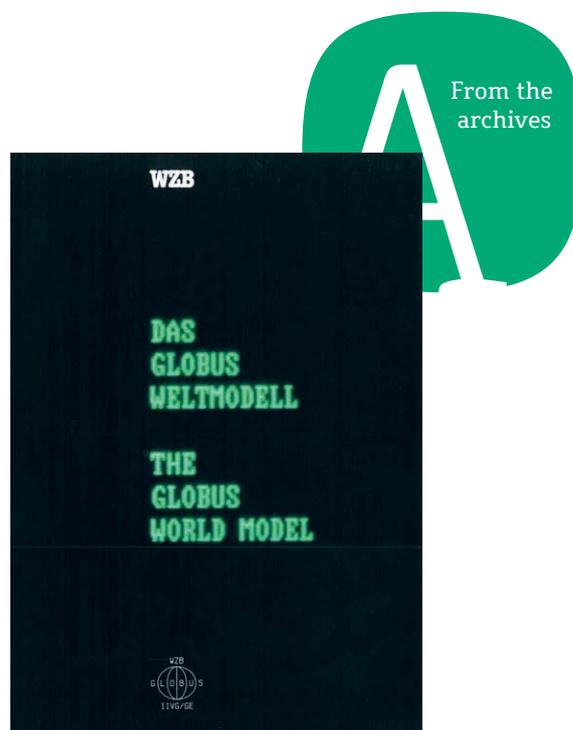
In the meantime, digital platforms are evolving into the new gatekeepers of the public sphere. Instead of merely providing the infrastructure for political discourse, their services encompass active election support for political parties – in return for advertising revenue from campaign ads. Today, a handful of platforms could theoretically provide the entire media infrastructure for the public sphere. The reach of the social networks has now become so gigantic, subtle, and pervasive that the old mass media have little choice but to increasingly succumb to their rules and rationales of attention. As a result, public discourse becomes faster and more heterogeneous, but also more irrational and less predictable.

It is important to note that digitalization does not predefine these structural changes, it only makes them possible and likely to occur. Other forms of organization would have been imaginable. The large

media companies, for example, could have started experimenting with digital communication environments themselves, by offering new spaces for horizontal modes of communication.

A closer look at these changes reveals a dramatic increase in the possibilities for organization and communication that challenges if not threaten the familiar gatekeeping mechanisms of the public sphere. The routine interplay between the political apparatus and its communication via the media, that for decades created a high degree of stability, especially in terms of drawing red lines in public discourse, is undergoing a process of re-formation. This has long-term consequences for democratic practice as we know it, as the latter is shaped not only by legal but also by informal norms. The principle of democratic self-determination, however, is not at stake.

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## The computability of the future

In the 1980s, WZB researchers found “reasons for conditional optimism” in the scenarios on future worldwide developments they computed using the GLOBUS (Generating Long-Term Options by Using Simulation) computerized world model. Based on large data collections and with the help of freshly acquired computer technology, the team headed by Karl W. Deutsch and Stuart A. Bremer produced projections for different paths. The goal was not to predict the future but to provide policy makers with decision-making aids. All based on the one assumption, of course, that the world would largely keep turning the way it did then.

*Das GLOBUS-Weltmodell, brochure, Berlin: WZB, 1985.*