Public Sphere, the Virtual Subject and Ethics of Social Media
Fasil Merawi[34]

Abstract

Analysis of the public sphere is currently used as a foundation for the creation of a public discourse, democratic governance and the institution of a public space dictated by the power of the better argument. Classically, the analysis of the public sphere was seen as part and parcel of the project of enlightenment and is founded on the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas' work, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeoisie Society. Here, the activities of individuals in forming a public space where all individuals have an equal voice regardless of their societal status and backgrounds were emphasized. Analysis of social media as a public sphere ranges from its impact on classical conceptions of the self, and its role in societal engagements and activism to how it contributes to the process of democratization. One theme emphasized here is the virtual subject as the individual found in the world of social media, sharply contrasted to the real subject involved in the concrete world of contradictions and human interactions. Drawing on current studies into social media and the virtual subject, in this paper, I will argue that the analysis of social media in today's world must closely pay attention to moral dilemmas in such a public sphere made possible by social media. One must as such explore the impact of social media on the cultivation of moral excellence and upholding of basic human relationships involving trust, friendship and confidentiality.

Key Words: Public Sphere, Social Media, The Virtual Subject

Public Sphere, the Virtual Subject and Ethics of Social Media

1. Introduction

The project of modernity is seen as the exercise of rationality, facilitating human emancipation against the background of custom, conventional authority and religion. In such a conception, there is a distinction between the private and public spheres. The former refers to the life of the individual and the isolated subject, whereas the latter pertains to the emergence of a public space where, through discursive rationality, issues are debated and contested among individuals. As Pauline Johnson argues, "Whereas private forms of association endeavor to cement

---

[34] Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Addis Ababa University

their exclusive character, an interest in building the shared grounds in terms of which the needs and points of view of strangers can become mutually intelligible is central to the goals of a public" (Johnson,2006,2). Such a vision finds its clearest expression in the works of the German philosopher *Jürgen Habermas.*

As Habermas argues, the project of societal enlightenment in modern Europe was founded on a public sphere of everyday arguments. Such a horizon was seen as the emergence of a public reason ruled by the offering of better arguments horizontally envisioned among the members of a community. In speaking of the public character of rationality, Habermas remarks, "We call events and occasions 'public' when they are open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs-as when we speak of public places or public houses" (Habermas,1991,1). *Habermas soon augmented such a vision with an ideal of communicative reason founded in everyday speech acts and validity claims. In both his analysis of the public sphere and communicative action, Habermas saw instrumental rationality as a major threat to human emancipation.*

In today's world, the analysis of the public sphere is founded on the emergence of social media, rapid achievements in science and technology, and the emergence of a new form of subjectivity in the virtual subject. There is a controversy regarding the nature of social media and its role in social life. Some see it as an agent of democratization and social activism, whereas others perceive social media as an extension of Western thinking's focus on individual liberty and freedom. As such, "the discussion of the public sphere has been colored by the key concerns of activists, scholars, and politicians in particular countries" (Mustapha, 2012, 36). *Again, others perceive social media as presenting a new space where classical notions of individual nature, moral conduct, and human interactions are radically altered, whereas for others, social media promotes radical ideologies of extremism and fundamentalism, propagating views that are polarized.*

In this paper, I will argue that there is a need to incorporate an analysis of moral dilemmas in today's studies of social media by appealing to virtue ethics and the focus on the cultivation of moral excellence in the world of social media. As such, going beyond a narrow focus on the role of social media in development, modernization, and the transfer of knowledge and information, the impact of social media on everyday human interactions and classical conceptions of friendship, trust, and reciprocal relationships must be explored further. The paper starts by introducing the notion of a public sphere. The essence, genesis, and transformation of the public sphere will be

explored here. This is followed by an analysis of social media and the public sphere, where current attempts to situate the public sphere in the age of the internet, social media, and the virtual subjects are discussed. Finally, in the third section, I will highlight some of the ethical challenges to social media in presenting the impact of social media on human nature and the self, friendship, trust and confidentiality.

2. The Idea of a Public Sphere

The genesis of the public sphere cannot be separated from the attempt to institute relations of symmetry and also embody principles of accountability and transparency in the system of administration. One must operate within a distinction between the public sphere as an ideological justification of bourgeoisie relations and as a stage where discursive rationality regulates the quest for truth. This is a quest for, *"identifying the strategies necessary within a late capitalist society to preserve, under the present conditions, the principle of the public sphere, but not its bourgeois form"* (Hohendahl and Russian, 1974, 47). Looking at the influence of instrumental rationality and money, and power in the public sphere, for the true realization of a public sphere, there must be a clear separation between communicative and instrumental rationality.

Conceptions of the public sphere for Ku focus on a distinction between the sphere of private life on one hand and that of public opinion on the other. In such a distinction, a public sphere "has to do with the issue of publicness, openness, and visibility as opposed to privacy, secrecy, and invisibility "(Ku, 1998, 172). It represents a platform for contesting different claims to truth driven by the spirit of argumentation. The public sphere is also separated from the domain of politics since it is not a form of political participation or engagement but a world of individual opinions and arguments.

Habermas' notion of the public sphere is founded on the idea of individual autonomy, the power of argument and the absence of external factors that impose limitations on the public exercise of reason. Particularly, Habermas "investigates the beginnings of a kind of public discourse that claimed to represent general public opinion in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe"(Ward,1997,367). Habermas strictly believed that ascribed status was not important in the public sphere; horizontal relations existed among individuals in such a space and "these public forums

were, in principle, inclusive" (Ward, 1997, 368). Primarily, it was ideas and not social status that mattered most in such a sphere.

Habermas analyzes the trajectory of democratic institutions and communicative rationality in the West. Being carried out through an interdisciplinary analysis, such a study particularly focuses on modern forms of the media and the immense potential they hold in inculcating the principles of communicative rationality. In such an analysis, *"the press and media are central"* (Benson, 2009, 177).   Whereas most thinkers are interested in the idea of a public reason as a utopian ideal, Habermas's attempt to find an empirical ground for the exercise of public reason in modern Europe is mostly met with skepticism. What is left unanswered in most investigations of the public sphere are questions like, is the public sphere founded in real history or is it simply a mere hypothesis? Benson remarks, "We need answers to such questions as: What is the empirical structural organization of the public sphere? How do public spheres vary cross-nationally?"(Benson, 2009, 180)

The promise of a public exercise of rationality and a quest for truth carried out through the force of the better argument for Habermas was thwarted by the capitalistic economy and the influence of instrumental rationality and the interests of the powerful and elites on the public exercise of rationality. Critics of Habermas argue that what is concealed in the name of enlightenment and public reason is ideological manipulation and class conflict. As such, *"recourse to the Enlightenment thus hides the present class conflict and tries to reconstruct what is long lost"* (Hohendahl and Silberman, 1979, 92).   Particularly being forwarded from the postmodern critiques, there is a charge that the idea of a public sphere is founded on the grand narrative of knowledge and emancipation which is abandoned in the postmodern world. From this angle the idea of a public exercise of rationality is no longer tenable in today's world of difference, particularity and the abandonment of emancipation in favor of a contextual analysis.

Within the continental tradition, there are different ways of understanding the essence of the public sphere. Critical modernists like Habermas celebrate the public sphere as a stage for communicative rationality, whereas postmodernists like Foucault witness the rise of a repressive and *"the perfection of disciplinary power during the same historical period"*(Johnson and R. Villa, 1994, 428). Although communication and understanding are situated by Habermas and others as the goal

of the public sphere, still, this must be situated more as a normative ideal rather than a factual characterization of everyday potentials embedded in modern societies.

Although presented as a sphere freed from any particular interest, the public sphere was in reality influenced by the ideas of individual liberty and universal rationality. As Ryder sees it, " the rhetorical conventions of the dominant public sphere privilege ideologies of individualism, autonomy, efficiency, abstract reason, and naive multicultural pluralism, ideologies that privilege whiteness " (Ryder,2007,516). Because of this, the idea of a public space dictated by the force of the better argument is being criticized in both normative and factual grounds. The problems in language, like linguistic confusion, and also legitimating crises resulting from non-linguistic factors like the role of money and power, are not properly explained in conventional studies of the public sphere.

3. Social Media as a New Form of Public Sphere

Currently, there is an attempt to characterize the internet and social media as a new form of public sphere. This is predicated on the assumption that it's not technical knowledge but individual opinion and not institutions but virtual subjects that are important in such a world. As such, "the Internet might again serve as a space where non-specialists and the general public can interpret a vast array of cultural artefacts for themselves because of its potential for reproducing and distributing virtual versions of them"(Ward,1997,372). This also entails the emergence of the new world of social media that made new human relations and interconnections across boundaries.

In today's world, the classical opposition between the private life of the individual and the community populated by other rational actors is mediated by social media. Particularly, "with the development of the internet, this polarization between public and private media started to change" (Miller et al, 2016, 2) . Social media completely revolutionized conventional forms of communication. It created a space where horizontal relations were instituted among individuals as opposed to forms of media like the television, whose access was regulated by institutional actors on one hand, and other mediums like the telephone, which primarily facilitated conversations between two individuals. One sees that social media is heavily contrasted with "public broadcast media such as television, radio, and newspapers [and] media that facilitated private communication

between two people as one-to-one conversations, for example, a telephone conversation" (Ibid). One sees forms of media that are more interactive and dictated by the intentions of users here.

The idea of social media is associated with the emergence of multiple spaces online, participatory practice, and a sense of a self that is constituted in one's relations with others. For Kessler, "the term 'social media' refers to the use of 'web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue'" (Kessler, 2013, 26). It is perceived as a forum regulated by multiple actors rather than institutions and bodies that are formal in their nature. One also sees that social media is more highly dictated by individual users than corporations, and that going beyond space and time, it has made possible new forms of communication among subjects. As such, "social media is not just a communication tool; it is also a connection tool" (Kessler, 2013, 27). Paradoxically, it is the autonomy given to individual users on social media that also leads tothe dissemination of false content and fake news online.

For Uncel, there are three peculiar features that characterize our usage of social media. First of all, users have a greater degree of autonomy over the features of their profiles. Secondly, it is the users that direct their networks on such media and also their interactions with other users. Thirdly, "users are creating unique identities and then establishing and sharing connections with other users" (Uncel, 2011, 46-47). Social media creates a space for individuals to fashion their identities, thereby giving them access to shape the way their personality is perceived. Based on this, one could see social media as a realm where personality identity is formed in a more dynamic manner without necessarily being confined to factual assertions and objectivity. Based on this, "social network spaces are not simply representational spaces: they are performance spaces" (Mazali, 2011, 290). It represents a space where all voices are equal and public opinion is regulated through the contestation of individual opinions and beliefs.

Such an ethical reflection into the world of social media allows us to understand what kind of selves we are becoming in such a virtual realm of human interactions. From the perspective of virtue ethics, it is the cultivation of moral excellence as seen in virtues like honesty, courage, humility, empathy whereas from an existentialist perspective, it is the upholding of individual freedom under the performance spaces that are made possible by social media that is of a greater importance. Furthermore, the Habermasian approach allows us to understand the possibility of a discourse that is being carried out by the force of the better argument in the realm of social media whereas the Foucauldian approach on the contrary concentrates on the tools of disciplining and control that are being presented by social media.

The ethical challenges posed by the usage of the internet are directly related to the rise of new forms of science and technology in the world of globalization. One sees here that the "ongoing globalization of trade gives rise to ethical questions both nationally and internationally, for individuals and for collectives" (Tiemtore and Vettraino-Soulard, 2004, 2). *P*articularly in the developing world, programs of modernization and development are directly related to the mastery of science and technology since it is believed that the dissemination of knowledge through the new mediums raises the level of literacy and the transfer of knowledge in one's society.

One indispensable element of any process of democratization in today's states is the existence of a transparent and accountable media that   promotes the public good. This shows that the media functions as the "the bearers of democracy's political communication beyond face-to-face settings" (Dahlgren, 2012, 99) Whereas the classical analysis of the public sphere focuses on public spaces, the printing press and dialogical encounters among equal partners, these days the public sphere is associated with the internet and social media that function as spaces for a discursive search for the truth. This shows that, "there are today many more, albeit smaller, public spheres that can be accessed, and there are more media outlets online that are eager for more opinion content" (Dahlgren, 2012, 101). Critics might argue that social media does not have a truth-functioning utility although such line of criticism arises from the failure to pay attention to the world of everyday speech acts and the contestation of truth that is taking place in such a realm of human interactions. Some of the dynamic possibilities presented by social media include serving as gateways for individuals into the world of public opinion and also participating in "what constitutes politics, what is deemed to be political" (Ibid, 102). Social media challenges traditional relations among individuals by providing a stage where one interacts with a multitude of other actors. As such, there is a need to integrate the study of moral dilemmas presented by social media alongside the presentation of social media as a new form of public sphere. Some of these dilemmas include truth seeking vs. algorithmic rationality, freedom of speech vs. hate speech, privacy vs. public participation, authenticity vs. performance, and inclusion vs. algorithmic bias.

Still, questions are raised like does the internet needs to be regulated, or should it be a space simply dictated by the voices and inputs of diverse actors? And also, does the internet promote processes of democratization, or is it involved in disseminating the values of one culture to other parts of the world, realizing ideological manipulation in the process? Tiemtore and Vettraino-Soulard argue

that several moral dilemmas are actually involved in today's usage of social media. These involve a conflict between individual and communal interest, social space and space in social media as well as personal expression and societal harm. Hence, "the digital revolution gives rise to several conflicts: Conflict between the real and virtual worlds, and the associated danger that we may neglect or ghettoize the real world; Conflict between law and a legal vacuum" (Tiemtore and Vettraino-Soulard, 2004, 8). Furthermore, whereas some regarded the internet and social media as a catalyst for societal progress, others conceived it as being part and parcel of the ideology of neoliberalism, the rights to non-interference and an advocacy of individual liberty

4. Ethical Challenges of Social Media

Social media certainly acted as a positive force in the dissemination of information, facilitation of interaction among individuals and acceleration of "the speed and scale of group coordination" (Gladwell and Shirky, 2011, 154). The dynamics of social relations are revolutionized by social media, where the virtual world is becoming more important than real day-to-day interactions. There is also an assumption that the level of literacy and value given to individual autonomy dictate one's usage of the social media. Because of this, "Political freedom has to be accompanied by a civil society literate enough and densely connected enough to discuss the issues presented to the public" (Shirky, 2011, 34). Against the argument that social media facilitates processes of democratization, there is an objection that social media as a forum is not well enough to realize organized struggle and societal coordination in a given society. It is also asserted that social media incites violence and serves as a medium for preaching radical ideologies.

The internet and social media offer dynamic possibilities regarding the construction of the self by allowing individuals to control their self-representations and also decide who they interact with. As such, "it enables users to be masters of their identities" (Parsell, 2008, 41).Social media provides easy access to individuals without the need for a sophisticated knowledge of technological appliances. Such access also allows individuals to further causes that are extreme and only focused on advancing a certain interest. Here, "the likely result is radical opinion polarization" (Parsell, 2008, 45).

The same social media that served as a forum for social activism also dissolves the boundaries between the individual and public, through the mediation of interactive frameworks. Added to this

is the fact that companies who own such technologies of social media employ certain mechanisms to control and influence the activities of their users. As Tierney remarks" the owners of these publics track each correspondence and purchase in order to better understand, analyze, and market their communities' consumptive practices"(Tierney,2013,83). Although individuals increasingly utilize social media as instruments of resisting oppression, fighting regimes, and raising public opinion on certain issues, governments also employ the latest technologies to regulate the usage of such medium.

In characterizing the public sphere both in terms of a social space and also social media, there is significant attention given to the incursion of instrumental rationality into the world of everyday communication. It's asserted that, "once controlled by capitalist interests, the media actively contributed to the decline of the public sphere" (Claassen, 2011, 70). Based on this, the idea that social media must be regulated by the forces of the market rather than a normative reference is being criticized. It's argued that social media must be subjected to moral principles and the public good in general. It's also assumed that social media must be "conducive to the well-functioning of the democratic process" (Claassen, 2011, 66). This has rapid implications for the content of social media and its impact on the lives of individuals.

One feature of social media is the fact that users share personal information online without seriously considering the issue of privacy. In such social media, "there is no way to verify the identity of a user who creates a profile" (Uncel, 2011, 55). This is a serious issue since information from social media is even being presented in courts as evidence. There is the proliferation of so many fake profiles and such profiles being used to commit crimes and spread hate and radical and fundamentalist beliefs. Social media for Charles Ess is an integral element of the modern constitution of the self. Being modeled after the Enlightenment tradition, it radiates the virtues of control over one's own destiny, and the ability of the self to posit new modalities of existence and to map out a space for one's life in the world of others. Hence, "the technologies of literacy and print thus facilitate the emergence of a sense of self that is foundational to the justification of modern liberal democracies" (Ess, 2010, 107). In the world of social media, questions like What is the interaction between the material and online self are being posed. Furthermore, the notion of identity becomes disputable when the reference to the actual self-embedded in the world of everyday objects is no longer needed in the realm of social media.

In the age of social media we need to revisit our moral categories and ideals. One area here is trust and care which functions as an agent of societal cohesion and reciprocal relations amongst the members of a community. One as such needs to ask, what is trust in the virtual world and can one think of morally binding relationships in the world of social media? One as such need to explore "the prospects for developing trust between partners transacting through the Internet" (De Laat, 2005, 167). One needs to ponder what leads individuals to reveal confidential information on social media, and why do individuals readily participate in the world of others, although they have no real contact with them whatsoever. Again, is there any underlying logic that dictates human interactions in the world of social media? One needs to ask, "Are they just acting irrationally and foolishly, or is there some reason behind these behaviors nonetheless?"(De Laat, 2005, 172).

One could use the moral philosophy of virtue of ethics in order to assess the role of social media in the life of the individual. One can ask is moral virtue developed in our interaction with others in the space of social media. Furthermore, do the social media foster the values of friendship, care and compassion which could be regarded as crucial habits that must be developed in our interaction with others? One could ponder, "what, then, are the character traits strongly associated with those friendships marked by excellence?" (Vallor, 2010, 164) Are we more moral in the virtual or the real world? Which one is more conducive to the cultivation of virtues?

New modalities of existence, altering given forms, are introduced by social media. Both in the concrete and virtual worlds, identity is created and destroyed. One as such needs to study the essence of the self in the virtual world compared to the real self that is found in the world of objects. Do we have even an ontological status in the virtual world? We need to investigate "what are the criteria by means of which disparate episodes of postings, comments, video links, etc. that together constitute an online person in a social networking website" (Hongladarom, 2011, 539). In both the real and virtual worlds, there is a process of socialization where we are inducted into the world of others. Identifying what unifies the two worlds and expressions of the self, concrete and virtual, is still a difficult task.

A virtual self is said to be founded on the material world, having its distinct features. But if a self is only found in the virtual but not in the real world, then what are the implications to the problem of personal identity? This is relevant since in today's world of social media, "most social network sites now allow the relatives of deceased users to choose to keep their profiles online as a memorial,

allowing other users to post tributes and messages, sometimes speaking of the dead in third person, sometimes in second person" (Stokes, 2012, 366). One needs to probe, do the virtual self-found in the space of social media disappear when the real subject dies? And if the virtual self exists even after the death of the real self, is it a member of the moral world and subject to moral evaluations? Does this refute the claim that personal identity is only grounded in the objective world? In the world of social media, identity persists in a digital form as the existence of the human subject is not limited to the idea of an individual occupying space and time in the physical world. The digital self needs to be subjected to moral evaluations because the actions of such a mode of subjectivity have real consequences in the real world. Also, the idea of a personal identity that is only founded on the physical world is narrow since it does not account for the complex relations that are being established among individuals in the digital world.

Determining the essence of moral boundaries in a virtual space is a difficult task. For some, social media is a space where one envisions a goal of ontological authenticity. Just like in the real world, the subject tries to transcend his facts of life, and conventional authority, also in the virtual world we try to posit a new self, one that is freed from conventions and is dynamic in its nature. One needs to explore, "what are the technologies that society places at his or her disposal for achieving that end?"(Bakardjieva and Gaden, 2012, 404) Social media is a space where one reshapes his nature, acknowledges the existence of others, and enters into their world. This calls for a normative ideal that regulates our interactions with other individuals.

Reconciling Identity Formation and Truth Dissemination in the Digital Public Sphere could be made possible by seeing identity construction as foundational—not antithetical—to public engagement. In a functioning democracy, individuals must first recognize themselves as subjects capable of judgment and expression before they can meaningfully participate in collective truth-seeking. Social media, by allowing individuals to explore, perform, and assert identities, actually foster the conditions for democratic engagement: it enables voice, visibility, and recognition.

The ethical implications of social media use are urgent and complex. They touch on fundamental concerns such as privacy, personal security, and the health of public discourse. Privacy, in particular, has emerged as one of the most pressing challenges of the digital age. Frequent data breaches and the misuse of personal data highlight the vulnerabilities users face when engaging on these platforms (Trepte, 2021). Privacy is ethically tied to autonomy, consent, and dignity—core

values in any democratic society. Users must be vigilant to protect their privacy: they should carefully manage their privacy settings, limit the personal information they share, and utilize tools like encryption and Virtual Private Network VPNs. At the same time, social media platforms bear a greater responsibility. They must be transparent about their data collection practices, implement robust data protection protocols, and prioritize user consent by establishing clear, user-friendly policies.

Beyond privacy, misinformation and fake news pose serious ethical threats. The ease with which false information spreads on social media, especially without editorial oversight, can have damaging effects on public health, democratic processes, and societal trust. As the comment notes, misinformation about issues such as the vaccination for the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) is not merely an error of communication; it is an ethical failure that endangers lives (Cinelli et al., 2020). Social media platforms must recognize their role as modern gatekeepers of public knowledge. They should implement fact-checking systems, label or remove demonstrably false content, and redesign their algorithms to reduce the amplification of sensationalist misinformation. This is not a restriction on freedom of speech, it is an ethical obligation to uphold epistemic integrity in public discourse.

Another serious concern is online harassment and discrimination, which disproportionately impact marginalized communities. Hate speech, targeted attacks, and exclusionary behaviors degrade the quality of public engagement and create hostile environments. Just like the physical world, the virtual space must uphold principles of equality, respect, and human dignity. Social media platforms must take clear, enforceable steps to prevent discrimination (Blackwell and Tianying, 2018). This includes establishing robust content moderation policies, investing in AI and human review systems, and ensuring swift responses to abuse reports. They must also educate users about respectful engagement and the consequences of violating community standards. By doing so, social media platforms can contribute to a safer, more inclusive digital public sphere.

5. Conclusion

In modern societies, one witnesses a quest for grounding critical praxis and human emancipation in a space within which all members of a given community have an equal voice. In modern Europe, such an urge was expressed in the notion of a public sphere as a context that institutes symmetrical

relationships and functions as an autonomous unit being shielded from the influence of particular interests, power, and ideology. Today, such an idea of a public sphere is expressed in social media that revolutionizes our conceptions of space, time, subjectivity and human interactions by creating a new stage in the space of social media. Such a space is dictated by concrete human relations, although it also has its own internal logic, making possible new ways of relating to other individuals.

The analysis of social media is mostly associated with the politics of new forms of media and how they could serve as agents in processes of democratization. As such, the role of science and technology in general and social media in particular in the dissemination of information and transfer of knowledge is emphasized. What is taken for granted in such an emphasis is how social media revolutionizes our conceptions of moral autonomy, everyday human relationships, cultivation of moral excellence, and moral responsibility. This shows that the public sphere and our usage of social media must be regulated by a normative ideal to mediate the radical disparity that currently exists between access to new forms of technology and moral responsibility as rational subjects.

For the proper ethical regulation of social media platforms, there are a number of steps that need to be taken. First of all, there needs to be a multilateral ethical oversight body, and it needs to be founded on the insights of philosophers, technologists, civil society representatives, and the users of social media. Secondly, there is a need to carry out ethical impact assessments, mainly concentrating on issues like changes that are taking place in algorithms and the policies that are being passed down in the domain of the moderation of online content. Thirdly, there is a need to introduce digital virtual education across the curricula, and this needs to be seen as a way of realizing the common good in the world of knowledge production. Fourthly, there is also a need to introduce a transparent form of governance. There is a need to realize the participation of the government, platforms of social media, the academic world, civil society representatives, and social media users in the management of social media platforms.

References

Benson, Rodney.2009. "Shaping the Public Sphere: Habermas and Beyond", The American Sociologist, Vol. 40, No. 3, pp. 175-197, Springer

Blackwell, Lindsay, Tianying Chen, Sarita Schoenebeck, and Cliff Lampe. 2018. "When Online Harassment Is Perceived as Justified." In Proceedings of the International AAAI Conference on Web and Social Media, Vol. 12, No. 1, Association for the Advancement of Artificial Intelligence.

Cinelli, Matteo, Walter Quattrociocchi, Alessandro Galeazzi, Carlo Michele Valensise, Emanuele Brugnoli, Anja L. Schmidt, Fabiana Zola, Corrado Matteo Del Vicario, and Alessandro Scala. 2020. "The COVID-19 Social Media Infodemic." *Scientific Reports*, Vol. 10, No. 1, Article 16598, Nature Publishing Group.

Claassen, Rutger. 2011. "Communication as Commodity: Should the Media be on the Market?" *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 65–79, Wiley.

Dahlgren, Peter. 2012. "Public Intellectuals, Online Media, and Public Spheres: Current Realignments." *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 95–110, Springer.

Ess, Charles. 2010. "The Embodied Self in a Digital Age, Possibilities, Risks, and Prospects for a Pluralistic (democratic/liberal) Future?" *Plenary 3, New Dynamics in Online Social Networking: Revisiting Communication, Consumption and Division of Labor*.

Gladwell, Malcolm, and Shirky, Clay. 2011. "From Innovation to Revolution: Do Social Media Make Protests Possible?" *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 2, pp. 153–154, Council on Foreign Relations.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1991. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. Trans. Thomas Burger, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Hohendahl, Peter Uwe, and Russian, Patricia. "Jürgen Habermas: 'The Public Sphere' (1964)." *New German Critique*, No. 3, pp. 45–48, Duke University Press.

Hohendahl, Peter Uwe, and Silberman, Marc. 1979. "Critical Theory, Public Sphere and Culture: Jürgen Habermas and His Critics." *New German Critique*, No. 16, pp. 89–118, Duke University Press.

Hongladarom, Soraj. 2011. "Personal Identity and the Self in the Online and Offline World." *Minds and Machines*, Vol. 21, pp. 533–548, Springer.

Johnson, James, and Villa, Dana R. 1994. "Public Sphere, Postmodernism and Polemic." *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 2, pp. 427–433, American Political Science Association.

Johnson, Pauline. 2006. *Habermas: Rescuing the Public Sphere*. Routledge, Madison Ave, New York.

Kessler, Edward. 2013. "Social Media and the Movement of Ideas." *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, Vol. 46, No. 1, pp. 26–35.

Ku, Agnes S. 1998. "Boundary Politics in the Public Sphere: Openness, Secrecy, and Leak." *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 172–192.

Laat, Paul B. de. 2005. "Trusting Virtual Trust." *Ethics and Information Technology*, Vol. 7, pp. 167–180, Springer.

Mazali, Tatiana. 2011. "Social Media as a New Public Sphere." *Leonardo*, Vol. 44, No. 3, pp. 290–291, The MIT Press.

Miller, Daniel, Costa, Elisabetta, Haynes, Nell, McDonald, Tom, Nicolescu, Razvan, Sinanan, Jolynna, Spyer, Juliano, Venkatraman, Shriram, and Wang, Xinyuan. 2016. "What Is Social Media?" In *How the World Changed Social Media*, pp. 1–8. London: UCL Press.

Mustapha, Abdul Raufu. 2012. "The Public Sphere in 21st Century Africa: Broadening the Horizons of Democratization." *Africa Development*, Vol. 37, No. 1, Special Issue on 'The African Public Sphere: Concepts, Histories, Voices and Processes', pp. 27–41, CODESRIA.

Parsell, Mitch. 2008. "Pernicious Virtual Communities: Identity, Polarization and the Web 2.0." *Ethics and Information Technology*, Vol. 10, pp. 41–56, Springer.

Ryder, Phyllis Mentzell. 2007. "Multicultural Public Spheres and the Rhetorics of Democracy." *JAC*, Vol. 27, No. 3/4, pp. 505–538.

Shirky, Clay. 2011. "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change." *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1, pp. 28–41.

Stokes, Patrick. 2012. "Ghosts in the Machine: Do the Dead Live on in Facebook?" *Philosophy & Technology*, Vol. 25, pp. 363–379.

Tiemtore, Oumarou, and Vettraino-Soulard, Marie-Claude. 2004. *Ethics and the Internet in West Africa: Toward an Ethical Model of Integration*. Africa World Press, Inc., Trenton, NJ.

Tierney, Therese F. 2013. "Disentangling Public Space: Social Media and Internet Activism." *Thresholds*, No. 41, Revolution!, pp. 82–89, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Trepte, Sabine. 2021. "The Social Media Privacy Model: Privacy and Communication in the Light of Social Media Affordances." *Communication Theory*, Vol. 31, No. 4, pp. 549–570, Oxford University Press.

Uncel, Megan. 2011. "Facebook is Now Friends with the Court: Current Federal Rules and Social Media Evidence." *Jurimetrics*, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 43–69, American Bar Association.

Vallor, Shannon. 2010. "Social Networking Technology and the Virtues." *Ethics and Information Technology*, Vol. 12, pp. 157–170.

Ward, Irene. 1997. "How Democratic Can We Get? The Internet, the Public Sphere, and Public Discourse." *JAC*, Vol. 17, No. 3, pp. 365–379.