THE PUBLIC SPHERE: PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

The notion of the public sphere is at the center of participatory approaches to democracy. The public sphere is the arena where citizens come together, exchange opinions regarding public affairs, discuss, deliberate, and eventually form public opinion. This arena can be a specific place where citizens gather (for example, a town hall meeting), but it can also be a communication infrastructure through which citizens send and receive information and opinions. The public sphere is a central aspect of good governance. Without a functioning and democratic public sphere, government officials cannot be held accountable for their actions, and citizens will not be able to assert any influence over political decisions.

The idea of the public sphere is normative. It is an ideal of good and accountable governance. Its requisites are free flows of information, free expression, and free debate. The ideal public sphere is truly participatory and the best protection against abuse of power. In reality, we only find approximations to this ideal. However, promoting good governance means striving toward the ideal of a truly inclusive public sphere.

Historical Roots of the Public Sphere

To understand the meaning and the nature of the public sphere today, it is helpful to look at the historical development of the meaning of the term. Its meaning has always been closely tied to historical circumstances and to technical developments.

The historical trajectory also highlights the relevance of the public sphere for promoting democracy and political accountability.

Originally, the public sphere was a specific meeting place. With the development of media and communication technology, the character of the public sphere changed from a location to a communication network.[1]

- **Ancient Greece**—The most general understanding of the public sphere comes from the Ancient Greek city-states, where citizens directly participated in political decisions.[2] Public life was tied to a specific locale, the *agora*, where citizens exchanged and discussed opinions.

- **European Monarchies**—In the non-democratic state-forms of later centuries, the Royal court was the public sphere, and only the king determined what was public.

- **Salons**—Over the course of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, coffeehouses (England), salons (France), and table societies (Germany) became places where aristocrats and members of the middle class met to discuss art and politics. In these gatherings, "authority of argument supplanted the authority of title,"[3] social status became disregarded entirely.[4] With the development of the first mass medium, the newspaper, the groups that met in salons and coffee houses became truly public: "newspapers made public affairs and discussions about such affairs accessible to individuals scattered across space."[5] Technically, this denotes the advent of what is today understood as public sphere.

1 Splichal, S. (1999). *Public opinion. Developments and controversies in the twentieth century*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

2 Habermas, J. (1962/1995). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

3 Price, V. (1992). *Public opinion*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage. (p. 9).

4 Habermas (1962/1995).

5 Splichal (1999, p. 23).

- **Tribal gatherings**—In stateless communities in Africa or in regions with strong tribal traditions, tribe gatherings have similar functions as Western citizen assemblies, or indeed the ancient agoras. Such meetings represent the public life of the tribal community.

- **Church congregations**—In periods of political struggle, the Church often provided a space for members of oppressed or marginalized groups to gather and articulate their objectives.

- **Today**—Today, the public sphere is even more strongly tied to the media. It is "defined in relation to the mass media, because the mass media permit the circulation of opinion and offer the conditions in which the forum can function."[6] The term gained new prominence with the spread of new communication technologies in the 1990s. The Internet in particular is considered to provide unprecedented opportunities for exchanging information and for deliberation among a large number of people of different backgrounds. Access for minority voices and political outsiders is considered to be essential to a well-functioning public sphere.[7]

Defining the Public Sphere

The concept of the public sphere has a long tradition in philosophy and the social sciences. The contemporary understanding of the term is mainly based on the work of German sociologist Jürgen Habermas, who provided a comprehensive analysis of the nature of the public sphere and its historic transformations.[8] He defines the public sphere as "network for communicating information and points of view . . . the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions."[9]

The public sphere is situated between private households on the one hand, and the state on the other. It is a space "where free and equal citizens come together to share information, to debate, to discuss, or to deliberate on common concerns."[10]

Until the invention of the printing press, citizens came together in a particular space, for instance a coffee-house, where they discussed with other people. The development of mass communication has changed the nature of the public sphere from a physical space to a communication structure.[11] Today, people can get in touch through telephone or the Internet, and they can find out about what other people think by reading a newspaper editorial or by watching local television news. Therefore, today's public sphere goes beyond space and includes all channels of communications through which citizens can send and receive information. This two-way-flow of communication is essential: A public sphere does not exist if, for instance, a government publishes information but does not listen to the people.

The public sphere is for the state what the market is for the economy.[12] In the public sphere, the goods that are exchanged and the currency that is traded are not of economic, but of political nature. The main

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6 Bentivegna, S. (2002). Politics and new media. In L. Lievrouw & S. Livingstone (Eds.), *Handbook of new media: Social shapings and consequences of ICTs* (pp. 50–60). London: Sage. (p. 52).

7 Marx Ferree, M., Gamson, W. A., Gerhards, J., & Rucht, D. (2002). Four models of the public sphere in modern democracies. *Theory and society, 31*(3), 289–324. (p. 299).

8 Habermas, J. (1962/1995).

9 Habermas, J. (1992/1997). *Between facts and norms: Contributions to a discourse theory of law and democracy*. Cambridge: Polity. (p. 360).

10 Odugbemi, A. (2008). Public opinion, the public sphere, and quality of governance: An exploration. In S. Odugbemi & T. Jacobson (Eds.), *Governance reform under real-world conditions. Citizens, stakeholders, and voice* (pp. 15–37). Washington, D.C.: The World Bank. (p. 17).

11 Habermas, J. (1992). Further reflections on the public sphere. In C. Calhoun (Ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (pp. 421–461). Cambridge: MIT Press; Dahlgren, P. (1991). Introduction. In P. Dahlgren & C. Sparks (Eds.), *Communication and citizenship: Journalism and the public sphere* (pp. 1–24). London: Routledge; Splichal, S. (1999). Public opinion. Developments and controversies in the twentieth century. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; Habermas (1992/1997).

12 Splichal (1999).

product of the public sphere is public opinion, and ideas are the "goods" that are exchanged. This view equates the public sphere with a "free marketplace of ideas," a libertarian ideal where everyone is able to propose ideas, and where the best idea will win.[13]

Constitutive Elements

A functioning democratic public sphere rests on five pillars:[14]

- **Constitutionally guaranteed civil liberties**—Freedom of expression, opinion, and assembly. Most countries today accept basic civil liberties as agreed upon in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

- **Free, plural, and independent media system not under state control**—The media system is often seen as the main institution of the public sphere.[15] As such, it can only guarantee equal access and voice to citizens if it is independent of political and corporate interests.

- **Access to public information**—This includes freedom of information legislation and a culture of transparency and openness. A large number of countries have adopted freedom of information laws. However, such laws need to be complemented by a culture that is conducive to openness and inquiry.

- **Civil society**—A vibrant civil society supports citizens' demand for accountability and participation in the public sphere. Civil society organizations organize and promote the citizen agenda.

- **Sites of everyday talk about public affairs**—Everyday talk is an important factor in the formation of public opinion. Sites of everyday talk are all places where people come together to discuss politics (such as work place, coffee shops, schools).

The constitutive elements of the public sphere work together based on the underlying principle of openness and publicity.[16] The philosopher Immanuel Kant articulated the principle of publicity as a legal maxim and as a fundamental principle of democracy. He stated that all actions that affect other people are wrong if they do not hold up to public scrutiny.[17] Kant also designated the public sphere to be the space for "public use of reason." The public use of reason is based on ethic principles of communication,[18] such as respect for opposing speakers and viewpoints, the ability to compromise, and other principles of fair public debate.

The Public Sphere and Civil Society

The democratic public sphere is a "structural force in politics . . . a critical part of the architecture of good governance,"[19] which again is crucial for the elimination of poverty. The public sphere is a participatory space where citizens' voices are amplified.

The concept of the public sphere is closely tied to civil society, although they are not synonymous. Civil society organizations act and can gain voice and influence in the public sphere, thereby exerting influence

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13 This concept was invoked by U.S. Supreme Court Judge Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., in *Abrams vs. United States*, 250 U.S. 616 (1919). Holmes did not actually use this term but invoked the general ideal. See also Mill, J. S. (1859/1985*). On liberty*. London: Penguin; Milton, J. (1644/1927). *Areopagitica*. New York: Payson & Clarke.

14 Odugbemi (2008).

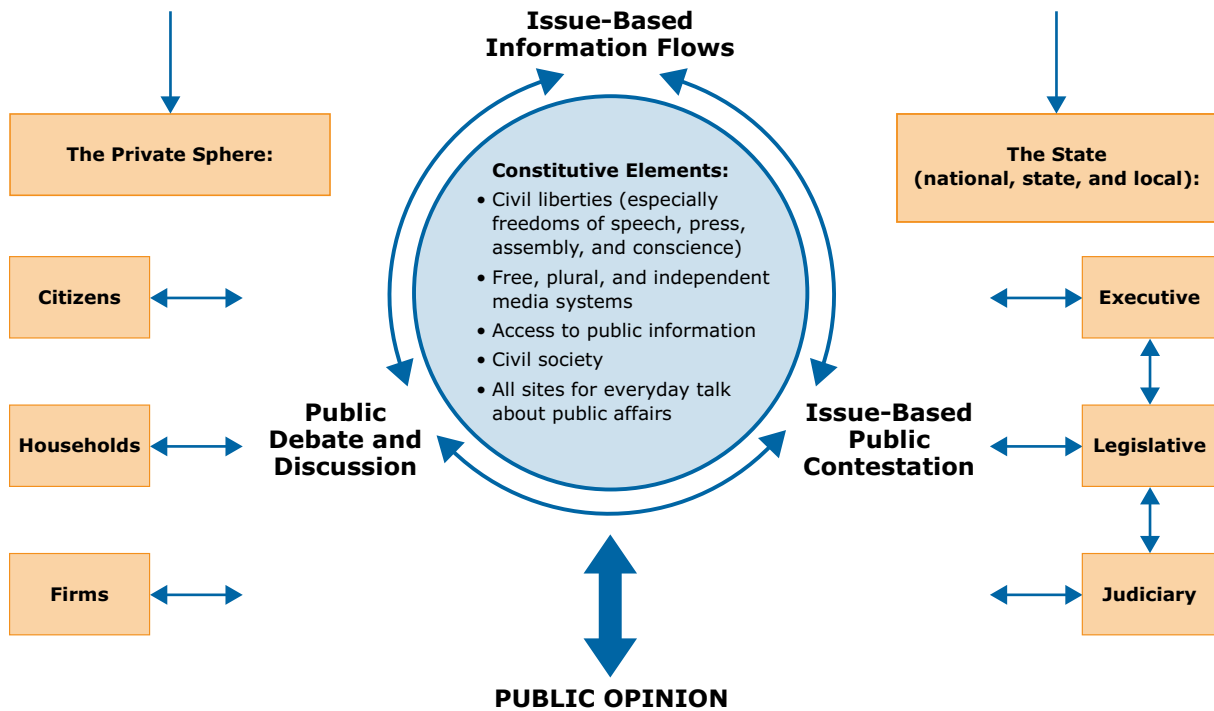15 McQuail, D. (2005). *McQuail's mass communication theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

16 Splichal, S. (2006). In search of a strong European public sphere: Some critical observations on conceptualizations of publicness and the (European) public sphere. *Media, culture & society, 28*(5), 695–7147. See also Habermas (1962/1995); Odugbemi (2008).

17 Kant, I. (1795/1983). To perpetual peace. In *Immanuel Kant: Perpetual peace and other essays on politics, history, and morals* (pp. 107–144). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.

18 Habermas, J. (1981/1984). *The theory of communicative action*. Boston: Beacon Press.

19 Odugbemi (2008, p. 15).

The National Democratic Public Sphere

Issue-Based Information Flows

The Private Sphere:

Citizens

Households

Firms

Constitutive Elements:
- Civil liberties (especially freedoms of speech, press, assembly, and conscience)
- Free, plural, and independent media systems
- Access to public information
- Civil society
- All sites for everyday talk about public affairs

Public Debate and Discussion

Issue-Based Public Contestation

The State (national, state, and local):

Executive

Legislative

Judiciary

PUBLIC OPINION

Source: Odugbemi (2008, p. 30).

over official authorities through public opinion.[20] "It is in the free and open public sphere that social movements acquire a public voice, fight for recognition, assert themselves, seek to shape public opinion, influence leaders and policy makers, and bring about change."[21] Good and accountable governance builds upon a free flow of information, free expression, and free discussion of matters of political concern.

Actors in the Public Sphere

- **The public**—The traditional understanding of the public refers to an imaginary group of people that are connected through their mutual interest in one or several issues of public concern. The members of the public need not be located in the same place. In contemporary social science, the term is often equated with politically relevant groups of citizens, for instance the electorate, civil society, local communities, or mass media audiences.[22]

- **Civil society**—Civil society and the public are closely related, but conceptually not synonymous. Civil society is constituted by organizations and activities that have no primary political or commercial character, and are not motivated by profit or power.[23] Under certain circumstances they can become part of the public sphere.[24]

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20 Habermas (1992/1997).

21 Odugbemi (2008, p. 28).

22 Price, V. (2008). The public and public opinion in political theories. In W. Donsbach & M. W. Traugott (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of public opinion research* (pp. 11–24). London: Sage.

23 Splichal (1999).

24 Habermas (1962/1995).

- **Public officials**—The state is not a part of the public sphere, but it has the capacity, and even the obligation, to be an actor in the public sphere. In the democratic public sphere, public authorities listen to the public and determine the public will, communicate their own issues and positions,[25] and provide information about decisions and actions.

- **The media**—The mass media "have central significance in the creation of an institutional (infra) structure enabling the organization of the general interest both nationally and internationally."[26] In addition to providing communication channels, the mass media also introduce and shape topics of public discussion.

- **Private actors**—When private citizens or corporations enter the public sphere, they usually do so to promote private or public interests. In the latter case, they become part of the public.

Public Opinion

Public opinion is a product of the public sphere, and a crucial concept in governance and political decision making. Public opinion refers to:

- Affairs related to the state, the government, or social institutions;

- Issues that are open and accessible to everyone;

- Events, policies, or decisions that concern people that do not participate in them;[27]

- Issues of common concern;

- The public good (as opposed to private interests).

Public opinion is often understood to have the following characteristics:

- It represents one prevailing opinion among many possible ones.

- It tends to be transitory.

- It refers to the dominant opinion, the opinion of the majority.

Public opinion is formed through processes of collective decision making:[28]

1. Issues of concern are articulated.
2. Possible solutions to a problem are developed.
3. Decision makers assess the consequences of choosing one option over the other.
4. Decision makers evaluate alternative solutions.
5. Decision making.

Public opinion is crucial for politics. As Scottish philosopher David Hume stated: "It is therefore, on opinion only that government is founded."[29] Public opinion is the basis of political power and legitimacy, and any government "is secure only to the extent that the relevant population willingly consents to the rule."[30]

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25 Odugbemi (2008).

26 Splichal (2006, p. 703).

27 Mill (1859/1985).

28 Price, V. & Neijens, P. (1997). Opinion quality in public opinion research. *International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 9*(4), 336–360.

29 Hume, D. (1994*). Political essays*. Ed. K. Haakonssen. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press. (p. 16).

30 Odugbemi (2008, p. 17).

The Public Sphere as Threat

Not only democratic governments need to be aware of the functions of the public sphere. Hostile public opinion can be a threat to democracies as well as autocratic regimes. In authoritarian contexts, hostile opinion can build underground and may eventually erupt to disturb the political order. Through mobilizing public opinion, opposition groups may be able to gather substantial support and frame reform proposals that a government may be forced to heed. In the worst case, divisive groups may fracture the public sphere, causing political chaos or even violence.

Politicians and technical experts sometimes argue that it may not be advisable to follow public opinion in every instance. It is assumed that people often do not know or do not care about particular governance issues. If this is the case, following public opinion may even be detrimental to citizens' well being. A healthy and open public sphere is a remedy against uninformed and unconsidered opinion. The idea of democracy rests upon the assumption that if people are educated, have access to all relevant information, and if they are able to deliberate on issues, they have a right to have their say on how they are governed. Public opinion is not the "tyranny of the majority," but the considered product of deliberation in the public sphere.

The Public Sphere as Opportunity

A properly functioning public sphere that allows for free information flows and for equal participation in deliberation will provide real opportunities for successful and good governance. Governments' legitimacy rests on the support of the people. National unity or at least an operative consensus enables the effective implication of policies. Citizens' genuine support for government programs and reforms is a prerequisite for their success. Active and informed citizens provide valuable input into the process of governance, helping to improve the quality and effectiveness of public service delivery. In short, governance is only good and democratic if citizens are able to form considered opinions within an open public sphere.

Policy Implications

An open and democratic public sphere rests on legally guaranteed civil rights, most importantly freedom of expression, opinion, and assembly, as well as access to information laws. Such laws will only be effective in a culture of openness. That means that public officials should feel committed to the public's right to know, not the government's right to secrecy. Media regulation should guarantee that the media can fulfill its democratic roles without political or economic pressures. Literacy and education promote a citizenry that is interested in public affairs and that is willing as well as able to participate in governance. Policies should target these main factors to promote a public sphere that enables good, democratic, and account-able government.

CommGAP

The **Communication for Governance and Accountability Program (CommGAP)**, a global program at the World Bank, seeks to confront the challenges inherent in the political economy of development. By applying innovative communication approaches that improve the quality of the public sphere – by amplifying citizen voice; promoting free, independent, and plural media systems; and helping government institutions communicate better with their citizens – the program aims to demonstrate the power of communication principles, processes and structures in promoting good and accountable governance, and hence better development results.

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