# FROM THE HABERMASIAN SPACE TO THE NEW FORMS OF THE PUBLIC SPACE

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***Abstract:*** *The Habermasian theoretical perspective offers, in the literature, a detailed image of the "public sphere" concept signification. Being applied, over the years, in issues related to media theories too (globalisation, consumerism, democracy), the concept of "public sphere" has undergone radical changes due, mainly, to the emergence and convergence of electronic media. In this respect, this article does nothing more than to describe and analyze, in a realistic way, the public space, the mechanisms involved in it, as well the interplay of the public space with the private one. We could say that this dissolution of the public space is one of the major consequences of postmodernism.*

***Key words:*** *postmodern society, public space, private space.*

### 1. Introduction

Communication has always been at the basis of the evolution of modern society, modern capitalism being a form of society, characterized typically by industrialization and critically by marketing in order to organize the distribution of goods and services, nowadays a dominant economic form [1]. Arguing upon this issue, communication itself is the one that builds culture, it seems, "placed in contexts ranging from local to global level" [2].

A comprehensive analysis of modernity has been carried out by the sociologist Anthony Giddens [3], who asserted that "we move away from a social system based on production of material goods towards another one, in which information becomes central". At that time, his analysis suggested the emergence of a new type of social system - "information society" or "consumer society".

The treatment technique, storage medium and means of disseminating information have evolved considerably due to the emergence of the New Information and Communication Technologies (NICT), their rapid development characterizing the beginning of XXI century.

The evolution of Web 2.0 has led to changes at the social and educational level, thus resulting to the "XXI century revolution" - *the information society*. The new media have influenced the traditional processes of communication and imposed a rethinking of the communication political space and, implicitly, of the electoral strategies. As an obvious result, significant changes are perceived, particularly in how documents and information are stored, organized, accessed and retrieved.

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## 2. The Idea of Postmodernity

The main concern of this article will be directed mainly towards the period of postmodernity and also to the culture that characterizes it. This is mainly due to its high degree of complexity and difficulty, which targets a new culture that develops after modernity, with fundamental challenges and assumptions.

According to certain philosophers of culture (Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard), modern era ended in the '70s and, it has been found that now "we are in a new postmodern era" [4]. The idea of "postmodernism" has been highly debated (from a social, economic and political perspective) by theoreticians Jean-François Lyotard (*La condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir*, 1979), J. Baudrillard (*La société de consommation,* 1970), F. Jameson (*The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*, 1998), Norman K. Denzin (*Images of Postmodern Society: Social Theory and Contemporary Cinema*, 1991) and Steven Connor (*Postmodern Culture: an introduction to theories of the contemporary*, 1989), each of them developing their own theory.

For Jean-François Lyotard postmodernity reflects "the state of culture after the transformations that affected the rules of the game for science, literature and art beginning with the late nineteenth century" [5], transformations that are analyzed and related to the "narratives crisis"-the metanarratives.

F. Jameson places postmodernity in relation to the consumer society [6], while J. Baudrillard summarizes it at the dominant consumption premise.

The term "postmodern" is, for Norman K. Denzin [7], an "oxymoron with a short history, because it is the end of a series of another "post-ism"s, the most important

being poststructuralism (...)". As Steven Connor noted, postmodernity should be "partially taken into consideration, depending on the difficulty to interpret «it»; or, rather, depending on the difficulty to clearly define what is «it» after attracting knowledge and theory within culture, even when the culture changes its purpose and coordinating reports" [8].

G. Lipovetsky also described the situation of the postmodern society, which aims at hyperconsuming (hypermodernity), the transformation of experience and of the ways of life representing a main cause: "We are only at the beginning of the hyper consuming society, nothing being able to stop or even decelerate the progress of transforming to merchandise the experience and ways of living" [9]. However, postmodern trends can be identified as well in cultural life areas, especially in cinema, television, theater and music.

## 3. The Reconfiguration of Public Space

Although the concept of public space has been the subject of numerous studies in time, the discussions created around it are supplied, as it is known, by the theories of J. Habermas and H. Arendt.

Various names in the literature analyzed and expanded the signification of "public space" concept in terms of communication, their contribution being of a considerable value. In this respect, we could note the significant contribution of Jürgen Habermas (*Sfera publică şi transformarea ei structurală*, 1962).

A member of the Frankfurt School, Jürgen Habermas is the first theorist who imposes the concept of public space called "public sphere", analyzed subsequently on a typical category for a certain period (the bourgeois period), as being the most

constructive, unless influenced by commercial interests or by state control.

The bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth century was graphically represented by Jürgen Habermas [10] by the following scheme of social domains (Fig.1). In this scheme, the private sphere includes civil society, the political public sphere descending from the literary one.

| Private domain | | Public power sphere |
|---|---|---|
| Civil society (area of trade in goods and social work) | Political public sphere | State (domain of "police") |
| | Literary public sphere (clubs, media) | |
| Small internal space-family (bourgeois intellectuality) | (Cultural property market) "The city" | Court (noble society of court) |

Fig. 1. *Scheme of the bourgeois sphere of the eighteenth century*

Following closely the evolution and development of the public sphere, the German sociologist tries, in his study, to define the concept: "An area of our social life in which public opinion is formed. Access to public sphere is open, on principle, to all citizens. A part of the public sphere is constituted in any conversation in which private people form a public. Citizens act as public when dealing with subjects of general interest without being under compulsion." [10]

From the previous definition, two expressions appear as defining notes (*public opinion*, *public*), the first expression being more able to be understood if we consider the context of emergence, evolution and extension of the concept itself. Media can control public opinion through the strategies of manipulation, but it can also impose it.

In developing the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas pays special attention to the distinction "liberal state of law - social state of law". Regarding the functioning of public sphere in a state of law, Jürgen Habermas added: "a public sphere that functions politically needs not only the guarantees coming from the institutions of the state of law, but it is also linked to the support of the cultural heritages and of the social patterns, to the political culture, of a population accustomed to freedom" [10].

The structural transformation of the public sphere, referred to by the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas in his work (*Public Spere and its Structural Transformation*, 1962), consists in the process of transforming the state and economy, on one hand, and in the interplay of the state with society, on the other hand. It shows in fact which were the factors (*forms of organization, distribution and consumption of a specialized book production, publication of newspapers and magazines whose content has been redesigned in accordance with the requirements of the time, development of*

*electronic media and broadening of channels of communication, etc.*) that produced essential modifications at the infrastructure level of public sphere.

Also, Jürgen Habermas noted that "media research is important for the structural transformation of the public sphere, particularly in the analyses of communication sociology regarding the effects of television" [10].

The professor and political scientist John Keane redefines the public mass-media model according to two coordinates: production and exchange of commodities. In his opinion, civil society is "dominated by corporate speech and, when circumstances require it, by state sanctions" [11]. This belief, regarding civil society is clearly expressed as it follows "A pluralistic civil society marked by a multitude of opinions will never look like a big happy family. It will always have a

tendency to auto paralysis. (…). A truly democratic civil society, grumbling and sanguine, will never reach a state of homeostasis, precisely because its pluralism. It would always be haunted by poor coordination, misunderstandings, greed and open conflicts between its components" [11].

As it is shown in Fig. 2, the public model is discussed "in terms of political democracy, effective regulation and reduction of private corporate power over civil society" [11]. Specifically, J. Keane tries to develop the concept of "civil society", by relating it to the contemporary theory of democracy.

From my point of view, both the model of public sphere proposed by J. Habermas, and that of J. Keane, adhere to the distinction between civil society, state and their intermediaries.
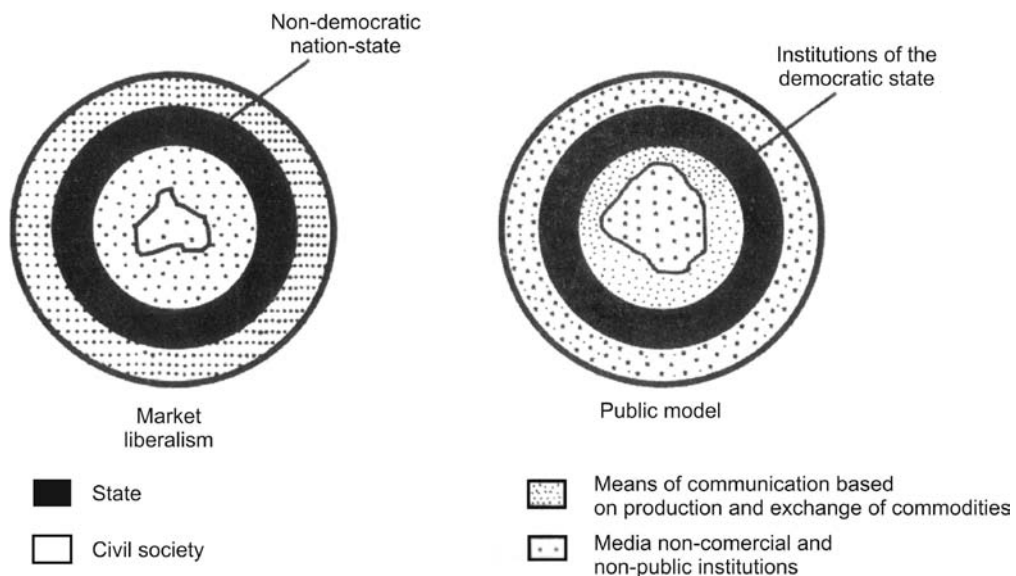


Fig. 2. *Redefining the public mass-media model*

A definition of the "public sphere" was proposed also by the English sociologist

Charles Taylor, based on the idea of the shared space: "The public sphere is a

shared space in which it is presumed that the members of society meet through mass-media (printed and electronic) and through direct contacts, discuss problems of common interest and thus becoming able to reach a common conclusion about them" [12].

If for Jürgen Habermas the "public sphere" had become an instrument of state power analysis, for Charles Taylor this causes "a mutation of the social imaginary, a crucial one for the development of modern society" [12]. In his approach, Charles Taylor refers to the religious character of "public sphere", opposed to Jürgen Habermas, who strongly supported its political character. Thus, the public sphere, which appears in the eighteenth century, is, according to Charles Taylor, "a meta-topical common space", drawing attention to the fact that "what is new is not meta-topic", the Church and the state being concrete examples of meta-topical spaces.

In addition to Jürgen Habermas and Charles Taylor, the sociologists Talal Asad, Marianne Van de Steeg, François Foret, Ruud Koopmans and Patrizia Nanz also gave a definition of the concept of "public sphere". In Talal Asad's opinion, the public sphere "is not an empty space, but it is composed of sensibilities, memories and aspirations, terms and expectations of those who listen" [12].

Marianne Van de Steeg, affirms that the public sphere means "a space where citizens (most often elite citizens) discuss problems in the presence of an audience that have (at least theoretically) the possibility to intervene and participate" [12].

For François Foret, public sphere means an "arena for expressions of the commitments and collective confrontations, the location of the interaction of these variables with the practice and discourse of power" [12]. Ruud Koopmans considers that public sphere is "deliberate and public articulation of political demands and current or potential criticisms, affecting the interests or integrity of those who claim or other collective actors" [12]. Patrizia Nanz considers public sphere "a social space in which members of a society discuss issues of common interest and public opinions are articulated in relation to these matters" [12].

A parallel between public and private space is also drawn by Dominique Mehl, relating to issues such as intimate shows (*reality shows*), stating that the borders and the relations between public and private space are redefined and that the public space is shaped by the private one". By private space we understand the domestic sphere (also dealt with by the English sociologist Roger Silverstone), privacy, providing its own forms of intimacy by media technologies (mobile phone), premise supported by the sociologist John Tomlinson" [13].

Dominique Mehl notes that the public space becomes a standard and a symbol of society and, at the same time, we witness a devaluation of the private space [14]. This is evident in the media, television being today a favorite place where public relationships and private relationships are generated. The dichotomy of public/private individual/society may be embodied, according to Richard Dyer, by show business stars in different ways.

Trying to explain the difference between private and public, Patrick Charaudeau concludes: "public space could not be, by definition, universal, on the contrary, it is dependent on the cultural specificities of each group" [15]. The essential elements, with which it operates directly, are: public opinion, mass media and, finally, the actors - participants in public life.

Father of private communication, Patrice Flichy [16] said that the shift from public to private space was not only due to mass media development, but also to the emergence "of a private musical life, in which the piano becomes the main instrument". As the case stands, this vision of public-private relationship is extremely delicate.

Moreover, the reconsideration of the relationship between *public sphere* and *public screen*, performed by Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples also proves to be interesting. These sociologists did not hesitate in saying that the two above mentioned elements are rather "in dialectic remedial". Furthermore, Kevin Michael DeLuca and Jennifer Peeples believe that "announcing the public screen appearance does not mean announcing « the death » of public sphere, although it may suggest its eclipse" [17].

Some researchers (Nicholas Garnham, John Keane, Michael Tracey) have analyzed the triad *media - democracy - public sphere*, trying to explain the type of relationship existing between these concepts, not always on a dichotomy between modernity and postmodernity (see Table 1) [18].

The reconfiguration of the contemporary public space was due, mainly, to the emergence of new information and communication technologies, especially television, the "agora of modern times" [19]. Thus, a new model of public space was created, conceived in other parameters, which gave rise to a new type of communication (mediated communication, televised), and then the virtual public space (cyberspace).

*Dichotomy between modernity and postmodernity*	Table 1

| MODERNITY | POSTMODERNITY |
|---|---|
| state | market |
| civil society | individualism |
| parliamentary democracy | community(ies) |
| citizen | consumer |
| national | global |
| class politics | identity politics |
| equality / fraternity | liberty |
| universal rationality | discursive particularity |
| public sphere | public sphericules |
| truth | plausibility / persuasion / seduction |
| information | entertainment |
| PSB (Public Service Broadcasting) | commercial media |
| real | virtual |

At present, the question arises: "Is there a clearly defined European public space (public sphere)?" to which real and well reasoned answers are expected? In this respect, expressing her personal opinion, Patrizia Nanz said that the European public

space represents "more public categories, which have sometimes inter-connected views sometimes contrary, engaged in transnational and intercultural dialogues and citizenship practices" [12], while Hans-Jörg Trenz notes that the European public space is "an unfinished project of collective will" [12].

## 4. Conclusions

Defining the new society through concepts such as "*communication*", "*public space*", "*media culture*" has been possible due to the evolution of the online environment (from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0).

Web 2.0 applications have allowed an increased interactivity between users, thus leading to social media visibility. Thereby, the spectrum of mass communication was enlarged, associated with other political and social innovations, nowadays giving birth to new forms of public space (blogosphere, virtual communities). Thus, the public space, the result of a movement of emancipation, is not only symbolic, but also material if we consider the support and networks of modern communication emerged in the digital age.

Therefore, without claiming to have covered all aspects, the present paper has tried to outline, the fundamental media changes produced in Romanian contemporary society.

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