

# Rational Criticism, Ideological Sustainability and Intellectual Leadership in the Digital Public Sphere

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## ABSTRACT

*This review postulates that today's digital environments unveil an era of connectivity, in which digital communication devices exercise a general influence on social interactions and public deliberation. From this perspective, it argues that connective practices are likely to affect two main components of the normative public sphere, namely rational criticism and ideological sustainability. Drawing on the case of the 2011 Arab revolutions, in which social media proved to have a strategic function, this paper illustrates the ideological heterogeneity of social networks. Additionally, this article considers how issues of rational criticism and ideological sustainability could be improved by regulating online interactions and proposes that the digital divide could act as a natural process of regulation for today's connective and transnational public sphere.*

*Keywords:* Arab Spring, Connectivity, Cyber-Activism, Digital Divide, e-Democracy, Ideological Sustainability, Intellectual Leadership, Public Sphere, Rational Criticism

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## INTRODUCTION

With an eye to anticipating the effect of digital technologies on representative democracy, research in the fields of politics, development and public administration is examining how public infrastructures can be adapted to meet the needs of a participatory and collaborative culture. Indeed, the connective and collaborative patterns generated by the use of social media and interactive communication devices has significantly increased the power of individuals within their social environment. As such, it is likely to revolutionise the structure of representative

democracies. Therefore, experts in the field of political sciences aim to anticipate the future evolution of public administrations by defining online interactions between citizens and their governments.

They explore all forms of online infrastructure that contribute to the establishment of an e-democracy, such as e-governance or local e-participation projects. By doing so, they intend to identify structural differences between online deliberation and traditional forms of representative democracy. Simultaneously, development studies underline the potential benefits of digital technologies in developing

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countries and evaluate new ways of providing free access to information in regions facing a high level of digital divide. Alternative academic work in the field focuses on how to implement successful e-governance in democratising countries, which reduces the costs of public administration as well as the level of corruption, by providing direct communication flows between a government and its people.

Yet this research does not take into account the existing patterns of online deliberation that have already taken shape among the community of internet and social media users. Indeed, it is now necessary to understand the effect of digital and connective culture on representative democracy from a broader perspective. This requires investigating the internal structure of connective societies and identifying the factors that contribute to the elaboration of a rational and critical public opinion in the digital world. In this regard, social theorists have been discussing the sociological transformations that came with the emergence of connective and transnational networks. Opposing views have been expressed regarding the effect of such networks on neoliberal societies. Whereas some experts argue that transnational communication flows preserve the freedom of expression inherent to democracy, others claim that connective practices are determined by the commercial interest of web corporations and fail at promoting an impartial public opinion. To some extent, both views confirm Habermas' theory of the public sphere, as they illustrate the process through which information can be liberalised, whether it is politically or economically. In order to contribute and build a macro theory about future participative democracies, this article reviews some of the studies that analyse online social interactions from a Habermasian perspective and identifies two major differences between cyberspace and the normative public sphere: *rational criticism* and *ideological sustainability*. Referring to the theories of Cardon (2010), Flichy (2010), and Dean (2003) this paper demonstrates how internet usage contrasts with the original project of the web pioneers who envisioned virtual space as an alternative to neoliberal society. It

presents the argument that the mass of internet users failed in defending the libertarian values that inspired the web and did not manage to produce a sustainable and rational critique of the new transnational corporate hegemony. Secondly, this paper underlines some of the characteristics of online networks as specific social structures. As has been demonstrated by Bennett and Segerberg (2011), connective networks tend to be particularly flexible and versatile, which can affect the sustainability of their ideology. In other words, beyond a lack of criticism, digital communication weakens the stability of political agendas in the long run.

We might postulate that issues of rational criticism and ideological sustainability are caused by that fact that the online public debate is not subjected to any form of regulation (Fraser, 2005). By recalling the historical context in which Habermas (1962) sets the emergence of public opinion, this paper demonstrates that the bourgeois public sphere was initiated by intellectual elites, who exerted their intellectual leadership over public discourses. This process spontaneously regulated citizens' deliberation and assured the rational criticism essential to the public sphere. Today, this theory appears to be particularly relevant and topical when it comes to interpreting the digital revolution as well as some of the recent political changes occurring in the Middle East and for which social media played a significant role. The function of digital media in the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions leads us to think that, ever since the eighteenth century, the liberalisation of information has reached a critical point, and now affects the way the public debate operates. New forms of public mobilisations not only bring us to rethink the normative public sphere but also to understand how democratising countries of the digital era fit the Habermasian model of the eighteenth century. Like the emergence of the press and bourgeois literature on the eve of the French revolution, access to digital media in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt stimulate a democratic and deliberative culture. For this reason, it is worth examining the digital and transnational public sphere under the light of the

2011 Arab revolutions. In this regard, this article will address the Tunisian and Egyptian contexts with the purpose of analysing the correlation between digital innovations and the democratising process. More specifically, it illustrates the lack of ideological sustainability in the context of the Tunisian and Egyptian post-revolutions and describes how the digital divide can act as a natural regulator of the online public sphere.

## CONNECTIVITY AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Whereas Van Dijck (2013) essentially applies the concept of *connectivity* to social media, this term could also be used to designate a broader spectrum of online social practices in the context of web 2.0. For instance, Bennett and Segerberg (2011) refer to online activism as *connective action*. Besides this, one could argue that, in the context of technological convergence provided by the internet, the culture of connectivity characterises mainstream media as well as digital media. In this regard, Robertson (2013) claims that social media have a significant influence on the news coverage of mainstream media and television in particular. This indicates that the culture of connectivity is not specific to the internet and potentially qualifies the majority of the communication flows that contribute to shape public opinion in the digital era. In a broader spectrum, connectivity can be interpreted as a paradigm characterising the sociological and political practices of the digital era. Accordingly, this new communicative pattern will potentially explain a large proportion of future *offline* and *online* social interactions. On the other hand, the terms *collaborative* and *participatory* emphasize the interactive nature of digital devices, as opposed to traditional media. The concept of collaborative culture expresses the democratic values inherited from the pioneers of the internet. It underlines the accessibility and flexibility of online information as well as the bottom-up dynamics that typify online public discourses. This is precisely how we distinguish

connective and collaborative culture as we go on to address the issues of rational criticism, ideological sustainability and intellectual leadership in the digital era.

## THE LIBERTARIAN UTOPIA OF A DIGITAL WORLD

Historically, the dream of a collaborative democracy has been considerably influenced by the libertarian culture of the sixties which inspired many pioneers of the digital industry, such as Stewart Brand, Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs (Cardon, 2011; Flichy, 2011). As he traces the origins of the internet, Patrice Flichy (2006) recalls that the Arpanet project, which is well known as the first computer network and the predecessor of the internet, was initially conceived collaboratively within a community of computer engineers. The collaborative dimension of today's connective culture manifested itself at a very early stage in the technical architecture of the internet. As they created more opportunities for cooperative projects, the pioneers of digital culture anticipated the use of the network and hoped to stimulate collective intelligence by extending the limits of human communication (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978). Before the application of digital technologies by the broad community of users, the ideals and values promoted by the initial designers of today's connective environment conveyed an utopia in which virtual societies were more democratic and enhanced interpersonal relationships (Flichy, 2006). In his book on *Stewart Brand and digital utopianism*, Fred Turner (2008) describes the community values behind the creation of the internet and acknowledges apparent similarities between the *counterculture* of the sixties and the emergent *cyber-culture* of the nineties. Yet paradoxically, according to Turner the designers of our new digital environment consisted in a small elite of highly educated computer scientists who appeared to be the only few individuals able to understand the shape of future communication networks.

Among *cyber-optimists* (Oates, 2008), Douglas Rushkoff (2003) has argued that the interactivity and connectivity of the digital era revolutionises human thinking and socio-political structures by establishing an *open-source democracy*. According to Rushkoff, the collaborative culture of the digital era allows social reality to be perceived through multiple perspectives, which adds in complexity to human reflection. The digital revolution is comparable to the scientific discoveries of the Renaissance, as it institutes a multidimensional perception of the world and inspires new modes of representation. Similar to Henry Jenkins (2006) and his conception of the participatory culture, Rushkoff develops an optimistic vision of cyberspace. He defines virtual spaces as an alternative to neoliberal hegemony and claims that the online collaborative culture empowers consumers and citizens with the ability to shape their political and cultural environment. This approach precisely reflects the ideals and values that motivated the digital revolution, according to which free access information and collective work break the dynamics of the neoliberal economy and renders users more critical. Yet paradoxically, some social scientists studying the evolution of cyberspace in the long run argue that the *technolibertarianism* (Borsook, 2000) that inspired the digital revolution sustains neoliberalism and promotes a form of *communicative capitalism* (Dean, 2003). Due to corporate interests underlying the *culture of connectivity*, social scientists progressively question the ability of digital technologies to stimulate the rational deliberation essential to the public sphere.

In his essay *The Internet Democracy, Promises and Limits*, Dominique Cardon (2010) emphasises the contrast between the original purpose of the digital public space and its commercial function. The agenda of the pioneers was to develop a critical discourse on society in which everyone would be able to participate, in part thanks to anonymity. Cardon argues that the libertarian utopia of the internet's pioneers did not reach the broader community of users, who indirectly contributed to the success of search

engines and content providers such as Google, YouTube and Facebook. Despite the promising development of collaborative work, open-source licenses, and free access information, the mass of internet users failed to exploit the interactivity of cyberspace to create an alternative social reality and blindly reproduced their offline world online. Everyday life conversation progressively became an important part of online interactions between individuals, further affecting the original agenda. Overall, Cardon insists that the democratisation of public debate has merged public and private spheres together and reduced the quality of deliberations.

Likewise, Jodi Dean (2003) identifies irreconcilable differences between the rational public sphere and today's digital environment. This leads her to postulate that digital public spaces actually contribute to establish a *communicative capitalism*, which maintains people in the position of potential consumers. Democratic governance today is highly dependent on a consumption-driven entertainment culture (2003, p.102) and *technoculture*, according to which new communication technologies enhance participative democracy. From this perspective, she corroborates the arguments of Cardon (2010) and supposes a positive correlation between the use of the internet and the expansion of global markets. According to Dean, the concept of publicity fails to activate substantial democratic deliberation and essentially legitimates *communicative capitalism*, producing an illusion of the public sphere. In this regard, she recalls that (in accordance with Habermas' theory) the public sphere acts as a "decentralized model of sovereignty", emanating from the people, (2003, 104) that provides legitimacy to social institutions and authorities. Yet in the context of *communicative capitalism* the fact that the opinion of the people is indirectly driven by economic interests affects the role of the public sphere as a critical counter-power:

*This is precisely my worry about the public sphere in communicative capitalism: the technologies, the concentrations of corporate power, the demands of financial markets, the seductions*

*of the society of the spectacle that rule in and as the name of the public have created conditions anathema to democratic governance. The subjectless flows are sovereign – and that is the problem. (Dean, 2003)*

Consequently, Dean describes the internet as a specific kind of social infrastructure - a *zero institution* - to which different members can belong while assuming their individual identities. Collectivities and individualities are constantly confronting each other on a global scale, which makes consensus very hard to reach. In providing the feeling of belonging to a global and virtual space for deliberation, the internet creates an illusion of freedom of speech and rational deliberation, which is sufficient to legitimate dominant ideologies. This leads to a *neodemocracy* in which the criteria of the normative public sphere are slightly transposed. In order to develop a critical and rational public sphere, opportunities for *contestation* should feed a sustainable critique of the dominant political climate and lead to a fully democratic consensus. However, in the case of *neodemocracies*, the process of deliberation is limited to the stage of contestation. Consequently, even if information tends to be more transparent, this new form of publicity fails at stimulating an impartial political debate and maintains the hegemony of global corporations. Unlike the normative public sphere, the publicity of *neodemocracies* is used to enhance the credibility of corporate powers and justify decisive action.

From different perspectives, Cardon (2010) and Dean (2003) both accentuate the fact that today's digital era fails to improve citizens' criticism. Contrary to what suggests the digital utopia, connective culture serves corporate powers by maintaining users in the position of consumers, while creating an illusion of self-expression. Such interpretations have been supported by the latest studies on social media (Van Dijck, 2013). According to these sources, one could assume that the quality of public opinion would not be decreasing, if the original utopia of the collaborative cyberculture had not been affected by corporate interests.

## **From Habermassian Model to the Connective Deliberative Framework**

As we can see, recent critiques of the connective culture condemns the fact that digital media promote today's neoliberal hegemony, and by doing so, fail at stimulating a critical public opinion among the communities of social media users. However, from a Habermassian perspective, one can argue that liberalising information actually trains citizens' capacity to express subjective views in a critical way. More specifically, in the first stage of a democracy, liberalising public affairs meets the interest of the bourgeoisie willing to gain political power and privatise markets. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas identifies this phenomenon by first describing the simultaneous evolution of private markets and private information networks in the early eighteenth century:

*Almost simultaneously with the origin of stock markets, postal services and the press institutionalized regular contacts and regular communication. [...] These elements of early capitalist commercial relations, that is, the traffic in commodities and news, manifested their revolutionary power only in the mercantilist phase in which, simultaneously with the modern state, the national and territorial economies assumed their shapes. (Habermas, 1962)*

In a second stage, the fact that liberalising public debate meets the interests of a growing middle class assures the critical and democratising function of the public sphere. Indeed, according to Habermas, this educated social class has the intellectual resources to lead a rational discussion on public matters. Indirectly, economic motivations stimulated the democratic values of the Enlightenment and potentially preserve the quality and efficiency of the public sphere:

*As soon as privatized individuals in their capacity as human beings ceased to communicate*

*merely about their subjectivity but rather in their capacity as property-owners desired to influence public power in their common interest, the humanity of the literary public sphere served to increase the effectiveness of the public sphere in the political realm. [...] the interest of the owners of private property could converge with the interest of the freedom of the individual in general. (Habermas, 1962)*

Additionally, one could argue that the emancipation of individuals' and citizens' subjectivity that occurred within bourgeois societies prefigured the social function that consumers were about to play in today's capitalist and neoliberal economy. The role of economic and corporate interests in the process of developing a critical public sphere has been stated in the initial theory of the public sphere, which indicates that commercialising social interactions through digital media is not affecting the quality of public debates in itself. It is possible, however, that the exploitation of connective networks for economic purpose has reached a critical point, after which it can no more improve the quality of public opinion. Nevertheless, if the efficiency of the normative public sphere does not interfere with citizens' criticism, other criteria should be identified to anticipate the distinctions between traditional forms of public deliberations and new connective structures. Examining the latest critiques of our connective environment in the light of the Habermasian bourgeois public sphere leads to identify two main criteria. The first criterion lies in citizens' ability to share their views and argue rationally. Further to the fact that connectivity does not always reach its initial objective; to develop an alternative to the neoliberal hegemony, social scientists detected a lack of rational argument in digital interactions.

## **POPULARITY OF THE ONLINE DEBATES: A THREAT TO RATIONAL CRITICISM**

Patrice Flichy (2010) describes the digital era as the recognition of *amateurs* as legitimate

contributors to public knowledge. According to Flichy, the most significant sociological change generated by internet and social media lies in the fact that *amateurs* gained credibility in their fields of interest. Whereas experts and professionals were traditionally considered the only reliable reference on any questions relating to sciences, art, culture and politics; connective media provided random *amateurs* with the opportunity to contribute to public knowledge. In the context of politics, this phenomenon affects the way the normative public sphere operates, given that internet users who shape public discourses are not subject to the traditional *gatekeepers* (Mc Combs, 2004; Cottle 2004). As opposed to Habermas' model, today's public opinion is not moderated by the members of any specific intellectual society. Amateurs can potentially become leaders of the connective public sphere. Yet, according to Flichy, these new public figures provide unreliable arguments and fail in discussing public matters in a critical and rational way. Additionally, Flichy (2010) observes that the recognition of *amateurs* in the public sphere intensifies the diffusion of political views. Due to the fact that connective media target very specific audiences, opinions are expressed in a very scattered way and citizens tend to interact exclusively with people that share a similar interpretation of the facts. Consequently, different ideologies are hardly confronted with each other on the same website and members of the connective public space have only very few opportunities to assess, question and improve their arguments. Once again, this phenomenon significantly alters the quality and efficiency of the public sphere (Flichy, 2010).

Flichy concludes that online political engagement tends to be less sustainable and does not encourage debate between communities of citizens with opposing ideological views. He argues that the digital era has transformed the traditional forms of political networks that were active in the second part of the twentieth century. Whereas citizens previously engaged themselves in the long run to promote a party or an ideology, the amateurs of the digital era

operate from time to time to support specific political projects in order to preserve their individual interests.

Again, this interpretation ascertains the paradox that lies between the original digital utopia and the growing connective culture, as it claims that bottom-up communication flows alters the quality of public opinion. Unlike the libertarian values of the technoculture, it suggests that, connective forms of public expression should be filtered and regulated, as it is the case for the press and mainstream media. In order to preserve rational thinking, the public sphere should be structured by a formal hierarchy and moderated by professionals and experts: "This online deliberative democracy works provided that formalised rules are respected, accepted by the participants and reminded by moderators." (Flichy, 2010)

Like Flichy, Nancy Fraser (2005) emphasises the need for regulating connective communications as she postulates the existence of a *transnational public sphere*. By referring to Habermas' model of the public sphere, Fraser recalls that a critical public opinion inevitably emerges within the context of a national sovereign power, in order to maintain the democratic balance between State authority and citizen empowerment. However, the global communicative infrastructure fails to facilitate an efficient public debate in which national policies are distinctively discussed and negotiated. This implies that transnational citizenship should foremost be recognized and institutionalised as part of a transnational democratic infrastructure. In other words, Fraser demonstrates that in order to comply with the Habermasian public sphere, transnational regulations should be applied to connective interactions. Additionally, Flichy suggests that moderating these emerging practices could also improve the quality of the public sphere, not only regarding the rationality of public deliberation but also by ensuring *ideological sustainability*.

### **Ideological Sustainability**

Among the weaknesses of online discourses, Flichy states that digital communication devices

render individuals' political engagement more superficial. Flichy explains this phenomenon on the grounds that the boundary between private and public spaces is hard to define. In a collaborative context, personal experiences shared by private internet users are progressively collected and interpreted by broader networks to promote a particular political message. Individuals partially contribute to larger social movements, without being involved in the entire political process or understanding their strategic and ideological purpose. Furthermore, in today's connective environment, political organisations appear to be less exclusive and citizens are likely to be affiliated with different parties depending on their personal interests. This reveals another condition of the public sphere that digital media have not yet fulfilled.

This condition resides in the ideological sustainability of the views and opinions expressed by internet and social media users. Indeed, the flexibility of public opinion in a digital context renders the range of political positions harder to visualise. This is precisely what has been illustrated by some of the latest research on cyber-activism (Bennett and Segerberg, 2011), according to which new forms of political action are likely to be less sustainable in the long run and harder to represent in the context of representative democracy. Setting out an inventory of the strategies employed by activists' networks, Bennett and Segerberg (2011) claim that new manifestations of political engagement emerging in cyberspace should now be assessed in terms of their ideological sustainability. Their study demonstrates the particular flexibility of connective networks as well as noting that, as opposed to traditional forms of collective action, online activism enables members involved in a common cause to express their individualities within the group. Given that individuals can personalize the object of common interest, the action becomes more fluid and is more likely to appeal to members from different social and cultural backgrounds. However, this indicates that the outcome of connective action is less predictable and that its ideological message is not sustainable. Similarly, in the context of

global security, Hoskins and O’ Loughlin (2010) demonstrate that the coverage of war by digital media renders the causality of events harder to interpret. New mass media provide publics with the opportunity to record and compile every single event. By doing so, digital media generate *diffuse* interpretations of the facts and prove to have a significant influence in foreign policy. As the narratives of war progressively become more *diffuse*, the outcome is less predictable, which makes the conduct of war by policymakers highly difficult. Like Bennett and Segerberg, Hoskins and O’ Loughlin suggest that the fluidity of online social interactions is hardly compatible with the traditional structure of representative governments. Bennett and Segerberg therefore propose to normalise *connective action*, from the perspective of its potential ideological sustainability. Indeed, they claim that the structural flexibility of connective networks requires assessing their ability to stand for specific ideological views as well as their political efficiency in the long run and in accordance with the criteria of the emerging connective culture:

*It is from the perspective particular to connective action that it becomes fruitful to return to [...] the general debate about digitally networked dissent: the question whether such action can be politically effective and sustained. [...] These concerns need to be addressed even if the contours of political action may be shifting: sustainability and effect are fundamental to assessing any collective action in the context of popular democracy. Given the nature of connective action, then, it is imperative to develop a means of thinking meaningfully about the capacities of sustainability and effectiveness in specifically networked action [...]. (Bennett & Segerberg, 2011)*

In other words, if the incapacity of virtual public spaces to produce efficient deliberation is due to a lack of rational criticism or ideological sustainability, the answer is to apply the proper rules and regulations on the proper scale. Again, however, assessing and regulating

digital practices contradicts the original agenda of collaborative culture by institutionalising online interactions. Consequently, we need to identify the natural processes through which online debate can be filtered and improved in terms of criticism, rationality and ideological sustainability.

## **CONNECTIVITY AND IDEOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY: THE CASE OF THE ARAB SPRING**

The Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions perfectly illustrate the issue of ideological sustainability. One of the characteristics of the 2011 Arab uprisings lies in the fact that social media and connective action enabled protestors to gather from very different sociological backgrounds and political views. According to Bennett and Segerberg (2011) it is precisely the flexibility that provided the leaders of the revolutions to reach such a diversified audience. Yet beyond people’s will to remove Mubarak’s and Ben Ali’s governments, post-revolutionary events demonstrated that the revolution was not motivated by any homogenous political ideology. On the contrary, it is probable that the strategic application of social media by revolutionaries created an illusion of consensus, whereas Tunisian and Egyptian protests were driven by different and conflicting political agendas.

In post-revolutionary Tunisia, 144 new parties reflecting different political orientations applied to the Ministry of the Interior before the election of the new Constituent Assembly, which indicates a considerable diversity of ideological opinions among the population. Uppermost, the outcome of this election revealed a strong ideological contrast between the young leaders of the revolution and the conservative party Ennahda that won the majority of the Constituent Assembly. Indeed, young Tunisian cyber-activists like Lina Ben Mhenni (2011), who initiated the uprisings in favour of a liberal and modernist democracy,

expressed their regret regarding the result of the first democratic elections.

In Egypt, conflicts of interest between the different political actors have been even more significant, given the strong implication of the army in the national economy (Paciello, 2011). The demission of former president Mubarak encouraged the people to claim more and to express specific ideological views. The revolution only introduced a series of public demonstrations illustrating the opposition between military and civilian interests. Moreover, as in Tunisia, deeper ideological oppositions exist between some of the movements that contributed to the success of the revolution (Masoud, 2011). For instance, the demands of young activists inspired by leading Egyptian liberals such as Mohamed El Baradei or Naguib Sawiris contrast with the agenda of the traditionalist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi movement that succeeded in the 2011-2012 parliamentary elections:

*The pluralism (and attendant lack of leadership) of Egypt's revolt has been hailed as its great strength, but today it appears to be the primary obstacle to translating the revolt against Mubarak into a genuine democratic revolution. [...] The country's revolutionaries - liberal and Islamist - will have to find some way of managing their differences if they are to have a hope of bequeathing the legitimate government that Egyptians deserve. (Masoud, 2011)*

From the perspective of a connective culture, this demonstrates that collective forms of actions taking shape on social media uphold superficial social identities that do not annihilate deeper socio-economic or political divisions. This is precisely what we regard here as an issue of ideological sustainability. The case of the 2011 Arab revolutions also shows that this phenomenon not only characterises online social interactions as opposed to offline sociological and political practices. Indeed, cyber-activism is only one of the parameters that contributed to the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Yet the lack of ideological sustainability is likely to typify the era of *connectivity*, as a

new cultural paradigm. Given that the digital revolution indirectly generates new communication patterns, one can suppose that such a distinctive feature might explain some of the fundamental sociological and political changes of the twenty-first century.

### **EXAMPLE OF REGULATION IN A CONNECTIVE ENVIRONMENT: INTELLECTUAL LEADERSHIP AND THE DIGITAL DIVIDE**

At this stage, it is worth recalling that Habermas' model of the bourgeois public sphere, in the democratising Europe of the eighteenth century, relies on the intellectual leadership of an educated elite. As demonstrated by Nancy Fraser in her critique of the liberal public sphere (1991), Habermas conceptualises the emergence of a deliberative culture as an elitist process through which bourgeois intellectual leaders held the privilege of expressing their views publically. The nascent public discourses of salons and coffee houses as well as the arguments emanating from the press and literature were exclusively provided by a minority of people able to argue their opinions rationally and experiment with democratic deliberation. Habermas specifies that the bourgeois public sphere did not initially involve people deprived of the intellectual resources needed to deliberate:

*In relation to the mass of the rural population and the common "people" in the towns, of course, the public "at large" that was being formed diffusely outside the early institutions of the public was still extremely small. Elementary education, where it existed, was inferior. The proportion of illiterates, at least in Great Britain, even exceeded that of the preceding Elizabethan epoch. [...] The masses were not only largely illiterate but also so pauperized that they could not even pay for literature. [...] Nevertheless, with the emergence of the diffuse public formed in the course of the commercialization of cultural production, a new social category arose. (Habermas, 1962)*

By underlining the fact that the bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century had exclusive access to the public scene as well as to the intellectual resources required to contribute to critical deliberation, Habermas leads us to reconsider the phenomenon of the digital divide from another angle. Indeed, with regard to development studies, which investigate the perspectives for electronic governance and e-deliberation in developing countries, the digital divide has always been seen as an obstacle to the implementation of e-democracy (Chatfiel & Alhujran, 2009). However, by observing the achievements of the online public sphere in Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab spring, one could argue that the intellectual leadership inherent to the bourgeois public sphere is still prominent in countries that show a high level of digital divide.

By conducting a survey among Tunisian internet users, Anita Breuer (2012) demonstrates that the 2011 protests were covered and organised by a young educated elite who managed to draw the attention of the international community, despite the media blackout imposed by Ben Ali's administration. Like the emancipation of a critical public in the original theory of the public sphere, digital technologies and social media contributed to the "politicization and mobilization of the young urban middle class and elites" (Breuer 2012). This digital infrastructure that enabled strategic communications between the minority of young educated activists, the rural poor and the diasporas played a significant role in the success of the Tunisian revolution:

*A surprising element of the Tunisian uprising was its broad, cross-class support. As has been demonstrated, the Internet and social media significantly contributed to transcend geographical and socio-economic boundaries and facilitated collaboration among the alienated intellectual elite, the rural poor, and the urban middle class. It thus helped to remove one of the central obstacles of collective action under authoritarianism, namely the lack of social interaction. (Breuer 2012, p.25)*

While research like that of Dean and others cited above has revealed seemingly irreconcilable differences between public sphere and connective culture in Western established democracies, Breuer (2012) and Iskander (2011) show that, in Tunisia and Egypt, digital devices stimulated the politicisation of younger generations. According to the UN database, the amount of internet users in 2010 reached 36.8% of the population in Tunisia and 26.7% in Egypt. Comparatively, the same year, internet users represented 74% of the population in USA and 85% in United Kingdom. This confirms Breuer's argument and suggests that only a minority of the local population actively used social media to lead protests and raise the attention of the international community. Furthermore, the Arab Social Media Report published by Dubai School of Governance (Mourtada & Salem, 2011) indicates that the average for Facebook's penetration in the Arab region at the end of 2010 was only 6.77%. Given the disproportion of internet and social media users between Western societies and Arab democratising countries, one can easily argue that the community of internet users involved in the 2011 Arab uprisings reflected the bourgeois public sphere. Indeed, this minority formed a homogenous sociological category of people who benefitted from the economic resources as well as from the education needed to access and produce online information. This intellectual elite succeeded in leading a critical counter-power as well as an efficient political action. This prompts the thought that the internet may be more likely to generate democratic culture and critical deliberation in countries where educated middle classes have easier access to digital technologies. As with the issue of literacy and the lack of intellectual resources among the broader population in the eighteenth century, the digital divide acts as a natural filter or *gatekeeper* of the public sphere. It guarantees that the very few users participating in online deliberation have the intellectual capital to invest in the broader audience and potentially recognise themselves as intellectual leaders. In this sense, digital divide functions as a natural regulator of the online public sphere and

answers the need highlighted by Flichy (2010) and Fraser (2005) to moderate cyberspace.

This observation helps to conceptualise participative democracy on two different levels. First of all, it partly explains why the online public debate reached a consensus and proved to be politically efficient in the case of Tunisia and Egypt, whereas social scientists are still questioning the political outcome of a participatory culture in digitally developed countries. Secondly, if the hypothetical correlation between digital divide and intellectual leadership were to be confirmed after being tested empirically, this would annul the advantages of participative democracy over representative democracy. Indeed, the natural regulation by an intellectual leadership of the digital public space remains a top-down structure and fails in promoting the libertarian values of connective culture. Besides these questions, the digital divide is not a solution in itself, as it prevents illiterate and digitally deprived people from experiencing deliberation. Nevertheless, as the intellectual leadership of the bourgeoisie played a significant role in promoting deliberative culture in established democracies, this phenomenon may still influence connective practices in democratising countries.

## CONCLUSION

The dream of a fully transparent public space with no internal or external hierarchy empowering citizens with more freedom of speech has been achieved. However, this does not entirely meet the original agenda of the digital culture, according to which users develop alternative ways of thinking and consolidate a critical counter-power able to contest global corporate hegemonies. In fact, the libertarian utopia that inspired the designers of this growing digital culture contrasts with the reality of cyberspace. This is not only due to the fact that digital communications contribute to the success of transnational corporate powers, but also to the fact that an entirely free and accessible public deliberation with no regulation might not be

efficient in terms of rationality. Furthermore, this type of public debate fails in questioning the dominant political environment and elaborating a sustainable opposition with a clear ideological identity. These issues of rational criticism and ideological sustainability constitute fundamental differences between the normative public sphere and the emerging network of new transnational public spaces. Identifying these parameters helps conceptualising future e-democracies, as it clarifies the reasons why deliberation emanating from a digital environment is often hard to actualise efficiently in the context of a representative democracy. In fact, it is worth remembering that the model of the bourgeois public sphere is naturally regulated by the intellectual leadership of the bourgeoisie, which suggests that hierarchical structures might be beneficial to democracy.

In the case of participative cyberspace, one can argue that the digital divide is an equivalent to the intellectual leadership of the bourgeoisie and acts as a natural regulator of the online public sphere. This hypothesis seems particularly relevant in the case of the Tunisian or Egyptian 2011 revolutions in which the educated middle class developed a strategic use of social media to communicate on behalf of poor and rural populations. One can argue that the digital divide – just like the intellectual leadership of the normative public sphere – rendered public opinion politically efficient by leading citizens to a consensus in the first stage of the 2011 uprisings. However, the political instability and ideological divisions following the revolutions perfectly illustrate the issue of ideological sustainability. Therefore, the case of the Arab Spring does not ascertain that intellectual leadership or even less digital divide increases rational criticism or ideological sustainability. However, it is worth noticing that the intellectual leadership of educated elites, which can partly be explained by the digital divide, functions as a natural regulator of online public discourses. As such, it is likely to improve the political efficiency of public deliberation.

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