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Communication in the Digital Public Sphere

An Epistemological-Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to delineate the dimensions and affordances of communication within the digital public sphere. Departing from conventional paradigms of the traditional public sphere, this emergent domain leverages social networking platforms (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Whats App) as dynamic conduits for fostering dialogic discourse. These platforms facilitate critical engagement with sociopolitical issues, events, and public figures, while simultaneously functioning as potent instruments for articulating individual proclivities, ideological stances, and collective orientations toward pivotal national concerns. Crucially, the digital public sphere empowers users
to cultivate a public opinion around phenomena or events. A defining feature of this sphere lies in its *interactivity*—a transformative attribute scarcely evident in pre-
digital communicative frameworks—and its capacity to democratize discourse by embracing pluralistic viewpoints.

Keywords: Digital era; communication; social networks; digital public sphere; interactivity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The digital era is associated with the period following the industrial age, in which information became the axis that governs politics, economics, and social life. It is also the age in which all forms of information are digitized and transmitted through the global information network using electronic intermediary devices (Mahmoud & Abdullah, 2018, p.11). This gave rise to new media, which differ fundamentally from traditional media linked to mass communication outlets.

Within the realm of new media, numerous social networking sites have emerged and diversified in their usage—Facebook, Twitter, video platforms, Snapchat, Viber, etc. It has become easy to download applications for these platforms onto smart devices without much effort and at a very low cost compared to traditional communication tools. These networks have introduced the element of **interactivity**, a defining feature that distinguishes new media from traditional media. Moreover, they have broken geographical and temporal barriers, creating a new space for freedom of expression, reinforcing the principle of democracy, and dissolving centralization. These qualities have made digital communication and media the primary channels of interaction within the virtual public sphere.

Thus, the digital public sphere has become a vast, dialogic, and virtual space where societal issues, public interest, and matters of public opinion are discussed. Communication within this domain has its own features and specificities, which we will focus on in this study from an epistemological-cognitive descriptive perspective, aiming to answer the central question:

What are the dimensions and advantages of communication within the digital public sphere from an epistemological-cognitive standpoint?

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Definition of Communication:

Communication can be defined as a field of study concerned with the transmission and broadcasting of information. It encompasses various professions associated with information exchange such as advertising, public relations, broadcasting, and journalism. Communication is a daily human activity carried out through diverse means—phones, blogs, television, art, hand and body gestures, facial expressions—and it can occur in enclosed spaces or across vast distances. The process depends on personal and internal skills such as observation, speaking, questioning, analysis, and comprehension. It also enables collaboration between individuals (Fatimayin, 2018, p.02).

2.2 Definition of Digital Communication:

Dr. Mohamed Abdel Hamid defines digital communication as:

"A social process in which remote communication occurs between parties who exchange roles in sending and receiving various communicative messages through digital systems and their media to achieve specific objectives." (Dubeissy & Zuhair Yassin, 2012, p.04)

2.3 Definition of the Digital Era:

The digital era refers to the period following the industrial age, during which information became the central axis controlling politics, economics, and social life. In this era, all forms of information are digitized and transmitted via the global information cm network via electronic intermediary devices (Mahmoud & Abdullah, 2018, p. 11)

3. Public Sphere and Digital Public Sphere

3.1 Public Sphere:

The concept of the public sphere is closely tied to the notion of communicative rationality. Jürgen Habermas devoted significant attention to it throughout his writings, even dedicating an entire independent work titled The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962), in which he conducted a sociological analysis of the bourgeois public sphere. His approach

drew on interpretations of Immanuel Kant, and Habermas utilized what he called an "archaeological perspective" to trace the meaning of the public sphere, focusing on:

- Its historical formation
- Transformations resulting from economic, social, and political conditions
- Its primary function as a space for dialogue, argumentation, and persuasion, emphasizing its communicative role
- Its interaction with broader societal elements within bourgeois communities
- Its connection to public opinion and the manner in which the public employs reason, whether in support of authority through submission and dominance, or in opposition to it, acting as a counter-power (Sharafi & Abdullah, 2016, p.409)

The public sphere, originally established by the bourgeois class, played a critical role in the evolution of political, social, and economic domains. The economic development achieved in Europe contributed to the rise of civil society as an independent social force capable of monitoring aristocratic power (Sharafi & Abdullah, 2016, p.410).

3.2 Digital Public Sphere:

Howard Rheingold defines it as:

"Social communities formed by individuals located in various parts of the world, who come together and communicate through computer screens and email. These individuals are united by shared interests and engage in interactions similar to those found in the physical world, although the communication occurs remotely. This community represents a domain where social networks grow, serving as the framework within which the threads of these networks are woven." (Mansour, 2019, p.208).

3.3 An Epistemological Approach to the Digital Public Sphere:

The emergence of what is commonly referred to as the digital public sphere has brought forth individuals, events, and issues from daily life—social, political, and cultural—that were previously invisible within the traditional public sphere. Individuals have gained the ability to voice their opinions on public affairs, while civil society organizations have acquired the means to organize and represent citizen interests. This digital domain thus strengthens democratic practice (Qawasem, 2020, p.97).

Moreover, the virtual sphere has enabled the formation of non-traditional communities that transcend conventional boundaries and geographic limits. It has created a welcoming environment for these groups, which differ significantly from traditional communities. In the digital public sphere, a group is formed through network traversal—free from spatial constraints or social conventions.

With ongoing technological advancements, the space has expanded to allow for the rise of a new culture that surpasses local borders and ethnic particularities, resulting in a liberated domain known as the digital public sphere. This space virtual, symbolic, and interactive, where social interactions occur independently of national or geographic belonging. Unlike traditional society, where individuals are bound by shared values and a common geographic setting, the digital public sphere embraces collective elements such as a sense of belonging and shared symbolic interaction (Shabi, 2016, p.47).

3.4 Forms of Communication in the Digital Public Sphere

Digital public sphere communication offers various modes of interaction and exchange that are often absent in the traditional public sphere. These include:

- **Openness and Engagement with Others:**

Communicating with individuals who may differ in religion, beliefs, culture, customs, skin color, appearance, or preferences allows for building connections with diverse identities.

Whether someone is in the next room or thousands of miles away, such interaction fosters global friendship.

- **Platform for Diverse Opinions:**

One of the core features of social media platforms is the ease of editing and adding content that reflects personal thoughts and beliefs—even when they contradict others. These platforms enable freedom of expression, making social media a powerful tool for representing personal inclinations, ideological perspectives, and attitudes toward critical national issues.

- **Reducing Civilizational Conflict:**

While social media contributes to cultural globalization, it also helps bridge civilizational and cultural gaps. This is achieved through a shared communication culture among platform users (Ghazi, 2025, pp. 36–37).

4. **Evolution of the Public Sphere via Social Media Platforms**

Social media has gone through several phases before reaching its current form:

4.1 First Phase:

In the late 1990s, several social networking sites emerged, such as:

- Classmates (1995): Aimed at reconnecting schoolmates.

- Six Degrees (1997): Focused on direct personal connections, built around the concept of "six degrees of separation."

These platforms introduced user profiles, private messaging between friends, and other features. Other notable examples include:

- LiveJournal

- Cyworld (launched in South Korea in 1999)

Early platforms primarily emphasized short messaging services and friend-to-friend interaction.

4.2 Second Phase:

This phase marked the formal launch of social networking applications on the web (blogs, sharing sites, multimedia platforms, etc.). There was a clear shift toward high interaction, integration, and collaboration in virtual communities, driven by the evolution of internet services.

It is considered the maturation phase of social networks, highlighted by the rise of:

- MySpace, the popular American site
- Facebook, which ushered in a new digital era of social connection (Amina & Abdel-Aal, 2009).

5. Means of Communication in the Digital Public Sphere

Digital communication relies on a variety of smart networks and applications easily downloadable via platforms like Play Store and installable on mobile devices. The most widely adopted by users and the public include:

5.1 Facebook Application

Facebook is one of the leading social media platforms. It has evolved from a simple social forum into an accessible technological base through which users can perform countless actions (Sadiq, 2008, p.218).

Created in 2004 by a Harvard University student, it is now one of the most renowned sites, valued at over $9 billion.

The Dictionary of Media and Communication defines Facebook as:

"A social networking site founded in 2004 that allows users to publish personal pages. Initially designed for students, faculty, and staff, it later expanded to serve the general public." (Awad, 2015)

5.2 WhatsApp Application

WhatsApp condenses the features of traditional computer-based chat programs into one mobile app. The name "WhatsApp" is derived from the English slang phrase "What's up?", commonly used by youth to ask "What's new?" or "What's going on?" (Mislam, 2020).

Key features include:

- Messaging through text, voice, and video exchanges
- Easy-to-use interface, widely adopted in education and research—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic
- Ability to create professional, academic, and personal group chats
- Document and file transfer, reducing reliance on email (Aqla, 2015)

5.3 Snapchat Application

Snapchat stands out as one of the most interactive platforms, particularly in today's smart-device-driven environment. It emphasizes the power of video-based imagery in affecting the receiver (Daghfaq, 2019, p.127).

Its standout features include:

- Capturing and sharing short videos or images with optional text, shared with individuals or posted as stories (maximum 10 seconds)
- Automatic deletion of photos and videos after 24 hours
- Creative filters and masks for engaging visuals
- Prominent use of the color yellow in its branding (Shariteh, 2017, p.463)

5.4 Viber Application

Founded in 2010, Viber operates across multiple platforms and provides instant messaging, voice calls, and multimedia messaging—similar to WhatsApp.

5.5 IMO Application

IMO is a free smart app available on Play Store. It combines features of Skype and WhatsApp, offering high-quality video calls. Highlights include:

- Clear and sharp video calls even on weak internet connections
- Compatibility with all smart devices
- Rapid reception of diverse message types
- Use of stickers in chat messages (Atoum, 2021).

5.6 YouTube Platform

Opinions differ on whether YouTube qualifies as a social network. Some consider it a "video-sharing site," yet due to its social features, it is often categorized among social networks. YouTube allows the free upload, download, and sharing of films and videos, offering both public and private viewing options. It plays a vital role in wide-scale video dissemination and comment-based interaction (Dulaimi, 2011, p.194).

5.7 Twitter Platform

Twitter is one of the most prominent social networks today, especially influential in political events across the Middle East. Named after the word "tweet," symbolized by a bird icon, Twitter allows users to send short text messages (max 140 characters). These "micro-posts" often convey complex ideas concisely. Tweets are visible on personal profiles or can be accessed via the sender's page. Twitter supports microblogging, responses, email updates, and RSS feeds through SMS notifications (Hijazi, 2017, p.76)

Note: Though numerous apps exist today, this section focuses on the most widely used and publicly endorsed ones.

6. Dynamics of the Digital Public Sphere

The communicative dynamics of the digital public sphere enable a diverse communicative environment via social media platforms:

- Users from all social segments can connect using modern smart communication tools like email, Facebook, and Twitter
- Social platforms have created new patterns of public interaction such as comments, content creation, and multimedia sharing
- Rich communicative content—images, texts, videos, even graphics—support seamless information exchange among communities
- The virtual public sphere fosters greater social proximity, interaction, and collaboration, offering real-time engagement with issues of public interest
- These platforms generate a sense of social space among users, helping integrate them into broader societal contexts (Ben Amra, 2018, pp.204–205)

7. Social Media Networks and the Formation of Virtual Communities

Social media networks facilitate the creation of virtual communities through key **mechanisms:**

User-Generated Content

Content on these platforms takes multiple forms:

- Text-based (e.g., Facebook posts)
- Image-based (e.g., Flickr)
- Audio (e.g., SoundCloud)
- Video (e.g., YouTube)

Notably, content is produced by users themselves, not by the network developers. Even administrators must participate as users to contribute content.

Personal Pages:

Each piece of content is linked to a personal profile, enabling social interaction like friend requests, comments, and ratings. Most platforms require users to create a personal profile in

order to interact or post content—ensuring dynamic and personalized engagement (Humaidi, 2015)

User Relationships:

Every social network must provide a means of forming relationships between users. These connections play a crucial role in content dissemination, determining what appears on users' main feeds and influencing their online experience.

Variable User-Generated Content:

Each user has content unique to their profile, shaped largely by relationships with other users. Content is commonly derived from posts by friends and pages followed by the user (Humaidi, 2015).

8. Advantages of Communication in the Modern Digital Public Sphere

Digital communication today holds several key advantages:

- ✓ Low Cost: Digital public communication is much more affordable than traditional channels, especially for international exchanges via social media.
- ✓ Flexibility: Users need not be in the same location or connected simultaneously.
- ✓ Progressive Reach: Expands steadily through easy-to-use equipment and growing technological needs.
- ✓ Group Interactions: Offers group chats, personalized contact details, and user control over receiving, rejecting, or deleting messages.
- ✓ Device Compatibility: Communication systems are widely available on Android-based smart devices.
- ✓ Simplicity + Multimedia Integration: Platforms are user-friendly, allowing seamless blending of text, visuals, and sound via smart apps (Blue, 2018).

According to researchers Lievrouw and Livingstone, standout characteristics of communication in the digital public sphere include:

- ✓ Networked Multilateral Communication: Unlike one-to-one communication in traditional public spheres, digital networks allow interaction from many-to-many directions.
- ✓ Role Fluidity: Users can easily act as both senders and receivers of content.
- ✓ Interactivity: Users actively participate in creating content—a central strength of digital public discourse, rarely seen in traditional settings (Makhlouf, 2016, p.223).
- ✓ Diverse Content & Rich Narratives: Platforms encourage audience participation via stories, videos, images, and tools like "Have Your Say" (Ali Al-Zalb, 2023).
- ✓ Multifunctionality & Openness: Exposure to fresh ideas and innovation in both content and media form.
- ✓ Global Reach: Not bound by geography, digital spaces break down physical barriers and connect voices worldwide (Makhlouf, 2016, p.223).

9. Findings and Insights

From this study, we conclude:

1. The digital public sphere creates communities that transcend traditional boundaries.
2. It enables users to shape public opinion on political, social, and economic issues.
3. Social media forms a digital base for mobilizing users, fostering interaction, and sparking dialogue—essential to the digital public sphere.
4. Its communication dynamics allow 24/7 exchanges and interaction.
5. Smart, free apps support wide-ranging exchanges and contributed to the emergence of a rich, diverse virtual domain.
6. Digital public communication hosts varied content (text, video, images), helping to unite users around specific issues and engage in dialogue through comments suited to their communicative preferences.

10. Conclusion:

From the foregoing, it can be affirmed that communication within the digital public sphere serves as an effective—if not ideal—medium for fostering dialogue, discussion, and the exchange of information and ideas across various contexts, whether political, cultural, or social. It transcends boundaries of race, ethnicity, and religion, reflecting the emphasis of numerous thinkers and scholars, particularly Jürgen Habermas.

What distinguishes communication in this sphere is its interactivity, a characteristic that was largely absent in traditional public spaces. This interactivity has emerged thanks to the diversity of social media platforms, which now represent the most prominent communication channels within the digital public sphere. These platforms also embody its technological dimension, relying on multimedia tools that allow for the diversification of communicative content in line with users' preferences and needs.

At its core, the digital public sphere is defined by its participatory, decentralized, and media-rich nature—a transformative shift that reconfigures how individuals engage, express, and influence the social landscape.

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