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INFLUENCE OF INTERNET ON THE RE-DEFINITION OF PUBLIC SPHERE

Summary. The article is focused on the fact how Internet's popularization affected the definition of the public sphere. In the first part classical concepts of this issue - Hannah Arendt's, Bruce Ackerman's and Jürgen Habermas' - have been presented. In the next part classical visions of the public sphere have been re-interpreted, based on the examples of present civil engagement. It has been defined which of their constitutive elements seem to be still valid and which have lost their significance as a result of the development of Internet.

Keywords: public sphere, Internet, civil society, public activities.

WPLYW INTERNETU NA ZMIANĘ DEFINIOWANIA SFERY PUBLICZNEJ

Streszczenie. Artykuł koncentruje się na tym, w jaki sposób upowszechnienie się Internetu jako środka komunikacji oddziało na przedefiniowanie sfery publicznej. W pierwszej części przedstawione zostały klasyczne koncepcje tego zagadnienia – wizje Hannah Arend, Bruce'a Ackermana i Jürgena Habermasa. W następnej części tekstu, w odwołaniu do przykładów współczesnego obywatelskiego zaangażowania, dokonana została reinterpretacja klasycznych wizji sfery publicznej. Określono, które z ich konstytutywnych elementów wydają się nadal aktualne, a które w efekcie rozwoju Internetu straciły na ważności.

Słowa kluczowe: sfera publiczna, Internet, społeczeństwo obywatelskie, działanie publiczne.

1. Introduction

Since its beginning, for over forty years, Internet has significantly influenced the functioning of societies. It is particularly noticeable in the highest developed countries where the global network (along with devices connected with this) accompanies everyday life of most of citizens. Monitoring of one's status at the social network with the help of smartphone or receiving immediate e-mails are not the main issues here. Even people who avoid using technological novelties are indirectly the participants of the global network because they are customers of public and commercial services.

Paraphrasing the classical comment of Marshall McLuhan, one can say that the global network has obtained the status of another electrical invention which has led to "prolonging of our central nervous system (...) and overcoming of time and space"¹. Nowadays Internet causes "individual and social consequences"² and "shapes (...) the scale and form of interpersonal relationships and human activity"³ the same as mass-media (e.g. film, radio, TV) were described by McLuhan in the past.

The influence of Internet on individuals and all societies has already been broadly described. In his famous book, Nicholas Carr has focused on its disadvantageous impact on human cognitive abilities⁴. Also a destructive influence of mass media (including Internet) on the state of social capital in the United States was described by Robert Putnam⁵. Manuel Castells has thoroughly analysed the reality of omnipresent Internet and concentrated on the influence of the global network on the sphere of multimedia, economy⁶, authority⁷, or social movements⁸ in his works.

Taking into account all the voices concerning the discussion on the Internet until now, I am going to consider how popularization of this communication medium has influenced a re-definition of public sphere. The notion of public sphere is based on the assumption that there exists contestation and participation domain of public life within which the actors of democratic public life can take part in the bodies of public representation, co-participate in forming of the public as well as – based on discursive activities – shape common norms of agreement⁹. The title notion is so important because it constitutes a frame for a reflection on

¹ McLuhan M.: *Zrozumieć media. Przedłużenia człowieka*. Wydawnictwa Naukowo-Techniczne, Warszawa 2004, p. 33.

² Ibidem, p. 39.

³ Ibidem, p. 40.

⁴ Carr N.: *Płytki umysł. Jak Internet wpływa na nasz mózg*. Wydawnictwo HELION, Gliwice 2013.

⁵ Putnam R.D.: *Samotna gra w kręgle. Upadek i odrodzenie wspólnot lokalnych w Stanach Zjednoczonych*. Wydawnictwa Akademickie i Profesjonalne, Warszawa 2008, p. 363-409.

⁶ Castells M.: *Galaktyka Internetu*. Dom Wydawniczy REBIS, Poznań 2003.

⁷ Castells M.: *Władza komunikacji*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2013.

⁸ Castells M.: *Sieci oburzenia w nadziei. Ruchy społeczne w erze Internetu*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2013.

⁹ I paraphrase here Margaret Somers' definition of the public sphere (Somers M., *Citizenship and the place of public sphere: Law, community, and political culture in the transition to democracy*, "American Sociological

such substantial issues as shaping of the public, engagement of individuals within the structures of civil society or forms and range of political participation¹⁰.

As we have already noticed here, the issue of public sphere has appeared in the scientific thought. The re-interpretation of classical visions of the public sphere is a novelty we would like to offer here – defining which constitutive parts seem to be still valid and which have lost their significance as a result of the development of Internet.

2. Classical approaches to the issue of public sphere

The concept of public sphere has its bases already in the philosophy of Aristotle, who made a division into *idion* and *koinion* which respectively represented the area of private and public activity. However, the notion, although with the ancient origin, has been the best developed in the works of contemporary social thinkers.

Seyla Benhabib is an often cited author of typology of approaches to the public sphere and she distinguished three ways of understanding this notion in the social science. *Three models of public space*¹¹, described by Benhabib are: 1) agonistic perspective presented by Hannah Arendt; 2) a liberal model, mainly supported by Bruce Ackerman; 3) Jürgen Habermas' discursive model of the public sphere.

According to Benhabib's assumptions some deep differences occur between distinguished visions of public sphere. While Arendt concentrates on the ideal of *polis* which is antique, exclusive, full of politics and competition, Ackerman's main problem is working out the rules which would allow to reach the neutral character of public debate. Still, for Habermas a modern public sphere is a kind of mediator between the order of society and state.

Arendt's most essential part of the model is an assumption that actions typical for the public sphere are not possible without co-appearance of other people. For *action* – as opposed to *labour* and *work* – is a form of activity happening directly between people¹². Externalization of “personal identities”, that is revealing of who people are, can only happen in the case of communication mechanisms of physical co-presence of a bigger number of

Review” 5/1993 (58), p. 589, quote after: Wnuk-Lipiński E., *Socjologia życia publicznego*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2005, p. 104) and Pietrzyk-Reeves D. (Pietrzyk-Reeves D., *Idea społeczeństwa obywatelskiego. Współczesna debata i jej źródła*. Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2004, p. 200).

¹⁰ Marody M., Giza-Poleszczuk A.: *Przemiany więzi społecznych. Zarys teorii zmiany społecznej*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe SCHOLAR, Warszawa 2004, s. 258.

¹¹ Benhabib S.: *Trzy modele przestrzeni publicznej*. „Krytyka Polityczna” 3/2003, Stowarzyszenie im. Stanisława Brzozowskiego, Warszawa 2003, s. 74-89; Benhabib uses the notion of “public space” in her article. However, this notion shows a set of ideas characteristic for the public sphere. Therefore, *Three models of the public sphere* should be understood as three visions of the public sphere.

¹² Nowak P.: *Wolność albo życie*, [in:] Arendt H., *Kondycja ludzka*, Fundacja Aletheia, Warszawa 2000, p. 356.

people¹³. Basic actors in such a public sphere are free and equal citizens who, performing exceptional deeds, are trying to be distinguished among others¹⁴. Competition, a noble rivalry are constitutive features of agonistic model of the public sphere (*agonistikós* means “being able to fight”¹⁵). Thus, agonistic public sphere is a domain of civil competition, aiming at the realization of community’s good and equal individuals may develop their personal identities within this sphere. The open space – which used to be Ancient agora - constituted a model of physical basis for the processes described here¹⁶.

Ackerman's considerations focus on the issue of organizing a public dispute– its range and limits. The basis for this liberal way of considering the public sphere is an assumption of “conversation restraint”, that is the necessity to limit a public debate so that the issues to which a general agreement cannot be found – based on standard procedures - are beyond its borders (e.g. abortion, euthanasia, death penalty). In accordance with this vision controversial and exciting problems should not go beyond private sphere. Far-reaching impartiality and not the competition are the best state of the public sphere’s functioning¹⁷

According to Habermas’ late suggestions - reflected in a discursive concept of the public sphere – the public sphere is a mediator between public and private order¹⁸. The processes of “resonating” which consist in considering and commenting the events are ones of the most significant phenomena taking place in the public sphere¹⁹. Various branches and institutions, with the press at the forefront, discussion clubs and intellectual societies have got a significant role in establishing public sphere understood in this way²⁰. “Civil society” (*Zivilgesellschaft*) is the most important causative subject which operates in this model of the public sphere. There are various unions, organizations and social movements which help to maintain the public sphere²¹. However, what is more important here, Habermas’ paradigm as deprived of any records limiting the participation in the public sphere is the most inclusive. It emphasizes social participation in the mechanisms of public discourse and democratic negotiation of norms and political decisions.

¹³ Arendt H.: *Kondycja ludzka...*, s. 196-198.

¹⁴ Ibidem, s. 33-47.

¹⁵ Nowak M., Pluciński P.: *Problemy ze sferą publiczną. O pożytkach z partykularnych rozstrzygnięć*, [in:] Nowak M., Pluciński P. (red.): *O miejskiej sferze publicznej. Obywatelskość i konflikty o przestrzeń*. Wydawnictwo Ha!art, Kraków 2011, s. 15.

¹⁶ Ibidem, s. 15.

¹⁷ Ibidem, s. 18-19.

¹⁸ Elliott A.: *Współczesna teoria społeczna*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2011, s. 189.

¹⁹ Habermas J.: *Strukturalne przeobrażenia sfery publicznej*. Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, Warszawa 2007, s. 83-91.

²⁰ Czyżewski M.: *Wprowadzenie do wydania polskiego*, [in:] Habermas J.: *Strukturalne przeobrażenia sfery publicznej...*, s. VII.

²¹ Habermas J.: *Faktyczność i obowiązanie. Teoria dyskursu wobec zagadnień prawa i demokratycznego państwa prawnego*. Warszawa 2005, s. 380.

Table 1

Classical concepts of the public sphere – the most important assumptions

model issue	Hannah Arendt's agonistic model	Liberal model of Bruce Ackerman	Discursive model of Jürgen Habermas
Accessibility to active subjects	limited to the privileged minority (as far as status is concerned)	no subjective criteria of exclusion	no subjective criteria of exclusion
Range of considered issues	No limitations – the debate concerns all possible issues	excluding sensitive issues beyond the area of the public sphere	no limitations – the debate concerns all possible issues
Type of legitimization	private ownership allowing for "non- mercenary" activity; ethos of free and equal citizens	formal criteria based on the system of law; equation of legality with legitimization	formal criteria limited by the criticism of the main actors of public sphere
Nature of relation	competition, rivalry	impartiality	Mediation between private and public order

The source: Own study based on – Nowak M., Pluciński P.: *Problemy ze sferą publiczną...*, s. 39-40.

3. Civil society in the times of global network – new look at the public sphere

After presentation of the main concepts of the public sphere we can wonder how much these mental attitudes – to a great extent normative ones – can constitute an analytical frame for the description of the processes occurring in the public sphere. We should consider which of the theoretical elements mentioned above should still be taken into account in the research of the public sphere and which – in the times of network societies – have become out of date. That is why we will refer now to the essential examples of civil organizing of people with the help of the medium under consideration. Revolutions in the Arab area, the activity of Occupy Wall Street and Occupy Together or protests concerning ratification of ACTA's agreement are among well-known events of the last years. However, we will now focus on a more significant example – the Arab Spring.

It is assumed that a suicidal death of Mahomed Bouazizi, a twenty-six years old street vendor who had been harassed by a local police, was the event that directly preceded the revolution in Tunisia (that is the first revolution of the Middle East). The act of self-immolation caused an outbreak of social dissatisfaction. The events progressed very fast. Still, on 17th December 2010 – on the day of this incident – hundreds of young people gathered in the place of self-immolation to express their indignation against authorities' behavior. A short film showing this protest was published in the Internet, which in turn inspired people to

another demonstrations and acts of desperate death. A few months later the protests spread nearly over the whole country. In spite of the brutal reaction of the authorities, as a result of which at least 147 people died, demonstrations continued. Finally, as Tunisian army renounced allegiance, on January 14th, 2011, the Tunisian dictator Ben Ali was forced to flee from the country at the same time finishing the activity of his government which had existed since 1987. However, not only dates or events are the most important as far as Tunisian revolution is concerned. Noticing some structural conditions of the situation under the analysis and defining its unique characteristics are much more important²².

In the case of Tunisian revolution we deal with the synergy of two grounds. On the one hand, this is a structural and institutional factor – that is a high percentage (21,1%²³) of young unemployed people who had to live in the reality of authoritative country. On the other hand, Internet played an important role as it was a ground of externalization of social frustration, discussion of the topics ignored by the authorities, organization of protest's progress. Revolutionists used Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, that is social network of a global range, as communication channels in the issues of public character. It is also important to stress here that Tunisia, as a country where the Arab Spring was initiated, is in the lead of Internet popularization in the Arab countries. At the end of 2010 37% of Tunisian citizens had an access to the Internet and 20% had a Facebook profile²⁴.

The same scenario applies to the majority of the countries involved in the Arab Spring. The overthrow of Ben Ali's government has become an impulse for other Middle East countries. Since the mid-January 2011 mass protests flared up in such key countries of the area as Egypt, Yemen, Syria or Libya. Incidents were of a different local character. Nevertheless, the common motif of them was the presence of structural tensions, which caused the channelization of frustration with the help of Internet to appear in concrete public activities.

4. Conclusions

And what conclusions are drawn from the analysis of the case considered here when we pose a question on the topicality of classical models of the public sphere? It seems that Internet, along with its communicative possibilities, affects the functioning of the public sphere. We can immediately notice that there is a lack of subjective restrictions of engagement in the public sphere. Demonstrators, mentioned in the previous point, did not fulfill the condition of the status assumed by Arendt, which developed in the private

²² Castells M.: *Sieci oburzenia w nadziei...*, s. 34-39.

²³ Ibidem, s. 38.

²⁴ Ibidem, s. 41.

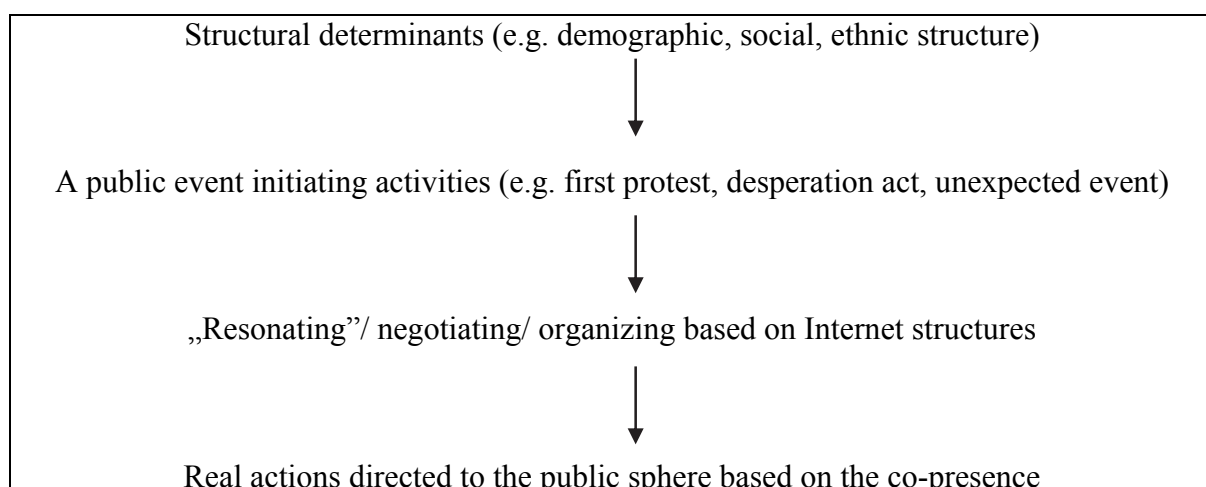
ownership. Infrastructural and competence possibilities were of greater importance in this case.

It is very significant here that the global network was the initial ground of demonstrators' cooperation. And consequently, it is a bit difficult to unambiguously classify the activity undertaken by them. On the one hand, communication processes based on the externalization of political postulates are characteristic for the activity described by Arendt – that is the basic form of activity in the public sphere. However, on the other hand, it should be remembered that according to this concept, a physical co-presence of a bigger number of people is a boundary condition of this activity, which allows to show others one's own individual identity. It is not possible via Internet which allows to create a picture of one's person. Moreover, it is not possible to perform institutional transformations of the public sphere with the actions deprived of their physical manifestation. It seems that, in spite of fulfillment a communicative condition, civil activity within the frames of the global network reminds more a process of "resonating" described by Habermas – commenting, negotiating of public phenomena. It also means that – as opposed to Ackerman's postulates- relations in such public domain are conflicting and not neutral.

However, to make a scheme of network public sphere complete, the processes present at the virtual level must be seen in the real space. This way, a preceding virtual dimension of the public sphere should be introduced along with "classical" physical dimension. However, the most important reservation, which should be made here, deals with the fact that new virtual level cannot constitute the only dimension of the public sphere. Processes of Internet commenting, discussing, organizing – if they are not supported by activities beyond Internet – cannot be understood as a rightful symptom of public engagement (Table 2).

Table 2

Model of activity of the public sphere in the global network – a proposition



The source: Own study.

Internet may be considered as a component of the public sphere but, with no doubts, it is somehow an imperfect ground. For working out some effects requires transformation of virtual relations into more traditional ones. In this way, in spite of some revision of classical notions, the basic condition is still valid: public sphere requires engagement of individuals in the space. My own proposition of defining the components of network's public sphere is presented below (Table 3). However, it seems that this Habermas' proposal is more up-to-date. It is more "open" as far as the topics in question and possibilities of taking an action are concerned. Additionally, the process of "resonating", crucial in this idea, seems to be the basis of civil activity in the Internet.

Table 3

Components of the public sphere in the times of global network – propositions

model issue	network model of the public sphere
Accessibility to the active subjects	no subjective limitations, structural limitation with regard to the possibility of the access to the network
Range of considered issues	limited with regard to the set of rules adopted by social networks
Type of legitimization	technological – based on competences
Nature of relation	"resonating" of national events; mediation between private and public order; articulation of postulates

The source: Own study

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Omówienie

W artykule zaprezentowano, jaki jest wpływ Internetu na sferę publiczną oraz naukowe sposoby jej ujmowania. W pierwszej części tekstu – dla należytego porządku terminologicznego – skrótowo zaprezentowano trzy klasyczne ujęcia tytułowego terminu. Są to koncepcje Hannah Arendt, Bruce’a Ackermana oraz Jürgena Habermasa. Te trzy modele posłużyły za merytoryczne tło dla dalszych naszych rozważań. W odniesieniu do wybranego współczesnego przykładu funkcjonowania społeczeństwa obywatelskiego, jakim są wydarzenia Arabskiej Wiosny, dokonano charakterystyki współczesnej – sieciowej – sfery publicznej. Z jednej strony, wykazano, że Internet stanowi istotną płaszczyznę „rezonowania” i organizowania społecznego. Z drugiej strony, przedstawione w artykule rozważania zawierają stwierdzenie o ciągłej aktualności fizycznego aspektu tytułowego terminu.