

# Datafication and Regulation: Today's Controversies in Publicness and Public Opinion Research

## Interview with Professor Slavko Splichal

Professor Splichal, I warmly congratulate you on your Media and Democracy Karol Jakubowicz Award 2023. The award is the prestigious recognition by the Polish Communication Association and the Journal of Central European Journal of Communication to a scholar for an outstanding contribution to media and communication science. Your book titled "Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere: How Extraction Replaced Expression of Opinion" was released last year. The publication discusses the contemporary issues of public opinion and publicness. In the next couple of minutes, we will be discussing the main issues and the takeaway messages of the book.

In media and communication studies the terminology of public sphere, public opinion, publicity, and publicness are often interconnected and used as synonyms. I wonder what you think about the cacophony of terms and what is your approach to the structure of the interrelated concepts.

I believe that this is a very important issue, particularly in relation to language. I have published quite a lot in English, particularly concerning matters related to publicness, and particularly the public sphere. It is worth noting that English terminology differs from Slovenian terminology, and it also diverges from the terms and definitions you would find in German-language books and articles.

Consequently, the debate on the public sphere is, I would say, mostly limited to English-language literature. For instance, in the German language, you would hardly find discussions about what they would refer to as „öffentliche Sphäre.“ This term does not exist in the German literature; instead, they deliberate on issues related to „Öffentlichkeit,“ a term that does not have a direct English equivalent. I am not sure how this matter is handled in Poland or Hungary, but

it is crucial for us to begin contemplating these significant differences among languages, which are also linked to diverse cultures. Instead of concentrating solely on English-language publications, which is presently the dominant trend, it is crucial that we start acknowledging and integrating national concepts that are absent in English literature into the global discourse. I hope that recent developments in artificial intelligence will support this direction and make different languages more equal in the global academic community.

It's important to introduce national concepts, absent in English literature, into the global discussion. Presently, everything seems to be subservient to concepts developed in the English language even if [they are] not used in our national languages. In the case of the topic addressed in my book, we should reflect on what happened to the concept of the „public,“ which was the central idea until, let's say, the 1930s and 1940s. During this time, the terms „public“ and „public opinion“ were in sharp decline in social science critical discussions. A discourse dictated by opinion polls has prevailed, reducing public opinion to poll results. In the same vein, with the invention of the concept of the public sphere, the notion of the public has gradually faded from use, not only in English but also in several other languages. Presently, the focus is predominantly on the „public sphere,“ which is often perceived as an institutional, technological, and societal infrastructure. In contrast, the concept of the „public“ or „publics,“ which would place more emphasis on the actors, behaviors, and dynamics, has taken a back seat, with less attention paid to the structural elements.

/// In your book, you discuss the great dichotomy of private and public. In what ways do you think the private and public distinction is relevant in our era? Why should we, communication and media scholars, pay particular attention to the issues of public and private?

This narrative traces back to the 19th century, a period marked by significant developments in the relationship between the public and the private, which offer valuable insights in relation to current developments. Two important events from that era are noteworthy. Firstly, in the late 19th century, scholars primarily in the field of sociology, recognized that the prevailing dynamics, in which newspapers were driven by market forces, did not align with the ideal functioning of publicness within society. Secondly, they started to discuss the possibility of how to regulate the press to preserve its democratic essence. Market forces were deemed an unsuitable mechanism for this purpose, and other possibilities were looked for, unfortunately without success.

At the same time the concept of privacy became very important, largely propelled by the invention of cameras and the widespread use of photographs in the press. It became obvious that privacy is not something given but is something

that should be, on the one hand, developed, worked for and, on the other hand, protected. It was during this period that the principles of safeguarding both publicness and privacy began to take shape.

The two parts of the great division between the public and the private are intrinsically linked, negatively defining each other. They serve as mutual reference points: the private is defined as that which is not public, and vice versa. However, particularly with the advent of digital technologies, this boundary between the private and the public has become increasingly blurred.

In the contemporary landscape of digital platforms, we observe that both private and public communication coexist and are routinely practiced on the same platforms. The control over this blend of private and public communication lies primarily with the platform owners, rather than being subject to regulation by societies or governments. This close and sometimes problematic connection between privateness and publicness is becoming, I think, one of the most pressing challenges in democratic societies today. It underscores the need for careful consideration and research by communication and media scholars.

/// The Internet radically changed our understanding of publicness. Some say that the metaverse is the future of the internet. What are the possible scenarios, challenges, and even risks of the increasing importance of virtual or augmented reality technologies from the viewpoint of the social sciences?

Central to these considerations is the issue of regulation. This includes questions related to access to these platforms and the rules that govern behavior and communication within these platforms. These questions should not be solely entrusted to the owners of these platforms. History repeats itself in this case because this was a problem with newspapers in the late 19th century. At that time, the discussion around regulation proved to be too late to redirect prevailing editorial policies and business models.

Today, the danger persists that without immediate action to regulate the Internet, societies may find themselves in a similar difficulty. In fact, we may already be too late. Only a few but huge corporations dominate social media. Therefore, it is extremely difficult to introduce a new regulation against their will because they are so powerful.

Today, digital social networks define what public opinion is, how it is formed, and what the public sphere will be like in the future. If this infrastructure is completely dominated by corporate interests, it cannot possibly have a genuine public character and prevents the formation of public will from representing an authentic general will.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter addresses the issue of the quantification of public opinion. When providing the overview of the efforts of measuring opinions, you introduce the concept of datafication. What do you mean by that and what are the main ambivalences of the empirical public opinion studies?

Datafication is a process in which all characteristics of any kind and all aspects of communication can be transformed into quantified data. In the context of public opinion, we shift our focus from words, sentences, and thoughts of individuals to data collected in opinion surveys, and polls, and data analysis. Based on this data analysis, we attempt to make decisions that can have a significant impact. Consequently, the question becomes not how these opinions can influence decision-makers, but rather how we can influence those expressing their opinions in opinion polls.

The manipulation of individual opinions in a statistical sense is a necessary part of this process, and it began with opinion polls. However, this shift in interest in statistical data has also transformed the original idea of public opinion as fostering robust public debate on important social issues with significant long-term consequences into eliciting answers to very specific questions, often with binary „yes” and „no” responses.

With the advent of digitization, the situation is somehow getting worse. In survey methods, respondents were at least aware that they were participating in an interview, as they were explicitly asked and had to consent to participate. By contrast, today's digital datafication often happens without the knowledge of those whose opinions are being „datafied.” This raises crucial questions about how this communication is regulated, whether through legal means or other mechanisms.

**Opinion mining and big data research of social communication are some of the most fashionable topics in communication studies. You critically examine such academic trends. Please explain why we should be careful with AI-based methods!**

While datafication has brought about numerous benefits, it has also raised significant ethical concerns. The data collected online is frequently used in various ways to influence user behavior. Just remember the attack on the US Capitol, which is being investigated as being based on a „big lie” about election fraud in 2020. It was actually a result of conscious and orchestrated manipulation that included the former president of the United States. All this data collected by the owners of social media platforms and those who are contracted with the owners is very helpful in planning how to influence people's behavior instead of helping them to discuss publicly relevant issues. That is why I suggest more

control over the use of social media data. If regulation is not coming soon, it will not come at all.

That is why I am in favor of enhanced control and oversight regarding the use of social media data. Without prompt regulatory action, there's a risk that it may never materialize, and the consequences of unbridled manipulation could continue to pose serious challenges to the integrity of public discourse and decision-making processes.

Lastly, let me ask about your success in initiating and managing academic platforms in Central and Eastern Europe! You are the founder of the International Colloquia on Communication and Culture, which were held in Slovenia, Finland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, Italy and the USA. The European Institute for Communication and Culture developed from these colloquia, co-founded by you, and a journal entitled *The Public*, where you hold the post of Editor. The audience of this interview should know that this journal is the only Slovenian social science journal included in the Social Sciences Citation Index. Tell me please what made you so active at the international level and what do you think was the key to successful institution-building?

It might be more fitting to have someone else evaluate this journey, but I can certainly offer my perspective. In the 1980s, a group of media and communication scholars, including figures like Karol Jakubowicz, engaged in discussions about the advent of democracy in Eastern Europe. Our conversations touched upon the challenges of publishing manuscripts pertaining to Central and Eastern Europe. While Western academic interest in our region was very high at that time, the authors writing about the democratic transition were mostly from outside Central and Eastern European universities, largely American academics. It was evident that the visibility of scholars based in CEE in journals and conferences needed a boost.

Our idea was to provide a platform for scholars genuinely interested in the media and communication field within our region but from an insider's perspective. We aimed to bring this perspective to a wider international podium, which led us to organize workshops and publish edited volumes. However, the reach of these books was limited in reaching individuals beyond our network. Hence, we decided to establish „Javnost – the Public”, the journal you mentioned.

To my surprise, the journal was quickly included in international bibliographical collections. Nonetheless, publishing for a national market and operating in an international academic environment presented distinct challenges. In the 1990s, international academic publications primarily relied on print circulation, which required specialized facilities. So we sought an international publisher and our collaboration with our publisher, Routledge, has been excellent.

Today, we face the challenge of a changing academic publishing ecosystem: what types of journals are being published, changes in publication practices, profit margins in the book and journal industries, the emergence of open access, and the relationship between authors and publishers, among other considerations. These are substantial issues that are largely related to the issue of regulation, although in a different context than the kind of regulation needed for the digital realm. In this case, universities should play a more active role, rather than tacitly accepting the rules established by international corporate publishers, which may not always be in the best interest of inclusive knowledge production.

Over the years, I've come to realize that the „publish or perish” culture has had an impact on research quality, and it's not always positive. As an editor, I can attest that a significant portion of the research submitted for publication is poorly designed and often has limited added value. The immense pressure on university teachers and researchers to publish to maintain status or get promotion also leads to some unethical practices, while fueling a lucrative publishing business with high profit margins. That is not the purpose, nor should it be the purpose of scientific publications.

*Slavko Splichal was interviewed by Gabriella Szabó on the 14th October 2023.*

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Slavko Splichal holds the position of Professor of Communication and Public Opinion at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. He is a fellow of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts and Academia Europaea. As the founder and director of the European Institute for Communication and Culture (EURICOM), he also serves as the editor of its journal *Javnost-The Public*. His research interests include communication theory and research methods, media politics, public opinion, and the public sphere. Some of his most recent English-language publications include *The Liquefaction of Publicness: Communication, Democracy and the Public Sphere in the Internet Age* (editor, Routledge 2018), “In data we (don't) trust: The public adrift in data-driven public opinion models” (*Big Data & Society*, 2022), “The public sphere in the twilight zone of publicness” (*European Journal of Communication*, 2022), and *Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere* (Anthem 2022).