

SLAVKO SPLICHAL (2022): DATAFICATION OF PUBLIC OPINION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE. HOW EXTRACTION REPLACED EXPRESSION OF OPINION, LONDON: ANTHEM PRESS, 182 PP., ISBN: 978-1-83998-450-1

Slavko Splichal is a professor of communication and public opinion at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana. His book “*Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere. How Extraction Replaced Expression of Opinion*” is an extremely important historical study of Enlightenment ideas about society, changes in the basic phenomena of the formation and operation of public opinion, and the development of the public sphere. In the book, Splichal cites and refers to such important publications as Ferdinand Tönnies’ *Kritik der Öffentlichen Meinung (Critique of Public Opinion)* (1922), Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922), Gabriel Tarde’s (1901) *L’Opinion et la Foule (Opinion and the Crowd)*, and finally, Jürgen Habermas’ (1962) extremely catchy book *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft (The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society)*. Furthermore, Splichal attempts to combine normative-critical theoretical conceptualizations with constructive empirical applications and research on the public sphere. Splichal recognizes the changes that have taken place in interpersonal communication through the development of digital communication technologies, the increasing availability of digital communication channels and networks. In these changes, he sees not only opportunities for more efficient communication and expression of one’s own individual views, but also sees dangers. As he writes:

no matter what they are, but also allows corporate-owned social network platforms to systematically and often covertly monitor and influence users’ online communication and even offline behavior. The ubiquitous processes of datafication made possible by digital technology have also strengthened the quantification of public opinion triggered by the invention of opinion polling in the 1930s. In the same vein as polling in the past, *opinion mining* (prevalently called *sentiment analysis*) by harvesting and analyzing large data sets from social media services online now seems to facilitate *extraction* even more effectively to replace free expression of opinion that has been traditionally conceived as the core of (the principle of) publicness. (Splichal 2022, pp. 2–3).

Moreover, the author points out that with these new technological inventions has come algorithmic communication, based on opinion analysis and the analysis of large data sets, which are often used to legitimize individual opinions thereby legitimizing various interests, such as political or economic. Hate speech, discriminatory discourses and fake news and disinformation are also often used for this purpose. The place that opinion polls have occupied for decades in social research has been taken by social media and opinion mining (Splichal, p. 4). At the same time, Splichal does not treat opinion polls indiscriminately, nor as the gold standard for „testing” the validity of an opinion poll.

In the emergence of online integrated private-public networks and communication platforms, Splichal sees a liquefaction of the boundary between the once clearly separated domains of public and privacy. As he states:

Privateness and publicness are connected qualities as they are each other's negation, but they also constitute each other, as they are what they are only through their relation with each other. Maintaining boundaries between the public and private spheres and enhancing their autonomy are therefore essential to human freedom and democratic governance. (Splichal, 2022, p. 5).

He calls for maintaining privacy by controlling the extent to which others have access, but also by self-controlling that access. The changes in production and consumption and new modes of communication that have liquefied the private-public dichotomy become the basis for Splichal's reflections on critical development issues. He poses the questions of whether the originally critical notions of advertising, public opinion and the public sphere have lost their critical impetus and epistemic value? If so: How can a critical perspective be restored? What role did the rise and fall of the idea of the public sphere play in this? (p. 10)

These questions become the starting point for broader normative-critical considerations of theoretical conceptualization and empirical reference to specific situations and conditions of the rise and fall of public opinion and the public sphere in scientific and public discourse. To achieve this goal, Splichal divided his book into five chapters.

The first chapter discusses the early history of the idea of public opinion and the concept of the principle of the public (then called „publicity”). Splichal supports the discussion with the approaches of Machiavelli, through the Enlightenment thoughts of Bentham, Rousseau, and Kant, and the idealist approach of Hegel, and finally the contemporary empirical-historical approaches of Tarde, Tönnies, Lippmann and Dewey. Adopting a chronological approach, Splichal identifies the key points of development and marginalization of the critical concept of public opinion, marked by the invention of opinion surveys, the rise of opinion methods and data analysis. The closing catch of this part of the book is the

consideration of a new category that emerged in the mid-21st century, the idea of the public sphere.

The second chapter focuses on the phenomenon of quantifying public opinion and the belief that public and private actions can be translated into numerical data, thereby making it possible to track and forecast phenomena. Quantification of public opinion, through opinion polls, has been greatly enhanced by the latest digital forms of data. This, in turn, has contributed to questioning the legitimacy of public opinion as a national and transnational phenomenon.

The third chapter addresses the decline of the concept of public opinion in scientific discourse, which was replaced by Jürgen Habermas' concept of the public sphere. According to Splichal, this was the need to respond to the collapse of the once-critical concepts of the public and advertising, which lost their critical epistemic value due to the development of promotional advertising and surveillance, and due to the commercial and political spread of opinion. Now there is a liberalization of the concept of the public sphere, which is being accomplished through internetisation.

The fourth chapter deals with the eponymous datafication of communication and data mining, associated with the development of digital communication, which is changing the public sphere and influencing public opinion. Splichal points to their operational reduction by narrowing their scope, stripping them of their discursive nature and blurring the line between what is private and what is public. The mining of opinion in online networks leads to the replacement of opinion polls, and this reopens the question of the essence of public opinion and makes us think about possible threats to the autonomy of the public sphere.

The final section of the book presents a framework for developing a public scenario on news media and journalism at a time when public communication is becoming increasingly private and threatened by the development of commercial messaging apps that can manipulate and steer opinions. Splichal proposes the creation of a „public knowledge algorithm,“ a way for researchers to critically respond to techniques that manipulate public opinion. The chapter presents the six basic elements of the public (VARMIL) as benchmarks for research on three levels related to (infra) structural conditions of the public sphere. They can also be used to identify the basic functions that should be performed by the media and journalists as key indigenous actors constituting the public sphere. Splichal suggests and urges comprehensive empirical and theoretical work, a close connection between social theory and research. He argues that the development of digital communication and data-driven public sphere research should prompt critical reflection on the theoretical foundations and epistemic value of empirical approaches.

Slavko Splichal's book *Datafication of Public Opinion and the Public Sphere. How Extraction Replaced Expression of Opinion*, is a must-read for anyone whose

research focuses not just on the categories of public opinion, the public sphere and democracy, but also digital communication and big data research. This study of crossing the divide between normative-critical theoretical conceptualization and „constructive” empirical application in the social sciences, prompts deeper reflection and consideration of the impact of major technological developments, such as data and opinion mining and algorithms, and on the social nature of communication and research approaches.

REFERENCES

- Habermas, J. (1962). *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*. Neuwied
- Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public Opinion*. New York
- Tarde, G. (1901). *L'Opinion et la Foule*. Paris
- Tönnies, F. (1922). *Kritik der Öffentlichen Meinung*. Berlin

Katarzyna Konarska

UNIVERSITY OF WROCLAW, POLAND