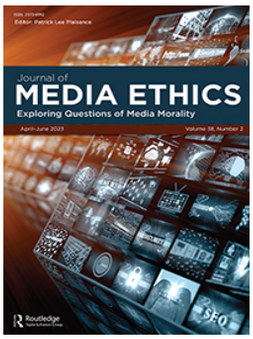
Recommendations for a Healthy Digital Public Sphere

Kalli Giannelos



Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Journal of Media Ethics
Exploring Questions of Media Morality

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hmme21

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To cite this article: Kalli Giannelos (2023) Recommendations for a Healthy Digital Public Sphere, Journal of Media Ethics, 38:2, 80-92, DOI: 10.1080/23736992.2023.2193970

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2023.2193970

Published online: 30 Mar 2023.

JOURNAL OF MEDIA ETHICS
2023, VOL. 38, NO. 2, 80–92
https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2023.2193970

Recommendations for a Healthy Digital Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT

As the multiple issues of the digital public sphere threaten our democracies and the cohesion of our societies, most attempts for a betterment of the digital networks and platforms revolve around a risk-response approach. This paper takes the opposite approach and develops a positive definition of the ideal ethical public sphere, combining normative features with original taxonomies. In view of defining common standards for a healthy digital public sphere, this paper offers an interdisciplinary literature review, and original recommendations, before discussing potential leverages for implementing these changes. The suggested ethical normative features derive from a positive approach to the digital public sphere, as ideal common standards. Sustained by the underlying assumption that the composite landscape of the media ecosystem and its different layers (networks, platforms, users) cannot be steered by government regulations alone, the normative (deontological) approach serves to understand and justify the need for a normative approach, to help envision new pathways for an ethical transformation.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 23 September 2022
Accepted 19 March 2023

In the era of digital media, new functions and boundaries shape the media ecosystem, with platforms and citizens playing the role of editors, with new responsibility and accountability circuits that defy conceptualization attempts. While media regulation has become a central response to media's adverse effects, other pathways could be envisioned. The field of digital ethics is prominently occupied by issues revolving around the governance of algorithms, digital monopolies (corporate dominations), singularity, digital democracy, and digital freedoms. Among the latter, we identify the normative grounds and solutions for a healthy digital public sphere. Attaining digital democracy and a democratic public sphere entails moving beyond the analysis of the ethical shortcomings of digital platforms toward a positive definition of the ethical digital public sphere. This analytical approach has been extensively explored by deliberative democracy theorists and perceived through its corrective capacities in regard to the democratic deficit combined with the public's distrust in mainstream news media (Schwanholz et al., 2018), or in regard to new enhanced civic interactions, early on labeled as the "great Agora' (Benkler, 2000).

This project offers common ethical standards as recommendations for a healthy digital public sphere, which derive from a selective literature review, as well as a set of leverages to achieve them. The digital public sphere is here considered in its multidimensional nature, encompassing all digital networks and platforms, targeting common ideal standards. The underlying assumptions guiding this paper are the following: (i) a positive definition of the digital public sphere can be reached through a normative approach unrelated to risks and anchored in the pursuit of ideal standards; (ii) common ethical principles can be proposed across all dimensions of the digital public sphere, focusing on its capacity to host democratic discourse and democratic values; (iii) leverages for the betterment of the

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digital public sphere could align with ideal normative standards, instead of the avoidance of risks. The focus of this paper spans across the definition of the ideal (ethical) digital public sphere, the exploration of its features and their impact, as well as the proposal of new incentives as solutions to reach a healthier state. Considering the political impact of digital technologies, the digital public sphere needs new models and solutions for building a sustainable media ecosystem. Drawing from the different approaches that the literature offers in terms of ethical foundations associated with the digital public sphere, we will aim at a comprehensive overview, combining democratic values and media features. Our approach builds on several disciplines – media and communication studies, political science, philosophy, sociology, deliberative democracy, and computer science – and delves into the impact of digital technologies on the online democratic debate and politics at large, encapsulated in the definition of the public sphere.

The digital environment has shaped new dynamics of democracy (Dahlgren, 2018): considering online platforms as a place of online deliberation, online civic engagement in the public sphere will also be considered through the Internet's potential to improve democracy through new pathways of political participation (Margetts, 2013), investigating how citizens use media technologies and contribute to the online public sphere (Schwanholz et al., 2018). The identification of these normative pillars and their operational translation in the architecture of the digital public sphere points to the need for new ethical commitments, able to steer the new digital town square toward a healthy public sphere enabling sound levels of information and interaction between citizens. In the media ecosystem, the need for responsibility and social cues (e.g. gender, race) helps prevent hostility and uncivil behaviors (Maia, 2018).

The selection of ethical principles for a healthy digital public sphere will be addressed through different theoretical lenses, aligned on principles of responsibility and responsiveness (toward users and society). Harnessing online media for the betterment of our democracies will be here addressed through the definition of the ideal features of the ethical public sphere, as well as leverages to implement it. Working toward an original definition of the healthy digital public sphere, the first section identifies the specificities brought into the public sphere by new digital technologies, introducing a digitally mediated public sphere. The identification of inherent political risks (second section) leads to inversing the approach and defining the ideal normative features of a healthy digital public sphere (third section), combining existing theoretical approaches with the suggestion of a new model. Following this, the last section delves into the practicalities of the ethical transformation of the digital public sphere, exploring potential leverages.

The public sphere and its digital avatar

Initially defined by Habermas (1962/1989) as a discursive space where individuals discuss public matters, the public sphere is ruled by discussions of public concern. Habermas considers that the public sphere enables public discourse as a key element of political participation, encompassing opinion and decision: this definition identifies three dimensions: openness to participation, legitimacy of public decisions, and the ideal of the rational-critical discourse (Van de Steeg, 2009). Yet the diversity of publics forces the consideration of a plurality of the public sphere, at least since Nancy Fraser's (1990) critique of the Habermasian vision of the public sphere. The normative assumption of Habermas gives precedence to a singular public sphere over a proliferation of a multiplicity of publics: this is contested by Fraser, on the account that it would generate domination mechanisms, excluding from the public sphere what she calls "subaltern counterpublics" (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). The need for an inclusive discursive space can only be ensured in a plurality of public spheres, where people with diverse values can participate. However, inclusion is difficult to achieve, and also depends on the boundaries set regarding public talk versus the private sphere (Fraser, 1990). The public sphere in Habermas' vision is a separate arena, or as rephrased by Fraser's (1990, p. 58), "a theater in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk." If a key feature of the public sphere is to be separate from the state and to serve as a counterweight to the state (Fraser, 1990),

the different connotations of the term "public" can also give a broader meaning to the public sphere as "the totality of deliberation in public life in a society, including the institutions of government" (Bächtiger et al., 2018). To a lesser extent, the public sphere could, in line with Fraser's (1990) conception, point to the plurality of public spheres, encompassing traditional and new media.

Over time, the public sphere has shifted from a mass-media public sphere based on broadcast to a digitally networked public sphere with networked communication offering a two-way communication system (Cohen & Fung, 2021), and eventually turning into the new battlefield of modern politics (Thompson, 2020). Digital technologies bring new possibilities for wider public participation while they also introduce new issues, related to reality distortions, caused either by filtered access to information or fake news. The mediated public sphere transforms the way citizenship is exerted. Probably the most significant dimension is that the citizen is also a media user, with only partial overlapping of both dimensions. In the era of mass media, a major political impact identified early on (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) was the political setting effect of mass media, while mass media were the main contact of citizens with politics. Transposed to the digital era, these statements still hold true. We may posit that currently the main democratic challenges facing online media are to ensure the conditions of a democratic debate, in terms of privacy and free speech, qualitative information and trust, conditions for a healthy public discussion and healthy mechanisms of opinion-formation. This qualitative approach runs counter to the quantitative approach of a mediated space ruled by impact factors and human attention as part of the market economy: through their role in the regulation of public debate, gatekeepers shape this current state. In the digital deterritorialized space, the political sphere is altered, as well as the ethical notions of legitimacy and accountability, which escape the national boundaries and integrate a global connectivity (Volkmer, 2019).

The digital public sphere understood as transnational connected public discourse (Volkmer, 2019) offers new possibilities, while representing a shift toward mediated online interaction (Thompson, 2020). The digital mediation implies "the stretching of social relations across space and time and it involves a certain narrowing of the range of symbolic clues," while being dialogical and oriented toward many recipients (Thompson, 2020, p. 6). This distinction draws a continuous line between traditional media and digital media, precisely because they all have in common the fact that they rely upon organizations that operate as "social infrastructures" (Thompson, 2020, p. 9). Still, the political use of the Internet (i.e. democratic deliberation, opinion formation) is minor, as other functions are dominating the online public sphere: consumerism, entertainment, networking, and chat functions (Dahlgren, 2005). The goal of proposing an ideal normative framework is to protect the political dimension of the digital public sphere as the online public town, as well as other dimensions (e.g. cultural) that contribute to the political sphere and to social cohesion. Building a healthier digital public sphere is also about creating the virtual space that sustains the democratic values of our societies: as an ideal framework, it can help transform existing digital platforms or steer future digital networks and platforms. As the root of the public sphere in democracy must reconnect with the idea of a government for the people and by the people (Van de Steeg, 2009), the digital public sphere can reflect this ideal as a space of equality and equal participation in politics, under the form of a political community. The Internet brings an extension of the public sphere, this latter being a constellation of communicative spaces in society, with the sharing of information, ideas, debates, but also the construction of political will (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 148). However, unlike the non-mediated public sphere, the digital one does not necessarily provide the conditions for discourse.

The transformation brought by the new media intermediaries brings divisive views on the impact of the Internet. As explained by Dahlgren, (2005), some scholars argue that the Internet has not changed the public sphere because it has not induced any change in the ideological political landscape, has not changed public participation nor politics at large. On the contrary, others consider that the digital era transforms politics, offering greater civic interaction – which does not always entail public discourse, however. Moreover, for some scholars, the new generation of networked media has inherent democratic capacities (Benkler, 2006), while other scholars point to the fact that online platforms do not create a strong

public sphere, but only offer public space for discussion, connecting citizens and enabling conversation, without being necessarily associated with democratic features and equality, even making democracy more porous (Papacharissi, 2021). We could even differentiate online chat from genuine conversation. In other words, the Internet offers civic interaction but cannot provide a quick fix for democracy (Blumler & Gurevitch, 2001). In the Internet era, communicative shortcomings arise (Dahlgren, 2005) – such as less time to listen to each other, thus limiting participation – while at the same time, it liberates speech for people who cannot express their opinion in their social environment, or even amplifies citizens' voices without guaranteeing they are being heard (Papacharissi, 2021). Although the impact of the digital transformation on the public sphere is multifaceted and unclear (Dahlgren, 2005), nevertheless, new forms of visibility and interaction bear some inherent risks for the political sphere, related to public exposure, democratization of transmission along with the "banalization of recording" (Thompson, 2020, p. 24).

The digitally mediated public sphere (Cohen & Fung, 2021) could be considered in its plural form, following the different publics that coexist in a diversity of media systems, as well as diversity of voices and views and new possibilities of expression (Farrell & Schwartzberg, 2021). However, digital technologies are not inherently a tool for democratization, as stated by Ford (2021), also considering the political context of use. In a broader sense, the Internet itself does not bear any normative features, relying only on technical norms with normative scope. In this respect, different interactions between democracy and technology could be considered, as the following common perceptions: "democracy increasingly depends on technology for better or worse;" "technology is currently failing democracy;" or "technology could be fixed to support democracy more effectively and securely" (Ford, 2021, p. 275). The online public sphere can then offer new political options as online deliberation, e-voting, expanding democratic choice and an answer to the credibility crisis of our representative democracies – and the lack of citizens' influence at the ballot – as well as new risks and challenges (Ford, 2021). The Internet creates new communication channels in the political sphere, but access or influence are not equally distributed, and "the content, diversity, and impact of political discussion need to be considered carefully before we conclude whether online discourse enhances democracy" (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 18).

Digital technologies introduce new roles in the media environment, as citizens become users, and coextensively producers and consumers (Benkler, 2000), and as every user can become an editor, publisher or broadcaster (Miel & Farris, 2008). At the center, content – either cultural goods or information – form the basis of the online mediated information and reflect variabilities in regard to public interest: they can either be democratizing or colonized by specific interests at the expense of the public good (Introna, 2000). A diversity of organizations and technological features coexist, forming a pluralistic media ecosystem, with different cultural and political dimensions, bringing together culture, politics, and civic interaction in the same arena, governed by the same rules. With the extension of digital platforms' functionalities, taxonomies of media types differ according to the perspective. Miel and Farris (2008) outline a taxonomy of digital editorial institutions, identifying five main types according to the functions of author, editor, or public: publisher (with original reporting, editing, publishing, and distribution/broadcasting), news agency (gathers news that is published and distributed by others), aggregator (distributes and publishes content produced by third parties), author-centric (authors are controlling the content production and distribution), audience-driven (the audience is in charge of content production and editorial decisions). Other taxonomies suggested by scholars outline aggregation platforms (assembling content), search platforms (indexation of content) and social bookmarking (giving prominence to some contents) (Burri, 2016). Particular challenges can be identified in the case of social media, through their activity as cultural and political aggregators, vectors of identity, and through their political impact as the new town squares.

From risks to a positive definition of the public sphere

Several risks are associated with digital networks and platforms, and their use, with the consequence of blurring the possibility of a positive definition of the healthy public sphere that does not equate with risk avoidance. New mediations bear the risk of diluting the ethical principles governing our political contract and the sense of responsibility (Chardel & Reber, 2011). From the perspective of deliberative democracy theory, the online public sphere encounters four types of shortcomings, in terms of limitations in the understanding of: its epistemic functions, the participatory levels, the role of online media, and policy reform in relation with the context (Holst & Moe, 2021). Other scholars focus on three main issues: "the blurring of the line between journalism and social media chatter, the incentivization of 'fake news,' the emergence of new forms of mass persuasion" (Ehrenfeld & Barton, 2019, p. 4), and the fragmentation of the political discourse (Bouvier & Rosenbaum, 2020). We identify here three main areas of political risks of digital platforms: polarization, misinformation, and (loss of) political/social trust. These risks stem from the infrastructure, and in particular in the lack of diversity, which we identify as the root cause of all main risks associated with the digital public sphere. The deprivation of diversity generates a number of negative impacts as filter bubbles, echo chambers, information cocoons, fragmentation of public discourse. The connection between reduced exposure diversity and the fragmentation of the public discourse has already been identified (Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2002, 2007), leading to a situation in conflict with democratic ideals. In line with Chris Anderson's analysis of the distribution system tail, the choice between the long tail or the head is a complex one according to Sunstein (2007), who shifts the usual observations from the perspective of diversity and curiosity toward the political consequences – as niches may have adverse effects on the shared culture, thereby leading to fragmentation in politics – and the vague policy responses on this matter. Past research on news media (cable news and the press) has shown that while oppositional media hostility is nurtured by a fragmented media environment, the possibility of choice (self-selection of contents into proattitudinal political contents) reduces negative assessment of news media (Arceneaux et al., 2012). Also, the fragmentation of media into niches enhances divisive forces tending to marginalize the public from the common conversation on politics (Arceneaux et al., 2013). Another political impact of media is that distrust in media increases partisan voting (Ladd, 2010). Transposing these findings on news media to the digital public sphere (i.e. the digital media ecosystem), points to the connection of political fragmentation and distrust with selective (media) exposure on the one hand, and political engagement and voting on the other.

Algorithmic selection is associated with several risks, including loss of diversity (echo chambers), or threats to data protection. Filter bubbles theorized by Pariser (2011) sustainthe fragmentation of public discourse and polarization of views, keeping users within familiar boundaries (Burri, 2016). These negative effects are rooted in the algorithms' goal to maximize engagement by reducing exposure to non-alarmist contents and promoting shocking, alarming and even radicalizing contents (Farrell & Schwartzberg, 2021). Scientific research on the matter is supporting that online news knowledge is more polarized when it is filtered by online platforms and social media (Dommett & Verovšek, 2021). Filter bubbles "filter out information that disconfirms our priors while highlighting information that strengthens them" (Farrell & Schwartzberg, 2021, p. 191). This fragmentation of the digital public sphere is all the more problematic that exposure to unanticipated material is key to democracy (Sunstein, 2007), as it prevents social fragmentation and extremism. The scholarly debate on echo chambers is divided (Dommett & Verovšek, 2021), with some views pointing to the limited exposure to diversified information and the resulting reinforcement of one's own convictions, while other views indicate that this issue is tempered by residual diversity that ultimately results in people encountering information they disagree with. Such contradictory statements are challenging for policymaking adaptations, which are lacking strong empirical consensus. Also, the overall impact can be altered by any potential underlying political agenda in digital platforms (Gilardi et al., 2022), which should be identified. Cohen and Fung (2021) identify a chronological coincidence between the rise of the digital public sphere and amplified polarization, notably through the form of affective

polarization, much higher to the mass media era. Both polarization and misinformation – which are mainly epiphenomena of algorithmic selection, due to the confinement of one's views within filter bubbles – can result in hate speech and violence. However, platforms are not responsible for the content but for the organization of the platform (Helberger, Pierson, et al., 2018).

Beyond risks, desirable features can be identified for a healthy digital public sphere: these ethical principles can draw from the normative features sustaining deliberative models (Beauchamp, 2020). Having ideal media conditions allows for healthy deliberation in the political system (Maia, 2018), inasmuch as the political impact of the technical features of the digital public sphere is considered. The health of the digital public sphere is particularly relevant in the context of deliberative democracy theory, which draws the conditions for political discourse (Chambers & Gastil, 2021; Chambers, 2003; Dommett & Verovšek, 2021; Forestal, 2021; Sunstein, 2007). We here argue that the deliberative model is relevant in our search for the ethical principles of the digital public sphere because it focuses on the conditions of sound political debate. This exploration entails a shift from a consumer-oriented approach toward a citizen-oriented approach: as already mentioned by Sunstein (2007), the impact of digital technologies should be evaluated on citizens and not only on consumers. The most important dimension of the public sphere for Dahlgren (2005) is civic interaction and discussion. Similarly, Dommett and Verovšek identify two strands for "desirable democratic practice online:" diversity of communities and publicly-available knowledge. The boundaries of the unforeseen long-term and large-scale consequences in political/civic life point to the need for a context-dependent normative analysis of the use of digital mediations. The need for a healthy digital public sphere appears as a moral imperative, given the pervasiveness of the digital space and the extent of the risks at societal level. In our subsequent analysis we aim at ethical standards common to all types of digital networks and platforms, as general normative principles for the digital public sphere.

Building ideal normative features

Addressing the ethical or desirable features of a healthy digital public sphere implies a consideration of the existing limitations and risks a move toward a positive and ideal definition of the digital public sphere that we will here address through an interdisciplinary perspective: through a literature review in deliberative democracy, philosophy, media and communication studies, political science, sociology, and computer science. What we term *ethical* is elsewhere found under the terms of "well-functioning democratic public sphere" (Cohen & Fung, 2021). It will here be addressed through the lenses of the concept of responsibility in both its backward-looking (liability; accountability; blame) and forward-looking (as obligation or virtue) dimensions. It also will include the notion of responsible innovation, and its inherent dimensions of anticipation, reflexivity, inclusion (deliberation) and responsiveness (toward society) (Van de Poel & Sand, 2021). The main paradox, pointed by Papacharissi (2002) is "how do we recreate something online, when it never really existed offline?" (p. 20). Yet, the constraints and comparative assets of both dimensions are not the same. The normative foundations of the public sphere can be identified at the crossroads of desirable features related to the digital infrastructure, or to democratic ideals related to deliberation and civic discourse, and broader democratic ideals. The main requisites for a healthy digital public sphere are encapsulated in the vision of the Council of the European Union (2020) regarding a free and pluralistic media ecosystem, which should be grounded in sustainable, pluralistic and trustworthy media. .

Among the pluralism of moral theories, our approach of media ethics draws from normative ethics and deontology in particular, which seems more relevant to our approach, due to ethical principles collected from our literature review and the important contribution of deliberative democracy, which aligns with the deontological perspective emphasizing on duty, obligation and moral rules. We identify the main limitation to the transformation toward the ethical digital public sphere in the market forces.

In the scientific literature, the media ecosystem is usually analyzed around different blocks: three scholarly approaches have expanded over the years, each with different conceptual and technical references, outlined by Dahlgren (2005) as the structural, representation, and

interactional dimensions of the digital public sphere. These dimensions can be related to (i) freedom of speech, access or inclusion, (ii) accuracy, and (iii) public debate. On the downside, this three-tier categorization introduced by Dahlgren (2005) does not reflect interdependencies: the representational dimension is intrinsically structural, if we consider that the algorithmic infrastructure defines content (the media outputs) from the viewpoint of diversification and accuracy – insofar as the modalities of access determine and select the contents. Algorithmic selection affects the representational dimension of online platforms, limiting the user's autonomy into predefined boundaries, thereby transforming online content as a question of access and structure. In that respect, to Dahlgren's (2005) classification and terminology, we here introduce a new analytical approach across two dimensions. Online content and the infrastructure hosting it could form a first dimension – "*infrastructure and display dimension*;" while a second dimension would relate to civic interaction and public debate – a "*media use dimension*." In other terms, the first one is under the responsibility of media platforms, whereas the second one refers to the citizens' online behavior and their use of media platforms. Around these two blocks, editorial functions are commonly shared by platforms and their users, as different gatekeepers act as intermediaries or editors of online content (Benkler, 2006; Burri, 2016; Sunstein, 2007).

Our bidimensional analytical approach will allow the categorization of additional normative features that we import from several theoretical approaches, for their relevance in an ethical approach to the digital public sphere. We will first consider the ethical features on what we have termed the *infrastructure and display dimension*, for which we identify in Cohen and Fung (2021) five key criteria: basic liberties, expression of views, equal access, diversity, and communicative power. While the authors (Cohen & Fung, 2021) acknowledge that this framework is demanding, this does not resolve the question of how to instill a civic culture in a non-binding fashion – in other terms, the leverages and the means for this transformation. Ford (2021) suggests an architecture for effective digital democracy built around four hierarchical layers: the base is digital citizenship preventing fakery, then the layer of access and inclusion, completed by a higher layer of information and content (accurate and unbiased information) as the basis for deliberation, and finally the democratic deliberation and choice layer, which is the ultimate goal, for self-governance through democratic deliberation and social choice (Ford, 2021).

The digital transformation of the public sphere renews the idea of citizenship around cultural rights as citizens (equal access to social life) and consumer choices (products tailored to our needs and rights upon them (Golding & Murdock, 2001). This division between cultural and material resources is useful to outline the different needs and issues related to the digital public sphere. According to Golding and Murdock, full citizenship can only be granted through infrastructures that provide five criteria: (i) access to diversified information; (ii) access to frameworks of knowledge; (iii) access to opposing views; (iv) access of just cultural representations (cultural diversity); (v) equal participation to public culture. While more recent literature draws on deliberative democracy features, this approach offers an original connection between cultural diversity and citizenship in the digital public sphere. These authors also point to the shift in the communication system, from cultural rights to market choices: two decades after, we could argue that the citizens/consumers divide has been replaced by a fusion of both tendencies, though back in 2001, Golding and Murdock had stated that "greeting users primarily as consumers precludes addressing them fully as citizens" (p. 115).

An additional relevant normative feature is the diversity of content, which is also an essential characteristic of a healthy digital public sphere. We primarily locate this feature in the infrastructure dimension, and we connect it with the ongoing debate on recommender systems' role in the democratic role of media and diversity of exposure (Helberger, 2015; Helberger, Karppinen, et al., 2018; Napoli, 2011), the issue of the concentration of media ownership, and the advertising-based revenue model of most digital platforms. Also, deliberative democracy literature is another strand that we identify as relevant for its connection with matters of sound public debate: we identify useful principles that could be applied to our *infrastructure dimension*. Relevant principles would be the following: purpose, accountability, transparency, inclusiveness, representativeness, information, integrity

(oversight), and privacy. These eight principles derive from the eleven-principles grid of good deliberation principles outlined by the OECD (2020).

At *media use* level – our second analytical dimension referring to media use and the public's interactions – we first identify two deliberative principles that could form the basis of a healthy interaction: respect and integrity (Bächtiger et al., 2018). We identify three additional features that apply both to the content/infrastructural dimension and to the interactional dimension: absence of coercive power; equality/inclusion; common good orientation (and fairness). It is worth noting here that deliberative theorists as Bächtiger and colleagues (2018) also consider the principle of consensus, which beyond the requirements of a deliberative mechanism, could not be ethically considered in a democratic public sphere since disagreement and diversity of opinion and views are a core democratic requisite. The deliberative model is both useful and not entirely transposable to the digital public sphere – with dramatic possible abuses if consensus was retained as a goal. In the context of online media platforms acting as channels of public discussion, we here select some deliberative principles relevant for shaping an ethical online civic discourse – removing those that are either too specific to the consensus/output-oriented goals of deliberative processes or those that do not preserve anonymity and privacy. Applying deliberative features to media-based communication (Maia, 2018) is rooted in the idea that democracy depends on the possibility of a public sphere with deliberative potential. For most scholars investigating the deliberative potential of the digital public sphere, the normative foundations revolve around the ways to leverage the democratic potential of digital communication and information technologies. Also in deliberative democracy and specifically in literature targeting online deliberation, we identify relevant features for the digital public sphere: the discourse of the users should be aligned with reason giving, respect, honest expression (Beauchamp, 2020).

Drawing from other theoretical spheres, we find additional principles relevant for our *media use dimension* in the three norms identified by Cohen and Fung (2021) as components of a healthy political culture: truth, common good, and civility. In their taxonomy, the first norm mitigates the spreading of misinformation to the extent that the person sharing is aware of the truthfulness (or lack of) of the views or contents expressed/shared. The second one relates to acknowledging the value of equality (including communicative freedom, justice) in a collective discussion; the third one is a matter of accountability to others and the commitment to explain underlying values and principles for any views supported. Also, equality and inclusion are identified by Fraser's (1990) as key components of the democratic public sphere, since they create a participatory parity, which is essential to a democratic public sphere. Inclusion is, however, still a challenge as online participation is still not egalitarian, a phenomenon identified as a digital gap between production and consumption (Schradie & Bekirsky, 2022). On the side of civil discourse, civility should not be confused with or reduced to politeness (or courtesy) toward others, because heated disagreement contributes to democracy and impoliteness does not equate with incivility (Papacharissi, 2004).

From ideal normative features to ethical recommendations

Following the previous interdisciplinary literature review, this section discusses some ethical dimensions derived from our analysis and presented here through the perspective of their translation into operational technical features. These normative features relate to the different dimensions of responsibility, both in the sense of holding responsible – and the related dimensions of accountability, liability – but also forward-looking dimensions as the willingness to take responsibility and to proactively consider societal challenges (Van de Poel & Sand, 2021), in building healthier platform standards. The principles that we previously selected from our literature review can be merged into four different sets of recommendations for at healthy digital public sphere.

A first set of recommendations revolves around *trustful networks and platforms*, aligned with responsibility and accountability principles. This first cluster relates to the possibility of having an open and inclusive web economy – endeavors in the direction of web 3.0. Transparent privacy and ownership of Internet platforms are aligned with this aim. In view of ensuring basic liberties, data

protection, digital citizenship (absence of fakeries), accuracy in information and contents, several principles prevail as transparency, accountability, clear purpose (objectives of the network or platform), integrity (and transparency in oversight), accuracy and common good orientation. This ethical dimension falls mainly under the responsibility of networks, platforms owners and regulators. In addition to the recent European regulations introduced on consumer protection, new improvements are still needed in algorithmic accountability and transparency audits, targeting the way recommender systems harness data relying on personalized consumer data. Similar to a hosting structure of a civic debate that has to explain and prove its respect to privacy (OECD, 2020), a digital public sphere would need these principles in order to ensure a sound ethical public square. Also, privacy and data security are the basic requirements for a public debate that is inclusive and protects citizens from attacks. Trust and privacy also contribute to reduce the influence of algorithmic filtering and related polarization effects. Congruent with the concept of open science, promoted by the European Commission (2014), trust is also a multidimensional feature. Its translation into operational guidelines can find significant obstacles, since transparency is problematic in the case of private companies that have to defend their competitive advantages.

The second cluster that can be identified through the previous literature review is *diversity of content and views*. Diversity of content could be perceived as a corrective ideal, spanning from cultural contents to information, and that counters echo chambers and filter bubbles and their impact (political and ideological polarization, most notably). Diversity of online content ensures better information and unbiased opinion formation, while it also preserves the democratic requisites of access to diversified information, opposing views and just cultural representations and inclusion in the representations. It also counters phenomena of fragmentation that, as noted previously, derive from the lack of diversity. The principle of diversity requires "equal access to a range of competing views about public values" (Cohen & Fung, 2021, p. 30). This, in turn, contributes to a qualitative public debate and a well-functioning public sphere. The issue of fake news can be addressed by other means than suppression: by increasing the access to reliable information (Cohen & Fung, 2021). Reaching diversity both in supply and exposure (consumed diversity) entails a shift in recommender systems, as well as in media use (information on algorithmic filtering and ways to avoid it). This normative dimension is not included in legal provisions and would require new leverages.

A third cluster that we can derive from our literature overview is *inclusive, respectful and free civic discourse*. This last normative dimension targets communicative freedom and civility, with a view to actualize the deliberative potential of the digital public sphere, its inclusiveness and representativeness, and to ensure it aligns with basic liberties. Civic discourse relies on the possibility of equal chances (equal participation in the digital public sphere) and expressive liberty – which stands against censorship and is "democracy enabling" (Cohen & Fung, 2021). Civility is the main counterbalance to expressive freedom, ensuring broad participation, while it is also a norm mentioned by Cohen and Fung (2021) as a key feature in a well-functioning democratic public sphere, by acknowledging the persistence of "deep and unresolvable disagreements on fundamentals" that can be solved with equal respect and the justification of the views expressed. This third ethical dimension requires respect and integrity, absence of coercive power as well as equality, and should ensure that there is a broad array of voices. This would require that the algorithmic infrastructure addresses the issue of allowing lay citizens to have a voice (regardless of their followers and their media exposure). From the side of digital networks and platforms, values of reason-giving, respect and honest expression could be promoted in value-sensitive designs encouraging a sound public debate. This third normative feature falls under the responsibility of networks and platforms primarily and the way they enable a safe and trustful environment with basic rules to ensure inclusion, civility and freedom of speech. The citizens' responsibility also intervenes, in a lesser degree, according to their capacity to honor these rules and rights.

All these features lie mainly under the responsibility of platforms (*infrastructure dimension*) but can also be subjected to the media user's responsibility in the choices they make, that can either hinder or concur with these goals. These three normative features emerging from our literature review and positive definition of the ideal digital public sphere are outlined in the following table (Table 1). As

Table 1. Main normative dimensions for a healthy digital public sphere.

Ethical dimension	Related features	Related challenges	Type of platform	Responsibility
Trustful networks and platforms	Data protection Accountability and transparency Common good orientation Accuracy	Privacy and ownership of data; open and inclusive web economy; responsibility allocation and integrity; trust and media independence	Social media; search engines; news aggregators	Mainly networks and platforms
Diversity of content and views	Diversity of content and diversity of views (diversity supplied or consumed)	Fight against echo chambers and filter bubbles; access to diversified information, opposing views and just cultural representations and inclusion in the representations	Social media; search engines; news aggregators	Both platforms and users (citizens)
Inclusive, respectful and free civic discourse	Equal participation and inclusion Expressive freedom Civility	Basic conditions for democratic discourse, to be ensured via equal conditions of free speech and representation in the public debate and general rules of civility and respect.	Social media	Both platforms and users (citizens)

recommendations, they primarily target networks and platforms' responsibility and subsequently, to citizens' responsibility.

To operationalize the three ethical dimensions presented above (in Table 1), we suggest four different leverages, which could be categorized as follows: (i) change in the infrastructure (digital platforms) through regulatory or self-regulatory approaches; (ii) change in media use through ethical nudges. These latter have been already explored in studies on exposure diversity (Burri, 2016; Helberger, 2015; Helberger, Karppinen, et al., 2018), which is only one dimension among others. If we disregard the regulatory pathway, the other two leverages rely on the voluntary change of digital networks and platforms by digital actors' themselves in the first case, and in the second case, their possible endeavor to guide users toward a responsible use. Both strategies suggested are inspired by responsible innovation, that draws from the pluralistic concept of responsibility, referring to the future orientation we aim at as a society (Owen & Pansera, 2019), offering a more responsive approach to societal grand challenges (European Commission, 2014; Von Schomberg, 2013), through a broader understanding of accountability and responsibility toward society or stakeholders (Van de Poel & Sand, 2021). Responsibility allocation is difficult since many entities can be held accountable, rendering responsibility attribution difficult (Helberger, Pierson, et al., 2018) and also considering the pluralism of the conceptions of responsibility (Doorn, 2012; Reber, 2019). This hurdle favors the solution of orienting the incentives both toward the platforms and the users, so as to find a middle ground in the sharing of responsibility. Solutions of cooperative responsibility have already been suggested (Helberger, Pierson, et al., 2018) but with the aim to feed into governance (regulations) processes. Business incentives for entrepreneurs and ethical nudges for citizens (created by digital networks and platforms) could be potential leverages worth considering for the operationalization of these normative features.

The suggested normative approach has offered three ethical recommendations emerging from a positive definition of the digital public sphere. Only the first recommendation (*trustful networks and platforms)*, and partly the third (*inclusive, respectful and free civic discourse*) – regarding content moderation – are currently covered by regulations. This entails that a normative approach would require changes from within, led by corporations themselves willing to play an active role toward society's grand challenges. Entrepreneurial incentives would stem from the promotion of responsible innovation approaches "appreciat[ing] the power of free markets in organizing innovation and realizing social expectations but differ[ing] with it in being self-conscious about the social costs that markets do not internalize" (Valdivia and Guston, 2015, p. 2). Such approaches could therefore benefit from an ethics labeling, that would both steer the market in a sustainable direction and guarantee a more responsive media interface in regard to individual and societal

interests. A missing indicator is the extent to which business actors are willing to steer their activities toward responsible practices, aligning on international sustainability indicators and shifting the media ecosystem in a healthier direction, on the basis of self-regulation.

Conclusion

The digitally mediated public sphere brings new opportunities and risks to the public sphere, at the same time that it has blurred the boundaries between the media and the market, politics and the public, or between information, content and public chatter – under the same infrastructure and rules. A normative approach can serve to identify some ideal features that could converge to shape a healthy digital public sphere. With a view to create a healthy digital infrastructure enabling a sound public dialogue, this project has explored the specificities of the digital public sphere in relation to the traditional one, and has focused on its interactive nature, through the conditions for a healthy digital town square. Through an interdisciplinary literature review, we selected key characteristics, stemming from political science and philosophy literature, as well as communication, media studies and sociology, computer science, and even in deliberative democracy theory. These features have been successively discussed and assigned to a specific dimension of our analytical grid. This original taxonomy identifies what lies under the responsibility of media platforms, termed *infrastructural and display dimension*, and *media use*, depending on the public's use of the media.

Considering the ways to operationalize these normative features, this project also offered an original combination of this literature review, proposing three main ethical recommendations that align with a positive and ideal definition of the digital public sphere: *trustful networks and platforms; diversity of content and views; inclusive, respectful and free civic discourse*. These three recommendations for a healthy digital public sphere are the synthesis of an interdisciplinary literature review and have been outlined as original recommendations, stemming from a positive and ideal definition of the digital public sphere. This normative ideal approach serves to reverse the usual risk-oriented approach in endeavors to build a better Internet, and to both justify and anchor normative features into several theoretical perspectives that support their relevance and contribution to setting a sound basis for a digital public sphere that is responsive to society and citizens.

While all three recommendations rely primarily on the responsibility of digital actors, only the first and partially the third one are currently covered by regulations. For this reason, new leverages are needed to effectively transform the digital public sphere with a view to reaching these recommendations. The leverages we identified could be divided into two categories, following our two-tier analytical grid: (i) on the side of platforms' responsibility, regulation and self-regulation ; and (ii) on the side of users, informational nudges (media literacy) and behavioral nudges (civic discourse). Incentivizing ethical reforms in the media ecosystem would necessarily take the form of a transnational endeavor, rooted in innovation dynamics themselves. The unforeseen long-term and large-scale consequences in political and civic life point to the need for a context-dependent normative analysis of the use of digital intermediaries from an empirical standpoint. Future research could benefit from connecting this theoretical analysis and the suggestion of innovation incentives with market forces, as monopoly mechanisms. Also, a study on market dynamics in relation to responsible innovation would allow to determine the efficiency of the leverages that have been proposed.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express her gratitude to Vin Arceneaux and Bernard Reber for their encouraging and constructive feedback on the first version of this paper, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article. She is also grateful for the support of the library and the Scientific Direction of Sciences Po and in particular to Delphine Lereculeur, as well as to Martial Foucault.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the McCourt Institute

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