

TIKTOK AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE: EXAMINING THE STRUCTURE OF
ONLINE DISCOURSE

by

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ABSTRACT

What does the word *public* mean to you? In relation to *private*, the public offers a world outside of your individual life; it is its own sphere of society. The public sphere refers to the space that contains the public's communication, discourse, and debate. Ideally, this could be an equal place where the public could communicate its needs to the government. In reality, the public sphere is often dominated by a particular group of individuals who control the conversations and discourse within the sphere. Now, in the age of the Internet the public sphere has seemingly been implemented online. Social media platforms make virtual meeting grounds a new space for deliberation. The structure of these online spaces seem to be similar to the structure of the public sphere: a space for the masses, circulating discourse, and relatively equal. Yet, even online exclusions are made so that some voices are valued more than others. This paper seeks to analyze the platform TikTok, observing if it is comparable to the public sphere. Results indicate that while TikTok shares certain qualities that define a public sphere, there are still issues concerning exclusions, privacy, and algorithms.

1. THE BOURGEOIS PUBLIC SPHERE

What do the essay you published, that random article your mom sent you, or even the hashtag trending yesterday all have in common? They all exist within the same space; the realm called *the public*. Each are put into a place where others can view and respond to them, and each have their own assumptions & arguments about the status quo. Now, it might be true that the #MariahSZN (Mariah Season) has no argument outside Mariah Carey's influence on Christmas. Nonetheless, the space it exists in has an important history that influences the way we communicate in online spaces.

The term, *the public sphere*, is used to describe the space of society that holds the public's communication. In the past, the communication was specifically revolved around discourse over the problems facing the commonwealth and was strictly physical (i.e., print media, group gatherings). Ideally, they could use this discourse to form a public opinion and influence political action. Yet, the ideal is never actually implemented. While there are seemingly spaces that the entire public has access to (i.e., the internet), there are ways in which some opinions are more valued than others. Specifically, the public sphere is an exclusionary sphere that often centers white voices. The history of the public sphere explains how these exclusions have worked and continue to work. Called, *the bourgeois public sphere* (BPS) because of its tie to bourgeois society, the BPS developed values that excluded marginalized communities on the basis of racism, misogyny, and classism.

As the internet age continues to bring new developments to the virtual world, the question of the virtual public sphere becomes more prevalent. More and more of our time is spent online and communicating through platforms like, twitter, facebook, and now

through short videos on the app Tiktok. TikTok brings together millions of users everyday, interacting with each other in various ways. The app provides a space for people to process the world, it holds discourse over the status quo, and it has the potential for public influence. With that said, the BPS continues to influence the public sphere. TikTok has its problems; algorithms, corporate influence, and continued marginalization keep the platform from being a perfect space. How is the BPS responsible for some of the issues seen on the app? The following paper will analyze the bourgeois public sphere and how it came to be so exclusive. It will then analyze the app TikTok as a potential public sphere, observing the influences of the bourgeois public sphere.

The Bourgeois Public Sphere

“The bourgeois public sphere maybe be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come[ing] together as a public.” (Habermas, 1992)

The public sphere is most famously expanded upon by German philosopher Jurgen Habermas in his book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*. In this book he is analyzing the complete economic, political, and cultural transition from feudalism to liberal capitalism. The rise of secular philosophy and the development of the market economy, the restructuring of the family unit, are specific characteristics that aided this transition and also helped the development of the public sphere. (Warner, 2002) It helped develop the public through increased communication and by providing the philosophical groundwork to understand the world differently (i.e., the individual learned a new sense of individualism and autonomy that helped redefine the terms public and private). At the same time, the public

sphere aided the transition by promoting further communication over the status quo, giving people the opportunity to discuss how they wanted things to change.

To sum, Habermas is analyzing the fundamental changes that occurred as society transitioned from feudalism to liberal capitalism. The transition brought society out of the divine right of kings and into a liberal society hallmarked by free trade, democracy, individualism, and human rights. This analysis is done to observe how the public sphere is both developed out of this transition and helped continue it. Habermas is looking at a specific type of public sphere, however. As previously mentioned, the public sphere is not a universal space where all equally contribute to, and Habermas understands this to a certain extent. He is specifically concerned with the bourgeois public sphere, and understands this is not inclusive of everyone. (Habermas, 1992) His purpose is to acknowledge the major role bourgeois society had in the transition. While there are other important ideas to consider in public sphere theory, the role of the bourgeois public sphere provides a foundation to understand the rest of the nuances of the topic.

The bourgeois public sphere has had a major influence on the world, specifically through the way we communicate in public spaces. To fully understand how it developed, Habermas begins to recount its development by retracing the history of the terms public and private. He finds that in the periods of ancient Greece and liberal capitalism there are distinct definitions of the two terms with correlating spheres of society. (Habermas, 1992) In feudal society these two distinct realms cannot be seen.

Public vs. Private

Ancient Greece

Before discussing feudalism, Habermas helps the reader visualize what separate spheres of society can look like. In Greek society, the private referred to the realm of a master, his land, family, and land workers. The private realm was controlled by the master, so most other individuals had limited rights within it. The public provided a place for people to leave their private world and enter a communal space. This was where debate and discussion over the status quo took place, yet the opinion of higher ranking individuals had more value (i.e., the master was more respected in the public than the land worker). (Habermas, 1992)

Feudalism

As opposed to two separate spheres that individuals could move in and out of, feudalism created a singular sphere where all realms, (the economy, the public, and the state) were dominated by the monarchy, “Sociologically, that is to say by reference to institutional criteria, a public sphere in the sense of a separate realm distinguished from the private sphere cannot be shown to have existed in the feudal society of the High Middle Ages.” (Habermas, 1989) The public and the private aren’t necessarily combined, the distinctions are just blurred and the words lose their initial meaning.

The monarchs ruled all the land and assigned lords to own separate regions. In these regions, peasants would work for the lords in order to live on the land, thus being subject to the rules of the landowner. (Brown, 2021). However, there was not a public sphere they could exit to. There was a public community created by gathering the peasants on the land, yet it was created and regulated by the lord. Rather than the two separate spheres, the “‘private’ and ‘public’ powers are so fused together into an

indivisible unity that both are emanations from a single unified authority “ (Habermas, 1989).

Liberal Democracy

A distinction similar to the Greeks is made in liberal democracies. The private consists of the individual’s private matters—their family, their work, and their thoughts about themselves & the world around them. The difference is that an individual’s private life in Greek society was tied to their role in this sphere (master or worker); in liberal society the private is the space for the individual to learn how to think for themselves; they learn the ability to reason. The private realm is how a person learns they have opinions, and the public is the sphere where they can express these opinions and learn from others doing the same. (Kant, 1996) The value of reason is just one characteristic of the philosophy that helped define the enlightenment. Overall, this period of time had a major influence on the public sphere and the changing society.

The Enlightenment

In order to understand how influential the Enlightenment was on the bourgeois public sphere it is important to grasp the philosophy that represented the time. Philosophers like Immanuel Kant, and John Locke are two foundational thinkers that helped provide the groundwork of liberalism. Kant’s ideas on enlightenment and Locke’s ideas on rights and secularism are just a few of the major influences that contribute to the cultural transition from feudalism to liberal democracy. Furthermore, analyzing the

rhetoric of these thinkers helps highlight the inherent problems with the bourgeois public sphere and bourgeois society as a whole.

Kant and Locke

Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another. This immaturity is self-incurred if its cause is not lack of understanding, but lack of resolution and courage to use it without the guidance of another. The motto of enlightenment is therefore: *Sapere aude!* Have courage to use your own understanding (Immanuel Kant, 1784)

In his 1784 essay, *What is Enlightenment?* Immanuel Kant defines enlightenment as the human's capability of using their own judgement. Here he highlights the importance of reason. Reason is the "power of the mind to think, understand, and form judgements by process of logic". (Lexico) Thus, reason not only requires an individual to think for themselves, but strictly use the natural and material world to form these thoughts and judgements. This forms a foundation for both the value of individualism and secularism that marks liberal societies. Kant argues that there are institutions in our society, like religion and the church, that rely on the restriction of the individual's reason.

Similarly, John Locke expands on religious toleration and the separation of church and state. Locke uses the bible to challenge the justification for the divine right of kings, arguing there is no concrete scripture that justifies the monarchy. He also emphasizes the importance of religious toleration and expands further on the importance of separating the church from politics, "For the civil government can give no new right to the church, nor the church to the civil government." (Locke, 1990) His argument understands religion and politics as two separate spheres, religion concerned with spiritual matters, and politics with material conditions; this again promotes secular

philosophy and heavily influences the liberal ideology. Finally, Locke also emphasizes the right to private property, another important characteristic of liberalism. Because the world is made up of material goods, the individual has a right to the ownership of these goods.

These arguments from both Kant and Locke heavily influenced the bourgeois public sphere. Philosophy helped introduce new ways of viewing the world, but in order to have any real effect, people needed to interact with and share these viewpoints. There was a new need for the “freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters.” (Kant, 1784) The public needed to be the space for individuals to share their judgements. The important thing to note, however, is *who* these thinkers were specifically addressing. Kant's new understanding of the public insinuates an ideal space that all reasoned individuals can join. For both Kant and Locke, the individual deserved freedom of thought and expression; they deserved the right to private property. But who was granted these rights? Moreover, who was viewed and respected as an autonomous individual?

The developing arguments justifying individualism and autonomy did not typically refer to all of humanity. Chattel slavery, scientific racism, as well as misogyny, were each at a violent high. Colonialism had created a white supremest society, and those not fitting the white identity were not respected nor considered. Thus, the problems discussed within the bourgeois public sphere were restricted to the problems facing the white bourgeois individual. (Bernasconi, 2002) Because of this foundation, these exclusions are only solidified by the continued development of the bourgeois public sphere. It can be debated whether or not the specific thinkers are actively racist, misogynistic, or classist, but either way they were influenced by the cultural and political

context of the time; a discriminatory context. Thus, the writings of the thinkers were influenced by this context.

Developing the Public Sphere

Expanding through things like the market economy, the family unit, printing press, and cosmopolitan lifestyle, the public began to interact more and develop a voice. However, the demographic allowed into the pubs where discussions were had, or those who were able to participate in print media and the market, were limited to bourgeois white men; so again, the conversations centered around this white perspective. Nancy Fraser writes that “subordinated social groups usually lack equal access to the material means of equal participation” (Fraser, 1990) When analyzing the development of the public sphere it is important to keep this in mind.

A key element in the economic transformation was the already developing market economy. Because the feudal rulers had absolute power over the state, economic concerns were ruled by the monarch, and local economies were small with no extensive power. However, the economy started to expand as “*town economies were extended into national territories*” (Calhoun, 1990). It is important to note again that the actors within the market were restricted to a certain demographic. White men were able to participate in the economy and start building wealth before many other marginalized communities.

A certain “print capitalism” began increasing literacy rates and exposing individuals to more information. Because of an expanding economy, the amount of information that flowed also heavily increased. A growing literary sphere saw the expansion of print media giving the individual a platform to critique the state.

Furthermore, because of the increase in connection, there was a public that could interact with these critiques and form their own. This was able to spread with the increase of pubs and physical meeting grounds where people could share and further deliberate. Through these spheres of debate we see the early development of the bourgeois public sphere.

“Not just because its members are mostly bourgeois but also because the reorganization of society around public criticism was one of the means by which bourgeois society came into being” (Warner, 2002).

Important to note is who owns the means of production. For example, the printers used to publish, the building where it takes place, all the tools needed to produce the materials is owned by a certain class of individuals. Mainly a result from liberalism and the right to private property, the ability of these individuals to begin taking ownership of these spaces created a biased public sphere that highlighted the problems facing the ruling class. Marginalized voices were thus excluded from these spaces, but nonetheless were still able to be heard. They formed their own spheres and circulated their own discourse. Additionally, there were instances of privileged individuals using their power to uplift the struggles facing marginalized communities. An example being abolitionist newspapers like *The Liberator* (1831-1864) that helped promote black voices. (Tikkanen, 2021) This reiterates the fact that the public sphere is not a universal space, but made up multiple publics with complex relationships between each other.

Additionally, the role of the family helped develop a new definition of the private. In Greek society, the private realm was restricting and defined by your duties. Some of this restriction developed into the enlightened family, with the patriarchy still having heavy influence on its structure; “on one hand, they were bound together by patriarchal

authority; on the other, they were bound to one another by human closeness” (Habermas, 1989). The family, while still very much connected to the market economy, became a sphere for the individual to learn their agency, exposing them to their humanity.

A final influence on the bourgeois came from aristocratic society (Habermas, 1989). The characteristics of an elite society that expressed value for wealth, beauty, and “proper” behavior influenced bourgeois culture. This heavily contributes to the white-centric perspective that exists within the bourgeois public sphere. There was a deep admiration for the “civilized” man. The values for civility, beauty, and manners were each dependent on how the terms were defined. These values, especially combined with the developing race sciences, were able to reinforce white supremacy. “As western colonial imperial powers conquered the territory of others on a global scale, those who were subdued and exploited were argued to be of... ‘barbaric’ character similar to Locke’s state of nature.” (Richardson, 2011) This rhetoric heavily influenced the bourgeois class and moreover the bourgeois public sphere.

The enlightenment is often seen as a progressive time in history that led to a serious change in the trajectory of society. In many ways, it definitely brought about revolutionary times; however, liberation from feudalism was only liberation for a few. There was an inevitable restructuring as the new society came to be. The influence of the bourgeoisie was carried out through their ownership of institutions and continued exclusion of marginalized groups. The bourgeoisie became the new top of the class and their values were made mainstream.

Expanding the Theory

Habermas helped bring it under focus in the second half of the 20th century. Since then, many have offered their criticisms of his work, tweaking and rejecting some of the points he makes. Past Habermas, scholars have provided general criticisms of the public sphere and its function in democracy. Many of these criticisms have pointed out to counterpublics, and antagonistic dialogue. Many question if the public sphere has an effective role in political action. Nonetheless, public sphere theory is lively and varied.

Counterpublics

Again, Habermas' *Structural Transformation* focuses on the bourgeois public sphere. As society progressed further into liberal democracy the bourgeois public sphere seemed to be better represented as the mainstream public sphere. The sphere still had the same value for the white identity, civility, and beauty, but began to expand past the bourgeois class as the new middle class began to emerge. Thus, these values are connected to the mainstream public sphere, consistently excluding marginalized communities in various ways.

Scholars like Michael Warner expand on the idea of counterpublics, or the spaces formed by those excluded from the mainstream public sphere. (Warner, 2002) These spheres are defined both by the identity of the individuals within, as well as the correlating topics of discourse. Nancy Fraser refers to this as a plural model of the public sphere, multiple publics that interact and overlap at times. She writes, "I contend that, in stratified societies, arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics better promote the participatory parity than does a single, comprehensive, overarching public." (Fraser, 1990) Fraser spends time in her essay

Rethinking the Public Sphere explaining how the singular model of the public sphere is not sufficient for the society we actually live in.

Throughout history, there are several examples of counterpublics achieving important political change. Examples like the civil rights movement, labor movements, and gay liberation movements, all start with marginalized communities coming together and organizing political action. These movements have moved society toward progressive social ends. In the 1980's homophobia was mainstream, now you can be seriously ridiculed for being outwardly homophobic. The same goes for blatant racism; the mainstream rejects racist hate speech and violence. However, the mainstream is still representative of a white perspective, so the progressive acceptance can only go so far.

For example, “the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex or national origin.” (GOV) Racism in the workplace and in federally funded programs was outlawed, and there was also an emphasis on desegregation and voting rights. These are policies based on active racism that can be easily noticed. However, racism is not solely an active display of hatred. The way we speak and the way we think is influenced by implicit biases that have developed since birth. Author Derald Sue uses the term “aversive racism” to describe a type of racism that affects most white progressives. (Sue, 2010) This type often sees the individual as completely unaware that they may be expressing/holding onto racist biases. Aversive racism will expose itself in who the individual spends their time around, the little comments the individual makes, and the behaviors they express towards Black individuals. Micro-aggressions are a way of expressing these biases in ways that might not even be noticeable to the individual spreading it. Sue defines micro-aggressions as:

Brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group. (Sue, 2010)

It is easy to call out overt racism because it is easily observable. In order to deal with implicit racist thoughts and feelings, the individual has to deconstruct their worldview and observe how it might be affected by a racist society. (Sue, 2010) Sue refers to an article whose “study reveal(s) that it is difficult for anyone born and raised in the United States to be immune from inheriting racial biases.” Because of the social context of the U.S., individuals are more than likely to develop racial biases. The same applies for the institutions created in the U.S.. The bourgeois public sphere had created itself with racist values, and the adjacent political, economic and social context of the country helped sustain these values. In order for the mainstream public sphere to become fully inclusive, it would have to fundamentally change to stop valuing the white identity. This would jeopardize the structure of the public sphere and the power of the ruling class which is not desirable. Therefore, the extent to which the public sphere includes marginalized voices is limited.

Conclusion

The bourgeois public sphere set a foundation that would effect the structure of future renditions of the public sphere. The public sphere would no longer represent strictly bourgeois society, but its values would continue to influence its structure and function. How exactly does it do this? Throughout the 20th century, examples of active exclusion through segregation, violent homophobia, and patriarchal values show continued exclusion of marginalized voices. However, mass society began to develop

more socially progressive views, thus the way exclusions were carried out shifted. Wealth inequality still caused the public sphere to favor the upper class. Further, the way we communicate is influenced by bourgeois values and can be seen through micro-aggressions and implicit biases.

With the introduction of the internet to the public in the 1980's, the public's communication would start to be held in online spaces. The progression of social media created a networked virtual sphere that introduced people to individuals miles away; it expanded the circulation of news and cultural products to a greater amount of people and made these items easily accessible. It wasn't long until discourse was being held on some of these platforms, showing the potential for a digital public sphere. While characteristics such as discourse and deliberation can be noticed on internet platforms, the influence of the bourgeois public sphere continue to affect the present public. The following section will analyze how the BPS influenced the internet from the beginning and how that influence is maintained present day on the social media app TikTok.

2. THE DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE

Habermas provides a foundational recount of the bourgeois public sphere. His work is critical to understanding how publics work. The 20th century began to make the public sphere inclusive, but only to a certain extent. The sphere was no longer specific to bourgeois society but constitutently maintained bourgeois influence. How does it continue to maintain this influence into modern times? Exclusions continue to affect the public sphere, but do so in different ways.

The 1980's introduced the public to the internet and the world was never the same. The internet made the impossible, possible. Now people could connect with groups, listen to music, watch a video, all within the comfort of their home. Social networking became a new way of connecting with multiple people. As time progressed into the 2000's, the internet became attached to our daily lives. Our smart phones give us the ability to join a public discussion at any moment with a few clicks. Is it possible that the development of a virtual sphere of society helped create a virtual public sphere? Applying Habermas's definition, the internet shows similarities both to the ideal definition and to bourgeois characteristics.

TikTok is just one platform that billions of people use and interact with. The video-based app lets people interact with each other in a unique way compared to other social medias. The app is content focused and is known for a really strong algorithm. The following sections will analyze how the internet shares characteristics with the public sphere, observing specifically how TikTok relates and is affected by the bourgeois public sphere.

The Internet

The internet first began in the 1960s as a networking project being studied by computer scientists and researchers funded by the U.S. Department of Defense. (Andrew's, 2013) It wasn't until the 80's when the platform began to open to the public. (Shah, 2016) In an essay tracing the history of social networking, author Shaqib Shah describes some of the first recognizable platforms for online communication: the Bulletin Board System (BBS), CompuServe, AmericanOnline (AOL). (Shah, 2016) The BBS and

CompuServe were simple programs to send a message to someone or share a file, but AOL “was the internet before the internet...complete with searchable ‘Member Profiles,’ in which users would list pertinent details about themselves.” (Shah, 2016) This can be recognized as one of the first types of social media profiles. AOL and early online communication paved the way for a developing World Wide Web.

As computer scientists learned more about how online networking worked more became possible. The development of Amazon and Yahoo, and the World Wide Web in the 90’s made it possible to finally “surf the internet”. (Jefferson, 2020) It was clear with the already millions of users in the 90’s, the internet was creating a virtual sphere the public could enter into, creating new possibilities of connecting with people, culture, and news. (Ward, 1997). There was a hope in the internet’s potential to become a functioning public sphere, while at the same time, there was an understanding of the potential problems it posed. The internet had already developed its own exclusions, the discourse held was a small portion of the communication, and there was a tendency for “flame wars”. (Ward, 1997)

A Potential Virtual Public Sphere

The early stages of the internet started the development of a virtual sphere of society, These programs made the idea of a virtual public sphere a real possibility. In her essay, *How Democratic Can we Get? The Internet, the Public Sphere, and Public Discourse*, Author Irene Ward analyzes the internet as a potential public sphere, finding characteristics of Habermas’ definition in online spaces. She does this by applying Habermas criteria for an ideal public sphere; there must be a dissolution of social status,

an increase in access to “cultural products”, and it must be generally accessible to the masses. (Ward 1997)

First, the Internet provided relative anonymity for its users. The users account was not dependent on the status of the individual in the real world, and thus it helped “to focus attention on what is being over who is saying it.” (Ward, 1997) Second, it helped tear down any barriers that kept people from engaging with art and literature. The internet helped to make it where wealth or higher education wasn’t necessary to engage with the culture. “Commodification of cultural products” helps spread these products to a larger group of people. (Ward, 1997) Ward highlights the tendency for the public sphere to become more inclusive because of the economic incentive. Lastly, there was seemingly general access to the internet, as there were no direct or active institutions/laws banning from any certain demographic of people. In these general terms, the internet seems promising. It provided a space for all to come and contribute to. However, it was not as accessible as it seemed.

Though social or economic status did not affect the users account, it did effect who was able to purchase computers and access these platforms. (Ward 1997) Many of the first buyers of PC’s were those who had the extra money to do so, typically those at an economic advantage (white upper class men). Thus, the content being spread around on the internet was influenced by this demographic. Further, the discourse held on the internet was only a small subsection of the millions of users, “The degree to which users of the Internet can challenge other users' assumptions and make themselves available for such challenges from others...still remains extremely small.” (Ward, 1997) Even so, Ward mentions that the limited discourse held would often lead to “fire wars.” The

anonymity of the profile made it easier to be adversarial in discussions with other people, often leading to heated discussions. Ward concludes that while the internet has promises of an ideal public sphere, but in practice there is a limited role it can play.

Developing Issues

Ward was right to make the observation that the internet would become more accessible as the price for computers became cheaper. More people could afford a computer and so the internet only became a more dominant part of our lives. After 2002, social media platforms with complex profiles were becoming mainstream. (Shah, 2016) MySpace, LinkedIn, Youtube, and eventually Facebook and Twitter, brought millions of users to their platforms. The economic barrier became less of a concern (though never completely gone), but new problems arose. Specifically, the concern for anonymity and algorithms have sparked discussion.

Ward points to anonymity that exists on the internet as beneficial. She acknowledges, though, that this can challenge the integrity of the information spread on these platforms. The problem of anonymity sees the easy potential for users on social media to spread misinformation and engage in hateful debate. (Dreyfus, 1999) The internet makes it easy for users to make a profile with no trace of their identity and have no accountability for the things they say. Author Hubert Dreyfus argues this is unfavorable because it can “undermine expertise.” (Dreyfus, 1999) There are some things that just need to be studied consistently in order to fully understand them. This doesn’t mean a degree is required to speak on everything, but the internet makes it especially easy for nuanced discussions to be misrepresented. Finally, the lack of identity makes it

easier to engage in antagonistic discussion. “Flame Wars” refers to the tendency for a series of hateful comments between two or more individuals. (Dictionary.com) Because there is no accountability, people feel safe to say things they might not say in the real world.

Secondly, as social media became more complex, the question of algorithms became an important topic. Because these platforms are major corporations, their interests are strictly profit based. (Tufekki, 2018) Author Zeynep Tufekki compares communicating in a “networked public but privately owned sphere” to “moving political gatherings to shopping malls from public squares.” (Tufekki, 2018) The public is allowed to gather here and have discussions, but the owners of the space have can decide who to kick out, what to prevent from being said, etc. Thus, the structure of social media and its regulations are determined by the corporation with little regard for public interest. This is a reoccurring issue of the public sphere, however. The upper class and corporations have long owned more property and the means of production, so there has always been private ownership of public spaces. The newness of this issue comes from the way it is algorithmically implemented.

Lastly, micro-aggressions and the centering of white voices continues to be a problem. The affects of the bourgeois public sphere have influenced the internet and continue to do so. Ward acknowledges “that the demographics of the Internet are strikingly similar to the demographics of the bourgeois public sphere: male, educated, and propertied.” (Ward, 1997) Now, with more social media platforms than one can count on their hands, there is a fully fleshed out virtual sphere of communication. How does a modern platform work in comparison to an ideal public sphere? How does

bourgeois society continue to influence the virtual sphere today? The social media app TikTok brings millions of users to its platform where people communicate everyday. The app is comparable to the public sphere in its circulation of discourse, culture, and news; however, the app has its ways of excluding marginalized voices: through the algorithm, and through micro-aggressions. The next section will analyze how communication on TikTok is structured and if its structure is 1.) comparable to a public sphere and 2.) influenced by the bourgeois public sphere.

TikTok

TikTok is a video based social media platform that allows users to make fifteen second to three minute long videos. The app is split into two pages, the For You page (FYP) and the Following page. The FYP suggests videos based on content you interact with, and the Following page is based on videos from people you follow. Users upload videos about anything they'd like (so long it fits within community guidelines) People can view and comment, and they can also "stitch" the video, a way of directly making a response video to someone else's clip. Finally, users can also have live sessions where people can watch the user talk live and comment in the attached comment section. There are many ways for users to communicate on the platform and with the app's one billion users there is consistent connection being made. (Dean, 2021)

The content shared on the app is varied; there are dance videos, cooking videos, comedy, and even discourse. Users will often times come to the app to talk about an event in the news, a philosophical concept, or a political cause. A video about choice feminism versus intersectional feminism will gain thirty four thousand likes and over a

hundred thousand views, showing that there is somewhat of a circulation of discourse on the app. (Lauren, 2021) On the simplest level, TikTok is a space that brings people together to a virtual public setting where they can express opinions and enter into discourse over the status quo.

Unfortunately, the reality of the app cannot perfectly fit into this definition. The app is often exclusionary, the discourse often leads to antagonistic dialogue, and the majority of users aren't actively engaging with discourse. Furthermore, the concerns over privacy and algorithms continue to apply. Whether or not TikTok truly fits the definition of the public sphere, its structure has clear influences from the structure of the bourgeois public sphere. The development of the bourgeois public sphere was incredibly influential and TikTok serves as an example of the sphere's continued influence.

The TikTok Public Sphere

To observe if TikTok has similar characteristics, I will first define the public sphere using part of Habermas' definition: the sphere of society where individuals may come together to share their thoughts on the world, potentially forming a public opinion through deliberation. Referring to the three points discussed in Irene Ward's *How Democratic Can We Get?*, I will observe if the app dissolves social status, spreads culture news and deliberation, and if it is generally accessible to the masses. (Ward, 1997) Second, I will also define it as a plural sphere with separate publics and counterpublics that form a dominant and subordinate relationship. Finally, I acknowledge that because the app still belongs to a corporation, there are artificial influences that tamper with the natural engagement with the space. However, despite these influences, it is still an app

that brings together a public of people, forming relatively natural interactions between users.

To begin, the app is not entirely reliant on social status within the real world. While already established celebrities can make a profile and instantly gain thousands of followers, the app allows for just about anyone to garner thousands of views and interactions. A reason for this can be pointed out in how the app “focuses on optimizing the content you see” as opposed to “the connections between people who [already] know each other.” (Vicente, 2021) Other social media platforms rely on connecting friends, family members, and coworkers, thus profile following is based on who already knows the most people. TikTok values the content of the video and shares it with people the app thinks would be interested. So, if someone makes a video over a topic many people relate to, they will likely attract people to their content. On some level, this values the content of what is being said over who is saying it.

As for the content of the videos, there are several examples of all kinds of discourse, analysis, and engagement with issues facing the public. One example shows the circulation of feminist discourse on the app:

A video from user @jazmelody suggests that women who work in male dominated work spaces tend to assume one of three roles: the mother, the bro, or the sexy object. This was something she had learned from her gender studies degree and shows how men will put women “in a category on how to relate to [them].” (Melody, 2021) The comment section was filled with users engaging with her ideas, but garnered even more attention when another user responded. The account @bmekween responded with her own video sharing her experience in engineering, arguing that women switch between in

these roles. In her comment section, users are again interacting with the argument and some applying different lenses to the argument; i.e., a user noted that “being a black women you have to ad the code and hair switch too” which prompted @bmekween to make another video opening up this point for conversation. (@menatedmillennial, 2021)

The first video had over sixty-two thousand views and twelve thousand likes. The second video had close to four hundred thousand views and fifty thousand likes. While these numbers still seem small in comparison to the billions of users on the app, there is still a large number of people engaging in complex discourse. A second example focuses on political/social discourse and how attempting to live ethically can sometimes cultivate hate to small businesses:

User Madeline Pendleton [@maddeline_pendleton] made a video responding to a person who left a comment on another video of hers. This user was asking her thoughts on how our efforts to live more ethically can make it where the collective attacks smaller business. (@bbymystic, 2021) Pendleton argues that this is because we are all trying to live morally, but due to the circumstances there are necessary evils we have to engage with (going to the grocery store, buying clothes, etc.) (Pendleton, 2021) Because it is harder to attack large corporations, the public puts its attention on smaller company’s that are easier to effectively criticize and shutdown.

While these videos don’t necessarily lead to direct action or political influence necessarily, they show how TikTok is a space where complex topics are being discussed. Things like captions and the video style help make the app more accessible for the disability community. The app is downloadable on most types of smartphones and tablets, thus the amount of people it can reach can only increase. Further, the app forces

the creator to make their discourse digestible and comprehensible because of its short time length. Further, videos reviewing and analyzing music (@pablothedon) and books (@schizopphrenicreads) is being shared constantly. Habermas' point that an ideal public sphere will be able to be inclusive to the masses, and it will spread discourse and cultural products to more people. Examples of these characteristics go far past the two videos mentioned and show the TikTok's potential of serving as a public sphere. However, there are very real problems with the app and its structure. The apps exclusions, the problem with anonymity, and the corporate influence are issues that have both been long established within the public sphere. The algorithm and the context of late stage capitalism create unique characteristics in the problems of the digital public sphere.

The Bourgeois Influence

There are several examples like the two provided above that show TikTok's capability of engaging the public in discourse and discussion. However, the app still manages to exclude marginalized creators and boost white creators. A big example comes from an incident in which creator Addison Rae came under fire for performing TikTok dances on *The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon* and did not credit the original creators of the dances. The creators were predominantly black creators that have earned a significantly less amount of fame and attention than Rae. (Juneau, 2021) Rae has over eighty-two million followers, while creator Mya Nicole, the original creator of the dance Rae used, has about one million. (Rae, n.d.; Nicole, n.d.)

This is not an isolated incidence either. Black creators have consistently reported of the term "shadow-ban" that refers to a method of discreet censorship. Essentially,

“shadow banning refers to blocking or partially blocking a user or their content from a web forum so it’s not immediately apparent to the user that they have been banned.” (Gebel, 2020) Creators will have their videos taken down, their views suppressed, and their account at times will even be restricted. *The Intercept* published internal documents that showed directions telling TikTok moderators to suppress content from “undesirable” people. (Biddle, 2020) While these practices reportedly are no longer in use, the problem continues to effect marginalized creators. This situation exposes an influence of the bourgeois public sphere: white centered voices. “Undesirable” depends on how one defines it, allowing racism, classism, ableism, etc., to help come up with a definition.

Counterpublics on TikTok. These exclusions lead to a gap in the views amongst different creators. However, just as the bourgeois public sphere, those excluded are left to create their own spheres of connection and discourse. TikTok is known for its incredibly accurate algorithm. The content it suggests is specifically catered to you and dependent on how you interact with the app. Thus, little niche communities of related demographics, subcultures, and discourse form “sides” of TikTok. While the mainstream side garners millions of views and seems to be creators like Addison Rae, the other sides of TikTok stick within the hundred thousands when it comes to views. With these divisions set by the algorithm and by the exclusion of certain communities, there seems to be a dynamic similar to the dynamic of publics and counterpublics.

For example, queer discourse is a popular subsection of discourse held on the app. Several users will make videos over the problems facing the community and engage with others in attempts to reach a common understanding about a particular issue. A video

from the user @eelbabe expands on “the project of queerness”. (@eelbabe, 2021) He argues that the goal of queerness is to abolish itself because the identity only exists as a result “of resistance against social conditioning and social categorization” (@eelbabe, 2021). The eventual goal is to break social conditioning and categorization to create a more accepting society, which would then make the queer identity unnecessary.

Another TikTok from user @I1z4rdg1rl argues that discourse on the app is just regurgitated arguments seen on the social media platform Tumblr. (@I1z4rdg1rl, 2021) What is interesting is how she speaks with an awareness of different spheres of discourse. She says “everyone has pretty much pointed out were going through the exact same queer discourse, the exact same mental illness discourse, and fandoms are behaving about exactly the same way they did back then.” (@I1z4rdg1rl, 2021) She indicates queer discourse and mental health discourse as distinct spheres represented by their topic of discourse.

TikTok has a complex dynamic that brings people together in a very specific way. People can join niche communities that circulates content specific to their interests, creating a separate side of TikTok defined by these interests. Of course, some see this as an issue. There is a very real potential for echo chambers to be made, which risks individuals staying within their own bubble of beliefs, not challenged by other view points. (Alexander, 2020) There are still instances of people being exposed to videos that aren’t necessarily aligned with their tastes. People are exposed to differing view points, just not as often.

Final Thoughts

The influences of the bourgeois public sphere on TikTok can be seen in how the app excludes its users and sets up a system of dominating/subordinating publics and counterpublics. The influence creates a public that holds onto the problematic values the bourgeois public sphere was founded on. The app has many problems with it, from echo chambers, to silencing marginalized voices. Nonetheless, it shows the possibilities of online discourse in the way it circulates niche topics.

Social media is here to stay. It is likely not going anywhere for a long time. Analyzing its structure and how it is influenced by the history of the public sphere can show us how we might better make use of these apps. If we know the public is prone to centering white voices, then what can we do to uplift those marginalized? Understanding how our implicit biases affect us can help us deconstruct the instances of adverse and implicit racism/misogyny/homophobia/etc. It is important to study the public sphere in order to grasp how we interact with each other in these spaces.

Conclusion

The public sphere is a complex sphere of society that works in nuanced ways. No one public sphere is different, each depend on the context of the society they are constructed in. The culture, the history, and the politics all affect how the public sphere is carried out and implemented. Thus, a stratified society will recreate its divisions into the public unless otherwise dealt with.

There are hundreds, maybe thousands, of different possible analysis of the public sphere. The current research is just a sliver of the cake that is public sphere theory.

Furthermore, TikTok is still a relatively young platform. Both the public sphere and the app create so many questions over how society will progress from here. In regards to TikTok, it might be interesting to see how the app's algorithm will develop and if there will be changes to lessen instances of shadow-banning. With the public sphere, the ideas around publics and counterpublics offer all kinds of research questions. The relationship between them offers many different points to study. For example, counterpublics are not distinct subgroups with borders. They are intersectional, some individuals subscribing to the identity of multiple counterpublics (i.e., a queer black woman interacts with black spaces, queer spaces, and women spaces). The is a relationship between counterpublics is a potential research question.

Overall, the public sphere provides us with more than enough points to study and analyze. The bourgeois public sphere provides a foundation that informs of how the public started and how it works.

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