Forum:	General Assembly Third Committee
Issue:	Alleviating the Polarisation of Discourse in Public Spheres
Student Officer:	Mary Freeman
Position:	Assistant President

Introduction

With technology exponentially becoming more integrated in the human experience, the domain of public spheres have had to adapt. Before the internet, public spheres were found in places like townhalls and markets for the common people, education and so literature for the intellectual class. The development of traditional media such as newspapers, radio, and then television, led public spheres to expand. The public sphere has now grown to incorporate social media thanks to the internet. Nowadays ideas can be shared with a click of a button for all to see. These virtual communities have enabled public spheres to globalise. And so, the change in what is a public sphere has also affected public discourse. Discourse is now not so localised, every thought and opinion posted on the internet will reach audiences farther than before. Public transcripts and hidden transcripts are now intermingled within social media. This in turn affects a government's relationship to its citizens. The presence of public thought is more apparent than ever before. Polarisation is now also more apparent. Polarisation is occurring either in between the public and the establishment, within the public, or even within the establishment itself.

Definition of Key Terms

Public Sphere

Based off of Haberma's thought, the public sphere is a domain of social life where differing public opinion can be freely expressed and formed. Haberma's public sphere requires it to be accessible to all citizens and constituted in conversation and participating individuals assume the role of a private person.

Questions to ask yourself: What are modern examples of a true public sphere? Is the public sphere always guaranteed in todays society? Can societies have true public spheres, or only altered versions of one? What are your country's public spheres?

Public Transcript

Political scientist James C. Scotts says this level of discourse is the open interaction between dominating and subordinate people, being openly accessible to all. This power dynamic inherently brings bias into the discourse, as it is determined by those in power.

Questions to ask yourself: What influence does the factor of power have in communication between different parties that are divided by social/political/financial gaps? How can solely analysing the public transcript exacerbate the problem of polarisation? How do those in power use modern public spheres to control the narrative? How does your country use the public transcript?

Hidden Transcript

Political scientist James C. Scotts appoints this type of discourse to be the internal communication within the subordinate people as well within the dominant. The hidden transcript is not determined by its social context (and as an extension its public sphere) but rather the content formed by internal discourse. This very well means that the hidden transcript can be part of public discourse, but not in the public transcript. This enables one to identify potential discrepancies between the two. 'Pure' forms of the hidden transcript are ideas banned from the public sphere, the discrepancies being too great that they are sanctioned.

Questions to ask yourself: How are the discepencies between the public and hidden transcripts in your country? How do modern public spheres play a role in this? Are hidden transcripts less 'hidden' due to these new public spheres? How does the dynamic between the subordinant and dominant change because of this?

Background

The majority of history was spent under monarchy rule for many. Monarchies have existed as early as Ancient Egypt, found in South America, Asia, Africa, and Europe. With sole monarch rule comes the responisibility of controlling the public transcript and having the subordinate class align themselves to it. This naturally bred hidden discourse and transcripts within the subordinate people, many unfavourable. A historical example of where the hidden transcript became part of the public one takes place in medieval England uner King John's rule. Barons were disgruntled by the king's arbitrary use of power. They captured London and made demans for King John to obey the law. The Magna Carta was then born, a document symbolising liberty. It became part of English law in the 13th century, and is echoed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Monarchies have since then fallen out of favour for democracies and republics. The nature of these forms of government provide opportunities for the hidden transcript to be part of the public transcript, such as constitutions that were to benefit all. Main public spheres grew to include the common people, mainly representatives of them. For governments that aligned to communism, it meant that hidden discourse was public discourse, and the public transcript should follow the hidden transcript. Today's world now makes up majorally of democracies, republics, monarchies, communist states, and dictatorships.

With the expansion of human development, traditional media has come to play an important part of everyone's lives. Traditional media includes print, radio, and television. Governments have used these to push the public transcript and to inform the public of what is happening in concern to them. Hidden discourse is also part of this new public sphere. Opinion articles of newspapers, differing guests on the news, have made the hidden transcript be seen, though it is important to note that these opinions were screened and checked by the establishments.

In the beginning of the 21st century, society has seen the liberalisation of media. New media now relies on the internet for distribution. Social media has grown to be an integral part of new media. Apps like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, and Reddit are meant to hold discussion between its members and have so expanded the domain of the public sphere once more. Anyone with WiFi can now post any thought on the internet. This can then in turn bring more attention to your ideas, wether positive or negative. Hidden discourse and transcripts are now ever more apparent in the public sphere, enabling them to become public thought, and so translate them into the public transcript. Social media has globalised interconnection.

Different countries have different views on the rise of social media. Some embrace it with open arms, allowing free access of new media to all and using the public opinion to form government policies. Other fear it for its possibility of rebellion, and censor the opposing forces in order to keep political power. There are forms of limitations in all public discourse of today, and countries have a large say in what is and what is not allowed.

In terms of polarisation, new media has amplified the issue at hand. Polarisation is the division into two sharply contrasting groups or sets of opinions or beliefs. Humans have had strongly opposing ideas amongst each other since the beginning of time. The problem of social media as the new public domain is that it is not only for the private citizen. More powerful establishments, wether it be companies or governments, have a role in social media. With this, they are able to push the public transcript by targeting individuals to support their side. This can be seen in political advertising, which allows political factions to supply their ads to their target market rather than all people. This strengthens their own base while distinguishing itself from other factions, allowing the rise of polarisation. There can also be the creation of exclusive communities, only allowing in those who share common beliefs, therefore alienating themselves from the general public. Social media has not caused polarisation, rather gave it more avenues to fester.

Major Parties Involved

United States of America (America)

America's problem with polarisation is seen with it's media habits in terms of politics. The extreme left and the extreme right composed 20% of the public overall in 2014, and has undoubtly grown. They have the most impact in the political process compared to those who have mixed idealogical views as they are the most politically active. Political polarisation is already clear. How these opposing sides use media only expands upon this. When concerning Facebook, consistent right-wing voters are more likely than any other ideological groups to be exposed to political opinions that support their individual views. This creates an echo chamber, that only reinforces right-wing, republican beliefs. On the same platform, consistent left-wing voters are more likely than any other ideological group to block and defriend those with opposing political beliefs. This only widens the divide between the two. This is a problem for America because as it votes for their representatives, those elected into power will be of polar factions, benefitting their own party rather than the whole of America. Reffering to the last paragraph of the background section, targeted advertising allows public and private interests – such as foreign powers looking to disrupt democratic processes – to further polarise pockets within American society in order to gain political and economic power. In the 2016

presidential elections, the Russian government was able to interfere with democratic processes using social media and targeted advertising to promote the then presidential candidate Donald Trump. The United States of America is constitutionally a country where freedom of speech exists and not to be taken advantage of.

Hungary

Viktor Mihály Orban has been Prime Minister for Hungary since 2010. He is also the President of the national conservative political party Fidesz. His most recent reelection was won with a landslide victory for him and his party. His stance is by definition nationalistic and anti-immigration, claiming to defend Hungary and Europe against Muslim immigrants threatening, **"**a Europe with a mixed population and no sense of identity" if immigration continues. In terms of his 2018 elections, international monitors said that opposition parties had no chance of winning. The Fidesz party stood up 'bogus' opposition parties in order to divide the anti-Fidesz vote and cement the party as the majority. The public transcript is controlled by the government in power, official state media outlets and private media companies who are allied with Orban have made the public spheres 'Fidesz friendly'. The Fidesz party has also been accused of gerrymandering parliamentary disctricts to once again ensure the party to be the majority. In March of 2019, the EPP bloc of European Parliament suspended the Fidesz party due to its 'non-EU' stance. Szelenyi, a political veteran of Hungary, says that "Hungary is not a democracy anymore. The parliament is a decoration for a one-party state."

Federal Republic of Germany (German)

In 2017, far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) became Germany's largest opposition party. It now controls 12.6% of the vote, having 94 representatives in the federal parliament and representatives in every state parliament. Their ideology is national conservatism, pushing for anti-immigration policies to fight the "invasion of foreigners" according to leader Alexander Gauland. They are seen by the public as a neo-Nazi group, whereas the German Intelligence Service says neo-Nazism is a subclass to this party. The rhetoric in the AfD public sphere has at times tinged with Nazi overtones. They supported the Pegida movement, a movement that staged weekly marches against 'the Islamisation of the West' and has adopted some of Pegida's anti-establishment rhetoric like calling news outlets the 'lügenpresse (lying press)', a term used by Nazis. They are steadily growing in popularity, particularly in eastern Germany, in some counties gaining more than 30% of the vote. The AfD seeks to pull Germany out of the EU if it continues to centralise.

Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

There has not been as much action taken due to new media being so recent. With social media allowing individuals to post with few limitations, the polarized communities tend to have more heated discourse. Most solutions have been directed towards hate speech and maintaining human rights in the online public sphere. Creators of social media are trying to limit the amount of hate speech and propaganda online, though this has been met with some resistance, some arguing it erases free speech.

Article 19 is the UN's campaign on Sustainable Development Goal 16, which aims to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels." They combat censorship, hate speech, and support digital rights, freedom of speech, and accessability.

Possible Solutions

- Regulations on targeted advertising practices and the acquisition of data
- Controls on social media user registrations to ensure that private interest is transparent
- Establish an identification system for polarizing content and misinformation
- Misinformation be penalised through strikes on accounts
- Make publishers of misinformation legally liable
- Provide a report if one country decides to censor content

Bibliography

Berkman Klein Center For Internet & Society At Harvard University, 2019, https://cyber.harvard.edu/topics/media-democracy-public-discourse. Accessed 1 Dec 2019.

"ARTICLE 19 - Defending Freedom Of Expression And Information". ARTICLE 19, 2019, https://www.article19.org/.

"Habermas' Public Sphere – Media Studies 101". Open Text BC Campus, 2019, https://opentextbc.ca/mediastudies101/chapter/habermas-public-sphere/ . Accessed 1 Dec 2019.

Heilig, Christoph. Hidden Criticism?: The Methodology And Plausibility Of The Search For A Counter-Imperial Subtext In Paul. Mohr Siebeck Gmbh And Co. KG, 2015, pp. 50-54.

Mitchell, Amy et al. "Political Polarization & Media Habits". Pew Research Center's Journalism Project, 2014, https://www.journalism.org/2014/10/21/political-polarization-media-habits/ .

Taylor, Natalie Greene et al. Information In Contemporary Society. Springer Nature Switzerland, 2019.

"What Is Magna Carta?". British Library.

Zappavigna, Michele. Discourse Of Twitter And Social Media: How We Use Language To Create Affiliation On The Web. Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012.

"Just How Far To The Right Is Afd?". BBC News, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-37274201.

Beauchamp, Zack. "It Happened There: How Democracy Died In Hungary". Vox, 2018, https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2018/9/13/17823488/hungary-democracy-authoritarianism-trump.