Accomodating pluralistic conflict in online (counter-) publics – a multiperspectival normative assessment approach

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Abstract

In this paper we argue that previous descriptions of normative models of a democratic public sphere lack a systematic account that links substantive ideas about what public debate should look like with a structural account of how to best achieve such a debate. Investigating the theoretical literature, we contrast 4 models of a democratic public sphere – representative-liberal, communitarian, deliberative and agonistic – and argue that based following each model's assumptions, principles for participation and linkage between different publics can be deduced that are of special importance for the design of online publics. In the last section, we connect these assumptions with current debates concerning online communication – the issue of echo chambers, hate speech and populism – and show that the four perspectives offer different answers to the question how to evaluate communicative breakdowns and how to repair them.

Keywords:

Normative assessment, representative liberal democracy, communitarianism, deliberative democracy, agonistic pluralism

Why do public sphere theories need an upgrade?

As Althaus (2012) reminds us, normative concerns about what is good or bad within political communication often inform both the research questions we choose, the conclusions we draw from our observations, and the policy implications we derive from them. Therefore, instead of relying on intuitive and undertheorized claims, we should aim for a systematic account of normative perspectives on how a democratic public sphere should function in order to inform our research. Using multiple, competing theories to ground our observations allows us to compare and contrast different normative implications of our findings as part of what we call a multiperspectival normative assessment.

In this paper, we will upgrade and specify four different normative models of a democratic public sphere for their application to online publics, based on extant accounts of long-standing traditions in democratic thought (Ferree, et al., 2002a; Held, 2008; Forst, 2002). We do this with recent developments in online public sphere research, and recent theoretical debates, in mind. The main goal of this paper is to provide a systematic account of how to accommodate deep pluralistic conflicts both *substantively* and *structurally* in four different traditions of public sphere theory, i.e., the representative-liberal, the communitarian, the deliberative and the agonistic-pluralist traditions (see table 1). How do these traditions deal with deep conflicts and how would they respond to recent challenges of online political communication such as echo chambers, hate speech and the rise of populist communication?

In the first section, we distinguish different public sphere models by how they aim to handle what Rawls calls the "fact of pluralism" as "a permanent feature of the public culture of modern democracies" (Rawls, 1987, p. 1): In modern societies, many different cultures and religions with their own respective traditions and conceptions of a good life coexist. A modern democracy needs to be able to enable the peaceful coexistence of these very different ethical-cultural commitments. With strong religious and cultural identities once more gaining

importance, and cultural conflicts being an increasing source for violence and even war these questions, in the early 21st century, are still at the foreground.

In the second section, we connect this question to the structural changes in mediated public sphere brought about by the partisan diversification of outlets and of sub-publics and, potentially, the increased participation of citizens in public debates. Early accounts of public sphere theories took a traditional mass media public for granted (Ferree, et al., 2002, pp. 9-13), and later works expanded on the possibilities offered by new technologies (Kies, 2010). Building on both, we aim to show that different normative traditions prefer different designs and modes of operation for online publics. These range from, professionalized public sphere unimpeded by lay citizen input, through broad public participation in public forums with strong linkage, all the way to networks of diversified, differentiated publics which combine strengths and weaknesses of different forums in specific ways.

After defining what attributes of public debate each model would aspire to improve, in the last section of the paper, we focus on discursive breakdowns and repairs (Estlund, 2008). There is widespread concern that in increasingly polarized public spheres, camp-bridging communication and constructive engagement across divides breaks down too often. We will look at how each model aims to deal with issues of echo chambers, that is, users within an online public sphere choosing to only rely on sources that confirm their biases, and only interacting with peers that share their views (Flaxman, et al., 2016); hate speech, in the sense of uncivil communication that threatens the rights or lives of groups of people based on race, gender or other common characteristics (Gagliardone, et al., 2015, p. 5); and populist rhetoric, in the sense of an appeal to “the people”, anti-elitism, and the exclusion of outgroups as strategies of populist movements and parties (Reinemann, et al., 2017).

Accomodating pluralism – four ideas about what to focus on in mediated public debates

At the center of different theories of the public sphere is the question how citizens should accommodate pluralism. Liberal, communitarian, deliberative and agonistic models of democracy all start from the baseline assumption that democratic theory needs to address the plurality of world views and lifestyles, and offer ways to handle disagreement and produce decisions that are legitimate in the eyes of citizens of all creeds. Public spheres constitute the social spaces in which such pluralism must be accommodated. Table 1 summarizes the model's perspectives on the preferred substantive focus of public debate in the first column, which we develop in the section, as well as their views of the appropriate set of participants and the linkage mechanisms between different arenas, which we turn to in the next section.

Table 1: Substantive focus, participants and linkage mechanisms in online public spheres according to four normative models

	Substantive focus	**Participants**	**Linkage mechanisms**
	What does the debate focus on?	**Who participates?**	**Where does the debate take place?**
Representative-liberal model	Communicative restraint	Elite dominance, Expertise	Representative overarching public sphere downward linkage
Communitarian model	Common ethical cultural values	Citizens	group-based arenas strong linkage
Deliberative model	Universalization of moral norms through public argumentation	All subjected groups or advocates	group-based and overarching arenas Loose linkage
Agonistic pluralist model	Contest between ethical-political projects	Citizens, marginalized groups	group-based arenas upward linkage into overarching public sphere

Representative-liberal theories of democracy feature different variations of what Ackerman calls *"communicative restraint"*. Since citizens cannot be expected to agree on a singular conception of the good life, they should try to retreat to neutral ground. When citizens in a political debate find that their argument rests on contested moral grounds, participants should decide to "simply say nothing at all about this disagreement and put the moral ideals that divide us off the conversational agenda of the liberal state." (Ackerman, 1989, p. 16) Liberal theorists aim at avoiding conflict by removing contested moral principles from the agenda and limiting politics to the practical application of principles of justice that are neutral towards moral points of view, with proposals ranging from socially liberal to libertarian principles (Ackerman, 1980; Rawls, 1999; Nozick, 1974). Liberal theorists assume outside of constitutional crises and deep reform (Ackerman, 1993), a liberal constitution can absolve everyday politics of the need to solve deep moral disagreement – the state functions as an umpire in conflicts, not a forum for debating deep moral disagreement (Gaus, 1996, pp. 184-191). In the extreme case, this can lead to arguments for gag rules (Holmes, 1988; Gaus, 1996, pp. 166-168) – if a topic is so inflammatory that citizens would expect any debate on it to threaten peaceful coexistence, politicians should instead agree to not debate the topic at all.

Gerhards (1997) links this to Down's (1957) description of elite competition within democracies: In a parliamentary democracy with strong political parties, professional politicians will have to learn to hold back inflammatory opinions, and concentrate on communicating common interests and policy solutions, while shying away from deep normative questions since bringing up deeply contested topics – culture, religion, and moral beliefs – could turn away potential voters. That way, he argues, political competition itself incentivizes communicative restraint for political elites. This overlaps with accounts of early 20th century accounts of democracy that similarly stressed the necessity of party elites to dominate politics, with the myopic, disinformed and disorganized masses of citizens

remaining apathetic outside of choosing amongst competing elites in free elections (Schumpeter, 2003, pp. 256-264; Held, 2008, pp. 134-157).

Communitarian authors argue that the liberal avoidance of ethical-moral questions, instead of leading to allegiance to the democratic state by diverse actors, leads to apathy and resentment. Since democratic decisions usually lead to a majority imposing their will on a minority, they fear decisions without any grounding in shared cultural values will alienate the losing minority (Taylor, 2003a, p. 18). That is why communitarian theorists aim to show that existing democratic institutions already rest on shared ethical traditions which should be fostered and strengthened. Shared cultural practices, education in the prevalent cultural traditions, and a public debate that grounds decisions in *common ethical-cultural values* are supposed to ensure allegiance to liberal democracy. This explicitly does not preclude pluralism and the prevalence of different cultures within society – instead, citizens of different backgrounds are supposed to accept each other as authors of a shared, common minimal cultural consensus that bridges different cultures (Taylor, 2003a; Taylor, 2003b).

While some communitarian authors seek the sources for such cultural consensus in the past (MacIntyre, 2003), and stress that we can fall back on already established traditions of thought that are the basis of many of our modern conflicts (Taylor, 1989), common ethical understandings should rest on an active citizenry that participates in debates on what the nation's identity and their common project should look like. Such ethical evaluations will always be culturally relative (Walzer, 1983, pp. 312-316; Rosa, 1998, pp. 487-547), so an exchange between citizens to renew and reinvigorate a common understanding, and to find a way include cultural minorities in the common political project is necessary, and only achievable through broad political participation (Rosa, 1998, pp. 433-444; Barber, 1984; Taylor, 2003a; Taylor, 2003b).

The *deliberative model* is often presented in contrast to the liberal and communitarian models (Forst, 2002; Habermas, 1994a; Kies, 2010, pp. 21-27). Where the liberal model aims to avoid conflict through communicative restraint, and the communitarian model aims to resolve it through fostering a common cultural identity, deliberative democrats aim at a *universalization of moral norms through public argumentation*.

Habermas' (1996) distinguishes moral principles from ethical concerns. For him, ethical commitments only concern members of specific groups – and are therefore not able to provide guidance in how to organize a pluralist society. Moral principles, meanwhile, concern the fair coexistence of different groups and consequently define duties and rights applicable to all citizens. For Habermas (1996, p. 228), these are to be found through public debate, which forces actors to take the perspectives of different members of the audience to form arguments that can survive their scrutiny. Over time, this incentivizes the formulation of impartial, universal principles that appeal across different cultural-ethical backgrounds. Public forums, therefore, should be structured in a way that enables public debate that has a strong probability to find morally sound, good policies, and avoid grave injustices (Estlund, 2008, pp. 112-116, 160-167; Habermas, 1996, pp. 118-131) in a continued practice that reopens debates and addresses perceived injustices in the light of new arguments (Benhabib, 1992; Habermas, 1996, pp. 179-180, 384, 488-490). The appeal to moral argument in this view is potentially emancipatory – marginalized groups often have not much but the strength of moral arguments to overcome the power of their oppressors, by showing how their grievances violate impartial norms that should apply to all citizens (Habermas, 1990, pp. 19-21; Habermas, 1994b, pp. 140-142; Huspek, 2007). Ethical-cultural debate and pragmatic bargaining where no moral agreement can be found are explicitly not precluded by Habermas. But he aims to show that ethical debate often cannot resolve disagreement across different ethical commitments. And political bargains often need to debate the morality of the process to assess whether a bargain can be considered a fair bargain (Habermas, 1996, pp. 162-168),

so open communication, for Habermas, has a tendency to fall back on moral arguments when other avenues of debate fail – at least if public scrutiny forces actors to justify their policies.

Agonistic-pluralist theorists position themselves as a response to the deliberative model (Mouffe, 1999), and in contrast to the liberal (Mouffe, 1993, pp. 41-59) and communitarian approaches (Mouffe, 1993, pp. 23-40).

For agonistic theorists, it is important to recognize that different identities within a modern democracy are incommensurable: political opponents, in a sense, speak fundamentally different languages that cannot easily translate across boundaries (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 60-79). Changing one's political views, thus, is less about seeing the validity of the other side's arguments, and more like a conversion (Mouffe, 2000, p. 102).

Conflict between different camps is thus unavoidable, and the goal is not to find just rules that resolve that conflict, but finding a framework that allows for *contests between different ethical-political projects* to take democratic form (Mouffe, 2013, pp. 36-58). Every existing order leaves a remainder, an outside - some remaining exclusion that does not account for everyone affected by a decision (Mouffe, 2000, pp. 21-22, 32-34; Honig, 1993). Political opponents always, potentially, see each other as an enemy; only if institutions allow for the expression of dissent can this antagonism instead turn into agonistic respect between parties that acknowledge each other as legitimate opponents (Mouffe, 2013, pp. 49-58). Different identities can unite their struggles through defining common opponents and compete for hegemony within the public, while respecting each other as adversaries, with electoral contests deciding which project temporarily prevails over others (2013, pp. 9-18). Through this confrontation with different identities, citizens should foster respect for deep disagreement (Connolly, 2005, pp. 30-37; Mouffe, 2000, pp. 102-104; Young, 2000, pp. 48-49) – only if dissent can be expressed in a democratic way is it possible to prevent citizens

from falling for nationalist, fundamentalist or otherwise illiberal alternatives (Mouffe, 2000, p. 96; Mouffe, 2013, pp. 7-8; Glover, 2012; Honig, 1993).

Participants and linkage mechanisms: four ideas on how to ensure productive public dicourse

Now that we've discussed how the different democratic models aim to handle conflict within a pluralist society, we can show what structure follows from these assumptions, and how theorists from each tradition would aim to realize their normative goals within complex and differentiated publics.

The representative-liberal model aims to avoid strong moral-ethical contestation and concentrate on the prudence of decisions. This is achieved by two means: Firstly, in these models, *expertise* and *representation through elected elites* are central – since professional politicians are better able to judge issues from a disinterested perspective and to weigh the evidence in favor of different policies (Schumpeter, 2003, pp. 269-283). They are more practiced in conversational restraint: By keeping strong moral evaluations out of public debate, they can appeal to the interests of different voter groups – thus representative politics are incentivizing constraint (Gerhards, 1997, pp. 29-30). Public political debate, in this view, is fair when different political interests are represented proportional to their strength within the populace – since a larger share of political weight is associated with representing the interests of more voters (Gerhards, 1997, p. 10; Ferree, et al., 2002a).

The structure representative liberals favor follows from that: Political debate is supposed to happen within a *representative overarching public sphere* dominated by political elites that is connected to the political center and makes its workings transparent to the spectating voters (Gerhards, 1997). We can therefore assume very sophisticated levels of argument within the overarching political public, with a polite, detached and reasonable exchange of arguments between political elites dominating the discourse. This overarching

public need only be a small sphere within all public communication, with any publics outside of the overarching political public being freed of strict normative demands. This division of labor is best achieved if there is a *downward linkage* from the overarching political public into other publics – while the professional public should be relatively unreceptive for lay opinions and semi-informed commentary, the content and results of debates within the overarching public should remain transparent for the rest of society – which observes but does not participate.

It is easy to see that the structure of traditional mass media publics, with political debate being dominated by oligopolistic enterprises who can self-regulate and maintain high professional standards is particularly suited for maintaining such a structure of debate (Gerhards, 1997; Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1991; Ferree, et al., 2002, pp. 9-13). Therefore, tendencies of new media landscapes to reproduce the elite dominance and market structures typical of traditional mass media publics are seen as a sign that the same structure can be maintained within online public spheres (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010). Relatively low levels of polite and sophisticated argumentation within social media publics fit with this model's assumption that lay publics could not be expected to uphold high standards of debate, and thus not be linked into the professional, overarching political public sphere (Freelon, 2013).

The *communitarian* model aims at broad public participation to arrive at ethically motivated decisions everyone can identify with and to foster solidarity between citizens (Taylor, 2003a; Rosa, 1998; Barber, 1984). Therefore, contrary to the liberal-representative model, equal *participation of everyday citizens* is preferred over professionalization (Barber, 1984, pp. 139-155; Taylor, 1993).

For the structure of debate this would demand decentralization – new media technologies should be used to allow debates between actors over distance (Barber, 1984, pp. 273-278), but decisions should be made at the smallest scale possible to avoid

bureaucratization and alienation (Barber, 1984, pp. 267-273; Rosa, 1998; Taylor, 1993). Therefore, the modern, centralized mass media environment should be supplemented by local *group-based forums* that are more able to express the needs of everyday citizens. At the same time, to avoid sectarianism and polarization, a *strong linkage* between different local forums would be necessary (Rosa, 1998, pp. 446-448) – since only exchange between different groups can allow for the formulation of a common national identity. Politically, local, smaller outlets, and technologies that enable smaller communities and regional debates should be incentivized, and tendencies of media oligopolization, and the dominance of online media markets by large, global outlets, should be disincentivized in favor of localized, cooperatively run media (Barber, 1984, pp. 277-278). Communitarian theorists where interested in new media technologies' capabilities to allow for decentralized, localized forums for debate early on (Barber, 1984, pp. 274-276).

Deliberative democrats believe that legitimate decisions are only possible when those who are affected by a decision can share their perspective on the problem and their arguments for their preferred solutions, because just decisions require the exchange of moral arguments that account for the perspectives of *all groups subjected to a decision* (Habermas, 2006; Habermas, 1996; Fraser, 2009, pp. 61-67).

At the same time, marginalized groups often do not have the – material or symbolic – resources to participate within the broad public debate, and the attention within the broader public is, understandably, limited. For these reasons, Peters (2007) and Young (2000, pp. 141-148) argue that *advocacy groups and representatives* should participate in the interest of those who cannot participate themselves, to represent their perspectives and arguments within the debate.

As for the structure of the overall public, since the systemic turn deliberative theorists assume that different forums within a broader public should serve different, complementary

functions. This means there can be a division of labor between different parts of the public sphere: If some arenas fail to meet some deliberative standards, other parts of the system can accommodate (Mansbridge, et al., 2012). Strict standards for politeness, while improving the chance that participants take each other's perspectives, can work to exclude groups from a debate (Young, 2000), while broad inclusion can work to lower the epistemic qualities of a debate (Christiano, 2012) – so integrating different publics that compensate for each other's failings can produce better results than aiming to increase all deliberative qualities in all forums.

This builds on the ideas of Fraser (Fraser, 1990): She sees the necessity for a *overarching public sphere* where different opinions clash, and potential political decisions are confronted with criticisms that come from all quarters of society, while *group-based publics* allow spaces for cultural differences on one hand, and for confronting power differences on the other, since they allow for marginalized groups to express their concerns. Habermas (1996, pp. 304-308, 359-384) suggests a two-track model: he suggests political forums closer to the center of power should be expected to more closely follow standards of respectful debate, while group based publics closer to the periphery are open to the thematization of grievances of different groups not currently present in the general debate. These different publics should be *loosely linked*: No linkage would mean opinions at one part of the system can't reach other parts, strong linkage would mean minority opinions would have a hard time to express themselves, since any opinion dominant in one public could easily dominate all other publics (Mansbridge, et al., 2012, pp. 22-23). For online publics, therefore, deliberation research shifts from an interest in the qualities of individual forums, to a perspective that tries to assess how specific forums can increase the overall qualities of a networked public.

Since *agonistic* theorists believe in the importance to allow unexpressed identities to enter a contest for power, they have a special interest in making public space *accessible for*

oppositional groups. On one hand, they want to allow marginalized groups that previously suffered from domination and couldn't express their concerns or form their own identity. But, on the other hand, they also want to allow unrecognized voices within dominant groups to express their identity in agonistic contest, because their resentment, otherwise, could lead to them expressing their grievances in disruptive ways (Honig, 1993, pp. 14-15).

To allow oppositional groups to confront dominant, hegemonic views within the public, agonistic democrats, too, engage with counter-public theory (Fraser, 1990): Spaces where oppositional groups construct their own identity and identify collective goals allow them to question views that are normalized and depoliticized within the current political discourse. At the same time, Mouffe (2013) argues, for counter-public communication to be effective, it needs to aim at establishing a new hegemony and to gain power within the *overarching public*, which should be a space of contestation, open to be conquered by different contestatory hegemonic projects though *bottom-up linkage* of *group-based publics* into the *overarching public*. Agonistic theorists, therefore, are interested in how online publics allow for spaces to emerge that allow for the expression of oppositional and counter-hegemonic identities and projects, and whether these forums foster agonistic respect for opponents, or rather are spaces for antagonistic, potentially fundamentalist political identities (Downey & Fenton, 2003). They are also particularly interested in how existing spaces preclude the formation of new identities – and how exclusionary mechanisms that prevent marginalized groups from forming their own counterpublics can be circumvented (Dahlberg, 2007).

Discursive breakdowns and repairs

Now that we have a general idea of the internal logic of each model, and we understand which institutional principles would guide each perspective's implementation, we can look at how each model would define breakdowns within public sphere communication,

and what possible repairs from each perspective would look like. As exemplary cases we have chosen three issues that are currently debated within online political communication research – the problem of *echo chambers*, how to deal with *Hate Speech* online, and the rise of *populist discourses* within online publics (table 2).

Table 2: Discursive breakdowns and possible repairs from the perspectives of different normative models

Breakdowns		**Diagnosis**	**Possible repairs**
Echo chambers	*Representative-liberal model*	no problem/ problem: linkage	Appeals to professionalism Reestablish trust in professional news No linkage of questionable forums into overarching public
	Communitarian model	problem: linkage	Link different group-based publics
	Deliberative model	problem: linkage	Partially open up spaces for arguments of other sides – universalism filter
	Agonistic model	no problem/ problem: linkage	Link into overarching public – pluralism filter
Hate Speech	*Representative-liberal model*	No problem/ problem: focus of debate	Tolerate in fringes with no linkage in overarching public Restore communicative restraint in overarching public
	Communitarian model	problem: focus of debate	Establish norms of mutual respect
	Deliberative model	problem: focus of debate	Differentiated politeness, demand civility
	Agonistic pluralist model	problem: focus of debate	Foster agonistic respect through contestation
Populism/appeal to "the people"	*Representative-liberal model*	problem: participation	Professionalism as filter
	Communitarian model	no problem	-
	Deliberative model	problem: focus of debate	foster cosmopolitanism by including debate on global matters of justice
	Agonistic pluralist model	no problem	-
Populism/Out-Group exclusion	*Representative-liberal model*	problem: focus of debate	Appeal to restraint
	Communitarian model	problem: focus of debate	Counter nativism with inclusive common identity
	Deliberative model	problem: linkage	Link populist publics with other publics – include marginalized perspectives
	Agonistic pluralist model	no problem/ problem: focus of debate	Foster agonistic respect instead of open antagonism, contest hegemonic closure, Liberal populisms

Echo chambers is the phenomenon that internet users tend to select similar minded media outlets and follow similar minded people on social media sites (Flaxman, et al., 2016).

The assumption is that selective exposure within a high-choice environment – as now exists due to digital media – leads to further self-selection into publics that reinforce one's pre-existing beliefs and disconnects users from those different from themselves. Within our framework, then, echo chambers denote a problem concerning linkage mechanisms – and, usually, studies that aim to investigate echo chambers do so by investigating whether users self-select into group-based publics that are not sufficiently linked. But as we will see, this perspective on echo chambers mostly mirrors the perspective of the communitarian and deliberative models (Sunstein, 2009) – with the representative-liberal and the agonistic model arriving at different diagnoses of breakdown and repairs (for a similar, extensive argument regarding the issue of filter bubbles, see Bozdag, van den Hoven, 2015).

The issue of *echo chambers*, from the perspective of the *representative-liberal* model, would in and of itself be *no problem*. In fact, proponents of this model would expect lay citizens to have a myopic perspective on political issues (Schumpeter, 2003, pp. 256-264), so they would naturally expect them to choose their media environment according to their limited perspective and prefer to associate with people that have similar experience as them. This would, presumably, be especially the case for social media, which share similarities with encounter publics (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2010) in that they tend to connect people of similar backgrounds. The problem with echo chambers, from that perspective, only arises when these myopic publics feed into the overarching public: Only if misinformed opinions directly feed back into professional debates and threaten to distort professional political debates would representative-liberals see a problem – one of *linkage* where there should be none. The *repair*, therefore, from this perspective, would consist of lowering the social impact of networks that allow for echo chambers to form, by reestablishing norms of professionalism and expertise that exclude group-based publics that can turn into echo chambers from the overarching debate (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1991; Schumpeter, 2003; Gerhards, 1997). The goal would be to reestablish trust in professional news media, whose standards of professionalism not only

could maintain high levels of journalism, but also serve as gatekeepers towards questionable inputs into the overarching debate. Through these norms, questionable forums would be detached from the professional political debate, and their negative impact contained.

From a *communitarian perspective, echo chambers* would be a problem since they indicate a lack of *linkage* between different group-based publics. A lack of shared cultural practices, including everyday exchange with people who are different from oneself, but part of the same community, can foster prejudice against those outside of one's echo chamber. A lack of common experiences also results in a lack of common perspectives on pressing political issues – leading to conflict between people who can no longer understand the problems other citizens face (Taylor, 2003a; Taylor, 2003b). The *repair*, from this perspective, would be to incentivize increased linkage between different group-based publics, and foster exchange between citizens who have different opinions. Individual citizens who cross different group-based publics and can translate between the life experiences of different groups are needed to hold together disparate ways of life that otherwise remain alien to each other (Rosa, 1998). Recent announcements by Twitter, interestingly, follow that logic, as they plan to adjust their timeline algorithm to confront users with content who have different political views than themselves (Gadde & Gasca, 2018).

The *deliberative model* would share similar concerns as the communitarian model – echo chambers would be seen as a lack of *linkage* between different group-based publics. The difference would be that deliberative democrats would aim at a lower level of linkage as communitarians (Mansbridge, et al., 2012, pp. 22-23). The focus would not be on fostering a shared practice between different citizens – in fact, as we have argued in the previous section, too tight linking could also be less than beneficial, and especially prevent marginalized groups or people who find themselves otherwise in the minority to feel unsafe to express their opinions (Fraser, 1990). Only once forums completely close off against outside arguments

would deliberative democrats see cause for concern. The *repair* would therefore not be to aim at full linkage between different group-based publics, but weak linkage that increases the flow of arguments. To investigate the linkage between forums, therefore, we would not be interested in how connected different political groups are, but in how open they are to arguments from different publics, and how well they represent, and respond to, arguments from other forums (Barberá, et al., 2015). Solutions that aim to increase linkage, therefore, would have to focus on increasing the perception of opposing points of view over technical solutions that just increase connections between different people. Arguments cannot translate into different perspectives would have a harder time to traverse different publics – leading to an intersubjectivity filter of sorts – which would decrease the impact of disinformation, which tends to appeal to the prejudices of specific groups (Tucker, et al., 2018, pp. 40-48).

Lastly, for the *agonistic model*, *echo chambers* would be considered *no problem*, either, in the sense that group-based publics in which citizens can form strong opinions, from this perspective, are necessary to allow for the formation of strong political identities that foster political engagement. The problem, from an agonistic perspective, arises when these strongly held identities remain uncontested and consider themselves to have privileged access to reality, leading to anti-pluralist, fundamentalist views that easily turn intolerant towards other identities (Connolly, 2005, pp. 38-54). Similarly, a public sphere of echo chambers that do not contest each other, and simply chose to believe whatever fits their world view, without challenging those believes, could lead to a public sphere of citizens unable to aim to establish hegemony and to bring about democratic change (Harsin, 2015). The *repair*, then, would be to allow for the contestation of different identities within the overarching public, by linking group-based publics into spaces designed for contestation. The aim, therefore, would be to create forums as arenas for public contestation that complement group-based publics, instead of aiming to link group-based publics with each other. Public contestation would mean that ideas that claim some foundational access to truth, and do not accept that there are multiple

perspectives towards one issue, would have a harder time to stand the test of contestation than would world views with less fundamentalist, less essentialist claims, fostering respect for different perspectives (Glover, 2012).

The problem concerning the debate on Hate Speech is that the term itself is a contested term. Generally, it concerns speech that expresses the superiority of one "race" over another and calls for racial discrimination, advocacy that incites to discrimination, hostility or violence against groups of people based on nationality or religion, or discrimination based on people's gender, sexual orientation, or further attributes (Gagliardone, et al., 2015, p. 5). As we will see, it concerns a breakdown of how a public sphere deals with difference – *the focus of debate* – with different models offering different accounts of how to reduce Hate Speech.

Hate speech, for the *representative-liberal model,* is *no problem* as long as it maintains within group-based publics (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1991, pp. 30-32) or remains otherwise inconsequential for the political process (Ackerman, 1980, pp. 96-99, 303-305) The assumption is that prejudices regularly occur within smaller publics, but that the professionalism of the representative overarching public manages to keep out such views from the professional political debate. If that fails, it is a problem of the *focus of debate* – with strong ethical-moral evaluations leading to a polarization of identities and turning different groups within society against each other. The *repair,* therefore, would be to aim at a restoration of decorum within the overarching public sphere – a return to communicative restraint, if necessary enforced through self-imposed gag-rules that apply to the representative overarching public sphere, where strong norms of politeness and civility, and a detached tone should be enforced and where professional political actors should refrain from heating up unsolvable political controversies (Gaus, 1996, pp. 166-168; Holmes, 1988). Meanwhile, incivility would be tolerated within forums that are detached from any political impact – they

would be relieved of strong normative expectations (Freelon, 2013) at the price of political irrelevance.

For the *communitarian model, hate speech* results from a lack of common identification between native citizens and immigrants. The problem, again, is on the *focus of the debate*, in this case because of a lack of common debate on shared values and cultural norms that can cross differences and offer a common identity (Taylor, 2003b). The *repair*, then, is twofold: one, to establish a debate on a common, inclusive national identity that is open to all that live in a country, including immigrants and their descendants (Taylor, 2003b). Two: To establish norms of mutual respect and politeness within forums and to prevent exclusion of marginalized groups from public debates within group-based publics – even if local groups are based around common cultural identities, they should not allow exclusionary language that prevents the exchange between different groups (Etzioni, 1998, pp. 104-105). A strong linkage of group-based publics without establishing such norms is inherently dangerous –without fostering a tone of debate that permits people to be open to different perspectives, such linkage only exposes groups to hateful language from other groups– which is not likely to foster mutual understanding. In that sense, social media platforms that increase the linkage between different group-based publics should also enforce strict norms for mutual respect, as Twitter now seems to aim to do (Gadde & Gasca, 2018).

The *deliberative model*, like the other models, sees *hate speech* as a result of a problematic focus of debate. Like the communitarian model, the aim would be to establish common understanding and norms of mutual respect, but unlike the model, the aim would not be to establish a common identity. The stakes, they would hope, are therefore lower – the debate does not have to concern questions of how to achieve a good life and be a good citizen, it is only necessary to establish debate on how to establish justice between different ways of life (Habermas, 1994a). The *repair*, then, would be to incentivize perspective-taking between

different groups, by establishing norms of politeness and civility especially in overarching forums. The deliberative model would accept some trade-offs between politeness and inclusion – lay publics tend to be less respectful in their tone, while stronger norms can be expected from overarching publics (Habermas, 1996, pp. 304-308, 359-384; Estlund, 2008, pp. 199-205). Incivility, in the sense of exclusionary language that questions the rights of groups of people, though, would be seen in a more negative light than impoliteness – while the latter can be tolerated, depending on the forum, the former should be penalized more strongly (Papacharissi, 2004).

The agonistic model, lastly, also sees the problem in the *focus of debate*. The argument, here, would be that a lack of democratic alternatives strengthens illiberal movements, and that essentialist identities that are not called into question through competing accounts foster a sense of dogmatisms (Mouffe, 2000, p. 96; Mouffe, 2013, pp. 7-8; Glover, 2012; Honig, 1993). The *repair*, then, would be to confront different ideas in public spaces of contestation, and demand agonistic respect of those aiming to participate in that contest (Glover, 2012). The way different perspectives are challenged and identities renegotiated, in that perspective, would prevent fundamentalism and the formation of the sensibilities that inform hate speech.

The problem of populism, lastly, concerns the rise of illiberal political movements that appeal to a myopic definition of "the people", which is defined in opposition to both political elites and marginalized groups, and tend to propagate a unitary definition of democracy that appears incompatible with a pluralist society. The role of social media and online publics in the formation of populist publics has been extensively researched (Engesser, et al., 2017; Krämer, 2017). We argue that the response to such movements will differ, depending on which model of a public sphere we apply. We will follow the definition of Reinemann, et al. (2017, pp. 13-21) here and distinguish 3 dimensions that different forms of populism share:

the appeal to a unitary definition of "the people", anti-elitism, and the exclusion of out-groups (mostly, minorities, immigrants or marginalized groups within society that are portrayed as enemies and contrasted with rightful, regular citizens). For the sake of brevity, we will discuss the former as one issue, while looking at the latter separately.

The *populist appeal to "the people"* and the *condemnation of elites* within the overarching public would be seen as a problem concerning *participation* from the perspective of the *representative-liberal model*. From this perspective, anti-elitism is identical with anti-intellectualism, and the simplifying, polarizing style of populist rhetoric and its appeal to emotion (Engesser, et al., 2017, p. 1286) conflicts both with a pragmatic style of governance, and with the aim to bracket deep conflict from representative-liberal governance (Gerhards, 1997). The exclusionary effects of populism, from this perspective, are seen as a side effect of this larger problem: Increased participation by citizens unable to grasp the complexity of political problems facing the community (Schumpeter, 2003). The *repair*, therefore, would be to reestablish professional norms that filter out simplistic and overly passionate, irrational demands from public discourse. Tightening the standards for participation in the overarching public, therefore, would be the means for holding populist politics at bay.

From the perspective of the *communitarian model*, the *populist appeal to a common understanding of "the people",* in itself, would not be considered a problem at all – finding such a common understanding, of course, is the goal within this model (Taylor, 2003a). The corresponding anti-elitism, too, would be seen as understandable – since technocratic governance is seen as alienating, and popular participation seen as a remedy (Barber, 1984).

For the *deliberative model*, meanwhile, the main problem within *populist appeals to "the people"* would lie in their parochialism (Habermas, 1994b): Since the goal of democratic politics, from this perspective, is to arrive at solutions that are just towards all subjected to a decision, the appeal to "the people" can be misframing issues – some problems affect people

on a regional level, or in one city, others are transnational or even of global scope. The problem with populist rhetoric that defines issues based on the interests of a – nationally bounded – people, therefore, is one of the *focus of debate*: The appeal to "the people", from this perspective, is limiting – especially with issues that concern transnational justice (Sen, 2009, pp. 124-152). The *repair* would be to appeal to global conceptions of justice – by connecting forums across borders, the goal would be to debate questions from a cosmopolitan perspective, and counter populist narratives with solutions that appeal to universal understandings of justice (Benhabib, 2002) and an understanding of global struggles for justice (Fraser, 2009). We will discuss the structural implications of this later on.

For the *agonistic model*, too, the *populist appeal to "the people"* would be seen as *no problem*. From this perspective, all democratic politics have to establish a common identity that unifies different demands and differentiates supporters of one's movement from opponents (Mouffe, 2013, pp. 5-9). Within a democracy, neither class nor other identities can offer such a unifying identity – leading Laclau to conclude that populist construction of a "people" to unite demands for justice under one popular identity is necessary to make democratic politics possible at all (Laclau, 2007, pp. 87-128) – with different political movements needing to construct their own definition of "the people" that competes with other definitions in the contest for hegemony.

Populist outgroup exclusion, from a *representative-liberal* perspective, again, would be a problem of the *focus of debate.* As with hate speech, from this perspective, social conflicts are the result of a lack of communicative restraint within the representative overarching public sphere (Ackerman, 1989). The *repair*, therefore, would be the same: Establish norms of conversational restraint within the overarching public sphere, and exclude populist rhetoric through delegitimizing it as unprofessional and irrational and revealing their

demands as incompatible with a liberal order and hence unreasonable (Gaus, 1996, pp. 168-171).

For the *communitarian model*, the problem with *populist outgroup-exclusion* would be the focus of debate: While they agree with the goal of arriving at a common national identity, the aim would be to do so by defining an inclusive national identity (Taylor, 2003a). The *repair*, therefore, would be for democratic politicians to counter nativist and exclusionary narratives of a common identity with an inclusive national identity that defines cultural pluralism as an ethical cornerstone of the community. Policies that consciously make room within the public for different cultural expressions – as in the multicultural policy of Canada, which establishes media quotas for different ethnic groups and defines the national identity as multicultural – would be combined with an appeal to a patriotic identification with this cultural plurality (Rosa, 1998; Taylor, 2003b, pp. 470-486).

For the *deliberative model*, meanwhile, the issue of *populist outgroup exclusion* would be one of insufficient *linkage*: myopic political opinions, from that perspective, can gain traction because they are not confronted with arguments from other perspectives within overarching publics (Habermas, 1994b; Fraser, 2009, pp. 61-71). This results in political solutions that neglect the consequences policies have for people outside of the national public – for example, by national debates on migration concentrating on the national perspective, ignoring policy implications outside of a nation's borders. The *repair*, therefore, would be to make publics, especially overarching publics, more open to arguments from outside publics (Mansbridge, et al., 2012) – by consciously linking up publics with those group-based or over-arching publics that offer different perspectives on the consequences of policies, and therefore increasing the justificatory demands on participants to include those perspectives previously marginalized (Fraser, 2009, pp. 76-99).

Lastly, for the *agonistic model*, *populist out-group exclusion* would be *no problem* as such – defining a common opponent, and defining one's identity opposed to an opponent, would be seen as the defining feature of politics (Mouffe, 2013, pp. 5-9; Laclau, 2007, pp. 67-128). In the sense that any political contest leads to winners and losers, any hegemonic order that emerges from democratic contestation is exclusionary to some degree (Mouffe, 2013, pp. 9-18). The problem arises when such contests aim for finality – for solving a contest permanently, and for physically excluding the opposing party (Honig, 1993; Connolly, 2005, pp. 38-54). The *repair*, therefore, would be to resist such attempts at hegemonic closure, to maintain democracy as a contest between opposing ideas, and to establish norms of agonistic respect between different opponents (Glover, 2012). The aim for liberal democratic movements would not be to combat populism, it would be to establish populisms that are compatible with a liberal democratic order, and foster the competition between different – liberal, conservative or socialist – populisms (Laclau, 2007, pp. 157-171).

Conclusions

Within empirical communication research, we often find implicit normative assumptions that inform evaluations of the phenomena we observe. But these assumptions are consequential and should therefore be made more explicit. By grounding our assumptions in an explicit theoretical framework that explicates how, from different normative perspectives, a democratic public sphere should function in practice, we can identify which empirical dimensions are normatively relevant, and which recommendations follow from a particular understanding of the public sphere.

We have argued that previous descriptions of public sphere theories lack a systematic account of how to accommodate pluralism substantively, and how to design structural linkage mechanisms within the complex networks that we call "public sphere." Contemporary online environments make this theoretical task only more urgent. We have therefore tried to show

how four particularly prominent normative traditions envision the networked publics of our day and age, i.e. what substantive focus of debate they prefer, what their preferred set of participants looks like and what kind of linkage they envision between smaller group-based arenas as well as between them and an overarching forum of mediated contestation.

In the last chapter, we applied these models to current debates about what theorists could consider to go wrong within existing public spheres and found that if we ground our analysis in our models, phenomena like echo chambers, hate speech within online spaces, and the rise of populist rhetoric result in very different angles to investigate and evaluate these phenomena, and in different prescriptions whether these phenomena are to be seen as problems at all, and how to remedy negative effects of them. For example, we saw that the representative-liberal model opposes populism most strongly, while the agonistic model is not opposed to populism at all – instead aiming to establish forms of populism compatible with liberal democracy. We also saw that two of the four models only see echo chamber as a problem under specific circumstances, and that the responses to hate speech vary widely between models.

Through these examples we show that our assessment of phenomena can be expanded by grounding it in a multiperspectival framework to assess them from normative perspectives that are grounded in sophisticated understandings of what we expect public spheres to accomplish. We upgraded previous accounts of normative public sphere models by connecting theoretical arguments about their central focus with structural arguments concerning the linkage between different publics within a larger public sphere. And, lastly, we applied these models to current debates to show how each model can offer perspectives on what is considered a breakdown of public sphere communication, and what possible repairs would look like.

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