Multifaceted European Public Sphere

Socio-Cultural Dynamics

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NICOLAS DEMERTZIS[1]

CHARALAMBOS TSEKERIS[2]

[1] **Nicolas Demertzis** (ndemert@media.uoa.gr) is Professor at the Department of Communication and Media Studies of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, and Director of the National Centre for Social Research (Athens, Greece). From 2004 until 2010, he was member of the steering committee of the Cyprus University of Technology (Limassol), Founder and Head of the Department of Communication and Internet Studies, and Dean of the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies. From May 2010 until May 2013, he was President of the State Scholarship Foundation, Greece. His current research interests focus on the realms of political sociology, political communication, and the sociology of emotions. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6251-0239

[2] **Charalambos Tsekeris** (tsekeris@ekke.gr) is Researcher on Digital Sociology at the National Centre for Social Research (Athens, Greece) and Professor Extraordinary at the School of Public Leadership (SPL), Stellenbosch University. He is also Research Associate at the Research Centre for Greek Society of the Academy of Athens (Athens, Greece) and at the Anti-Corruption Centre for Education and Research (ACCERUS), Stellenbosch University. A major part of his current research involves relational, computational and network approaches to social science theory and methodology, as well as the dynamical relationships between emerging technoscience, digital culture, social behaviour and democratic politics, within nonlinear post-human complex systems. ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3304-5331

Abstract

This paper seeks to describe, critically highlight and interdisciplinarily discuss the current status and the nonlinear sociocultural dynamics of the increasingly mediated and multifaceted European public sphere, drawing on three overlapping areas of theoretical interest: internet and web studies, economic globalisation, and the political sociology of emotions. On the one hand, internet and web studies help us to better understand the disputed character of digital politics and, especially, the "radically ambivalent" reconstruction process of the contemporary European public sphere. On the other hand, the analytical need to elaborate on the structural factors of the antinomic fluidity of this sphere leads us to the complex link between globalised and globalising financial capitalism with what is called "homo dictyous", as well as to the political sociology of emotions, emphasising on the informalisation of manners. The paper ends with a plea for *political emotional reflexivity*, which calls forth the urgent substantive need to revitalise late modern democracy with the practical cultivation of positive emotionality (containment, compassion, solidarity, empathy) and the nurturing of global liberal virtues, such as pluralism, tolerance, and moderation.

1   INTRODUCTION

For many decades now, the concept of the public sphere famously serves as a powerful theoretical junction point between political sociology and the wide field of media and communication studies, with a strong normative emphasis on the legitimacy of politics since "democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other" (Dahlgren, 2005: 149). In this sense, which follows the heavily Eurocentric, logocentric, and idealistic Habermas's (1989) model, democracy and the public sphere interact with each other and transform each other; they are intrinsically co-related and inter-constituted. Yet, the contemporary public sphere is not a one-dimensional communicative space for unfettered, uninterrupted and uncoerced dialogue between rationally motivated, well-informed and knowledgeable individuals, but a self-expanded heterotopia of contradictory, fragmented and multiple discourses (Ivic, 2017; Bruell, Mokre & Siim, 2012).

In particular, the internet and the nonlinear dynamics of cyberculture have decisively affected and reconfigured the public sphere of most democratic societies (Grömping, 2014; Colleoni, Rozza & Arvidsson, 2014; Rasmussen, 2008; Räsänen & Kouvo, 2007), including developing countries (Lynch 2012). Since more than two decades of internet and web studies, most scholars of digital culture and digital politics would have been likely to endorse what we can call as *technological indeterminism thesis*. Namely, the internet technology affects the entirety of the public and private life not as an independent variable but as an inter-dependent one, along with a host of long-, mid-, and short-term historical factors and vectors.[3] The internet thus constructs society as much as it is socially constructed. To use Niklas Luhmann's (1977) sociological terminology, society and internet technology systems are *structurally coupled* and interpenetrate each other reflexively in this mutual dynamic process of co-construction and co-evolution.[4]

In spite of their perhaps commonsensical nature, the abovementioned observations and assumptions are arguably raising critical comments, pertinent questions and crucial issues regarding the constitution of the political in the digital era. First, it is wrong to theorise the internet as a mere tool, or as a "medium" (see Rasmussen, 2014). On the contrary, it is all the more widely accepted today that the internet is an overwhelming relational platform or environment that (a) enables decentralised and self-organised interaction and expression of ideas, opinions, roles and repertoires, and (b) creates new building blocks of political power

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[3] For an elaboration of the concept of "technological indeterminism", see Anstead (2008).

[4] Accordingly, David Lyon (2001) often uses the term "technosocial" to express the mutual integration between technology and society.

configurations and groupings, as well as new and ever-extending societal interactivities and interdependencies. Second, digital politics and cyber-democracy constitute the ontological modality which the Political assumes in the contemporary information society, or the so called "second media age" (Poster, 1996; Beer, 2006). This is not to inflict nostalgia or even some sort of theoretical melancholy over the lost old days of a supposed media-free "golden age" of politics. Precisely because such an age had never existed and could never exist. Politics of all kinds in all historical periods have always been mediated by communication tools, even if these are made of stone, marble, paper, or bits.

Nowadays, the multiple ways in which European citizens engage in civic and political activities "greatly depend on both mass and social media, as do the means through which citizens discuss important public issues" (Gil de Zúñiga, 2015: 3153). This highlights the fundamental analytical need to better understand the "disputed dynamics" of digital politics and, especially, the "radically ambivalent" reconstruction process of the contemporary European public sphere (a common arena of cross-border political debate and deliberation between European citizens), as well as the major structural factors of its "antinomic fluidity". In fact, the scholarly emphasis on the re-making of the European public sphere in the digital era has been relatively weak or underestimated (De Vreese & Semetko, 2002; Bärenreuter *et al.*, 2009; Hennen, 2016; Gil de Zúñiga, 2012, 2015).

2   THE DISPUTED DYNAMICS OF DIGITAL POLITICS

We now proceed to elaborate on some crucial points regarding the complex dynamics of digital politics. Almost twenty years ago, promoting a postmodern theory of politics, Mark Poster (1996) focused on some topical issues intimately related to the discussion of the political impact of the internet: access, technological determinism, decentralisation, commodification, encryption, intellectual property, the public sphere, gender, and ethnicity. Since then, access, decentralisation, and technological determinism are issues that have been settled in terms of empirical research, theoretical understanding and policy implementation at least in the European societies. The other issues are still open to moral evaluation, theoretical scrutiny, and public policy (building regulations and planning policy).

Poster (1996) was by then an optimist advocate of the Web 1.0 generation. He strongly held that postmodern political theory should expand its scope to include a non-foundational and non-rationalistic conception of the subject supported by the admittedly subversive qualities of the internet. Insofar as the internet is not just a tool but a cultural-technological milieu where forms of interaction and identities are actively co-constructed, its enabling character was deemed to contribute to the promotion of participatory liberal democracy, the undermining of state power and surveillance through "unmonitorable conversations", the mocking of private

property through "the infinite reproducibility of information", as well as to the flouting of moral propriety through "the dissemination of images of unclothed people" (Poster, 2001: 182-183; see also Poster, 1997).[5]

The likelihood is that today's theoreticians of Web 2.0 (i.e. Social Web) would not share Poster's straightforward optimism (see, e.g., Tsekeris & Katerelos 2014). Twenty years ago, there was no Facebook, no Twitter, no Instagram, no blogs, no celebration of "fake news" and "alternative facts". There were no bitcoins, no internet of things (IoT) or internet of everything (IoE), no mighty dark internet, no post-truth;[6] in addition, there were no bots and other autonomous agents in political communication, and no highly sophisticated data management algorithms, while the information and communication technology convergence was just at its infancy. Nowadays, the new digital media of all sorts create a much more complicated context for human communication and politics, be it democratic or otherwise. Although it is envisaged that the new digital media will revitalise the public sphere by further promoting transparency, accountability, participation, dialogue and deliberation, as well as by enhancing active and activist sustainable citizenship, political efficacy and pluralism, it is equally argued that the other side of the information-society dialectics pertains to an ever-expansion of the dark internet, the exploitation of digital labour and processes of capitalist overconsumption, massive manipulation, financialisation, and fragmentation of citizenry: "the actual practices of data commodification, corporate media control, as well as corporate and state surveillance limit the liberal freedoms of thought, opinion, expression, assembly and association" (Fuchs, 2014: 92; see also Fuchs, 2015; Cammaerts, 2008; Hindman, 2009; Mosco, 2009).[7]

Nevertheless, long gone are the days where the internet scholars were easily divided into technophiles and technophobes, into utopians and dystopians of the cybersociety (or the infosphere). The new digitalised forms of politics are too complex to remain within the bounds of polarising discourses (Thrift, 2005). While we are already living deep into the first quarter

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[5] For techno-enthusiasts like Nicolas Negroponte (1995) or Bill Gates (1999), people would gradually gather on the basis of common interests, beyond linguistic limitations, cultural differences, and geographical barriers or other material restrictions.

[6] No doubt, post-truth is politically dangerous: "To abandon facts is to abandon freedom. If nothing is true, then no one can criticize power, because there is no basis to do so. If nothing is truth, then all is spectacle. The biggest wallet pays for the most blinding lights" (Snyder, 2017: 65). Timothy Snyder (2017: 66) also notes that in 2016 US election campaign, seventy-eight percent of the claims and statements made by President Trump on the election trail were demonstrably false. Heterogenous tactics of deliberate misinformation and trolling effectively disguise mass demagogy and propaganda in a veil of legitimacy (see Fuchs, 2018).

[7] In order, then, to turn social media into (commons-based) "truly social media" and a participatory public sphere, we need to occupy them and withdraw them from corporate and state control (Fuchs, 2014). This also calls for new forms of policy and regulation, able to affect internet access and content, and to promote sharing, pluralism and the deconcentration of power, as well as to define the connections with other media.

of the 21st century, the late modern human condition is not characterised by the zero-sum game logic of "either-or", but by the positive-sum game logic of "both-and" – that is, the "either-or" society has given its place to a this-as-well-as-that world. This has been convincingly argued by Ulrich Beck in his *Reinvention of Politics* (1997) and his *World at Risk* (2009). Living in the age of "both-and" implies simultaneity, hybridity, pluralism, multiplicity, connectivity, networking, inclusiveness, cosmopolitanism, contingency, uncertainty and, above all, ambivalence and doubt. To put it in other words, it implies a meaningful sense of constant experimentation, de-differentiation and de-specialisation, which embraces liquidity and fluidity, that is, the two great metaphors elaborated by Zygmunt Bauman in his highly influential book *Liquid Modernity* (2000). In such terms, the European public sphere, which can be roughly described as *ephemeral* (Eriksen, 2007), *elusive* (Heinderyckx, 2015) and *hybrid* (Gil de Zúñiga, 2015), or as *weak* (Hennen, 2016) and *inadequately developed* (Commission of the European Union, 2006),[8] is undergoing a deep-rooted process of dynamic reconstruction marked by what we would call "radical ambivalence".

3 RADICAL AMBIVALENCE

3.1 Positive Aspects

On the one hand, information and communication technologies (ICTs), user-generated social media, citizen journalism, or citizen data journalism (Gray, Chambers & Bounegru, 2012), computerisation movements, free/libre and open source software movements, open access courseware and open educational resources movements, and the like, have significantly broadened the range and scope of the public sphere. This broadening is regarded as part and parcel of what is called "the new operating system" of the highly individualised information/networked society (Rainie & Wellman, 2012). In such context, the online media contain the positive dynamics of democratisation, as well as of scrutinising public opinion through the operation of Synopticon and the concomitant "monitorial citizen" (Schudson, 1998). The Synopticon works opposite to Panopticon: it is now the many (citizens-consumers of political spectacle) who watch the few (political protagonists and celebrities) (Mathiesen, 1997). For John Thompson (1998) and John Keane (2009), this change is welcome as politicians

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[8] According to the Dutch sociologist Dick Pels (2016a: 121), however, "something like a European space of intellectual debate and political commentary is emerging. The euro crisis already triggered an unprecedented politicization and Europeanization of public spheres across the continent". Urgent socio-political issues pertaining to the EU as a whole, such as the current security and asylum crises, "have intensified public debate even further, both in national and transnational public arenas" (Pels, 2016a: 121; Risse, 2015). But for Terje Rasmussen (2016: 92), a European public sphere, which is not in sight yet, "can be established only in so far as the 28 national spheres become sensitive to one another. This means that the national mass media need to cover politics in other countries and in Brussels through reporting and commentary, in a way that citizens experience themselves as European citizens".

and decision makers are further scrutinised and get accountable under the pressure from the media (particularly see Thompson, 1998: 221-224, 246). It is thus considered that through the convergence of computers and telecoms, as well as through the synoptical observation of the powerful by civil society actors, democracy is democratised, assuming the form of *monitory democracy* (Keane, 2009).

Among the main features of *monitory democracy* -with the Wikileaks being one of its happiest, yet controversial, moments- is the proliferation of public sphere agencies and networks to control the mechanisms and procedures for taking and implementing decisions in both the public and private sectors, at sub-national, national, regional and global level. Another contemporary feature pertains to *grassroots models of political participation* (like the *Indignados* social movement), promoting the fight for social justice and democracy "from below", and a "Europe from below" (a Europe of citizens, a Europe of rights, a social Europe), which is underpinned by a critical, open and cosmopolitan public sphere, as well as by a mutual recognition of the differences between strong national cultures (Rovisco, 2016, 2017). Such a sphere always contains the possibility of counter-hegemonic discourses (Milioni, 2009), albeit in a state of communicative cacophony (Rasmussen, 2016).

In this new "networked" setting, citizens of the diverse EU member-states may potentially reach "common political ground, or possibly form some consensus on key political matters", which is "more characteristic of a public sphere than a public space" (Gil de Zúñiga, 2015: 3155). Additionally, bottom-up deliberation processes, local news (local publications), online media (including social media), online campaigns, alternative media practices, alternative participatory institutions, social movements, NGOs, investigative journalism, and supplementary public spaces for discourses and disputes (Kriesi, 2008), play a decisive role in the ongoing flow of communication and exchanges among European citizens. According to the *mobilisation hypothesis*, the openness of the internet and social media easily outweighs any negative effect: online or digital mobilisation positively influences the propensity to be politically active and potentially reinvigorates democratic participation in the public sphere (Vaccari, 2017). Such a highly diversified environment could not have been emerged unless the biggest information and knowledge revolution in the history of mankind was to take place. It is the first time in history where so many people share what Gouldner (1976: 42, 62-4) defines as "the culture of critical discourse", i.e., scientific knowledge and extended learning codes that make them efficacious and aware of the socio-political processes. Never before was such an abundance of information and access to knowledge data, with the Wikipedia being the most striking example of this sort of information revolution.

True enough, the new multiple public sphere of the networked society engenders what Brian McNair (2006) describes as "cultural chaos". Yet, McNair (2006) himself sees it positively as he
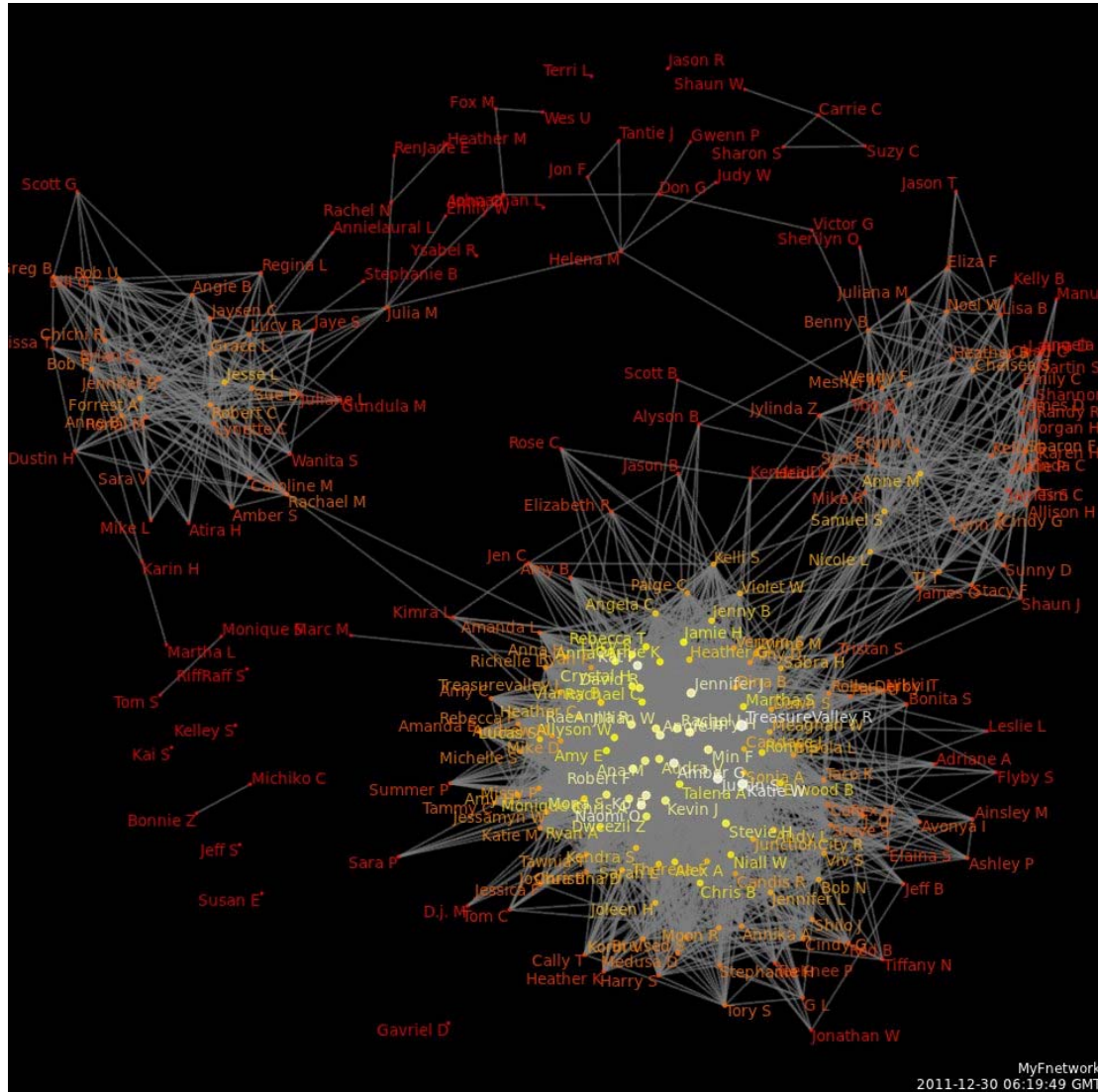
argues for an open information system and a realist cultural optimism springing out of the polycentric and polyphonic public realm. In the same vein, important scholars, from Pierre Levy (1999: 125-143) to Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler (2009: 364), champion the democratic idea of an open "collective intelligence" created by the new media which amplify the cognitive abilities of individuals, communities, and societies. The driving force of "accelerated pluralism" (Bimber, 1998) within the new public sphere is of such volume that in some countries, for instance Finland and Estonia, broadband internet connection has been institutionalised as a constitutional right like the access to open air or water. In this respect, the former Secretary-General of the International Telecommunications Union, Dr Hamadoun Touré, declared that: "The internet is the most powerful potential source of enlightenment ever created. Governments must regard it as basic infrastructure, just like roads, waste and water".[9] It is on this conception of the internet access as a public good that the Federal Communications Committee in the USA has been hardly trying to implement "net neutrality", i.e., the equal access to the internet for everyone without big providers favoring their powerful clients.

3.2   Negative Aspects

On the other hand, however, and at the very same time, there is a growing number of counter-tendencies which seem to suspend the democratising or empowering potential of the emerging "networked" public sphere. *Homo rationalis*, the hitherto grand symbol of the European public sphere, is rapidly metamorphosing to *Homo granularis*, thus signifying "a new form of humanity in a world of numbers and algorithms" (Kucklick, 2014: 15). Advanced technological systems of massive data collection and storage are currently employed to surveil (and even control) ordinary citizens and their online activities, which become "sucked up as data, quantified and classified, making possible real-time tracking and monitoring" (Lyon, 2014: 4). Network science and, in particular, social network analysis, nowadays, enables governmental agencies to gather and evaluate detailed information about millions of people's families, friends, acquaintances, and other contacts, since much of this information is voluntarily made public by the social media users themselves (see Figure 1). However, not even governments can absolutely control their own data: "data volume grows faster than processing power, implying that a growing share of data will never be processed" (Helbing, 2017: 319; see also Tsekeris, 2016).

Figure 1: An example network graph illustrating the relationships between Facebook users. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surveillance (accessed November 29, 2017)

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[9] See http://www.powerfulinformation.org/page.cfm?pageid=pi-digitaldivide (accessed November 25, 2017)

In the realm of today's "attention economy" (Davenport & Beck, 2013; boyd & Crawford, 2012), big data information increasingly becomes personalized, heavily influences our attention, emotions and behaviours, mostly in subconscious ways, and when combined with neuro-marketing (Zurawicki, 2010; Sampson, 2012), social bots and other autonomous agents (Shorey & Howard, 2016), overwhelmingly produces very effective propaganda, deception and manipulation results, as the current debates about fake news and the *post-fact society* show (see Sunstein, 2017). Emotional contagion (Kramer, Guillory & Hancock, 2014), social influence (Bond et al., 2012) and the propagation of "alternative facts" or "post-facts" (or post-truths) through online social networks actually bear many similarities or analogies to the evolution and transmission of infectious diseases (Kucharski, 2016); yet, it is important to be analysed not in a positivistic manner, but in social relational terms (Sampson, 2012).

Moreover, the advent of large-scale mass Big Nudging (Helbing, 2015) and "Big Data surveillance" (Lyon, 2014), through omnipotent technologies of control, calculability and prediction (Kucklick, 2014), in the last instance, produces unprecedented power asymmetries between the state and its citizens (Brunton & Nissenbaum, 2015).[10] Digital footprints make citizens (or consumers or voters) predictable and this "end of privacy" (that is, a condition of *post-privacy*) seems totally irreversible (see, e.g., Heller, 2011; Kosinski, Stillwell & Graepel, 2013). But secrecy and privacy are not the only modern values which would be eroded by information technologies. What it is in danger, indeed, pertains to

> *the most important rights and values that have formed the bedrock of democracies and their judicial systems since the Age of Enlightenment … we would lose our security and human values such as mercy and forgiveness. With the advent of predictive policing and other proactive enforcement measures, we could see a deviation from the "presumption of innocence" principle towards the implementation of an ominous "public interest" policy at the cost of individual rights. (Helbing, 2015: 8)*

Many would hence claim that the contemporary digital media contribute not to the democratisation of democracy, but to the *deconsolidation of democracy* (Foa & Mounk, 2017), or the advent of *post-democracy* – i.e., the technocratic, elite-oriented decision making, the diminishing of the welfare state, the privatisation of public goods, the Americanisation of political communication, marketing-led politics, generalised distrust and cynicism towards governments and political institutions, ostensible democratic legitimation, and so on (Crouch, 2004/2011). Negative changes in democratic life further pertain to fear, disenchantment and lost identities (or lost worlds), lack of civic participation, radicalisation and social exclusion in (online) social contexts affected by changing demographies. These countertendencies often link digital technologies (especially, social media networking) not with "collective intelligence", but with our "natural stupidity", as Amos Tversky would put it (Sunstein & Thaler, 2016). To start with, it is not unanimously accepted that the online media constitute a wholly new political public sphere, or something more than a new multifaceted public space which provides ample opportunities for imaginative self-presentation and self-expression (but not for substantial debate, genuine deliberation and civic engagement). Public space does not

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[10] Additionally, power asymmetries are being made more and more invisible and taken-for-granted by the increased presence of complex digital data systems throughout society (Lupton, 2014). In the same line, Vincent Mosco (2014) rightly warns us against highly powerful data politics and digital positivism (data processes of meaning-making are never innocent, neutral and objective), as well as against the systemic practice to assess patterns in society as the ultimate goal of Big Data, since it "is increasingly used to analyze, model, and forecast human behaviour" (Mosco, 2014: 182).

equal public sphere; therefore, the vast availability of information alone is not conducive to civic engagement. The process of the general "privatisation of citizenship", as Berlant (1997: 3) puts it, eventually results in the total lack of a genuine public sphere in contemporary society.

Furthermore, free speech on the internet, a potential and virtual public good in itself, may paradoxically lead to bigotry, social compartmentalisation, parallel spheres, "cyberghettos" (Ebo, 1998), or hermetic "filter bubbles" (Pariser, 2011),[11] since the inherently narcissistic social media use is likely to promote selective exposure to information that fosters prejudices, negative attitudes, discriminatory tendencies, stereotyping, tribalism and self-referentiality (see Papacharissi, 2009). In other words, when people are online, they tend not to encounter and negotiate opposing views, but to become like-minded believers and to create the virtual equivalent of gated communities. Exposure to content is then "the primary driver of content diffusion and generates the formation of homogeneous clusters, i.e., 'echo chambers'. Indeed, homogeneity appears to be the primary driver for the diffusion of contents and each echo chamber has its own cascade dynamics" (Del Vicario et al., 2016: 554; Sunstein, 2017). This involves what Castells (2011: 9) calls "constellation of tribes", which directly resonates Webster's (2011) and Sunstein's (2006) idea of "information cocoon".

In general, users are thought to constantly opt for self-confirmatory information, which suits their core predispositions or cognitive biases, and tend to communicate with people with similar or identical political interests, choices and preferences. This sort of "cyberpolarisation" shrinks, fragmentises and mutates the political public sphere, instead of injecting in it a healthy dose of direct democracy (see Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Narayanan *et al.*, 2018; Goodin & Dryzek, 2006),[12] as vividly shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3. Such condition also champions information over knowledge (which is indispensable for a mature democracy) and individual immediate needs over the democratic considerations of the public sphere (Barber, 2003), thus leading to the weakening or narrowing of citizenship in contemporary society and amplifying existing political forces (Schudson, 2006). In addition, the atomised use of online media does not constitute the public as such, or a public sphere, and does not promote the public interest or the common good – that is, notions which are of course not easily delineated in theory and practice.

Figure 2: A Twitter network (co-retweeted network) visualisation showing the polarisation of the public sphere in the case of the recent mass rally for Macedonia name dispute, held in Athens, Greece, on 4 February 2018.

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[11] Yet, the filter bubble theory is quite controversial and there is a lot of evidence to contradict it (see, e.g., Madsen, 2016).

[12] However, there is evidence from demographics that the growth in political polarisation in recent years "is largest among the groups least likely to use the internet and social media" (Boxell *et al.*, 2017: 3).

http://twittertrails.wellesley.edu/~trails/stories/investigate.php?id=2401494675#co-retweeted-network-2 (accessed February 8, 2017)
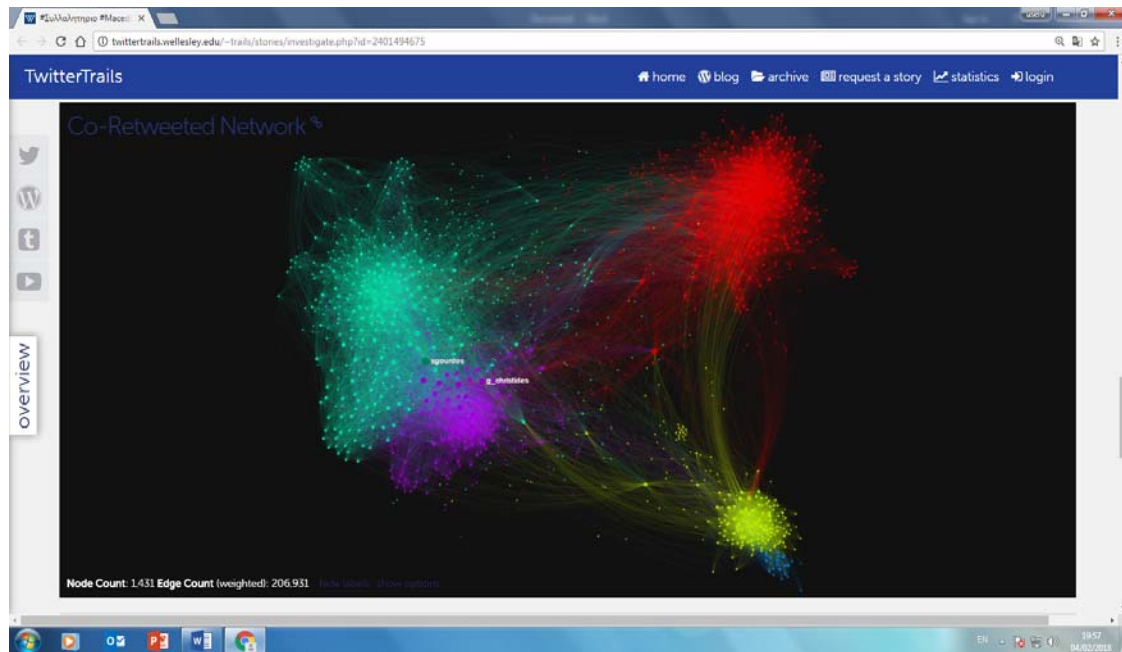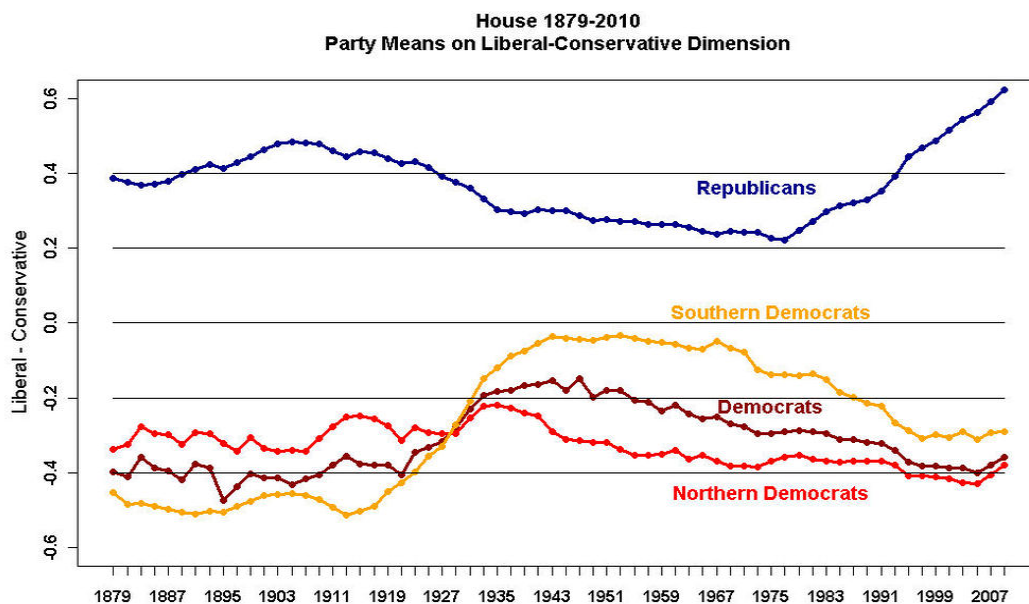

Figure 3: Political polarisation in the United States House of Representatives (DW-Nominate scores) is obviously rising since the advent of the so-called *Web 2.0 revolution*. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polarization_(politics) (accessed February 9, 2017)

Most importantly, the speedy forces of polarisation and populism self-evidently do not support neither the healthy "development of a post-national political identity", nor the "feeling of belonging to a political community",[13] which both pertain to strong European public concerns (Hennen, 2016: 28). Also, in vivid contrast to high journalistic standards, the portrayal of "the other", within online media, "can too easily turn into caricatures, oversimplifications, and stereotyping. More than technology and infrastructure, news production of such nature requires time and human resources, both of which are unfortunately in short supply in newsrooms across Europe" (Heinderyckx, 2015: 3174). Both fast capitalism and fast media drive an unprecedented acceleration which seriously threatens the slower pace of democratic deliberation and cultural creation – that is, the two strong features the European public sphere. So, defending a liberal-democratic society against the authoritarianism of speed, "requires us to preserve these temporal checks and balances, not merely between different social fields but also within them" (Pels, 2017; see also Fuchs, 2017). In the same line, Georgios Kolliarakis and Rosemary Bechler (2017) recognise the significance of mastering the rhythms of public discourse, as well as of promoting dialogue:

> *…fact-finding and democratic deliberation, those two weapons against arbitrariness, are awfully slow compared to the speed with which intentionally fake information travels and gets itself endorsed in the public sphere. In the absence of better alternatives, we should nevertheless, invest and foster spaces for exchange and confrontation among holders of opposing 'truths' within a democratic setting. This would be a step toward breaking out of the many echo chambers we occupy in the current landscape, even if our hands get a little dirty in the process. Politics in open democracies is bound to remain a controversial arena, yet, the struggle to defend pluralism, diversity, and the resolve to counter racist, sexist, homophobic, and fascist doctrines is a necessary component of the equation. [original italics]*

3.3   Irreducible Complexity

Many recent research results ultimately highlight the irreducible complexity as well as the radical ambivalence and undecidability that permeates the emerging (networked) public sphere in the digital era (see, e.g., Rasmussen, 2016; Schäfer & van Es, 2017; Pickard & Yang, 2017; Koc-Michalska & Lilleker, 2017; Jouët, 2017; Milner & Phillips, 2017). Interestingly, we cannot easily decide between the "public sphere-like scenario", where users are exposed to diverse content, and the "echo chamber-like scenario", where established partisan positions

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[13] Nonetheless, populism is often built around the idea of community (just that it is an exclusive one).

tend to be reinforced (Colleoni, Rozza & Arvidsson, 2014). Actually, social networking sites reinforce *both* group cohesion *and* information diffusion. In this view, digital platforms' affordances and features constantly and nonlinearly interact with the culture and practices of users, so that any conclusion is inherently problematic and calls for further investigation and discussion on the matter. Henceforth, there is no full and final answer to the persistent question whether the internet and the online media burst or boost democracy, or whether they make or break the public sphere. They just operate in both ways and can be thus theorised *as a highly heterogenous site of contestation* capable of connecting the local, the national and the regional dimensions of the European public sphere.

Following Beck's (1997, 2009) "both-and" integrative conceptual logic, positive and negative aspects of the public sphere's mediatisation/digitalisation mutually co-exist and co-evolve in the same relational context, thus signifying an analytical transition from dualism to *duality*. This calls for further empirical research and careful scrutiny on complex patterns of belonging, influence, communication, engagement and participation, paving the way for exciting intellectual developments, scientific findings, and interdisciplinary conclusions. Especially now that the "post-Internet", or the "Next Internet", is emerging (from the dynamic convergence of Cloud Computing, Big Data Analytics, and the Internet of Things), new risks and challenges are being energised and posed for the quality of democracy, citizenship, and the political public sphere (Mosco, 2017).

4 FACTORS OF ANTINOMIC FLUIDITY

Admittedly, all these tendencies and counter-tendencies, i.e., the emancipatory and democratising potential of the internet, the empowering emergence of counter public spheres and the alternative media, on the one hand, and the gradual strengthening of state apparatuses (and their combative/manipulation methods), corporate databases management activities, the systematic violation of privacy and the all-encompassing commercialisation of the (polarised) society, on the other, do not come out of thin air. Given the aforementioned "technological indeterminism thesis", it is needed to elaborate on two major structural factors which potentially contribute to our critical understanding of why the (mediated) European public sphere is in a state of antinomic fluidity. First, the complex link between globalised and globalising financial capitalism with what is called "homo dictyous" (from the Latin *homo* for "human" and the Greek *dicty* for "net"). Second, the informalisation of manners and the concomitant *emotional public sphere*. Of course, these two factors are not the only ones that help to explain the qualitative complexities of the European public sphere in the digital era; yet, they are important enough for not being taken into account.

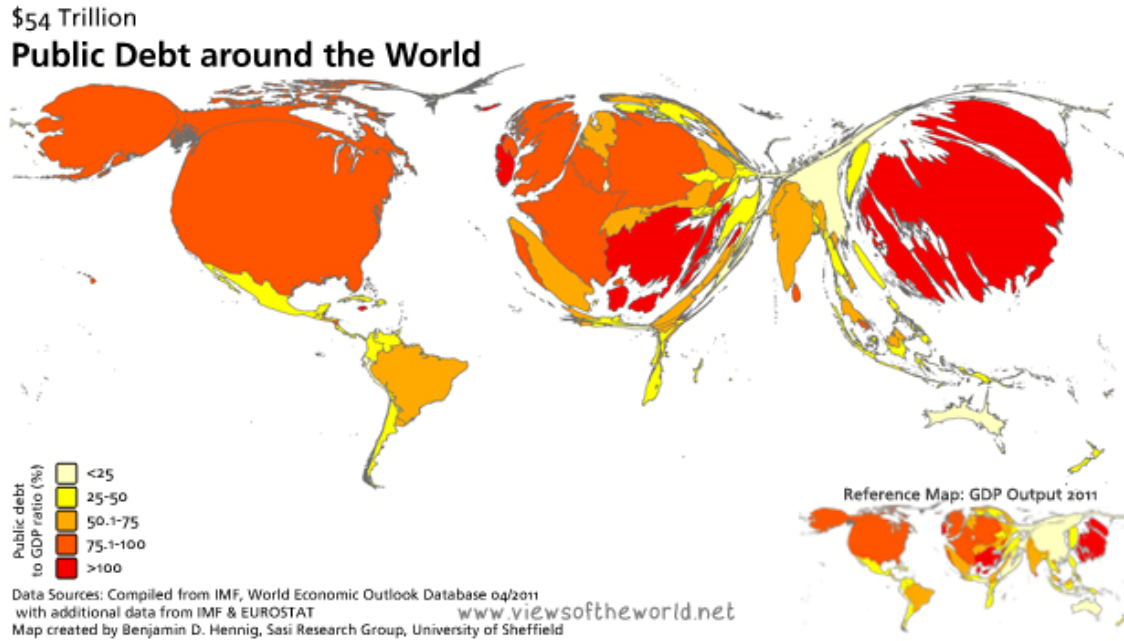### 4.1   Financial Capitalism and Homo Dictyous

The fluid and radically ambivalent state of the public sphere, in general, cannot be dismembered from the ongoing flows of commodities, signs and people, which are integral elements of the late global, "disorganised", neoliberal capitalism (Lash & Urry, 1994). In Arjun Appadurai's (1990) terminology, this is imaginatively expressed as "financescape", "ideoscape", and "ethnoscape". It is indicative that, within the last two hundred years, human mobility has increased a thousand times, when the population of the earth has grown in the same period by only seven times (Christakis & Fowler, 2009: 346-7). In this exponentially emerging international environment, new geographies of power are formed, new oppressors and new victims come to the fore, and new opportunities appear, along with significant threats that create contradictory perspectives and vague horizons of meaning for individual and collective action.

In the beginning of *Capital*, Karl Marx (1976/1867) declares that the wealth of Western societies, in which the capitalist mode of production prevails, appears as an immense collection of commodities, and that "the commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind" (Marx, 1976/1867: 125). In the twentieth-first century, it is more accurate to maintain that the wealth of the capitalist societies appears, on the one hand, as an immense flow of *immaterial commodities* (i.e., signs, symbols, information, services, and so on) and, on the other hand, as a colossal *accumulation of debt*. Public debt is an organic part of the networked financial world and seems to pertain to the neoliberal logic and interests that aggressively colonise the European public sphere. The following cartogram (Figure 4) shows the countries of the world resized to their total public debt in 2011 as estimated by the IMF.[14]

The late modern global capitalism is tailored as a financialised *debt economy*, two principal characteristics of which are *short-termism* and *networking*. Both characteristics are heavily grounded on what Scott Lash (who has been influenced by Poster) describes as *informationalisation* (Lash, 2002: 3). In such analytical context, informationalisation means that it is no longer the materialised commodity and the property of the mechanical means of production that drives capitalism, but the out-of-control swirls of bits and bytes of information and the intellectual property in the form of patent, copyright, and trademark. In this way, capitalism is being dynamically metamorphosed and reshaped into "cognitive capitalism" (Moulier-Boutang, 2012).

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[14] It is evident that, nowadays, most industrialised countries have already reached historical heights of public debt levels in the order of 100 to 200 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) or more: "Nobody knows how we will ever pay for this, never mind the cost of even more regulation" (Helbing, 2015: 222). This potentially endangers the fundamental democratic principles and cultural values of the European public sphere.

Figure 4: A cartogram showing the public debt around the world (2011) and the countries coloured by the public debt to GDP ratio. Source: www.viewsoftheworld.net/?p=1766 (accessed December 5, 2017)

$54 Trillion
Public Debt around the World

Public debt to GDP ratio (%)
- <25
- 25-50
- 50.1-75
- 75.1-100
- >100

Reference Map: GDP Output 2011

Data Sources: Compiled from IMF, World Economic Outlook Database 04/2011 with additional data from IMF & EUROSTAT
Map created by Benjamin D. Hennig, Sasi Research Group, University of Sheffield
www.viewsoftheworld.net

Cognitive capitalism is deemed to represent a "new great transformation", or a "third type of capitalism" (Moulier-Boutang, 2012: 9, 57, 136). Unlike the putative first (mercantile) and second (industrial) types, the third type of capitalism, introduced around 1975, is a "mode of accumulation in which the object of accumulation consists mainly of knowledge, which becomes the basic source of value" (Moulier-Boutang, 2012: 57). And it has been made possible by "the new information technologies, of which the digital, the computer and the Internet are emblematic in the same way in which the coal mine, the steam engine, the loom and the railroad were emblematic of industrial capitalism" (Moulier-Boutang, 2012: 57). In this respect, capitalism is more and more harvesting profit and accumulating power by exploiting collective cognition, on the on hand, and structuring it, on the other. Thus, the creation of wealth is increasingly based on raw materials which are intangible and difficult to measure and quantify, deriving directly from employment of the relational, affective and cerebral faculties of human beings. At the same time, cognitive capitalism is necessarily a *networked reality*, in the sense that it is nonlinearly interdependent and the hierarchies it develops operate within and between various nodes of global networks, which permeate the fabric of the European public sphere.

It is clear that our argument distances itself from the optimism of Benkler (2006) regarding the global "network information economy" (NIE). True enough, the networked society and the network information economy allow for the empowering emergence of non-hierarchical groups committed to information production, as well as for the organisation of what Benkler (2006) calls "commons-based peer production". Yet, it seems that Benkler "can't see the forest for the trees". And the forest, in our case, is that, first, the information-value created, accumulated and valorised in cognitive capitalism is ephemeral; it is a collage of "particulars without a universal" (Lash, 2002: 144), congruent with financial short-termism of share-holding capitalism. Second, the money-debt Lazzarato (2012) speaks about is substantiated in the form of digital information (as CDS, derivatives, bonds, shares, NPLs, installments, and so on). Therefore, the NIE itself exists within a global networked economy whose debt bubble in 2017 amounts to 217 trillion dollars, which in turn corresponds to 327% of the Global GDP, according to the McKinsey Global Institute (MGI).

All in all, then, global networking and global debt are interwoven in the contemporary digital era. By and large, the *homo dictyous* is at the same time a *homo debitor*. Under these terms, the *networked individuals*, much praised by significant internet scholars (see, e.g., Papacharissi, 2010; Rainie & Wellman, 2012), are all the more subjected to a neoliberal regime of governmentality which drives them to act as *entrepreneurs of themselves* (rather than as citizens), to put it in the terms of Foucauldian bio-political analysis. Indebted more or less, in one way or another, the networked individuals are likely to undertake courses of action by which they market themselves and make human capital-like investments in the self (i.e., education, wellbeing, exercise, fitness, diet, travelling, etc.), so as to cope with the neoliberal exigencies. Large part of these investments is taken place online, as much as offline, shaping the very essence of cognitive capitalism: the dematerialised production process derives directly from the employment of the relational, affective and cerebral faculties of human beings. Apparently, this tendency comes at odds with the creative potential of online networks to support the democratisation of the public sphere in the digital era. In Foucault's (1988) terminology, the "care of the self" is positively related to the making and the enhancement of the public sphere and civil society; on the contrary, the likelihood is that the "entrepreneurship of the self" style of living, in the last instance, contributes to the breaking and liquidation of the public sphere.

4.2 Informalisation of Manners and the Emotional Public Sphere

The ensuing governmentality of the neoliberal *debt economy* entails tools and mechanisms of societal control, which in turn involve new feeling rules, that is, regulations of emotion that, in one way or another, affect the setting of the public sphere.[15] So, let's turn the focus of our analytic attention on the discussion of the "informalisation of manners" and the concept of "emotional public sphere". Following the relational rationale of Norbert Elias, Wouters (2007) has documented a long-term process of informalisation of manners and emotions in Western societies, which succeeded the typification and formalisation "civilising process" described by Elias (1994). From the end of nineteenth century onwards, as long as the social distance between groups has been gradually diminishing, interpersonal contact became more relaxed and manners got refined, so that a habitus of *controlled decontrolling of emotional control* (Wouters, 2007) has been set in motion. In this context, people are supposed to express themselves free from the constraints of the past, following the track of the so-called "emancipation of emotions". According to Wouter's (2007) analysis, there are three important sociological dimensions here.

First, the informalisation process goes in tandem with high modern individualisation and consumerism, which are promoting -and at the same time are caused by- the relaxation of conduct codes, the reflexive identity formation, and the concomitant emergence of emotions in the public sphere of Western democratic societies, where the principles of equality and human dignity serve as the bases of common life.

Second, if the informalisation of emotions and manners process set out by the end of the 19th century, and then matured around the mid of the 20th Century, we could arguably claim that the online media have contributed to its culmination due to the "death of distance" involved into their very grammar.

Third, the informalisation thesis, developed by Wouters, shares much in common with Sennett's (1993) well-known analysis of the "intimate society", developed in *The Fall of Public Man*, and his position on the ensuing uncivilising of the public life due to the narcissistic disclosure of emotions in the name of the authenticity of the self. In Sennett's words (1993: 338-

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[15] On this point, see Eva Illouz's extensive sociological analysis of the reciprocal development between modern capitalism and an emotional culture, where "emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other" (Illouz, 2007: 5). According to Illouz (2017), over against the traditional assumption that the public sphere is a site of rational deliberation, "modern politics is particularly proned to the display, the diffusion and the manipulation of emotions". Through social media and their cascading effects, individual anger becomes a collective or political anger – that is, a structural phenomenon. In addition, fear, known as the emotion of pure survival, is increasingly becoming a dominant feeling in contemporary democratic societies (albeit not compatible with them) – a feeling which "justifies the aggressiveness and violence that are at the heart of a certain view of international relations" (Illouz, 2017). Furthermore, Illouz (2008) helps us theorise the economy and the personal as mutually synchronised within global capitalism and markets of self-help.

9), the generalised intimacy in the sense of revealing one's own inner world into the public gaze brings about "the effacement of the *res publica* by the belief that social meanings are generated by the feelings of individual human beings".

It is upon the cultural premise of informalisation qua intimacy that *the public sphere is reduced to a public space*, where networked yet meaningfully disconnected individuals express themselves in such ways that the principal distinction between the public and the private gets blurred. One could argue here that a great deal of the enormous growth of the social media is explained upon this premise. Informalisation of manners and emotionality – especially in view of terrorism, counterterrorism and the dissemination of securitisation discourses – makes it easier for social media users to pursue hate speech, to proliferate egotistic discourses, and to develop bonding rather bridging or linking social capital. In the analytical context of the conception of *global risk society* (Beck, 2009), this informalisation has made public culture a highly complex field of competing and coalescing emotional forces, which draw from the emotional energy produced by mediatised political rituals, the news framings, the dynamics of the blogosphere, the interactions taking place in the social media, and the emotional agenda setting of the media. In a nutshell, late modern informalisation of manners have made the public sphere more emotional than ever.

Let's use here, maybe in a somewhat different sense, the intriguing concept of "emotional public sphere" coined by Richards (2007). The emotional public sphere is a multi-dimensional space full of complex rules and structures of feeling, in constant interaction with each other (Richards, 2007: 137). It is a space, or a field, wherein the disposition of emotions at any given time will shape the contours of public opinion, will broadly determine the range of political alternatives which are on offer, and will set parameters and probabilities for all kinds of civic participation. This is exactly the case for the contemporary European public sphere. Richards (2007: 57) also argues that the emotional public sphere exists as intertwined with the traditional public sphere of rational debate and of formal democratic institutions and processes. This might not be actually so; it is not that two existential kinds of public sphere -one rational, one emotional- are set into close knitting. All along the public sphere has been a locus of *both* rational debate *and* emotional expression. It is just the *emotionalisation process*, referred to by Richards (2007) himself, which by the end of the twentieth century has transformed Western popular and political cultures, and influenced the ways the citizens experience the kind of politics that produces the conceptual illusion that another public sphere has emerged besides the traditional one. Emotionalisation and informalisation processes are deeply intertwined (or interwoven) and relational to the core.

The emotional public sphere may be resembled with a "parliament of feelings", or with a "democracy of feelings", which serves as the constant emotional accompaniment of formal

democracy. Notably, Richard's (2007) democracy of feelings metaphor is not to be conflated with the "emotional democracy", a notion coined, but slightly elaborated, by Giddens (1994) in his pro-European *Beyond Left and Right*. But more importantly, the emotional public sphere calls forth a distinction between democratic emotionality and demagogic emotional manipulation. Although this is not an easy distinction, it is of importance for the formation of not just responsive, but also responsible leaders and publics, who are to keep alive the tradition of *res publica* and the political virtues for the republican citizenship. For the point is not to efface or disavow emotionality from political culture and the public sphere. This would indeed be naïve and totally obsolete, an old-fashioned rationalistic regression at the expense of the so called sentimental citizen.

5   FINAL THOUGHTS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

In view, among others, of the securitisation processes caused by the global war against terrorism and terrorism itself, what is actually needed today can be conceptualised as *political emotional reflexivity*. Other scholars would speak of "emotional intelligence" or "emotional literacy". The term *political emotional reflexivity* is arguably preferable, because, in the first place, it connects the hot discussion of political emotionality and the emotional public sphere with the influential theorisations of "reflexivity" of the late 1990s and early 2000s (as famously pursued by Margaret Archer, Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, Scott Lash, Nicos Mouzelis, and others). Further on, however, it calls forth the urgent substantive need to actively revitalise late modern democratic polity with the practical cultivation of *positive emotionality* (containment, compassion, solidarity, empathy), as well as with the nurturing of liberal virtues like pluralism, tolerance, moderation, courage, magnanimity, and healthy skepticism.[16]

Under these terms, in theory and practice, it is envisaged that the European public sphere will be refigured into civil sphere in Alexander's conceptualisation: as a forum of publicity, participation, accountability, dialogue, respect, civility, solidarity, and moral responsibility (Alexander, 2005, 2006). Western and European societies do have the material resources to buttress this project. But whether this can be accomplished or not is of course an open historical question. Equally open is the question of whether there can be an "overarching" or "transnational" or "federal" European public sphere alongside the existing national public

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[16] For Pels (2016b), it is urgent to recover the original emotional idealism invested in the heart of the European project, thus avoiding to cede the wide field of political emotion "to populists who successfully monopolize people's passions against the EU by playing on frustration and fear. We need new inspirational stories about who we are and want to be, both as nationals and as European citizens". Political emotional reflexivity also pertains to the development of a radically new self-understanding of the political, down to its deepest emotional and symbolic structures and dynamics. Following John Urry's (2016) vision for the emerging role of social science in the digital age, we need to reveal both the political and emotional dimensions of the collective imagination of the future.

spheres in European member states. This obviously pertains to the ongoing discussion about European integration and the further development of the European institutions and the European system of democratic governance, as well as of the character and dynamics of the European community as a whole (Hennen, 2016).[17] Following the famous Nietzschean aphorism *"Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich stärker!"* ["What does not kill me, makes me stronger!"] (Nietzsche, 2008), Europe should, without any doubt, update the rules of the game and effectively foster inclusive democratic dialogue and responsible sustainable innovation in the digital age.

For the time being, our central analytic focus must remain upon the irreducible complexity and the radical ambivalence and undecidability that permeate the rapidly transforming European public sphere. Hence, we could arguably better understand it as a highly heterogenous and networked site of contestation, resistance and struggle, or as a conflictive social structure and a fluid "communicative space in the making" (Fossum & Schlesinger, 2007), offering a wide range of relational opportunities and risks, as well as of prospects for *both* empowerment *and* disempowerment, openness *and* closeness, integration *and* disintegration, unity *and* fragmentation. This nonlinear form of inquiry will also help us "consider how the new cultural intermediaries of the social networking phenomenon are formed in the tension between various capitalist interests and localised interfaces (of individual agents interacting across these networks of accumulated 'friends')" (Beer, 2006: para. 4.4), thus escaping the counterproductive polarising discourses of utopian optimism and dystopian pessimism. Nevertheless, the basic analytical need to carefully recognise and map relational sources of identity, power and resistance requires more data and more experiments, so that we can better grasp how the vastly increased amount of information actually shapes the contested and multifaceted European public sphere and the global political landscape in general (Margetts, 2017).

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[17] For Hennen (2016: 38), however, what it is more likely to expect in the future is not a unitary demos or "a unique public sphere as in the case of the national state, but an overlapping set of 'public spheres' alongside institutional, territorial and issue-orientated dimensions that will be overarched by a general European public sphere". See also the superb analysis by Heinderyckx (2015).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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