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Reason and Communication: Jürgen Habermas's Legacy for Media and Communication Studies

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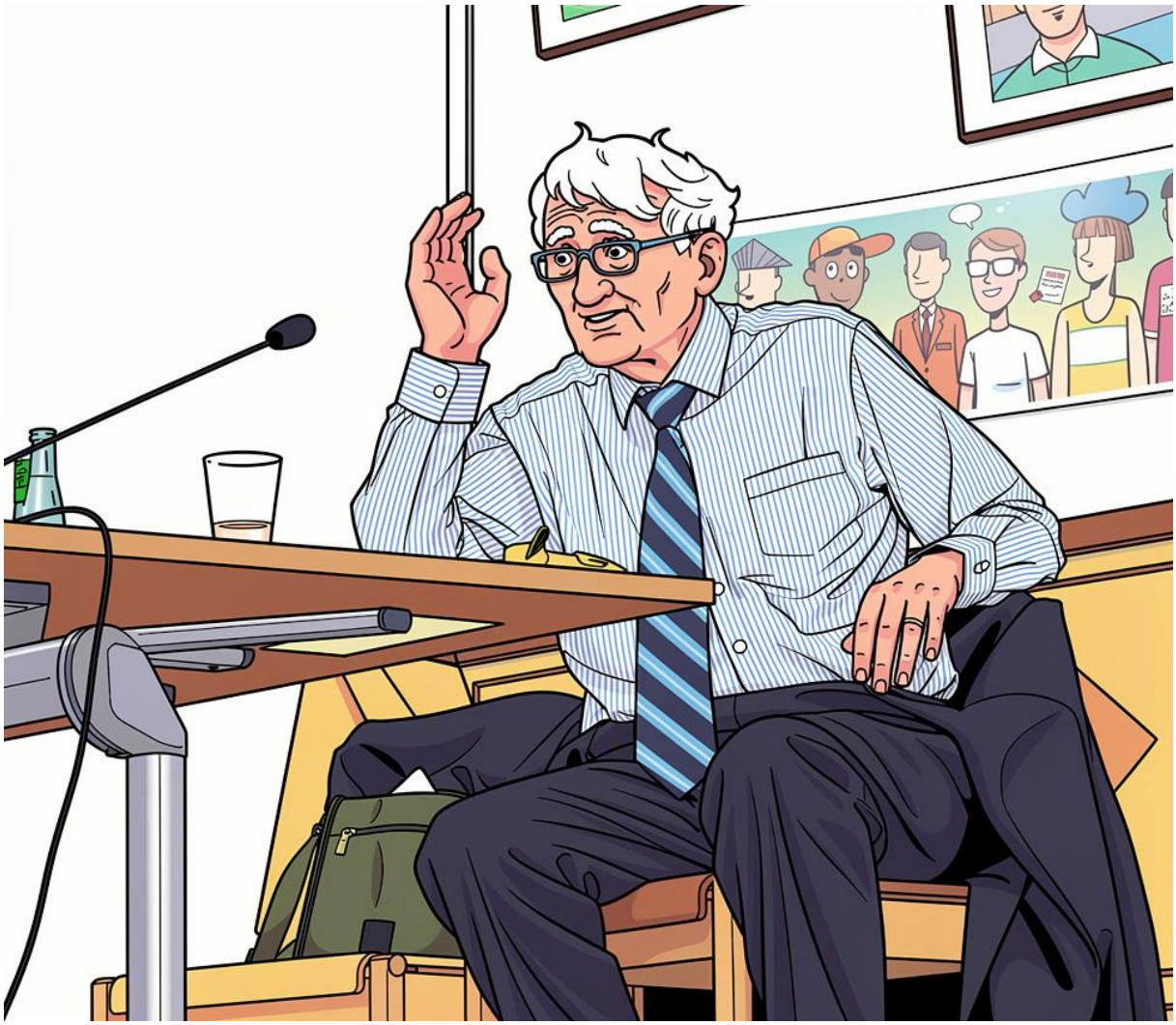

Abstract: This essay asks: What is Jürgen Habermas's legacy for media and communication studies? Jürgen Habermas (1929-2026), a towering figure in critical theory, profoundly shaped media and communication studies by emphasising communication as the cornerstone of social existence. His theory of communicative action, rooted in the interplay between language, culture, and society, redefined communication as both a means of social reproduction and a site of democratic potential. Habermas's concept of the public sphere – where communicative rationality confronts instrumental reason – remains essential for analysing how power structures, from capitalism to digital authoritarianism, distort democratic discourse. His critique

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of the colonisation of the lifeworld by systemic forces such as money and power offers a framework for assessing contemporary challenges, including algorithmic control, fragmented digital publics, and the rise of far-right ideologies online. By linking communication to emancipatory ideals, Habermas challenged scholars to interrogate the tensions between economic imperatives and democratic promises. His anti-fascist stance, informed by post-war Germany's reckoning with Nazism, underscores the urgency of defending universalism and humanism against resurgent authoritarianism. While his dualisms (e.g., lifeworld vs system) invite debate, Habermas's legacy lies in his insistence that communication is not merely instrumental but inherently normative – a space for contesting domination and imagining alternatives. This article explores how Habermas's ideas on communication, the public sphere, and (anti-)fascism provide critical tools to navigate today's mediated landscapes, where digital capitalism and ideological polarisation threaten the very foundations of democratic dialogue. Engaging with Habermas means confronting his blind spots while building on his vision of communication as a recursive process of social transformation. His work compels us to ask: How can we reclaim the public sphere in an era of algorithmic fragmentation and ideological extremism? Habermas's answers, though provisional, remain indispensable for theorising communication's role in fostering – or undermining – justice and solidarity.

Keywords: Jürgen Habermas's legacy, media and communication studies, communication theory, communicative action, democracy, public sphere, colonisation of the lifeworld, refeudalisation, public service media, public service Internet, structural transformation

1. Introduction

Jürgen Habermas died on 14 March 2026 at the age of 96. He was a critical theorist who, in a transdisciplinary manner, influenced thought across diverse fields, including anthropology, discourse analysis, media and communication studies, international relations, legal studies, pedagogy, philosophy, political science, religious studies, and sociology. Given that communication is his key concept, the question arises of how media and communication studies can build on Habermas's legacy. This article provides some ideas on this question.

My reflections on Habermas's legacy for media and communication studies are structured around his notions of communication (section 2), the public sphere (section 3), and (anti-)fascism (section 4).

2. Communication

Habermas differs from other Frankfurt School theorists – such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Axel Honneth – as well as from many other critical theorists, in emphasising the importance of communication in a critical theory of society. For humans and society to exist and survive, they must not only work, eat, drink, and sleep, but also reproduce their sociality, which they do in and through communication. Communication is part of what Marx (1844, 299) terms humans' "social being" when he writes that the human being "is the social being".

One need not agree with Habermas's concept of communication, but his theory of communication is a milestone that anyone theorising communication cannot and

should not ignore. We need to work through Habermas's works to in update the critical notion of communication.

Communication played a role in Habermas's entire oeuvre. Already in his dissertation on Schelling, he discusses Feuerbach's comments on Hegel and stresses that in society, dialectical mediation is a communication process: "Dialectical mediation must therefore be taken literally as a means of communication; it is only possible through the act of presenting and demonstrating something to others"[1] (Habermas 1954, 43). And also in his final works, communication remained a key concern. For example, in his last major book *Also a History of Philosophy*, Habermas clarifies the relationship of individual, culture, and society that are related in a recursive manner:

> "In the lifeworld, 'society', as the set of binding social relations between communicatively socialized subjects, is interlinked with the other two components, namely, 'culture' and 'person'. By the latter two components, I understand the intersubjectively shared and culturally stored knowledge of a society, on the one hand, and the embodied competencies of its individual members, on the other. In the interplay between these three components, the lifeworld provides in advance the 'resources' on which communicative action draws. From the perspective of social science, it is advisable to examine social reproduction both under the aspect of the systemic reproduction of the infrastructures that stabilize the functional connection linking the network of interactions to the social and natural environments, and from the viewpoint of the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld (in which, however, the systems remain anchored even when they become differentiated beyond its horizon). The symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld can be imagined as a circular process. In dealing with each other and the world, communicative actors draw upon the resources of the lifeworld, which, in the mode of intuitive 'know-how', provide them in turn with cultural knowledge, social bonds and acquired 'capabilities'. The subjects thus 'empowered' by the lifeworld renew, for their part, the only performatively present components of the lifeworld through their interpretations and learning processes by grappling with the challenges in the-for them-objective world" (Habermas 2023b, 84-85).

Habermas developed his theory of communication step by step, culminating in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (Habermas 1984, 1987), his major contribution to communication theory. A key feature of Habermas's approach is what he terms a "media dualism" (Habermas 1987, 281), which means that in his model of society, we find dualisms of communicative action and strategic action, social integration and system integration, interaction and work, lifeworld and system, as well as language

[1] Translated from German: „Die dialektische Vermittlung ist demnach wörtlich zu nehmen als ein Mittel der Kommunikation, sie ist nur möglich für den Akt der Darstellung und der Demonstration anderen gegenüber".

and steering media. In his essay “Labor and Interaction”, Habermas traces the dualism of work and interaction back to Hegel’s Jena philosophy. For Hegel, spirit “is an organization of two equally original media” – “language and labor” (Habermas 1968/1974, 152). Habermas poses a key problem for social theory and communication theory: how the economy and culture, work and communication, the material and the symbolic are related. Any critical theory of society, communication, or culture needs to ask how the economic and the cultural are related. It is Habermas’s achievement that he constantly reminds us of this question in his works. Of course, his solution is not the only possible one, as one can also conceive of the relationship as dialectical, so that there is the work character of communication and the communicative character of work: work is communicative, and communication is the work process of producing and reproducing sociality (see Fuchs 2016, 2020). The long quote cited above illustrates that Habermas’s dualism is not a strict one, but an interactive dualism. Society, including the economy, is “interlinked” (Habermas 2023b, 84) with communicative action. The difference from other approaches that see production as primary and as grounding society is that, for Habermas, work and interaction are two “equally original” (Habermas 1968/1974, 152) and “equally significant patterns of dialectical relation” (142).

Habermas distinguishes between strategic action (social action, oriented to success), instrumental action (non-social action, oriented to success), and communicative action (social action, oriented to reaching understanding) (Habermas 1984, 285: figure 14). What is communicative action? For Habermas, “communicative action designates a type of interaction that is *coordinated through* speech acts and does *not coincide with* them“ (Habermas 1984, 101). Communicative action means that at the “level of interpersonal relations“, “participants in communication come to an understanding with one another about something in the world“ (293). The validity claims of truth, truthfulness, understandability, and normative rightness are necessary features of successful communicative action. Such communicative action creates a joint understanding between actors about parts of the world. Validity claims concern conditions of communication, but do not imply that humans necessarily agree on the questions they discuss. Habermas (1998b, 18, 320-325, 326-329) distinguishes between weak and strong communicative action. Weak communicative action is oriented toward understanding; strong communicative action, toward reaching agreement (Habermas 1998b, 320). Strategic communication uses language, but Habermas argues it does not do so in a communicative way but “*with an orientation toward consequences*“ (Habermas 1998b, 326). Habermas (1998b, 317-320) argues that there are communicative and non-communicative uses of language.

For Habermas, communication is oriented toward a joint understanding of the world, which can, but need not, result in consensus and agreement. For Habermas, there is a normative dimension of communication, namely the goal of communicative rationality to advance peace, freedom, and democracy, which is why his theory of communicative action has led to his discourse ethics (Habermas 1990a, 1993) and a theory of

democracy (Habermas 1996). Discourse ethics is practical discourse aimed at reaching agreement on normative questions: “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity *as participants in a practical discourse“* (Habermas 1990a, 66). “The utopian perspective of reconciliation and freedom is ingrained in the conditions for the communicative sociation of individuals; it is built into the linguistic mechanism of the reproduction of the species.“ (Habermas 1984, 398).

Overall, Habermas has a positive, freedom-oriented understanding of communication. Let us assume that someone anonymously issues a death threat over the Internet to someone else, saying “You will be killed!“, to which the threatened person reacts by reporting the death threat to the police and posting the message “Reported to the police! You will be caught!”. For Habermas, such a threat is a linguistic strategic action and not a communicative action. However, A uses symbols to convey to B that A hates B and wants to kill B, to which B responds by using symbols to indicate that the police have been informed. We have a recursive social process where meaning is created by A in B and by B in A. There are no reasons why we should not define this highly instrumental action as a form of communication, too, an instrumental form of communication. Peace and conflict resolution certainly require communication as part of diplomacy and negotiations, and cannot exist without peace-oriented communication. But communication is also a means of instilling fear, issuing threats, and announcing actual or potential violence (Fuchs 2025).

Understanding communication today requires starting and engaging with, reading, arguing with, against and beyond Habermas. There is no critical theory of communication without Habermas.

3. Instrumental Reason and the Public Sphere

Building on Marx and Lukács, the Frankfurt School draws a distinction between instrumental and critical reason, a distinction that goes back to Horkheimer. Horkheimer understands instrumental reason as “transformation of reason into a mere instrument“ (Horkheimer 2004, 22). Humans are treated like things and turned into instruments for the advancement of particularistic goals through the exploitation of their labour, the violent suppression of their political will, or the attempted ideological instrumentation of their consciousness (see Fuchs 2020, 362: figure 15.2).

Habermas develops his theory of communicative action by engaging with Lukács‘s notion of reification and Horkheimer and Adorno’s notions of instrumental reason and the dialectic of enlightenment (Habermas 1984, part IV: From Lukács to Adorno: Rationalization as Reification). For him, critical reason is communicative reason that resists instrumental reason, which he conceptualises as the colonisation of the lifeworld by the steering-media of money (monetarisation and commodification, a process he bases on Marx) and power (bureaucratisation, a process he bases on Weber). Habermas develops theory dialectically by engaging closely with theories, working through them, and sublating them, in the sense of preserving certain elements

that are uplifted to a new level, where they take on new meaning. By reading Habermas, one can learn to develop theory dialectically, which is important for analysing communication and the social sciences and humanities more generally.

Habermas argues that "Horkheimer and Adorno failed to recognize the communicative rationality of the lifeworld" that "gives an inner logic – and not merely the impotent rage of nature in revolt – to resistance against the colonization of the lifeworld by the inner dynamics of autonomous systems" (Habermas 1987, 333). For Habermas, "communicative reason" has to do with "the linguistic medium through which interactions are woven together and forms of life are structured" (Habermas 1996, 3) and "the use of language oriented to reaching understanding" (Habermas 1987, 397).

Habermas's concept of the public sphere is where the antagonism between communicative and instrumental reason becomes most significant for critical media and communication studies. Habermas's (1962/1991) habilitation thesis *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* is his most read and most cited work. The public sphere is society's sphere of public communication where public opinions are produced, reproduced, and differentiated. Therefore, it is the sphere where civil society, social movements communicating dissatisfaction and political demands, the news media and journalism, citizens' public debates, and political engagement take place. The public sphere is the sphere of political communication beyond formal political institutions. The notion of the public sphere helps us to analyse if and how promises of society are undermined by its own logic. It stands in the tradition of Adorno's dialectic of enlightenment and negative dialectic, which analyses "the recoil of enlightenment into mythology" (Adorno 2004, 34) and how "progress is reverting to regression" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, xviii). Habermasian critique of the public sphere analyses whether or not promises of an enlightened, free, democratic, and progressive public sphere are realised and if not, how they can and do turn into their opposite, namely various forms of domination, including class rule, patriarchy, racism, imperialism, etc. "Under the conditions of a class society, bourgeois democracy thus from its very inception contradicted essential premises of its self-understanding" (Habermas 1962/1991, 428). Habermas does not abandon the enlightenment values of freedom, equality, and solidarity, but rather argues that they can only be properly realised in a radical democracy. He is not an anti- or postmodern thinker but a thinker of a dialectical modernity.

Habermas's notion of the public sphere has often been misunderstood and misinterpreted. The most common criticism is that he idealises politics that are based on domination and thereby leaves out the realities of the exploitation of workers, the oppression of women, racism, (post-)colonialism, the non-Western world, etc. The collected volume *Habermas and the Public Sphere* documents some scholars' engagement with Habermas's book and his response (Calhoun 1992). Habermas's concept of the public sphere is not an idealisation but an immanent critique that proceeds in a Hegelian manner by comparing the political promises society makes in

the realm of public opinion formation to societal realities. It tests whether a society that promises to realise democracy and freedom of speech lives up to its own promises. The notion of the public sphere as a critical theory concept is inherently tied to the ideas of the refeudalisation of the public sphere and the colonisation of the lifeworld. The refeudalised public sphere and the colonisation of the lifeworld are two key concepts for the future of critical media and communication studies as they are expressions of the critique of the political economy of communication and the media and allow us to analyse how political-economic power undermines communication systems' democratic promises and realities (Fuchs 2014, 2023).

Feudal societies have public spheres, too. In them, the "feudal powers" of "the Church, the prince, and the nobility" (Habermas 1962/1991, 11) represent their power and ideology before the people, so that there is what Habermas terms "representative publicness" (Habermas 1962/1991, 11), an undemocratic public sphere. The enlightenment has promised to advance democracy. Habermas (1962/1991) argues that unequal access to educational and material resources undermines the public sphere's promises of freedom of speech and public opinion (227), and that centralised political and economic power undermines the promises of the freedom of association and assembly (228). Refeudalisation of the public sphere means that powerful organisations use their power to dominate the formation of public opinion, becoming modern-day emperors and churches. In a refeudalised public sphere, big political and economic organisations "enjoy an oligopoly of the publicistically effective and politically relevant formation of assemblies and associations" (Habermas 1962/1991, 228).

Advertising and public relations aim at "strengthening the prestige of one's own position" (Habermas 1962/1991, 200) by utilising resources such as money, political influence, and reputation, which results in a "pseudo-public sphere" (162) and a "staged or manipulatively manufactured public sphere" (217). Based on Rüdiger Altmann, Habermas terms this process "communification" (201): public communication is shaped by the logic of commodities and commodification. Habermas's concern is that economic and political power are utilised to dominate opinion formation and that the power of the better argument and the power of facts, what Kant termed "the public use of reason" (28[2]), become secondary or completely unimportant. Public relations "has affinity with feudal publicity" so that the "public sphere becomes the court *before* whose public prestige can be displayed rather than *in* which public critical debate is carried on" (200-201). "The aura of personally represented authority returns as an aspect of publicity" (200).

In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas reconceptualises the notion of refeudalisation as colonisation of the lifeworld. Colonisation of the lifeworld means that "communicative action is replaced by media-steered interaction, when language, in its function of coordinating action, is replaced by media such as money and power"

[2] See Kant (1784/1959, 87)

(Habermas 1987, 374-375)[3]. If we consider how algorithmically driven reputation systems, bot- and AI-generated online communication, and targeted online advertising shape Internet communication, it becomes evident that Habermasian public sphere analysis is central to the critical analysis of Internet platforms and the media in the age of digital capitalism.

Habermasian public sphere analysis is a critical examination of the economic and political censorship of public communication, an important aspect of Marx's analysis of the press. Habermas updated Marx's critique of censorship and stands in the tradition of Marxian cultural analysis. Marx was an important influence on Habermas's works: "Although Immanuel Kant plays a far greater and more fundamental role in Habermas's work than Karl Marx, Marx remains essential nonetheless. For it is precisely this combination – already characteristic of Marx – of a normatively ambitious philosophy of reason with an empirical theory of society that distinguishes Habermas's work from that of his contemporaries, from sociologists such as Luhmann as well as philosophers such as John Rawls"[4] (Brunkhorst 2026, 53).

Marx argues against the economic, political, and ideological censorship of the press. In respect to censorship by money and capital (economic censorship), Marx's (1842, 175) concern is that the "*primary freedom of the press lies in not being a trade*". In addition, he criticises the political censorship of the press by state power and ideological censorship by media propaganda: "A free press that is bad does not correspond to its essence. The censored press with its hypocrisy, its lack of character, its eunuch's language, its dog-like tail-wagging, merely realises the inner conditions of its essential nature. The censored press remains bad even when it turns out good products, for these products are good only insofar as they represent the free press within the censored press, and insofar as it is not in their character to be products of the censored press. The free press remains good even when it produces bad products, for the latter are deviations from the essential nature of the free press. […] The essence of the free press is the characterful, rational, moral essence of freedom. The character of the censored press is the characterless monster of unfreedom; it is a civilised monster, a perfumed abortion" (Marx 1842, 158). By ideological reporting, the media,

[3] "The thesis of internal colonization states that the subsystems of the economy and state become more and more complex as a consequence of capitalist growth, and penetrate ever deeper into the symbolic reproduction of the lifeworld" (Habermas 1987, 367). The "colonization of the lifeworld by system imperatives […] drive[s] moral-practical elements out of private and political public spheres of life" (Habermas 1987, 325). The "imperatives of autonomous subsystems make their way into the lifeworld from the outside – like colonial masters coming into a tribal society – and force a process of assimilation upon it" (Habermas 1987, 355).

[4] Translated from German: „Wenn Immanuel Kant im Werk von Habermas auch eine weit größere und grundegendere Rolle spielt als Karl Marx, bleibt Marx doch stets wesentlich. Denn es ist gerade die schon für Marx charakteristische Verbindung einer normativ anspruchsvollen Philosophie der Vernunft mit einer empirischen Theorie der Gesellschaft, die das Werk von Habermas von anderen Zeitgenossen unterscheidet, von Soziologen wie Luhmann wie von Philosophen wie John Rawls" (Brunkhorst 2026, 53).

according to Marx, contribute to the circumstance that capitalism's class "antagonism is artificially kept alive and intensified" (Marx 1870, 475).

Habermas focuses on economic and political power as a means of censorship. He subsumes ideological power under political power. Culture, the realm of ideas, and heteronomous culture, the realm of ideology, are not merely subsystems of the political system but constitute a single domain of society (Fuchs 2020). Ideology is not a prominent concept in Habermas's theory of communication. Ideology is a key notion in critical theories of society and culture and should, therefore, also feature prominently in a critical theory of the public sphere. Ideology critique, for example, in the form of critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough 2010 & Reisigl and Wodak 2001, who regard Habermas's public sphere theory as a significant starting point), is an important aspect of public sphere analysis.

Digital capitalism dominates the world of Internet platforms. In contemporary world society, we are experiencing a transformation of digital capitalism into fascist digital capitalism where authoritarian ideology increasingly shapes ideology of and on the Internet (Fuchs 2024). Economically, US and Chinese digital media corporations, the "digital giants", constitute monopolies and oligopolies that dominate digital media markets, including online advertising, search engines, video- and image-sharing platforms, microblogs, application software, generative AI, and digital hardware. Politically, we have seen the tendency of the fusion of digital capital and authoritarianism. Donald Trump, the world's most powerful politician, has created his own social media platform Truth Social. In October 2022, the world's richest person, Elon Musk, bought Twitter for US$ 44 billion and renamed it X, which has become an online playground for the far right. The number of Elon Musk's X followers increased from 108 million in early October 2022 to 158 million a year later (October 2023) and 237 million in late-March 2026[5]. Such a large increase is not evidence, but an indication that the X algorithm may have been changed to boost Musk's visibility. The basic problem is that X and other Internet platforms' algorithms are private property whose source codes and algorithms are closed sources that cannot be publicly scrutinised. X is part of a feudalised public sphere that threatens democracy.

There is a lot of fake news and post-truth content on the Internet, so increasingly it is not facts but ideology and emotions that determine how citizens perceive the world. In a Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2025, 67 per cent of respondents reported encountering fake news and misinformation online at least once a week[6]. In algorithmic politics, algorithms and bots automate content creation and the organisation of visibility and reputation online, so that machinic behaviour replaces human activity, and it becomes difficult to identify which content is human-made and truthful. World politics

[5] Data source: https://web.archive.org/web/20221008000611/twitter.com/elonmusk, https://web.archive.org/web/20231001075636/https://twitter.com/elonmusk, https://x.com/elonmusk/, accessed on 24 March 2026

[6] Data source: https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/3592, accessed on 27 March 2026.

has become highly polarised, which manifests itself in online echo chambers and the prevalence of online hatred.

Taken together, these arguments mean that online communication is a highly colonised and feudalised public sphere in which money, political power, and ideology shape visibility, reputation, and opinion formation. Habermas's public sphere critique is needed as a methodological and theoretical approach to the critical analysis of the capitalist, authoritarian, and manufactured digital public sphere.

Habermas critically analysed the digital public sphere. He argues that the political-economic colonisation of the Internet has resulted in a fragmented public sphere. In 2006, he wrote in the paper "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension?" that "the rise of millions of fragmented chat rooms across the world" tends to lead to "the fragmentation of large but politically focused mass audiences into a huge number of isolated issue publics" (Habermas 2006, 423). On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of his book *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (2023a) reflected on its relevance and spoke of a new structural transformation of the public sphere. He argues that the tendency toward fragmented digital public spheres has advanced further into "fragmented, self-enclosed echo chambers" (37) and digital media that are "at the service of radical right-wing networks" (38). According to Habermas, the "algorithmic control of communication flows" feeds "the concentration of market power of the large internet corporations" (58) and advances the "commodification of lifeworld contexts" (47). Habermas updated his analysis of the public sphere to the age of digital capitalism. He sees that digital capital, digital fascism, and digital ideology threaten democracy and undermine the democratic potentials of the digital public sphere (see also Fuchs 2024, 2023, 2014).

Habermas's update of the critique of the colonisation of the public sphere and public communication to the digital age did not remain an abstract and empty shell. As a political intervention, he endorsed the Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto that demands to overcome the dominance of the capitalist Internet by creating, supporting, and funding public service Internet platforms (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021):

> "Democracy and digital democracy require Public Service Media. We call for the safeguarding of the existence of Public Service Media. […] A democracy-enhancing Internet requires Public Service Media becoming Public Service Internet platforms that help to advance opportunities and equality in the society. We call for the creation of the legal, economic and organisational foundations of such platforms. […] Public Service Media content is distinctive from commercial media and data companies. It addresses citizens, not consumers. […] Public Service Media should continue to be supported and funded so that they have the resources they need to realise and further develop their remit. In addition, the Public Service Internet requires sustainable funding that is based on mechanisms

> such as the licence fee, the Nordic model of a public service tax, and transnational funding mechanisms. […] The Public Service Internet provides opportunities for public debate, participation, and the advancement of social cohesion. […] The Public Service Internet is based on Internet platforms operated by a variety of Public Service Media, taking the public service remit into the digital age in co-operation with civil society, individual media users, citizens, and the creative, cultural and educational sector. The Public Service Internet advances democracy. It enhances the public sphere. It supports active citizenship by providing comprehensive information and analysis, diversity of social representation and creative expression and extended opportunities for participation. […] Now is the time for a Public Service Internet and revitalised Public Service Media“ (Fuchs and Unterberger 2021, 7, 8, 10-11).

Habermas's theory of the public sphere is a critical theory of public political communication that provides a framework for the critical analysis of the relationship between political communication and mediated and digital forms of capitalism, fascism, authoritarianism, and ideology. It will remain highly topical in the years and decades to come.

4. (Anti-)Fascism

Born on 18 June 1929, Jürgen Habermas was a toddler when Hitler came to power and a teenager when the Nazi regime collapsed and the Second World War ended in 1945. His commitment to and interest in humanism, democratic communication, and the democratic public sphere can be explained by his anti-fascism, situated within the context of German Nazi-fascism and post-war Germany. Habermas described himself as "a product of 'reeducation'" (Müller-Doohm 2016, 33) and said that his generation had a "desire to know. […] It was an intuitive understanding that separated the critical part of our generation from our generation from the entrenched mentality all around us: the Nazis had not been a foreign body in the fabric of an 'essentially healthy' culture – not some horrible episode that was fortunately over now. Rather, they were able to draw on the darkest legacy of our culture" (Habermas 2026, 2).

Habermas's life and works were shaped by a radical humanism in response to and in opposition to the fascist danger. He practised Adorno's post-Auschwitz categorical imperative: "A new categorical imperative has been imposed by Hitler upon unfree mankind: to arrange their thoughts and actions, so that Auschwitz will not repeat itself so that nothing similar will happen" (Adorno 2004, 365). Given the rise of new forms of far-right extremism, Habermas's life and works remind us of the importance of intellectually challenging authoritarianism and fascism.

In philosophy, Habermas challenged the works and intellectual legacy of the two Nazi Party members Martin Heidegger and Carl Schmitt. In a 1935 lecture that, after its republication in 1953, sparked public debate, Heidegger (2000, 213) spoke, in the context of National Socialism, of the "inner truth and greatness of this movement

(namely the encounter between global technology and modern man)". Habermas (1953, 197) drew the German public's attention to his discovery that Heidegger in 1953 "publishes his words, in the meantime eighteen years old, about the greatness and inner truth of National Socialism" and that it was therefore "time to think with Heidegger against Heidegger".

In the context of a renewed interest in Carl Schmitt, both on the political right and left, Habermas challenged Carl Schmitt's political theory that he saw as profoundly anti-democratic: "Schmitt's reasons for wanting to separate democracy, which he conceives in terms of identity, from public discussion, which he attributes to liberalism, are transparent. He wants to lay the conceptual groundwork for detaching democratic will-formation from the universalist presuppositions of general participation, limiting it to an ethnically homogeneous substratum of the population, and reducing it to argument-free acclamation by immature masses. Only thus can one envision a caesaristic and ethnically homogeneous *Führerdemokratie*, a democracy under a *Führer,* in which such a thing as 'sovereignty' would be embodied" (Habermas 1989, 139).

In the 1986 "Historians' Dispute" (*Historikerstreit*), German intellectuals discussed the question of the singularity or non-singularity of the Nazi system's crimes. The German philosopher and historian Ernst Nolte, who during the Nazi time was a student of Heidegger, claimed that Auschwitz was not primarily driven by anti-Semitism, but a reaction to the Russian Revolution: "Auschwitz is not primarily a result of traditional anti-Semitism and was not just one more case of 'genocide.' It was the fear-borne reaction to the acts of annihilation that took place during the Russian Revolution. […] Was the Bolshevik murder of an entire class not the logical and factual prius of the 'racial murder' of National Socialism?" (Habermas et al. 1993, 13-14, 22). Habermas responded that Nolte belittled the Nazis' crimes. Nolte "denies the singularity of the Nazi atrocities" (Habermas et al. 1993, 59). "The Nazi crimes lose their singularity in that they are at least made comprehensible as an answer to the (still extant) Bolshevist threats of annihilation. The magnitude of Auschwitz shrinks to the format of technical innovation and is explained on the basis of the 'Asiatic' threat from an enemy that still stands at our door" (41).

Assuming a singularity of Auschwitz and the Nazi system stresses the moral and political guilt of the Nazis and the Nazi system. Comparing this system, trying to causally explain it as a reaction to something external, or arguing that something much more horrific happened before or after in history, therefore excuses the Nazi system. According to Habermas, Nolte justified the Nazi system and its crimes by denying their singularity and causally reducing them to a reaction to Bolshevism.

Commenting on the rise of neo-authoritarianism, Habermas (2020, 31) wrote that the "convictions and motives, upon which the Nazi regime drew, no longer belong to a past that one can count by the intervening years: they have returned" (31). He argued that in Europe, "without European unification we will not overcome the unforseeable

economic consequences so far of the pandemic nor the right-wing populism at home and in the other member states of the EU“ (42).

Habermas is a critic of the postmodern turn in the social sciences and humanities. He argues that postmodern theory originates in the works of Nietzsche, who replaced the focus on reason and its dialectics as well as truth by a focus on myth, a critique of reason without a dialectic of enlightenment, and the will to power (Habermas 1990b, 86, 95-97, 104). Habermas sees a continuation of these Nietzschean characteristics in the works of Heidegger, Bataille, Derrida, Foucault, and other postmodern thinkers. Habermas characterises postmodern thinkers as young conservatives and neo-conservatives who “justify an irreconcilable anti-modernism” (Habermas 1981, 13) and “on the basis of modernistic attitudes […] justify an irreconcilable antimodernism” (Habermas 1998a, 13). Habermas (1992, chapter 1) sees postmodernism as part of structuralism, one of four great 20th philosophical movements he identifies (analytic philosophy, phenomenology, Western Marxism. Postmodernism “equates reason as a whole with repression-and then fatalistically or ecstatically seeks refuge in something wholly Other“ (Habermas 1992, 8). Habermas (1990b) argues that for Derrida and other postmodern thinkers, “language as such converges with literature“ (205); these thinkers transpose “the radical critique of reason into the domain of rhetoric“ and dull “the sword of the critique of reason itself“ (210) (see the collection of writings on the Habermas/Derrida debate in Thomassen 2006).

The poststructuralist critique of truth has been most clearly formulated by Michel Foucault and can be traced back to his interpretation of Nietzsche. For Foucault, history does not have the potential for freedom and reason: “Humanity doesn't gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination” (Foucault 1977, 151). Genealogy would be directed against the notion of history as: 1. reminiscence or recognition; 2. continuity or representative of a tradition; 3. truth and knowledge (160). Foucault argues for the “sacrifice of the subject of knowledge” (Foucault 1977, 162) and assumes that “all knowledge rests upon injustice” (163).

There is no doubt that there are organisations that use truth claims to discipline humans as workers in companies, pupils in schools, detainees in death camps, etc. However, assuming that any knowledge and truth necessarily foster disciplinary power and what Foucault calls a regime of truth leaves out the possibility of emancipatory knowledge, organisations, and societies. This becomes evident when Foucault writes that “[e]very society has its régime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth” that includes truth/falsity distinctions, sanctions and the power of those who define what is true (Foucault 1980, 131)

Habermas criticises Foucault’s argument that modern society, the humanities, and the social sciences have a “will to knowledge and to truth” that necessarily turns into new forms of domination (Habermas 1990b, 265). He questions the validity of “generalizing this will to knowing self-mastery into a will to power per se and to

postulate that all discourses (by no means only the modern ones) can be shown to have the character of hidden power and derive from practices of power“ (265). Foucault reverses “power's truth-dependency into the power-dependency of truth“ (274) and renders the dominative character as characteristic “for *all* times and *all* societies“ (270). Habermas criticises that Foucault does not allow for a notion of progressive counter-power[7] (281).

The postmodernist enmity towards universalism and truth makes it impossible to envision a state of society, in which there is universal wealth and well-being for all, and impossible to assess such conditions as normatively desirable. Postmodernism lacks a political vision. For Foucault, history is a sequence of ever newer forms of domination. He sees no possibility for the realisation of universal reason and happiness. That something emerges spontaneously from below does not guarantee that it benefits all. Such a view of society does not accept the normative judgement that fascism is false and needs to be avoided as valid because it does not provide categories that allow normative assessments of such conditions. Although Foucault opposes universalism and essentialism, he essentialises human history as necessary dominative. Foucault’s method of genealogy does not know the possibility of human and societal betterment, wealth and equity for all.

Postmodern scepticism toward truth exhibits logical parallels with authoritarian attempts to dismiss factual reality – presented by intellectuals, reputable news media, and science – as mere ‘fake news‘. This tendency has become known as post-truth politics. Postmodern logic not just questions truth but extends towards the fetishism of difference over commonality, identity over class, the post- and transhuman over humanism, relativism and particularism over universalism, fragmentation over totality, plurality over unity, micro over macro, etc. An example of the nihilism inherent in postmodern theory and right-wing neoreactionary thought is that Nick Land, who, along with Curtis Yarvin, founded the intellectual movement of the Dark Enlightenment and Neo-Reaction (NRx), has been highly influenced by postmodern thinkers such as Bataille, Deleuze, and Guattari. He refers positively to Foucault’s view of politics: “The Clausewitzean formula is notoriously inverted by Michel Foucault into the maxim ‘politics is war by other means‘“ (Land 2021, 303). For both Land and Foucault, politics is *necessarily* war (see Foucault 1978, 93), which is a Manichean view of society. Curtis Yarvin, who favours the creation of a CEO-monarchy where a top-CEO runs a country in an authoritarian manner, Yarvin argues that all universities and media have a left-wing agenda that they declare to be the truth. Therefore, he calls ”mainstream

[7] There was an interesting relationship between postmodern theorist Jacques Derrida and Habermas. Derrida and Habermas were intellectual opponents who respected each other and occasionally converged politically, for example when they together called for a "governance beyond the nation state“ that could “set a pre in the postnational constellation“ and "a cosmopolitan order on the basis of international law“ directed against “the destructive power of […] nationalism“ (Thomassen 2006, 274), ”The citizens of one nation must regard the citizens of another nation as fundamentally ‘one of us’“ (273).

academia, journalism and education“ the Cathedral, institutions that “produce and propagate the Synopsis" (Moldbug 2008 76). The “Synopsis is the set of all reasonable ideas. As for the Cathedral, it is simply the culmination of the great human quest for knowledge“ (76). Yarvin’s notion of the Cathedral parallels Foucault’s attack on truth, arguing that all intellectuals are always left-wing and making what are, in Yarvin’s view, false truths that are ideologically distorted. Donald Trump has carried this analysis practically to the end by constantly attacking “the Cathedral“ by claiming its members produce fake news and creating his own Internet platform Truth Social that defines itself as “the home for millions of people who have rejected the pervasive censorship regime that has ensnared legacy social media and endangered free speech online”[8]. Fusing anti-universalism, particularism, relativism, anti-humanism, and the logic of difference, Donald Trump is the leader of postmodern authoritarianism. In contemporary relativist ideologies, truth is not determined by facts and objective conditions but by ideology, emotions, and feelings.

In the relativist notion of truth characteristic of post-truth culture and politics, truth is what one feels positive about, not what corresponds to the facts and the foundations of a good society. Habermas (2008, 144) writes that a “post-truth democracy” is “no longer […] a democracy”. Frederic Jameson (1991) argues that postmodernism is the cultural logic of late capitalism, that is, “consumer or multinational capitalism“ (Jameson 1983, 125). Habermas indicates that postmodernism is not only the cultural logic of late capitalism but also that of late fascism.

What unites Habermas’s anti-fascist analyses is the defence of the very ideas of the dialectic, universalism, humanism, unity in diversity, and an alternative modernity, in opposition to relativism, particularism, nihilism, fragmentation, and reactionary modernity, which he saw as the intellectual foundations of fascist thought and practice. We can learn from Habermas’s courageous and committed anti-fascism how important it is to analyse and speak up against anti-humanism and authoritarianism.

5. Habermas’s Legacy: Critique as Imperative

Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communication is not merely a milestone – it is an inescapable reference for anyone engaging critically with media and society. To theorise communication today is to grapple with Habermas: to read with him, argue against him, and move beyond him. There is no critical theory of communication without Habermas, yet the task remains to update his project for our time. His insistence on interrogating the interplay of economy and culture cuts to the heart of any critique of communication. To understand communication now means beginning with Habermas – and then pushing further.

For Habermas (1990c), money, power and solidarity are three key structures of society. For him, socialism means that “the socially integrating force of solidarity should be in a position to stake its claim against the other social forces, money and

[8] https://tmtgcorp.com/#about, accessed on 27 March 2026.

administrative power, through a wide range of democratic forums and institutions" (19). Socialist media politics in the tradition of Habermas argues for and demands the creation and support of a wide range of non-commercial, ideologically and politically autonomous media and Internet platforms that enable "a radical-democratic universalization of interests through institutions for the formation of public opinion and political will" (21).

The refeudalised public sphere and the colonisation of the lifeworld are not just historical concepts; they are urgent frameworks for dissecting how political-economic power distorts democratic promises. In an era of algorithmic reputation systems, AI-driven discourse, and microtargeted advertising, Habermas's analysis of the public sphere becomes indispensable. It exposes how digital capitalism reshapes communication, turning platforms into arenas of control, ideology, and capitalist accumulation. Here, Habermas revisits Marx's critique of censorship and helps us extend this tradition to the age of digital capitalism and digital fascism.

Habermas's theory of the public sphere remains a vital tool – methodological and political – for dissecting the authoritarian undercurrents of digital capitalism. It reveals the connections between mediated communication and the forces of fascism, authoritarianism, and late-modern ideology. Habermas's anti-fascist interventions defend universalism, humanism, and unity in diversity against the intellectual foundations of fragmentation and reaction. His commitment teaches us that to resist anti-humanism and authoritarianism is to reclaim the possibility of an alternative modernity: rational, inclusive, and emancipatory.

Habermas was more than a theorist; he was a public intellectual who demonstrated that a critical theory of society must also be a critical theory of communication. His legacy is a call to action: critique is not just thought – it is intervention. As a critical public intellectual, he serves as a role model for future generations of critical thinkers.

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