

## Arenas of public debate

On the materiality of discussion spaces

Romain Badouard, Clément Mabi and Laurence Monnoyer-Smith

Translator: Richard Dickinson

---



### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/11000>

DOI: 10.4000/questionsdecommunication.11000

ISSN: 2259-8901

### Publisher

Presses universitaires de Lorraine

### Printed version

Date of publication: 31 December 2016

ISBN: 978-2-8143-0313-3

ISSN: 1633-5961

### Electronic reference

Romain Badouard, Clément Mabi and Laurence Monnoyer-Smith, « Arenas of public debate », *Questions de communication* [Online], 30 | 2016, Online since 22 March 2017, connection on 23 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/questionsdecommunication/11000> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/questionsdecommunication.11000>

---

This text was automatically generated on 23 September 2020.

Tous droits réservés

---

# Arenas of public debate

On the materiality of discussion spaces

Romain Badouard, Clément Mabi and Laurence Monnoyer-Smith

Translation : Richard Dickinson

---

## EDITOR'S NOTE

This English translation has not been published in printed form/Cette traduction anglaise n'a pas été publiée sous forme imprimée.

- 1 Public debate is at the very heart of how democracy functions. For a people to govern itself either directly or via its representatives, it must be able to forge enlightened opinions on the questions and problems which concern them. Forming individual or collective opinions requires access to information which is both independent of private interests and respectful of the diversity of points of view. The next stage is a process in which contradictory arguments are debated, thus confronting individuals or a group with diverging opinions to either modify or conversely support their initial positions. This debating process is seen as necessary for citizens to be able to make choices upon which public policies can be developed which will influence collective destinies. Thus, if we follow the ideas of many authors who have contributed to forging a deliberative theory of democracy (Girard, Le Goff, 2010), we could assume the following adage to be correct for the purposes of this introduction – individual or collective opinions are formed through discussion.
- 2 These discussions are not abstract exchanges which take place in a fanciful “world of ideas”; they are concrete social activities which take place in material spaces. In his initial work, Jürgen Habermas (1962) showed how the very emergence of the notion of public sphere in XVIII<sup>th</sup> century Europe was linked to a space restricted to *bourgeois salons* where literary discussions gradually moved towards political debates involving criticism of those in power. The way in which a space for debate produces or induces its own norms for exchanges has since been a favoured subject of study for many schools of communication studies research particularly in the fields of the anthropology of

communication (Goffman, 1967; Winkin, 1996), studies of political participation (Blondiaux, Cardon, 2006; Blondiaux, Fourniau, 2011) and science and technology studies (Barry, 2001; Callon, Lascoumes, Barthe, 2001). Since the XVIII<sup>th</sup> century *bourgeois salons* and experimentation with “the public use of reason” – to quote Jürgen Habermas – the public space has evolved a great deal. It is characterized today by the increase of spaces for debate and their (apparent) compartmentalization. Discussion on questions “of general interest” and public problems occurs in physical public spaces – like halls where public meetings are held, in the media, on television shows or daily newspaper columns – but also and perhaps above all in the informal spaces of daily life, in the “third places” so dear to Ray Oldenburg (1999). For him, advertising was the archetype of this type of space though it was to be replaced as such by social networks as is discussed by Scott Wright in this issue.

- 3 The web has indeed contributed a great deal to these changes. By allowing “counter-publics” (Fraser, 1992) whose discourse was absent from the main media to benefit from spaces of exchange and mobilization in certain cases, it contributed to creating effervescent public debate. Some however refer to the confinement and “Balkanization” of the space for exchange which it has brought about. The controversy surrounding the “filter bubbles” (see *infra*) at work on the social networks during the 2016 American Presidential campaign is but the resurgence of an old debate namely whether we find more contradictory arguments online (because the web enables a proliferation of different voices to be heard) or if, conversely, we are only referred to arguments which comfort us in our positions (because the web enables ideologically homogeneous groups to benefit from their own spaces for debate).
- 4 The “localization” and specific features of these spaces for debate therefore play an essential role in the configuration and even the content of the exchanges which occur there. This is firstly because the public groups which populate them often read events in the same way which implies a certain perception of the subject at hand and of the world in which it exists and evolves. Secondly it is because within these spaces there is a certain culture of exchanges which leads to specific uses of the right to have a say and particular ways of collectively evaluating the arguments exchanged. And finally there is the reason that the architecture of its arenas and the technical resources involved influence the position of those taking part in the debate and the logic of how opinions circulate and collective decisions are taken.

## The arenas and their audiences

- 5 Although the spaces for discussion in which public debate takes place are highly diverse in nature they all share a certain number of characteristics. Firstly, a public debate is always a debate *in front of* an audience (Lemieux, 2007). Members of the debate’s audience are both spectators and referees – they are led to make judgements about the relevance and authority of the arguments exchanged. This principle of exchanges being publicized, the aim of which is for their content to be made available for a third-party audience, is at the heart of Habermasian theory regarding the public space but it is also central to other approaches which are often considered to be opposing. Following on from Hannah Arendt’s work (1958), various research studies at the crossroads of sociology and communication sciences have for example attempted to study the public space in its stage-like dimension. According to this approach, the

public space can be understood as a theatre stage where politics plays to an audience of spectators whose collective judgement produces public opinion (Quéré, 1992). This school of research also recognizes the contributions made by phenomenology to the understanding of the dynamics underpinning public debate and has notably contributed studies of the “visibility” of social movements (Voirol, 2005) or to media reports (Arquembourg, 2011). These approaches have enabled a better level of consideration of effects which were unimagined by Jürgen Habermas and which are related to the postures of actors who cannot adopt a deliberative logic because of the existence of a stage to appear on which is offered to them.

- 6 Moreover Nancy Fraser’s criticism (1992) of Jürgen Habermas’s notion of public space also negatively refers to this issue of publicity. She considered that by only taking an interest in *bourgeois salons*, the German philosopher made no mention of a multitude of counter-spaces where groups with less visibility produced alternative ways to debate problems which concern them. The cultural studies field has also dealt with this question by investigating the way in which these population groups produce counter-discourses which reflect their own specific perceptions of the world (Hall, 2008). In more recent works (Dalibert, Lamy, Quemener, 2016), these contributions have been used to study the logics of structuring and conflict between these different spaces. An interpretative framework in terms of hegemonic public spaces was used – because these produce the dominant meaning of the events discussed – and also included counter-hegemonic public spaces because these provide alternative meanings for the same events thus acting as a form of resistance.
- 7 Other approaches have attempted to link the question of debate practices to that of the mobilization of population groups. For example, the sociology of collective action has suggested the notion of an “arena” to define the way these issues are structured together. Thus by developing an approach situating the construction of public issues problems (Cefaï, 2007) very close to those involved, the notion of the arena has enabled the characteristics of spaces for debate to be taken into account in the study of collective actions. The material dimension of these characteristics is an important factor. According to the definition formulated by Nicolas Dodier (1999: 109), an arena is:
 

*“an apparatus aimed at bringing together speakers and their audiences. Four elements generally characterize an arena: 1. Conditions for the entry of speakers and the subjects they can speak about; 2. Conditions for the mode of confrontation between speakers or between speakers and the audience; 3. Formats for recording the discourse produced (print, films, videos, digital formats, etc.); 4. Conditions of access for audiences (general public, members of an organisation, specialists, etc.)”.*
- 8 From this standpoint, concepts like “citizenship” or “public debate” are no longer just normative *a priori* propositions. Instead they are the concrete results of people’s commitment on public stages. Thus one important contribution of the notion of the arena of communication studies has been to go further than an approach centred on actors’ strategies and behaviour to observe the power relationships at work in spaces of discussion in context (Monnoyer-Smith, Talpin, 2010).
- 9 The sociology of controversies and particularly Francis Chateauraynaud’s work (2011) completes this approach by stressing the role of “argumentative trajectories” which enable the logics of interactions between the different arenas to be grasped. A controversy is constructed by the circulation of arguments between different spaces. It may for example start in a laboratory, be revealed by the press, go to court and so forth. The perspectives opened up by the notion of the arena enable public debate to be

considered in a pluralist framework which is open to different audiences and social groups. In this context, taking the materiality of these arenas into account helps complete the analysis of logics of problematization of public issues and the involvement stakes which derive from them (Mabi, 2014; Badouard, Mabi, 2015).

## The rationalities of debate

- 10 The different spaces for discussion – or rather the different arenas in which problems affecting specific population groups are discussed – have a second characteristic in common. Discussions take place in front of an audience with the aim of being heard by all the group members and therefore they are made up of expressed opinions which make validity claims and thus all constitute “regimes” of expression. According to Dominique Cardon, Jean-Philippe Heurtin and Cyril Lemieux (1995), three main regimes for expressing an opinion in public can be distinguished:
- that of criticism which implies the speaker taking a lesser role to serve an increase in generalities based on external sources aimed at legitimizing the opinion expressed (“making an argument irrefutable”);
  - that of opinion which conversely consecrates the speaker’s validity to get the specific point of view expressed recognized (“making oneself understood”);
  - that of sharing in which the speaker relates a personal experience with the aim of obtaining an empathic reaction from the audience.
- 11 According to the three sociologists, power phenomena occur in discussions “whenever the ability to act and speak in public in the acceptable forms (*i.e.* the three aforementioned regimes) does not appear to be universally shared” (*ibid.*: 14). This means that those who do not master the specific features of these regimes have to “represent their expectations in less public arenas” (*ibid.*: 15) by mobilizing regimes which do not have the same validity claims like violent interjections or spreading rumours.
- 12 In other words, all of the arenas possess their own cultures of debate which involve specific ways of proposing subjects for discussion and considering the arguments exchanged to be valid or not. When speakers are refused the right to claim validity in a particular arena because of the register they employ to express themselves, they then tend to move towards another arena where the regime they use will be appreciated to a greater extent. This apparent incompatibility between ways of bringing up subjects for discussion involves more than the simple mastery of linguistic or debating skills namely “ways of seeing” and “ways of thinking about” the subject of the given debate<sup>1</sup>. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot (1991) showed how individuals justify their arguments by grounding them in value systems. In this way, people’s arguments reveal different rationalities, different grids of perception of the world and very different ways of interpreting events. When these differences lead to incompatibility, intercomprehension becomes impossible because the interspeakers do not perceive the issues at stake in the debate in the same way and never really talk about the same subjects. This is where the idea of a “dialogue of the deaf” as theorized by Marc Angenot (2008) comes from. When individuals who are in opposition speak to each other, they often tend to consider what their interspeaker is saying to be “irrational” simply because the other person is following a different form of rationality from their own.

13 Nonetheless, while all speakers want to get their point of view “heard”, their sole objective is not necessarily to convince their audience. As expressing a view which bucks the trend of the regime governing a given arena is grounded in a specific rationality, this means its aim may be to put forward an alternative rationality. Thus two individuals debating in front of an audience may not be trying to convince their interspeaker or even that audience as a whole. Their goal may be to give a representation of a certain vision of the world on a public stage and show that they belong to a certain ideological or value-based community (Amossy, 2014). Guillaume Carbou (2015) illustrated this phenomenon well in his research into online debates on press websites following the accident at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant. In this rather unusual context, the communication researcher identified seven different modes for apprehending the problem caused by the disaster at the power plant. We do not have the time to discuss all these modes herein but we shall take four meaningful examples. Guillaume Carbou thus identified:

- the “Anti-economic growth profile” profile referring to pro-ecology internet users whose arguments are based on the idea of the finiteness of the world and its resources and whose objective is to change people’s behaviour on the personal scale by raising awareness;
- the “militant” whose arguments are based on a logic of binary denunciation (“it’s us against them”) and whose objective is to discredit “the enemy”;
- the “scientist” who provides technical and descriptive information without making judgements and whose objective is to thwart and discredit opinions s/he considers irrational;
- and the “manager” whose arguments are based on logics of calculation and whose objective is to promote a positive view of the idea of progress.

14 There is little likelihood of these four internet user profiles understanding each other because they adhere to four different rationalities and used varied perception grids and interpretation modes regarding the Fukushima accident and the issues at stake. What would make sense or be considered “fair”, “true” or “advisable” and the criteria to be used to evaluate arguments are radically different for a “manager”, “scientist”, “militant” or “top down” profile user.

15 This principle of incompatible rationalities and the regimes through which they express opinions is at the heart of the development of contemporary controversies (Badouard, Mabi, 2015). Those involved with a controversy defend visions of the world and value systems more than private interests which means that conflict is inevitable within such controversies. For actors involved in conflicts, not everything is negotiable. The aim of the process of putting forward controversies for public debate is actually to identify points which can be discussed by those with opposing rationalities. To alleviate this problem of incompatibility, the types of participative apparatus which bring participants in conflicts together for discussion tend to use “deliberative public grammars” to set the boundaries for debates through common exchange criteria (Talpin, 2006). If the interspeakers involved cannot align themselves on the basis of these criteria by a mutual recognition of the validity of each others’ arguments (this is the fundamental idea of the “communicative rationality” as described by Jürgen Habermas (1981) who thus founded a set of “discourse ethics”) they cannot attain any sort of mutual understanding. In these conditions, their opinions will not evolve through discussion and the dynamic of the controversy will move more towards a logic

involving the disqualification of opponents through strategies aimed at invalidating their arguments.

## The Web, design and the culture of debate

- 16 In public debate, it is not so much that the web has led to a revelation of the different rationalities at work therein more that there has been than a brutalization or dumbing down of exchanges (Bronner, 2013). As Guillaume Carbou writes (2015: 2) about the “ideological chaos” of the web – the profusion and circulation of discourse and counter-discourse – “there are not just diverging opinions being expressed, it is more a case of different ways of making sense of the world”. The web makes these different rationalities interact and makes their confrontation visible and sometimes violent according to debating logics which are very different from those at work in the traditional media (Badouard, 2015). This does not mean however that the web actually “produces” these rationalities – instead it offers them a forum for their expression. The important issue today is to understand whether the web favours these rationalities meeting or conversely makes them even more hermetic to each other.
- 17 One good illustration of this issue would be the debates which followed the election of Donald Trump in the United States and the alleged ideological “imprisonment” in echo chambers caused by social network algorithms during the campaign. The debate on the compartmentalization and even the “Balkanization” of the public space which the web is alleged to cause is not a new one. Indeed it was at the heart of the first communication studies dealing with the relation between digital and public spaces (Castells, 1996; Miege, 1997; Flichy, 2008) and also took place about the media for the general public before the democratization of the web (Wolton, 1997; François, Neveu, 1999). It accompanies a criticism of the Habermasian approach to the public space (Negt, 1972; Mansbridge, 1999; Dahlberg, 2001; Miège, 2010) which insists on its pluralist and fragmented dimension by showing how changes to the media landscape (radio, television, press then the internet) have led to the birth of a “patchwork” of theme-based spaces with mini-audiences which, according to Cass R. Sunstein (2002), have even more difficulty meeting today because the internet encourages the polarization of audiences more than their mutual consideration.
- 18 According to the theory of the “Balkanization” of the public space, audiences sharing the same rationalities, value systems and visions of the world meet up in closed-off spaces where they are not subjected to the discomfort of being exposed to diverging opinions. The originality of recent debate about ideological “imprisonment” is that this is said to occur on the individual level through the creation of “filter bubbles” (Pariser, 2011). In the theory of filter bubbles, search engine and social media algorithms shut people off in cognitive spaces because they provide internet users with information linked to stories they have previously consulted and thus this is only ever information which backs up their existing opinions. Thus, on Facebook during the 2016 American Presidential campaign, supporters of Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton were only suggested information which corresponded to their political views and thus never saw any contradictory arguments despite the fact that being confronted with opposing opinions is at the heart of how public debate should function.
- 19 This debate may be of limited significance to some extent (for a long time reception studies have found that we live our daily lives in ideological bubbles of varying

hermeticness) but it *does* show the important role now played by web technical resources (in this case algorithms) in the organization of public debate. Each space for debate has its own principles of inclusion/exclusion (who has a legitimate right to express views), its own rules for the circulation of speech (how people take turns to speak), its own limits on expression (time for speaking, rules on putting forward opinions, etc.) and its own mechanisms to evaluate the relevance and authority of people's arguments. Some of these rules are integrated into the actual architecture of spaces for debate and the organization of physical resources of which they are made up. For example, an assembly in a semicircle-shaped auditorium (like the French parliament's *Assemblée Nationale*) is designed to promote exchanges around a central point which coordinates them whereas an assembly in rows facing each other (like the House of Lords in the UK) is intended to promote confrontations. Similarly the classic organization of a classroom corresponds to a descending vision of learning in which teachers give knowledge to students whereas a "U-shaped" set-up is supposed to generate interactions between students themselves and promote crossed learning mechanisms. This is nothing new. Both architects (Pélégri-Genel, 2012) and sociologists with an interest in urban spaces (Winner, 1986; Latour, 1996; Denis, Pontille, 2012) have known for a long time that the resources involved in the organization of a space are actually social rules expressed in a material form. The difference between public and online spaces is that on the web nearly all the rules, norms and principles governing exchanges are integrated in technical rather than physical forms. One consequence of this material integration of debating norms is that they are made less visible with a certain technical culture being required to decipher them. Another consequence is that it makes them more "essential" according to its "robustness" (Jouët, 2000).

- 20 Following on from Lawrence Lessig's (1999) famous claim that online "Code is Law", since the start of the 2000s a line of research at the crossroads of the information and communication sciences and science and technology studies has been working on the way in which the technical resources of the digital sphere frame and direct deliberative and participative online practices. For example, such studies have dealt with the way in which the design of forums promotes specific exchange dynamics (Wright, Street, 2007; Benvegnu, 2006) or how the mobilization of certain technical resources (videos, "likes", evaluation tools, etc.) can develop mechanisms for the inclusion or exclusion of certain groups of users (Monnoyer-Smith, 2006; Coleman, 2008; Bennett, 2008). These "design-oriented" studies (Badouard, 2014) have shown how the design of participative sites is an indication of certain visions of democracy and citizenship (Monnoyer-Smith, 2010; Badouard, 2014; Mabi, 2013). Other research has covered the uses of public speech online (Greffet, Wojcik, 2008; Cardon, 2010; Wright, 2012; Jouët, Le Caroff, 2013) including such topics as anonymity, the equality of statuses in putting views forward, the inequality of discursive resources, the search for consensus, *flaming*, *trolling*, the polarization of exchanges or *push-button* participation. These are all elements which integrate a "political culture of the web" which profoundly infuses the many spaces for debates (Badouard, 2015).
- 21 Following on logically from this research, this issue's main argument is that, beyond the analysis of the material dimension of arenas and the way in which this shapes speaking and exchanges, study of how public debate circulates and evolves between these spaces is required. Understanding the circulation of debate between a wide range of arenas requires a comprehension of how each of these reconfigure debate by

enabling new participants to express themselves, by proposing new rules for exchanges and by enabling the mobilization of new resources in discussion. As each arena possesses its own rationality, it is important to better understand what these rationalities actually do to debate based on the spaces in which they express themselves. A proper analysis of the circulation between arenas requires observation of what makes sense in a given debate for each of the groups involved.

## Towards an “ecological” approach to the digital sphere

- 22 This issue thus covers the process of construction of “public debate” and the way in which it structures itself according to *where* the subject for debate is discussed and *who* is involved in the discussion. This study of the conditions for citizens to express themselves is a logical extension of interest in the dynamics of debates in the field of the sociology of public problems and collective action mentioned earlier (Cefaï, 2007). It highlights a point which has so far been the subject of less study namely the role played by the different arenas in the configuration and dynamics of public debate by contributing to reinforcing the “power of expression” (Chateauraynaud, 2011) of those involved to help the trajectory of exchanges to evolve. By mixing socio-political and socio-technical views on arguments, the objective of this issue is therefore to return to the question of the material constraints on public expression and the way in which they influence the way people put opinions forward. Two main subject areas are explored throughout these contributions. The first concerns the materiality of spaces for discussion. The idea is to put forward the hypothesis that the arguments used are affected by where speakers express themselves and that this communicational constraint influences the dynamic of debates. Are certain subjects more adapted to certain spaces than others? Why do certain groups attempt to express themselves via the “mainstream media” while others prefer more private spaces with “face-to-face” interactions? The aim is firstly to understand why certain people get involved with *certain arenas rather than others* according to their strategies and the material resources available to “equip” them to express themselves. An example is the case of groups of radical militants who refuse all contact with national media and its framing of stories in favour of telling the story of their own discourse, particularly on the internet. They work within the framework of a “mediactivist” (Cardon, Granjon, 2010) logic to express their own vision of the world (for the case of French “Zadist” militants, see Mabi, 2016). In this way, these spaces take part in the construction of meaning which enables actors to construct their own experience of a given subject and explain how and why a situation is unfair, immoral or unequal, thus justifying their involvement.
- 23 A second line of thought deals with the logics of circulation between the arenas and with the dynamics of argument trajectories. It starts from the hypothesis that, while debate circulates, gets disseminated and reshaped according to each arena’s own possibilities and constraints, spaces becoming part of networks is not a “fluid” operation and the circulation of arguments is affected by the power relationships which personify the formats of expression involved. There are dominant spaces which give certain arguments authority and a superior normative power. Gaining access to these arenas is thus of decisive importance for actors but not all of them succeed – far from it. The normative work required to “conform” to the preoccupations expressed in these arenas is so demanding that it makes the observation of circulation on certain

subjects purely hypothetical. For example, speaking about the migrant crisis in the medias in such a way as to stress the humanist imperative of taking refugees in or discussing climate change as being a consequence of the capitalist system is something of a challenge. Nonetheless there are reasons for hope. Julien Talpin's work (2016) on *Community Organizing* is an interesting counter-example and shows that through a great deal of mobilization and organizational work, certain causes manage to develop sufficient political gravitas to change arena. Taking a problem out of the ghetto requires its "organizers" to carry out painstaking fieldwork involving meeting people living in working-class areas and resituating daily issues in an overall schema of broader social inequality and injustices. Studying the capacity of problems to meet the right audiences according to the materiality of spaces for expression is also an opportunity to discuss what the digital arenas change during these processes. How do they integrate into the ecology of public problems? What influence do digital communication tools have on the expression of difficulties and on how communities based on experiences are structured? Stressing the importance of the interdependencies between formats of expression also enables us to no longer consider digital formats "separately" and to resituate them in a broader dynamic which integrates them as a dimension of socio-political questions being asked throughout our society. We therefore propose to take an "ecological" approach to the digital sphere which consists of trying to see how the communicational practices it authorizes contribute to modifying the processes of construction of meaning and of the collective experience. To what extent does this transform the field of possibilities in public debate? Approaching the role of the digital sphere in this way means debates on the web are no longer considered "as such" and instead study is made of their capacity to create radical changes of direction in trajectories and modify power relationships within the argument frameworks mobilized by those involved. The digital tools which make debate possible can thus be viewed as *artefacts* introduced into a given environment which provides access to new cognitive opportunities for forging an opinion on situations that have been experienced. This question is important for communication studies insofar as the analysis of the digital sphere "in context" is highly demanding as regards interdisciplinarity. This issue is a first attempt at experimentation along these lines and attempts to mix approaches, objects and viewpoints to find out more about contemporary changes in public debate.

## Contributions

24 Moving beyond the variety of approaches and case studies, a certain number of salient points emerge which are food for collective thought:

1. The public space fragments into arenas but these do not all manage to obtain the same levels of visibility or influence on the dynamics of debate. As Daniel Céfaï points out, this process of publicization influences the construction of public problems. His article highlights the key role played by the concept of a public arena in promoting and disseminating the study of "audiences" in all their diversity and in renewing surveys of democracy which is considered to be both a form of life and a process aimed at dealing with problems. The arena shapes actors' fields of experience, creates an issue of their access to the collective problem and their capacity to act upon it. The issue's articles tend to dissuade readers from having too "fluid" and irenic a vision of circulations between the arenas. The trajectory of public problems is not linear. It is the fruit of power relationships and mobilizations to move into

*certain arenas rather than others* which creates margin effects and compulsory crossing points in the organization of public debate. Hence the principle of symmetry which is popular with part of the field of the sociology of controversies (Latour, 1999; Callon, Lascoumes, Barthe, 2001) is damaged and shows how much debate's communicational fluxes organize themselves into a set of power relationships centred on dominant discourses and counter-spaces which people know about to varying degrees.

2. The interplay between frameworks identified by pragmatist approaches is of essential importance for power in public debate. Mathieu Berger and François Rominj reiterate the key role played by the "weight of situations" which invites readers to painstakingly study the interaction which occurs to avoid the traps of excessive "contextualism" which might underestimate the constitutive asymmetries of exchange. Their survey reveals that the patients' participation in important health issues involving them becomes difficult from the "infra-public" stage of a private conversation with doctors onwards and that public discussion only confirms the challenge represented by this kind of approach. In this way, to discuss their illnesses, non-expert patients make "a foray" into expert language which enables them to maintain a certain "ambiguity" about their capacity to interact. Their participation thus moves into a framework which prevents them having any effect on real-life situations. Despite a certain number of procedural precautions, participation in shared frameworks remains "highly improbable". This result is backed up by Julien Talpin's survey on debate about discrimination. Avoiding an ethno-religious reading grid for society's problems actually prevents the inclusion of minority groups in the public space and limits certain groups' involvement with certain causes. Through the case of racial discrimination being denounced in the French town of Roubaix, his contribution shows the gap between civic frameworks involving political parties, associations and institutions in the battle against abstention and the sentiment of injustice expressed by a population group whose members explain their political disengagement through their experience of discrimination. In the extension to Marion Carrel's findings (2006), the conditions required for people to speak (a debate to emerge) are fragile and aligning the frameworks which are necessary for participation is based on a subtle balance.
3. To a certain extent the digital sphere and particularly socio-digital networks are reshuffling the cards and dealing new hands. Limits on access to the public space are more flexible thus making it easier for "counter-audiences" to mobilize in a search for visibility. As Scott Wright reminds us in this issue, the digital sphere imposes a specific and particular form of normativity on exchanges, transforms our experience of politics and makes democracy's centre of gravity slide from its representative forms towards engaging "conversational" logics – to use the term coined by Dominique Cardon (2010) – as these are directed more towards the public and logics of opinion. It thus promotes "expressivist" type forms of participation (Allard, 2005; Monnoyer-Smith, 2011) which are grounded in informal daily discussions. The diversification of registers of expression which it authorizes makes possible new modes for the problematization of difficulties which are experienced and influence the concernment of different population groups. Several articles from this issue have therefore run surveys on dominated groups' capacity to exploit the characteristics of digital arenas to give their arguments visibility and make themselves some room in the margins of the public space. Virginie Julliard shows this in her study of how the French controversy of "gender theory" spread via Twitter. Militants used the features of the apparatus such as hashtags to make subject exist and mobilize people even before an issue (here the recognition of "gender theory") actually developed. In his study of forums for climate change sceptics, Baptiste Campion shows that a diversification of forms of legitimacy is constructed and founded on different criteria from those at work in traditional media arenas. Getting the measure of this renewed pluralism is a challenge for those wishing to grasp the evolutions of public debate in our societies. This pluralist requirement particularly involves the "main media" which are the dominant or hegemonic arenas opening up to normatively highly

divergent preoccupations and ways of seeing things. Their supposed impermeability can actually create favourable conditions for the dynamics of radicalization of positions on essential subjects such as climate change.

4. Despite the public space opening up, it seems increasingly difficult for different points of view to be confronted without it becoming a “dialogue of the deaf”. The articles in this issue show the ever-increasing number of arenas involved in debates and the complexity of the links between them but they also show that the degree of visibility alone does not modify power relationships. A greater variety of points of view is of course made public and communities get involved to make sure issues (whether they be “gender theory” or climate change scepticism) are on the general agenda but in the end arguments do not really get any further than the environment they were produced in and very rarely is the opposing camp confronted with such views. This assessment makes one wonder about the real capacity of the margins to affect debates – is it truly possible to modify the asymmetries of visibility? There is only a narrow opportunity for this but if we take Julien Talpin’s findings as a starting point then the organization of communities in marginal deliberative spaces enables minority actors to forge their own frameworks for debate before putting them to the test of the general public. Scott Wright uses the same hypothesis when he argues that the internet should be considered a positive and conducive place for this kind of approach.

## Conclusion

- 25 In general, the aim of this issue is to contribute to a better understanding of the current changes taking place in forms of public debate. What should be thought about the proliferation of speakers, the multiplication of discourses and counter-discourses? Is this profusion a symptom of the Balkanization of the public space particularly under the influence of the digital sphere? Or conversely does it reveal the hitherto unknown vitality of debate which is freeing itself from traditional constraints to enable public groups to actually become actors in debates? To provoke thought, the articles of this issue question the status of the notion of a public arena in an attempt to understand whether such spaces function as “bubbles” with rigid, pre-defined frameworks or if, conversely, public arenas encourage deliberation between different population groups. This tension is characteristic of our contemporary era and is both maintained and made worse by the fact that it is increasingly difficult to use a shared basis to test out and evaluate arguments which circulate. The environment of ever-diversifying media apparatuses makes the creation of “common spaces” everyone considers legitimate difficult. Succeeding in thinking up public arenas which are robust enough to play this role is clearly a fundamental challenge for the future of public debate.
- 26 Allard L, 2005, “Express yourself 2.0! Blogs, podcasts, fansubbing, mashups...: de quelques agrégats technoculturels à l’âge de l’expressivisme généralisé”, pp. 145-172, in: Maigret É., Macé É., dirs, *Penser les médiacultures. Nouvelles pratiques et nouvelles approches de la représentation du monde*, Paris, A. Colin/Institut national de l’audiovisuel.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Amossy R., 2014, *Apologie de la polémique*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France.
- Angenot M., 2008, *Dialogues de sourds. Traité de rhétorique antilogique*, Paris, Éd. Mille et Une Nuits.
- Arendt H., 1958, *Condition de l'homme moderne*, translated from English by G. Fradier, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1983.
- Arquembourg J., 2011, *L'Événement et les médias*, Paris, Éd. des Archives contemporaines.
- Badouard R., 2014, "La mise en technologie des projets politiques. Une approche "orientée design" de la participation politique en ligne", *Participations. Revue de sciences sociales sur la démocratie et la citoyenneté*, 8, pp. 31-54.
- Badouard R., 2015, "Je ne suis pas Charlie. Pluralité des prises de parole sur le web et les réseaux sociaux", pp. 187-219, in: Lefébure P., Sécail C., dirs, *Le Défi Charlie. Les médias à l'épreuve des attentats*, Paris, Lemieux.
- Badouard R., Mabi C., 2015, "Controverses et débat public: nouvelles perspectives de recherche", *Hermès. La Revue*, 73, pp. 225-231.
- Barry A., 2001, *Political Machines. Governing a Technological Society*, Londres, Athlone Press.
- Bennett L., 2008, "Changing Citizenship in the Digital Age", pp. 1-24, in: Bennet L., dir., *Civil Life Online: How Media Can Engage Youth*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Benvegnu N., 2006, "Le débat public en ligne. Comment s'équipe la démocratie dialogique?", *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique*, vol. 75, pp. 103-124.
- Blondiaux L., Cardon D., 2006, "Dispositifs participatifs", *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique*, 75, pp. 3-9.
- Blondiaux L., Fourniau J.-M., 2011, "Un bilan des recherches sur la participation du public en démocratie: beaucoup de bruit pour rien?", *Participations. Revue de sciences sociales sur la démocratie et la citoyenneté*, 1, pp. 10-35.
- Boltanski L., Thévenot L., 1991, *De la justification. Les économies de la grandeur*, Paris, Gallimard.
- Bronner G., 2013, *La Démocratie des crédules*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France.
- Callon M., Lascoumes P., Barthe Y., 2001, *Agir dans un monde incertain*, Paris, Éd. Le Seuil.
- Carbou G., 2015, "Des contre-discours aux contre-mondes: l'exemple des commentaires d'internautes autour de l'accident de Fukushima", *Semen. Revue de sémio-linguistique des textes et discours*, 39, pp. 1-18.
- Cardon D., 2010, *La Démocratie Internet*, Paris, Éd. Le Seuil.
- Cardon D., Granjon, F., 2010, *Médiactivistes*, Paris, Presses de Sciences Po.
- Cardon D., Heurtin J.-P., Lemieux C., 1995, "Parler en public", *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique*, vol. 8, 31, pp. 5-19.
- Carrel M., 2006, "Politisation et publicisation: les effets fragiles de la délibération en milieu populaire", *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique*, 75, pp. 33-51.
- Castells M., 1996, *La Société en réseaux*, t. 1, *L'ère de l'information*, translated from English by P. Delamare, Paris, Fayard, 1998.

- Cefaï D., 2007, *Pourquoi se mobilise-t-on? Les théories de l'action collective*, Paris, Éd. La Découverte.
- Chateauraynaud F., 2011, *Argumenter dans un champ de force. Essai de balistique sociologique*, Paris, Petra.
- Coleman S., 2008, "Doing IT for Themselves: Management versus Autonomy in Youth E-Citizenship", pp. 189-206, in: Bennet L., ed., *Civil Life Online: How Media Can Engage Youth*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Dahlberg L., 2001, "The Internet and Democratic Discourse: Exploring The Prospects of Online Deliberative Forums Extending the Public Sphere", *Information, Communication and Society*, vol. 4, 4, pp. 615-633.
- Dalibert M., Lamy A., Quemener N., 2016, "Circulation et qualification des discours. Conflictualités dans les espaces publics", *Études de communication*, 47, pp. 8-20.
- Denis J., Pontille D., 2012, "Signalétique du métro et politique de l'attention", *Sciences de la société*, 82, pp. 21-39.
- Dodier N., 1999, "L'espace public de la recherche médicale. Autour de l'affaire de la ciclosporine", *Réseaux. Communication, technologie, société*, 95, pp. 107-154.
- Flichy P., 2008, "Internet et le débat démocratique", *Réseaux. Communication, technologie, société*, 150, pp. 159-185.
- François B., Neveu É., 1999, *Espaces publics mosaïques. Acteurs, arènes et rhétoriques des débats publics contemporains*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Fraser N., 1992, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to a Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", pp. 109-142, in: Calhoun C., ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MIT Press.
- Goffman E., 1967, *Les Rites d'interaction*, trad. de l'anglais par A. Kihm, Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1974.
- Greffet F., Wojcik S., 2008, "Parler politique en ligne: une revue des travaux français et anglo-saxons", *Réseaux. Communication, technologie, société*, 150, pp. 19-50.
- Habermas J., 1962, *L'Espace public*, translated from German by M. B. de Launay, Paris, Payot, 1988.
- Habermas J., 1981, *Théorie de l'agir communicationnel*, t. 1, *Rationalité de l'action et rationalisation de la société*, Paris, Fayard, 1987.
- Hall S., 1977, "La culture, les médias et l'effet idéologique", translated from English by C. Jacquet, pp. 41-60, in: Glevarec H., Macé É., Maigret É., dirs, *Cultural Studies. Anthologie présentée et commentée*, Paris, A. Colin, 2008.
- Jouët J., 2000, "Retour critique sur la sociologie des usages", *Réseaux. Communication, technologie, société*, 100, pp. 487-421.
- Jouët J., Le Caroff, 2013, "L'actualité politique et la participation en ligne", pp. 117-157, in: Jouët J., Rieffel R., dirs, *S'informer à l'ère numérique*, Rennes, Presses universitaires de Rennes.
- Latour B., 1996, *Petites leçons de sociologie des sciences*, Paris, Éd. La Découverte.
- Latour B., 1999, *Changer de société, refaire de la sociologie*, Paris, Éd. La Découverte.
- Le Goff A., Girard C., 2011, *La Démocratie délibérative. Anthologie des textes fondateurs*, Paris, Hermann.
- Lemieux C., 2007 "À quoi sert l'analyse de controverse?", *Mil Neuf Cent. Revue d'histoire intellectuelle*, 25, pp. 191-212.

- Lessig L., 1999, *Code And Other Law of Cyberspace*, New York, Basic Books.
- Mabi C., 2013, "Analyser les dispositifs participatifs par leur design", in: Barats C., dir., *Manuel d'analyse du web*, Paris, A. Colin, 2016.
- Mabi C., 2014, *Le Débat CNDP et ses publics à l'épreuve du numérique. Entre espoirs d'inclusion et contournement de la critique sociale*, thèse de doctorat en sciences de l'information et de la communication, Université de technologie de Compiègne. Access: <http://bibliotheque.utc.fr/EXPLOITATION/doc/IFD/2014COMP2148>.
- Mansbridge, J., 1999, "Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System", pp. 211-239, in: Macedo S., ed., *Deliberative Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Miège B., 1997, *La Société conquise par la communication*, t. 2, *La communication entre l'industrie et l'espace public*, Grenoble, Presses universitaires de Grenoble.
- Miège B., 2010, *L'Espace public contemporain*, Grenoble, Presses universitaires de Grenoble.
- Monnoyer-Smith L., 2006, "Être créatif sous la contrainte. Une analyse des formes nouvelles de la délibération publique: le cas Ducaï", *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique*, 75, pp. 75-101.
- Monnoyer-Smith L., 2010, *Communication et délibération. Enjeux technologiques et mutations citoyennes*, Paris, Hermès/Lavoisier.
- Monnoyer-Smith L., 2011, "La participation en ligne, révélateur d'une évolution des pratiques politiques?", *Participations. Revue de sciences sociales sur la démocratie et la citoyenneté*, 1, pp. 156-185.
- Monnoyer-Smith L., Talpin, J., 2010, "sic et ethnométhodologie: réconcilier une approche des pratiques avec une analyse des formes de pouvoir", *Cahiers d'ethnométhodologie*, 4, pp. 119-128.
- Negt O., 1972, *L'Espace public oppositionnel*, translated from German by A. Neumann, Paris, Payot, 2007.
- Oldenburg R., 1999, *The Great Good Place*, New York, Marlowe, 2007.
- Pélegrin-Genel E., 2010, *Des souris dans un labyrinthe, décrypter les ruses et manipulations de nos espaces quotidiens*, Paris, Éd. La Découverte.
- Pariser E., 2011, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web is Changing What We Read and How We Think*, Londres, Penguin Books.
- Quéré, L., 1992, "L'espace public: de la théorie politique à la métathéorie sociologique", *Quaderni*, 18, pp. 75-92.
- Sunstein C., 2002, *Republic.com*, Princeton, Princeton University Press.
- Talpin J., 2006, "Jouer les bons citoyens. Les effets contrastés de l'engagement au sein de dispositifs participatifs", *Politix. Revue des sciences sociales du politique*, 75, pp. 11-31.
- Talpin J., 2016, *Community organizing. De l'émeute à l'alliance des classes populaires aux États-Unis*, Paris, Éd. Raisons d'agir.
- Voirol O., 2005, "Les luttes pour la visibilité. Esquisse d'une problématique", *Réseaux. Communication, technologie, société*, 129-130, pp. 89-121.
- Winkin Y., 1996, *Anthropologie de la communication. De la théorie au terrain*, Bruxelles, De Boeck.
- Winner L., 1986, *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, pp. 19-39.
- Wolton D., 1997, *Penser la communication*, Paris, Flammarion.

Wright S., 2012, "From "Third Place" to "Third Space": Everyday Political Talk in Non-Political Online Spaces", *Javnost. The Public*, vol. 19, 3, pp. 5-20.

Wright S., Street J., 2007, "Democracy, Deliberation and Design: The Case of Online Discussion Forums", *New Media Society*, vol. 9, 5, pp. 849-870.

## NOTES

1. See the work of the team working on the research project "*Formats de l'expression citoyenne dans les procédures locales de concertation en environnement: une comparaison européenne*". Access: [http://concertation-environnement.fr/documents/abstracts/LMS\\_Synthese.pdf](http://concertation-environnement.fr/documents/abstracts/LMS_Synthese.pdf).

---

## AUTHORS

### **ROMAIN BADOUARD**

Laboratoire Agora  
Université de Cergy-Pontoise  
F-91000  
romain.badouard@u-cergy.fr

### **CLÉMENT MABI**

Connaissance, organisation et systèmes techniques  
Université de technologie de Compiègne  
F-60203  
clement.mabi@utc.fr

### **LAURENCE MONNOYER-SMITH**

Commissariat général au développement durable  
F-92800  
laurence.monnoyer-smith@developpement-durable.gouv.fr