

The Transformation of Public Dissent: From Counter-Publics Spheres and Alternative Media to Disinformation Ecologies?

Counter-public spheres are commonly regarded as discursive arenas that allow members of subordinated or marginalized social groups to incite counter discourses, circulate alternate narratives and to promote oppositional interpretations of social realities against a hegemony constituted by dominant publics. As such, counter-publics allow social actors to actively and autonomously bring visibility to their experiences, interests, and identities, to mobilize for their causes and not least to publicly voice dissent. In this regard, counter-publics help to reflect the societal status quo and can become indicative of existing social inequalities as well as the logics of inclusion and exclusion prevalent in dominant public spheres and to criticize their shortcomings. Counter-public spheres are of paramount importance both in liberal-democratic as well as in authoritarian societies. As a radicalization of normative theories of the bourgeois public sphere, the concept of counter-publics challenges liberal democracies by demanding the full realization of their constitutive ideals. While actors of counter-publics in democratic societies can refer to the ability to publicly voice a dissenting opinion and participate in public debate without fear of persecution as a fundamental norm, in non-democratic societies, these are often the only seeds in which the fragile blossoms of criticism and political defiance can take root.

In a similar vein, alternative media have long since been regarded important carriers and constituents of counter-public spheres and were regarded as closely linked to oftentimes progressive and typically (radical) prodemocratic social movements such as the Labor, feminist, or ecological movement. Although important theorists such as Nancy Fraser or John Downing considered the occurrence of anti-democratic, right-wing counter-publics and alternative media, too, the research mainly focused on progressive groups and their media. Especially with the advent of the internet and social media and its principal potential to remove barriers for social and political participation, high hopes regarding the emancipatory potential for public discourse prospered. But instead of a public discourse freed of constraints of unequal power relations the optimism regarding counter-public spheres and alternative media have almost been reversed in recent years. The same public arenas, practices, and communication strategies, once idealized as sentinel for democracy, voice and participation are increasingly suspicious regarding their contribution to societal polarization, spreading conspiracy myths and a manipulative undermining of democracy.

This ECREA Communication History Section preconference addresses this apparent transformation and evolution of counter-public spheres and alternative media as one of their vessels from what was once considered an oasis of democracy to what is now rather discussed as swamps of anti-democratic agitation and radicalization. In the context of the conference, the topic will be treated both in terms of phenomena of counter-publics and alternative media and in terms of (scientific) discourses on them. In particular we are interested in contesting approaches to the idealized past and the allegedly gloomy present of counter-public spheres. How can the history of the concepts and historical cases of related phenomena help us track and challenge the alleged transformation of the counter-public spheres and alternative media from good to evil. What is the role communication research and its conceptual work, idealizing of some practices while alienating others have to do with it?

In particular we invite abstracts for presentations within the following areas:

- Conceptual and Theoretical Evolutions:

In how far are notions like counter-public spheres or alternative media relative to their contemporary contexts, societies, media or political and economic systems and geographies? To what extent do academic concepts of counter-publics and alternative

media contribute to essentializing or normalizing (implicitly or explicitly) a specific understanding of the public sphere, media organization, and also public dissent? To what extent is scholarly engagement with issues of counter-publics, alternative media, and public dissent – as public sphere theories in general – tied to specific, including normative value systems, and how much is it guided by whose critique and dissent one is dealing with? Is it important or possibly misleading if concepts are used too inclusively or too restrictively, e.g., can the public dissent of the radical left and the extreme right be described and analyzed with the same concepts? How can the antagonistic relationship of these disparate forms of counter-publics to dominant publics be conceptualized in a differentiated way? Do terms like counter-public and alternative media need to be protected from being used to describe disinformation and propaganda media, and thus from being damaged? Is there a risk that criticism of alternative media and counter-publicity will also generally discredit and delegitimize the possibility of public opposition?

- Cases and examples of historical counter-public spheres and alternative media:
How did different actors aim to establish (self-proclaimed) counter-publics and why did they see the need for it? What consequences did media and political change have on the emergence and development of counter-publics and alternative media? Which alternative media occurred and how did they evolve? What forms of counter-publics emerged in the Warsaw Pact states against media under state and party control? What role did right-wing counter-publics play against an assumed left-wing hegemony in liberal democracies? To which understanding of (counter-)publics and (alternative media) did the protagonists refer? In how far can norms and practices of counter-publics be distinguished, e.g., regarding information or disinformation, propaganda or truth, conspiracy or enlightenment? In which respect did alternative media establish alternative practices of media production, distribution, and reception? To what extent did actors pursue strategies other than founding alternative media to create counter-publics, e.g., media policy? What is the role of trans- and international networking in the history of counter-publics and alternative media? What role did foreign media play in creating counter-publics, e.g., against the backdrop of colonialism, imperialism, or the East-West conflict during the Cold War?
- Examples of how history or memory is referenced in counter publics:
What is the role of history and memory for and in counter-publics and alternative media? To what extent is their own history or the history of the social movements they are close to a resource for identity work and self-positioning of alternative media and counter-publics? To what extent do protagonists of counter-publics deal with their own past and genealogy or their personal relationship to the mainstream? To what extent are historical connotations and meanings appropriated or reinterpreted across political camps? What are examples of how history and memory serve as a basis for argumentation, a point of reference or strategically used strawmen in alternative media communication and for the constitution of counter-publics?

The two-day preconference will take place remotely via Zoom on October 6-7.

Abstracts of 300-500 words proposing historical/empirical case studies as well as theoretical, methodological or conceptual contributions should be submitted no later than **2 May 2022**. Proposals for full panels (comprising 4 or 5 papers) are also welcome: these should include a 250-word abstract for each individual presentation, and a 300-word rationale for the panel. Send abstracts to: **christian.schwarzenegger@uni-a.de**. All submissions will be subjected to anonymous peer review. Authors will be informed regarding acceptance/rejection for the

conference no later than **15 June 2022**. Early career scholars and graduate students are highly encouraged to submit their work. Please indicate if the research submitted is part of your thesis or dissertation project. The organizers will aim to arrange for discussants to provide an intensive response for early career and graduate students projects.

For more information, please contact one of the preconference organizers:

Dr. Christian Schwarzenegger, University of Augsburg (christian.schwarzenegger@uni-a.de)

Dr. Erik Koenen, University of Bremen (ekoenen@uni-bremen.de)

Dr. Niklas Venema, Free University of Berlin (Niklas.Venema@fu-berlin.de)