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Conceptualizing Mediatization: Is *Have Your Say* a Kind of Transnational Public Sphere for Public Deliberation?

Abstract. The present essay aims to reflect on the questions of how the BBC news website discussion forum *Have Your Say* is organized and to what extent it can be considered as a transnational or global public sphere for public deliberation. In order to do so, one must firstly look at this discussion forum in terms of its structure, so that we can comprehend *Have Your Say* in a descriptive and formal way. Then, one must focus on a reflection that encompasses the concepts of transnational/global public sphere [Habermas 1996; Castells 2008], public deliberation [Pateman 1970; Dryzek 2000; Abelson et al. 2003], as well as some mediation/mediatization paradigms. The goal of this essay is to provide an objective academic reflection by attempting to frame this specific online phenomenon within the concepts above mentioned, to ultimately argue and prove that online discussion forums such as *Have Your Say* are by definition ambivalent.

Keywords: mediatization; public deliberation; transnational public sphere; online discussion forums

Have Your Say – a profile

Firstly, let us begin by analyzing *Have Your Say* in terms of its structure. *Have Your Say* was a weekly discussion-based television program, produced by the BBC and broadcast on BBC World News and BBC World Service radio. Its last broadcast was on 20 April 2008. This program was associated with the BBC news website discussion forum with the same name. This discussion forum still maintains its own topics for contributors to voice their opinions on, serving as a platform for people to discuss and debate stories, by leaving comments on news posts. Before seeing their opinions published online, people's contributions are scrutinized by a team of professional journalists that ultimately decide if comments are suitable for online publishing. This moderation is made according to the *BBC House Rules*, an extensive list of rules that must be considered by people if they want to participate in this forum. In fact, one

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can resume *BBC House Rules* by the words: "Keep your contributions civil, tasteful and relevant" [BBC 2016]. Furthermore, if comments are considered adequate for publishing, they will either be "fully moderated" or "reactively moderated", the former option meaning that comments will be checked by a BBC moderator before actual publishing, and the latter option meaning that comments will be published directly to the website, without any pre-moderation, given the fact you are a registered member of the BBC news website and *Have Your Say* forum. Finally, people can also act as external arbiters and complain about a comment they consider to be inappropriate by using the "Complaint about this Comment" button on each published comment.

Having described *Have Your Say* in terms of its formal structure, let us now consider a more theoretically-oriented analysis. In this regard, some questions arise: Can comments on *Have Your Say* be considered as true public deliberation when defining public deliberation as an expression of individualized opinions that together form and represent a global public sphere? Or by controlling the conversation by means of BBC journalists moderation, these comments only constitute themselves as user-generated content selected by journalists and aligned with BBC editorial interests? Furthermore, should not a global public sphere platform such as *Have Your Say* be neutral? Is not that assumption compromised when public deliberation is formally mediated through a specific news organization website?

Online discussion forums as public *agoras*

Some studies argue that the Internet, where forums like *Have Your Say* dwell, plays an important role as a "public agora" for enhancing deliberative perceptions, consequently encouraging the democratic process [e.g. Dahlberg 2001; Sunstein 2001; Papacharissi 2002]. Moreover, other studies argue that we must consider the Internet as a place that provides opportunities for people to share their ideas in various degrees and dimensions [e.g. Price and Cappella 2002; Shah et al. 2005; Quintelier and Vissers 2008]. Therefore, to analyze and conceive *Have Your Say* as a global public sphere platform, we must take into consideration, not only the idea of online discussion forums as "public agoras", but also the fact that the Internet is inherently a place that provides diverse opportunities for people to share their ideas in various ways.

Let us begin by trying to define *Have Your Say* within the concept of global public sphere. According to Manuel Castells [2008], "the public sphere is the space of communication of ideas and projects that emerge from society and are addressed to the decision makers in the institutions of society". This definition is deeply related with the material expression of the public sphere. In other words, public sphere is traditionally associated to a "physical space – particularly public space in cities as well as universities – cultural institutions, and informal networks of public opinion formation" [Low and Smith 2006].

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With the process of globalization, a public sphere as the place of debate on public affairs is not only constructed within a national domain, but also around global communication networks. This led to the advent of a global public sphere. A global public sphere is a result of the emergence of a "global civil society", which was prompted by – what Castells [2008] referred to – the "crisis of national public spheres". This crisis was one the major consequences of the globalization process incited with and by the Internet, which ultimately allowed the creation and worldwide dissemination of discussion forums such as *Have Your Say*, making them eminently transnational. In addition, if we look at Jürgen Habermas's [1996] well-known concept of public sphere, "a network for communication information and points of view" which lies between the state and society, we can say that *Have Your Say* is a global public sphere platform by being not only transnational, but also a network for communicating and sharing information and points of view within a national context. Moreover, and according to Habermas [1964], public sphere is also "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed". Habermas [1964] also argues that "newspapers changed from mere institutions for the publication of news into bearers and leaders of public opinion – weapons of party politics". Thus, *Have Your Say* supports Habermas by allowing the public not only to comment and express their opinions, but also to publish them for everyone to acknowledge and discuss.

Nevertheless, this does not fully support the case for *Have Your Say* as a global public sphere for public deliberation, without us understanding exactly what public deliberation is, or more importantly for this case, the mediating role of deliberation within *Have Your Say* and other similar online discussion forums. General studies on deliberation are grounded on the argument that deliberation permits a certain intellectual flexibility, which allows "changing one's judgement, preferences, and views during the course of […] interactions" [Dryzek 2000]. Furthermore, deliberation accentuates the existence of a respectful debate even in the face of disagreement [Abelson et al. 2003]. Conflicts of ideas may happen, but they must be approached in a respectful way. Having said this, *Have Your Say* could be defined as a transnational public sphere platform for public deliberation in the sense that it is conducted according to a set of rules – *BBC House Rules* – that assure respectfulness, by making people follow a set of norms and practices for commenting and publishing their opinions. Additionally, it has been argued that true deliberative democracy can only occur when there is an equal opportunity and degree of power for each individual to participate in the making of decisions [Pateman 1970]. Thus, *Have Your Say* embodies deliberative democracy in terms of allowing the same opportunities to everyone, but it may not provide the same degree of power to everyone, given the simple fact that commentators are divided into two categories: registered website members that can publish "reactively moderated" comments, and unregistered people that can publish "fully moderated" comments. Ultimately, *Have Your Say* can be described as a global public sphere platform for public deliberation in the sense defined by Castells [2008],

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that is, a "global public sphere built around the media communication system and Internet networks, particularly in the social spaces of the Web 2.0, as exemplified by YouTube, MySpace, Facebook".

Have Your Say through the lens of mediatization concepts

Firstly, let us consider and try to frame *Have Your Say* in the light of the so-called mediation/mediatization theories, by identifying specific characteristics and dynamics within this forum that, to a varying extent, are linked to these theories. Therefore, and considering the way *Have Your Say* moderates people's comments, as well as the set of rules that people should align with to participate in the forum, one could firstly say that, on a primary level of analysis, this forum is in accordance with Habermas's [1980] notion of "system". Habermas [1980] established a key dichotomy in sociological theory, which is the division between "lifeworld" and "system". On the one hand, the "lifeworld" is based on mutual communication, face-to-face interactions, and the development of shared norms and values. On the other hand, "system" is more based on inputs and outputs, revolving around exchanges of money and power. Habermas [1980] argues that the "system" tends to be moving into the "lifeworld", eroding it, so that we get more capitalism rationality and less mutual understanding and dialogue, which ultimately is a threat to a civil society. Bearing in mind the internal subjective perspective of the "lifeworld" and the external perspective of the "system", *Have Your Say* clearly encompasses the notion of the "system", in the sense that a mediatized society is a society in which social interactions are guided by the system's bureaucratic, administrative and market rules. Consequently, *Have Your Say* moderation dynamics and rules could, therefore, be considered as an inevitability and a result of Habermas's system, therefore, and only at the light of this concept, public deliberation has to occur in an inevitable scenario where rules and norms are both "naturally" imposed by the "system" and part of the public sphere, whether national or transnational.

Secondly, let us consider one of Stig Hjarvard's [2013] fundamental principles of mediatization. According to Hjarvard [2013], there cannot be a separation between media and society because media is an integral part of society. In other words, media exists within a social and historical context, and media production is made by the same people that once were informed by media. *Have Your Say* integrates user-generated content in the form of people's comments, thus, taking Hjarvard's notion of mediatization into a new dimension, i.e. one could say that media is an essential part of society in the same way that society is an essential part of media. This dual interaction, where frontiers appear to blur, makes the case for stating that *Have Your Say* could be considered as a global public sphere for public deliberation because it is an integral part of both media and society, and their natural interconnection.

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Thirdly, *Have Your Say* is, to some degree, related to Roger Silverstone's [2007] concept of "mediapolis" in the sense that the ubiquity of media in society influences politics, decision-making and rules setting. In other words, political and personal relations and interactions greatly happen within digital media. Bearing this in mind, if in our contemporary society, political and social debate happens from and within media, then "mediapolis" is, therefore, a form of global public sphere, because it constitutes itself as the basis from which public deliberation arises. In the light of the concept of "mediapolis" described earlier, discussion forums such as *Have Your Say* could be considered as global public sphere platforms in which public deliberation occurs.

Conclusions

We have, at a certain level, understood and reflected upon *Have Your Say* in terms of its structural characteristics (an online discussion forum for people to discuss and debate stories by leaving comments on news posts, moderated by journalists and ruled by *BBC House Rules*). Then, we made the case for *Have Your Say* to be considered as a global public sphere platform by being both transnational and a network for communicating and sharing information and points of view, as well as a "natural" part of society's "system" [Habermas 1980; 1996], where public deliberation takes place in accordance with the idea that deliberation accentuates the existence of a respectful debate even in the face of disagreement [Abelson et al. 2003]. Finally, it has been suggested that *Have Your Say* is a global public sphere for public deliberation by being both an integral part of media and society and its natural interconnection [Hjarvard 2013], as well as the foundation from which public deliberation arises, due to the ubiquitous presence of media in society [Silverstone 2007].

Ultimately, we must consider *Have Your Say*, as well as other formats that encourage contributions from the public (such as *Polls*, *Comments on Stories*, *Blogs*, *Q&As*, or *"Your Story"*) as a phenomenon with an ambivalent nature. In other words, *Have Your Say* may, on the one hand, be considered as a global public sphere platform for public deliberation by allowing people to share and publish their ideas online. These ideas present the potential of reaching out to a huge number of readers who, consequently, may become discussion forum's participants in this rather circular cycle of public debate. In fact, a study about *Have Your Say* online forum [Herbert and Black 2009] concludes that:

> the BBC HYS message boards function as kind of global public sphere in several significant senses. First, they provide opportunities participation in debate for those for whom such opportunities are otherwise restricted (e.g. politics in Egypt). Second, they bring into some sort of interaction individuals with common concerns who would otherwise be unlikely to interact (e.g. AHYS) [Herbert and Black 2009].

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On the other hand, since all these ideas and comments are moderated by BBC journalists, as well as subjected to the *BBC House Rules*, that makes the case for suggesting that *Have Your Say* moderation is biased according to BBC's own journalistic and cultural profile, and that a true transnational public sphere platform should be moderated –if moderation is to be contemplated – by someone or something as much neutral as possible.

Furthermore, I would like to finish by pointing out some additional aspects that caught my attention while reflecting upon this matter. Firstly, I found out earlier research disclosing that some interrogations remain about the extent to which people are interested in participating and interacting with others:

> The fact that a 'popular' debate on the BBC News website's post-moderated comments system – *Have Your Say beta* – attracts contributions from just 0.05 per cent of the site's daily unique audience, and one fifth the page views of a 'popular' news story calls for further work on the utilization of these initiatives and the composition and motivations of contributors [Thurman 2008].

0.05 per cent is quite an intriguingly low percentage, which leads us to suggest that further studies on *Have Your Say* audience profile may prove to better answer the question of the validity of this discussion forum as a transnational public sphere for public deliberation. Secondly, we have also noticed that *Have Your Say* uses WhatsApp for gathering eyewitness media. WhatsApp is becoming an increasingly significant source of newsgathering, which also leads us to suggest that maybe the issue discussed in the present essay could be further contextualized within the participatory and/or citizen journalism perspective, given the fact that commentators on *Have Your Say* generate public deliberation not only by sharing ideas, but also by being sources of news contents.

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