SciencePG
Science Publishing Group

Social Regulation and the Digital Public Space in Cameroon

Ngo Yon Mekeme Michèle

Department of Communication Sciences, Advanced School of Mass Communication, University of Yaoundé II-Soa, Yaoundé, Cameroon

Email address:
miyon2011@yahoo.fr

Abstract: The concept of public space, which had its letter of nobility with Habermas, is at the center of democratic organization. It defines an intermediary space between civil society and the State. However, we cannot speak about such a space today without taking into account the complexity of the digital reality that characterizes it. The development of digital technology has redefined the physical borders between States as well as the relationship between citizenship and territory. The use of digital media has also transformed the modalities of collective action by making new forms of intersubjectivity possible, and more spontaneous and direct forms of participation have also emerged. Through the digital effect, the transformation of public space into digital public space reflects big problems of impoverishment of living together and collective action in Cameroon. This paper goes through the different modes of regulation, not without defining its role as a framework that would make public space a place based on communicative action and ethics. It also attempts to organize new forms of digital sociability and to rebuild living together. A moral education focused on redefining the bases of the social contract extended to all virtual spheres is presented as a way of reintegrating the fundamental principles of living.

Keywords: Public Space, Digital Public Space, Social Regulation, Digital Media, Living Together

1. Introduction

Digital media make it possible to create a much wider space than in the past, by redefining the relationship between citizenship and territory. Digital media make it possible to create a much wider space than in the past, by redefining the relationship between citizenship and territory. Their development causes a dislocation of the traditional concepts of the State and the citizen in their link to the actuality of a territory strictly defined by its physical borders. Their development causes a dislocation of the traditional concepts of the State and the citizen in their link to the actuality of a territory strictly defined by its physical borders. The flow of information crosses borders, the link between the political and the local is questioned. The flow of information crosses borders, the link between the political and the local is questioned. The development of so-called virtual technologies intensifies and accelerates a process of deterritorialization and delocalization. The use of digital media is also transforming the modalities of collective action, favoring more spontaneous and direct forms of participation. However, does the networking of the public space make it possible to affirm significant forms of sociability and commitment in the collective sphere? With the advent of the Internet are we still in a classic public space? Faced with this space that shines with the virality of information, what should we do? Shouldn't we think about regulating this new space?

2. New Media as a Kind of Space

An analysis of the evolution of the public space through the new media must be careful not to idealize the logics of flow which are supposed to free speech, these not escaping, depending on the nature of the political regimes in place, from surveillance and censorship mechanisms, as is the case for example in China: if forms of activism and dissent emerge with the web, they can be strictly controlled and suppressed at any time. The freedom of speech that occurs at certain times is not equivalent to the exercise of freedom. On another level, in the era of surveillance capitalism, the public

spaces that are emerging with digital social networks are more comparable to the spaces of shopping centers where the attention of consumers is constantly solicited, where the behavior of users is perpetually spied on. If the Internet is much more than a medium, as the American philosopher of techniques Andrew Feenberg [6] rightly noted, it is not a public space like any other; it could be defined more as a kind of space. Because if the networks make it possible to accentuate forms of collective commitment, it is also instinctual modes of expression and sad passions that are stirred up in the online public spheres, all the more so when the effects of disempowerment intervene in the tele-presence. A feeling of impunity is also generated by the invisibility that digital communication technologies make it possible to create. We are here far from the public space designating a place where people are gathered to discuss the organization of living together.

3. Classic Public Space

What is classic public space? Where is it from? Historically, this idea originated in modern Europe, in the constitution of spaces supposed to intervene to counter the power of monarchies, by referring to a philosophical ideal that we find in Emmanuel Kant at the end of the 18th century. Public space is a place where citizenship is exercised, being embodied in places that promote the exchange and debate of ideas; it is thus associated with the public square of a village, or even with cafes where various social categories rub shoulders, places conducive to the circulation of ideas as well as to the emergence of political movements. For Paquot, our imagination of public space, as we understand it today, is carried by the gathering space, in the physical and political sense, which is the agora [13]. In traditional society, public space was symbolized by the "palaver tree". It served as a framework for the sages and initiates of the village to discuss issues concerning the community, whether political, economic, social, cultural or magic-religious. It was a rather elitist public space that was not accessible to everyone, especially some uninitiated men and women, with the understanding that women had a public space, if needed, of their own. "Long considered an analytical category specific to Western societies, the contemporary public space has opened up with the proliferation of the media and the increasingly growing thirst of peoples to express themselves, to be informed and to communicate" [1].

Thus, public space is no longer the prerogative of wise men and initiates only, it is no longer exclusively reserved for the sphere of the sacred, the magic-religious, but has opened up to all layers of society. Without distinction of ethnicity, religion, age, disability, social or intellectual rank. Public space, which designates a place where one discusses about politics, is now technologically constituted by media apparatuses, including the Internet and its many media. Digital introduces a significant evolution compared to older media. Mass media such as radio and television - and as analyzed by Gunther Anders in the 1950s and Guy Debord in the late 1960s - were based on relatively homogeneous and unambiguous broadcasting logics, by depriving listeners and the power viewers to interact with the programs. They were in "The impossibility of responding", condemned in this sense to a certain "silence."

4. The Contribution of the New Media

With the virtualization of modes of transmission and the development of information technologies, the very principle of advertising has broadened considerably, while being impoverished by the fact that the mass media has become places of manipulation and control of people affects. But after the mass media (radio and television), we are witnessing the advent of active and individualized modes of reception of information: "The era of the mass media based on pyramidal one-way communication, which nourished the show theory, makes more and more room for an interactive subject, for an individualized, self-produced communication…". In this sense, the deployment of new digital media is causing a fairly decisive change compared to more traditional media, such as radio and television. This insofar as we no longer have access to a single information channel, but to a multitude of sources, with above all the possibility of exchanging and sharing, for example, images of events, by putting them into focus. Common via social networks, the forms of engagement in the public sphere that we see intensifying with digital technologies are breaking free from established orders, be they political, cultural or religious. By offering individuals the possibility of being in turn transmitters, receivers and relays of information, new media allow exchanges and interactions anywhere and at any time. Likely to be better informed, to interact more quickly, citizens can open up to more deterritorialized spheres of influence.

We can say that information and communication technologies in their digital version, there is an epistemological break insofar as they induce dynamics of interaction and contribution. With digital media, a "post-media" era of heterogeneous appropriations appears, making possible new forms of intersubjectivity and collective arrangements. The scope of the intuitions of the psychoanalyst Félix Guattari on this point is in many respects remarkable. Formulated before 1992, they remain particularly fruitful in interpreting what we are experiencing today with the expansion of digital technologies. He glimpsed the aesthetic and political potential of information and communication technologies by considering the way in which attitudes of (passive) reception were to evolve in the long term: "Cable and satellite will allow us to zap between fifty channels, while telematics will give us access to an indefinite number of image banks and cognitive data" [9].

The character of suggestion, even of hypnotism, of the current relationship to television will gradually fade. "We can hope, from there, that there will be a reorganization of mass-media power which crushes contemporary subjectivity and an entry into a post-media era consisting of a collective individual reappropriation and an interactive use of

information machines, communication, intelligence, art and culture".

Using the terminology of Félix Guattari [9], we can say that our era is now that of post-media (mass) where the conditions for a more interactive inscription in the public sphere are strongly stimulated. We no longer have access to just one channel of information, but to a multitude of sources, with above all the possibility of exchanging and sharing tastes, aspirations and struggles. The spheres of expression are affirmed, if we take into account, for example, the growing number of blogs and personal pages created each month in Europe, Africa and the rest of the world.

The forms of protest that we see developing with digital technologies are more easily free from established orders, be they political, cultural or ideological. What once determined subjectivities more or less homogeneously (a territory and its boundaries, a dominant value system in a given society) is now likely to be called into question by a variety of online affinity networks. We are thus witnessing a redefinition of the contours of politics in its link to a given territory. By offering individuals the possibility of being in turn transmitters, receivers and relays of information, digital media allow exchanges and interactions anywhere and at any time. Likely to be better informed, to interact more quickly, citizens can open up to deterritorialized spheres of influence. Thus, as Nancy Fraser emphasizes, public spaces are becoming in themselves largely, and in an increasing way, transnational or post-national: "The subject of communication, until then considered as a national group of citizens, is now a dispersed collection of subjects. The subject of the communication, until then considered as a national interest based on the national economy, expands, investing vast areas of the globe, into a transnational community of destiny (...). The space of communication, formerly considered as a national territory, is now a deterritorialized cyberspace "[7].

The events of 2011 in Tunisia have precisely highlighted these dimensions. Through digital networks, new modalities of political expression and resistance have emerged, confirming the idea that power is no longer only that of States but that it is likely to reappear in their interstices, through forms of dissent which are constantly renewed. The internet grows more sophisticated, it is creating new threats to democracy [14].

Through digital networks, new forms of political resistance have emerged, reinforcing the idea that power is no longer only that of States but that it is likely to appear in its interstices, through new forms of resistance, by making possible the creation of much more heterogeneous forms of advertising.

That being said, the considerable contribution of new media cannot blind us to the complexity of the entanglement of situations that have contributed to certain changes. The case of Tunisia is significant in this regard. In addition, the micro-political strength of networks cannot make us underestimate the tasks to be accomplished in order to organize public space: the exercise of freedom is distinct from a pure and simple liberation movement. This

observation does not only concern states which are barely emerging from autocratic forms, but also societies which define themselves as democratic Because if the use of new media transforms the modalities of collective action, favoring freer and more direct forms of expression, these do not necessarily contribute to fostering recognition of the subjectivities that are expressed through these channels. It would be too simple to assert that the networking of public space would make it possible to generate significant forms of sociability, as if technological causality could in itself explain the blossoming of new political spheres.

An analysis of the evolution of the public space in the digital age must avoid idealizing the logics of flow that are supposed to allow the "voiceless" to conquer spheres of expression. It is indeed necessary to distinguish the possibility of the fluidification of the word and the quality of its reception, even the quality of the recognition of the individuals which occurs (or not) in the game of online interactions. It is not enough to create more spaces for discussion on the web for real confrontations of points of view to occur. Online sociability sometimes tends to be established according to common criteria, shared tastes and affinities that do not necessarily produce the possibility of getting out of it. Indeed, Internet users rarely connect to sites developing points of view opposed to theirs. Moreover, in Cameroon, on the occasion of the 2018 presidential election, a research entitled "Digital social networks and politics: some considerations on the Cameroonian context to the test of Facebook" presents social networks as being versatile territories of political participation. The author of the research notes that "the virtualization of identity on this platform has served to defend causes of all kinds, sometimes very far from the promotion of democracy, such as the apology of tribal hatred, the apology violence ". For example, the production and sharing of photos or videos of abuses attributed or not to the Cameroonian army in the context of a critical political situation could well be a weapon. In fact, this is what is called war communication, the hidden aim of which is to create a climate of fear in popular imagery, at the same time undermining the morale of troops on mission in insecure areas and demonstrate that they are in serious difficulty. Similarly, the use of categories such as "Béti" # "Bami" in an electoral context certainly affects political participation and offers more opportunities for post-electoral escalation even though competition is intended to be the main modality of regulation. Political competition between different actors in the field. Facebook has thus served to transform the public space into a kind of virtual arena that can at any time lead to an escalation in physical violence. It is also a way of doing things that is innovative depending on whether the game is tense or soft, and also accommodates humor insofar as it takes formulas such as the following: "from now on the "Sardinards # Tontinards" duality is obsolete in Cameroon. We now have "Ducks and Cockroaches"[1]. From this point of view, Facebook is much

---

[1] In Cameroon, the neologism "Sardinard" is used (on Facebook) to refer to the

more a battlefield than an egalitarian and deliberative public space. As digital spaces tend towards partitioning, the confrontation between opposing opinions threatens to give way to ideological self-segregation [8]. Commentators are now denouncing the "myth of digital democracy" [11], when they are not accusing the Internet of "killing democracy" [2].

5. The Digital Public Space: A Vast Aeropaus

The speed of the networks and the simultaneity of the exchange of information thus help to redraw the contours of transnational political activism and if there is a very porous border between online mobilizations and those in the street and public places, these virtual mobilizations face what the techno-sociologist ZeynepTufekci calls a "tactical paralysis" which is illustrated by a difficulty in transforming certain demands at the political level, for lack of being able to bring out figureheads or leaders. Also, being able to join a social movement online, expressing a sense of outrage or anger, does not necessarily lead to long-term commitment but more than a space, digital technology opens up a world. A world with its affective, existential and symbolic specificities, constituting an environment in its own right, with its effects of constraints which do not say their name but which nevertheless characterize it well and truly.

One consequence of the logics of instrumentalization that are inherent to it is, among other things, that we are witnessing the development of privatized spheres. Digital technologies contribute to the valuation of individuals as well as the creation of information bubbles. The information received is adapted to the tastes of individuals, to their social status, to their habits: it is thus the figure of the man who is transformed, or more exactly, which confirms his desire to personalize his relationship to the immediate space as well as to the outside world. Everyone now has the feeling of having virtually everything at hand and thus being able to stay in their world, thus limiting the effort of confronting the outside world. Because it is through the register of the proper that the openness to what is supposed to be exterior takes place, which generates a very ambivalent mode of openness: we can be fully in the world but without the others, it is that is, without having to confront them in a face-to-face experience. We are here surprisingly close to the situation described by Günther Anders in The Obsolescence of Man [10], where he analyzed the will of the individual to reduce the friction between the world and himself to a minimum, thus wishing to produce a world which always better, even perfectly, "a world that fits him like a garment". It seems that we are getting closer to such an ideal today, as probably never before, by bubbles produced by filtering and content

selection algorithms. However, there is a risk here of losing the sense of common action, by dint of evolving in virtual environments, in permanent telecommunications, which contribute to locking us into our subjective spheres by sparing us direct confrontation with others. Faced with these risks of impoverishment of living together and of the sense of collective action, it is important to bear in mind what is at stake in the transition from a physical public space to an environment digital. The rules of the game are quite different from a phenomenological point of view, in particular with respect to the perception we have of others. This also requires redefining the bases of a social contract extended to these virtual spheres which facilitate disempowerment as much as forms of instinctual expression. In relation to such a state of affairs, moral education in the digital age would be a way of reintegrating the fundamental principles of living together. This would also require not being seduced by the intoxication that digital technologies provide and the traps they set for us (by making us, for example, confuse technical time and human time). But thwarting these pitfalls requires being able to decrypt and analyze the logic of influence that digital networks are likely to bring about. The metamorphosis we are experiencing calls in this sense for the development of a critical judgment, and more precisely of a techno-criticism. The ability of citizens to act is at this level at stake in an era where a strong digital lack of culture dominates, still generating a lot of infantilism in the construction of these new kind of political spaces that flourish with digital technology. Hence the importance of a draft regulation of the digital public space.

6. On the Social Regulation of Public Space

How to organize the common through new forms of digital sociability and the multiple interactions allowed by Web 2.0? What reconstruction of living together seems to be ultimately at stake in these new forms of interaction? Through instantaneity, ubiquity and vitality, the Internet illustrates a society based on the modification of bodies and the liberalization of speech, as well as a desire for control in a context on the way to becoming anomic. All in all, we are experiencing a fairly radical metamorphosis of our socio-political existence with information and communication technologies, by witnessing the emergence of networked public spheres, but we should not necessarily experience this mutation naively. The development of these spheres can only have meaning if we continue to question them while respecting the specificity of the symbolic and cultural contexts in which they are inscribed. There is, of course, no patent on the use of words. It is in this perspective, we subscribe to the line of argument that dates back to the German Enlightenment, especially to Kant, through Hegel and the Habermassian tradition which has dominated the debate on public space for 50 years. In this tradition, the public space is considered to be the totality of private men who publish themselves in certain forms and with certain purposes, thus

---

ethnical community "Beti" and other associates of the established power while "Tontinard" is used to refer to the so called "Bami" and other supporters of the political parti Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM). These words translate the idea of the politics of affection on the basis of two dominant modalities: ethnic belonging and prejudice about what one really is or is not.

creating normative, social, cultural and political links. But the transformation of public space into digital public space poses enormous problems of living together in inhabited space and also in Cameroon. This is what makes voices rise to ask for the framework of the public space that has become digital. During a conference organized in Yaoundé [15], Professor Jean Emmanuel Pondi suggested the creation of a digital police whose mission would be to track down those who transform the digital public space into a space of no law where the law of the jungle reigns. We believe that faced with the risk of the digital public e becoming wild, social regulation could be an adequate response.

The regulation of the behavior of the members of an organization occupies a central place in management, insofar as it is this which ensures a harmonious "cohabitation" and the achievement of the mission of the organization. This regulation is carried out by different modes which are defined as: "a set of implicit and explicit mechanisms aimed at defining behavior, so as to ensure the functioning of a community and to encourage the quality of life in common. The objective of the modes of social regulation is to ensure harmonious relations between the members of a community." [3].

These modes of behavior regulation are divided according to two poles that are essentially distinguished by the degree of autonomy left to the individual in the regulation of his conduct. At one of the poles is heteroregulation: "It is a movement of regulation established and imposed from the outside, that is to say that an external authority dictates to the individual the way which he must decide or act. In a heteronomous approach, the regulation of behavior requires respect for the rules enacted by the authority, and the fear of sanction by the latter in the opposite case" [4].

At the other pole is self-regulation. "Here, regulation emerges from the individual, who decides for himself about his choices and his actions [… and it is] in the mastery of himself that an individual finds the source of the regulation of his behaviours" [4]. That said, this self-control is exercised in a standardized context where the other occupies a preponderant place. In other words, self-regulation must take into account the demands of other modes of regulation and social and contextual expectations of oneself. As such, it is complementary to these modes. Thus, "from a self-regulatory perspective, we would say that the source of behavior regulation resides in fact in the meaning co-constructed and shared by the members of a group to which the individual belongs" [5].

This vision of things means that the values dear to an organization, in addition to being shared, are co-constructed, therefore developed, defined and lived by all the members of the organization.

This overview of the different modes of regulation makes it possible to understand how the regulation of behavior in the digital public space would operate. Each of the modes of regulation suggests a more or less autoregulatory or heteroregulatory force. Indeed, each mode has a double regulatory nature, that is to say that each includes «in

admittedly variable doses, self-regulatory elements and heteroregulatory elements" [5]. And it is in interdependence, complementarity and synergy that the modes of regulation are updated and allow a harmonious coexistence of actors, organizations and societies. Social regulation could be the framework that would make public space a place based on communicative action and the ethics of discussion.

7. Conclusion

The regulation of digital activities is complex: it poses a challenge to contemporary States and to democracy. It requires rethinking practices [12].

With social regulation, the notion of public space would then come to designate this intermediate place between civil society and the State or between the private and the political: it would be a space in between. A space where converging opinions are reinforced by meeting. Having become a digital public space and by extension a place of visibility for the plurality of expressions, it is at the same time the space for the development of a collective which, if it does not always achieve consensus, is nevertheless a common. The political link that could open up a plurality of public spaces today seems to be in question or, perhaps, it has been exceeded and replaced by discursive, media and technological logics. These difficulties seem to carry away our relationship to the unknown and the possible. They affect the intellectual and mental frameworks that structured our representation of the world. Admittedly, the regulation of digital activities remains complex and poses a challenge to contemporary states and democracy, however social regulation would then be an opportunity for the emergence of a digital public space that would make sense and give meaning.

References

[1] Abolo Mbita Christian, Médias, politique et opinion publique. Les logiques d'influence, [Media, politics and public opinion. The logics of influence]. Yaoundé, Éditions Afrédit S. A., 2020, p. 12.

[2] Bartlett Jamie, The People vs Tech: How the internet is killing democracy (and how we save it), Londres, Ebury Press, 2018.

[3] Boisvert, Yves (dir.), Magalie Jutras et Allison Marchildon. Guide d'éthique organisationnelle, Centre d'expertise de gestion des ressources humaines. [Organizational Ethics Guide, Human Resources Management Center of Expertise]. SCT., 2003.

[4] Boisvert Yves, Georges A. Legault, Louis C. Côté, Allison Marchildon et Magalie Jutras. Raisonnement éthique dans un contexte de marge de manœuvre accrue: clarification conceptuelle et aide à la décision – Rapport de recherche, Centre d'expertise en gestion des ressources humaines, Secrétariat du Conseil du trésor, [Ethical reasoning in a context of increased leeway: conceptual clarification and decision support – Research report, Center of Expertise in Human Resources Management, Treasury Board Secretariat]. 2003.

[5] Boisvert Yves, Magalie Jutras, Georges A. Legault et Allison Marchildon avec la collaboration de Louis Côté, Petit manuel d'éthique appliquée à la gestion publique, [Small manual of ethics applied to public management], Montréal, Liber, 2003.

[6] Andrew Feenberg, La pensée de la technique: pour une approche humaniste, [Thinking about technology: for a humanist approach]. Entretien avec Pierre Antoine Chardel, Esprit, n° 390, décembre 2012.

[7] Fraser, Nancy, Transnationaliser l'espace public, dans Nancy Fraser, Qu'est-ce que la justice sociale ? Reconnaissance et distribution, [Transnationalizing public space, in Nancy Fraser, What is social justice? Recognition and distribution]. Paris, La Découverte, 2011.

[8] Girard Charles, Quel espace public pour internet ?, [What public space for the internet?], Esprit, Novembre 2021, p. 3.

[9] Guattari, Félix, Vers une ère Post Média, [Towards a Post Media era] dans Terminal, n° 51, octobre-novembre 1990.

[10] Günther Anders, L'obsolescence de l'homme. Sur l'âme à l'époque de la deuxième révolution industrielle [1956] [The obsolescence of man. On the Soul in the Age of the Second Industrial Revolution], traduit de l'allemand par Christophe David, Paris, Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des nuisances/Éditions Ivrea, 2002.

[11] Hindman Matthew, The Myth of Digital Democracy, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009.

[12] Loiseau Gregoire, Repenser l'action publique à l'heure du numérique [Rethinking public action in the digital age], Les Échos, 4 juin 2019.

[13] Paquot, Thierry, L'espace public, [The public space], Paris, La Découverte, 2009.

[14] Sunstein Cass R., Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2017.

[15] Le renforcement de la gouvernance et de la gestion démocratiques des foules en Afrique: CAFRAD/ EIFORCES/ [Strengthening democratic governance and management of crowds in Africa], Mai 2017, Yaoundé.