



# Operationalizing distribution as a key concept for public sphere theory. A call for ethnographic sensibility of different social worlds

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## Abstract

This article takes issue with public sphere theories' lack of focus on the consequences of social inequality. Citizens divide the work of following politics between them, and we need a cohesive conceptualization of such divisions, through and beyond today's intrusive media and with attention to social inequalities. Instead of ideals of fully informed individual citizens, I propose we take the empirical fact of distribution of citizens' public connection as a starting point and anchor our theoretical ideals in the social world with an "ethnographic sensibility." Doing so facilitates an operationalized concept of distribution of citizens' public connection into four elements: *issues*, *arenas*, and *communicative modes*, which citizens variously rely on *over time*. With such an operationalization, we can assess when and for whom the distribution of public connection goes too far and disfavors certain citizens. This helps bring public sphere theory beyond the conundrum of our societies' paradoxically uninformed citizens.

**Keywords:** deliberative democracy, ethnography, interpretative approach, normative theory, public connection

## Introduction

Many communication scholars who grapple with public sphere theory will, at some point, have cursed political philosophers who sit comfortably at their desks, fine-tuning abstract norms for the basic structure of an ideal just society. Across democratic theories, citizens should consume political information to form opinions about issues that need common solutions (Ferree et al., 2002). The abyss forming between theoretical ideals of communication in the public sphere and the seemingly ever-accelerating complexity of institutional realities and everyday life conditions in the digital age is an enduring problem. The problem appears more pressing as democratic societies increasingly rely on algorithmically steered platforms to provide the infrastructure for the public sphere. The tiny computers we still call phones facilitate cross-media use everywhere and anytime. Media has become increasingly ubiquitous, intrusive, and hyper-connected (Ytre-Arne & Das, 2019). We need better conceptualizations of citizens' relations to the public sphere.

This matters far beyond seminars on public sphere theory. The dominant approach in empirical research on how citizens perform measures manifest levels of political knowledge or expressed opinions on specific issues (Amsalem & Zoizner, 2023; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Decades of studies show significant gaps between normative expectations and citizens' practices (Lupia, 2016). The puzzle that emerges is that although political information is accessible in an unprecedented way, citizens fail to appear informed.

Notably, not all citizens are found to be failing. Instead, the degree to which citizens live up to normative ideals corresponds with their position in the unequal allocation of essential resources in society. As a result, some political theorists

advocate for drastic measures: a smaller government to make it easier for more citizens to stay informed (Somin, 2016) or a withdrawal of the universal right to vote to weed out the most ignorant citizens (Brennan, 2016).

Identifying failing citizens and lamenting the masses have been staple activities throughout the history of public sphere theory (Gripsrud et al., 2011). Some have also questioned the theoretical ideals. To highlight one memorable instance, Lippmann considered the ideal of an omniscient, sovereign citizen as a false ideal, "bad in the sense that it is bad for a fat man to try to be a ballet dancer" (Lippmann, 1925, p. 29). As I will argue, the deficit is public sphere theories' traditional lack of focus on the democratic consequences of social inequality within the citizenry. Public sphere theory is inherently normative in describing what is good or bad, which is meant to help our assessments. However, I will argue that the ideals we operate under privilege a particular type of citizen. The question, then, is how we can develop a normative ideal for citizens' relations to the public sphere that acknowledges inequalities in socio-cultural preconditions among a society's public. To better diagnose, understand and critique existing public spheres, this article focuses on the *distribution of citizens' public connection*.

As a collective, citizens need to indicate which aims society should pursue and make sure the political system does its best to fulfil those aims (Christiano, 2015). This requires a public connection: a broad orientation to topics of shared concern, that might turn into actual attention (Coudry et al., 2010). In practice, this work of following politics is always divided between citizens. Public sphere theory needs a cohesive conceptualization of this division through and beyond today's intrusive media, with attention to social inequalities. We need to take the empirical fact of distribution of citizens' public

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connection as a starting point and anchor our theoretical ideals in the social world. With this in mind, I propose an operationalized concept of the distribution of citizens' public connection into four variable elements: (1) issues; (2) arenas; (3) communicative modes which citizens variously rely on; (4) over time.

Importantly, this proposal compels further development in dialogue with empirical studies. Moving our thinking forward, therefore, requires a discussion of the role of social facts in normative political theory—of “ethnographic sensibility” (Herzog & Zacka, 2017; Longo & Zacka, 2019)—to develop a position that lets us assess when and for whom the distribution of public connection goes too far and substantially disfavors certain citizens.

The argument proceeds as follows: To establish the challenge for theory, I first describe distribution as an empirical feature of people's relations to the public sphere and illustrate how social groups, to different extents, fail to fit the norm of an informed and actively deliberating citizen. On this basis, I argue that the systemic turn in deliberative theory (Chambers, 2017; Mansbridge et al., 2012) provides a foothold for further theory-building but that existing contributions stop short of tackling the lived realities of existing public spheres in the digital age. The following section then presents the proposal of an operationalized concept of distribution. Based on a call for ethnographic sensibility in political theory, I argue for the value of responsiveness to social facts when building low- and mid-level theory. The outcome is a stance that allows us to see and evaluate in greater nuance citizens' relations to the public sphere: we should be able to acknowledge different ways to connect to different parts of the public sphere, while retaining normativity. Before concluding, the article elaborates on methodological implications. I discuss the need for incorporating methods to properly grasp the digital domain in an approach that takes ethnographic sensibility seriously to continue improving our conceptions of distribution in people's relations to the public sphere.

Bridging current debates in political philosophy with systems thinking and empirical sociology, the article contributes an answer to why communication theory still needs the public sphere as a concept and how it can meaningfully respond to the digital transformation of media and communication. Proposing a new approach to normatively determine what public spheres should do for contemporary societies beyond a Habermasian tradition, the article puts communication scholarship at the forefront of democratic theory.

### Distribution as an empirical fact of citizens' public connection

If we task citizens with directing the aims society should pursue, and to check if the political system manages to reach those aims (Christiano, 2015), the citizens need some orientation towards the public sphere—they need a “public connection.” As a heuristic term, public connection describes “a basic level” of orientation that can “reliably (...) be translated into attention” (Couldry et al., 2010, p. 3). As such, it is a readiness for different kinds of engagement: cognitive, affective and behavioral. A public connection is an underlying precondition for engagement (Couldry et al., 2010, p. 5). Such engagement, in turn, might range from mentally grappling to understand an issue, emotionally reacting to it (e.g., interest, concern or worry), instigating behavioral change in the form

of activities ranging from involvement in informal local community groups, via trying to influence others' political behavior, through to voting in national elections (Moser & Dilling, 2011).

Public connection is actor-centered, reaches beyond the predefined political and allows for analysis of how different groups of citizens direct their attention to issues of shared concern (Couldry et al., 2010). Importantly, what exactly constitutes issues of shared concern is the subject of constant negotiation (Kaun, 2012). Furthermore, studies of citizens' public connection point to the relevance of non-news content—including sports (Moe & Ytre-Arne, 2022) and TV series (Nærland, 2020)—in triggering, deepening and solidifying links to the sphere of politics. Public connection also invites analysis not only of cross-media use but of other kinds of arenas based in civil society, workplaces, political organizations and movements, or through everyday life practices (Hovden & Moe, 2017).

The work involved with building and maintaining a public connection is not done in isolation. Instead, it is distributed in the sense of spread out or divided between citizens. People rely on others to gather, select, analyze, and evaluate information for decision-making. The business of news provision is founded on this fact, and the distribution also covers issues of shared interest in a polity. Communication theory is ripe with insights into such distribution (Moe, 2020). In *Voting*, Berelson et al. (1954), to pick one early influential example, noted that “everyone cannot understand and evaluate everything. The ‘opinion leader’ relationship is a useful instrument in democratic life” (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 114). As a system, democracy works, they stated, even though individual citizens do not, and “balance is (...) met by a distinction of voters rather than by a homogeneous collection of ‘ideal’ citizens” (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 315). As Lippmann noted, most citizens are bystanders most of the time on most issues, looking at and listening to insiders who have the knowledge and interest to understand and act (Jansen, 2012, p. 132; Lippmann, 1925, p. 140).

This realization can be traced through the social sciences and beyond, from Downs' rational choice theory of information shortcuts (Downs, 1957), through 1980s US political science (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998), and Schudson's history of American public life, which gave birth to the idea of a monitorial citizen (Schudson, 1998), via Graber's influential critique of political communication research (Graber, 2004), through to psychology's concept of “cognitive divisions of labor,” with an insistence on the inherently social character of knowledge-building (Sloman & Fernbach, 2017). All these contributions offer explanations for the basic point that citizens do not pay much concerted attention to the general political agenda in society. People have varying resources, time, and energy to spend on public issues, and they spend it differently. As such, the orientation towards the political domain is distributed between members of a society.

These insights should deter attempts at measuring individual citizens' ability to recall predefined pieces of political information in social science surveys. However, the fact that there is a distribution of citizens' public connection does not in itself address the question of social inequality. On closer inspection, what does distribution entail for well-off and less well-off groups in today's media-saturated digital age?

Studies find patterns related to education, economy, and cultural and social resources (Bergström et al., 2019; Karlsen

et al., 2020; Prior, 2007): Those worse off report lower interest in news and politics. Some feel an emotional drain and perceive that news is not for them (Toff & Palmer, 2019) or have lower attention levels towards the public (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018). Women are more frequent “news avoiders” (Toff & Palmer, 2019) and eager but less political users of social media (Brandtzaeg, 2017). Similarly, a broad literature has identified growing distrust in established news media in Western societies, correlated with individual-level factors (e.g., demography, political interest and partisanship) and media use (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2018; Suiter & Fletcher, 2020). For normative theory, such insights are tricky to handle. A distribution of public connection among citizens might cement inequality. Deliberative democratic theory provides a clue to start untangling this problem.

### Deliberative systems and the limits to normative thinking on distribution

The history of public sphere theory can be portrayed as a back-and-forth between realists or cynics proposing a minimalist version of public participation, labeled “liberal,” and idealists or optimists arguing for maximizing public participation, labeled as “republican” (e.g., Gripsrud et al., 2011). Communication scholars, however, have primarily been preoccupied with Habermas’ early contributions to public sphere theory (Lunt & Livingstone, 2013), a contribution that later evolved as a central reference in deliberative democratic theory (Wessler, 2018).

Deliberative democracy is not just one among many normative theories of democracy. It has been *the* dominant theoretical strand since the 1990s, at least in Anglo-American political philosophy (Bohman, 1998). As described by Habermas (1994), the strand lies between liberal and republican approaches and focuses on procedures and institutions to secure deliberation—the thoughtful discussion and consideration of all sides of an issue—as the core of democratic rule. While there is no shared agreement on the goals of deliberation, three primary functions are often highlighted (Mansbridge et al., 2012): Deliberation should serve an epistemic, ethical and democratic function, meaning deliberation should: (1) produce decisions informed by good reasons; (2) promote mutual respect; and (3) secure an inclusive political process in terms of voices and arguments. The theory thus places a form of communication at the center. Its appeal to communication scholars is obvious, and work on deliberative democracy has covered high-level normative theory as well as analyses of political communication in very different locales and arenas.

This is where the hair-pulling communication scholar enters the picture. The problem of constructively mobilizing comprehensive ideals of deliberation to analyze the mess of very non-deliberative modes of mediated communication is severe. And the problem is amplified with the advent of social and digital media (Habermas, 2022), with fragmenting publics and decline in institutional legitimacy, leading to descriptions of “disruptive and disconnected public spheres” (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018, p. 246). Even beyond the media, there are substantial feasibility problems with deliberative democracy once it is scaled up and confronted with the everyday realities of today’s society.

The one-decade-old “systemic turn” in deliberative theory was a maneuver meant to steer clear of these problems, as

suggested in an influential manifesto by a group of scholars (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Here, a deliberative system is defined to “[encompass] a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving—through arguing, demonstrating, expressing, and persuading” (Mansbridge et al., 2012, pp. 4–5). The critical point of the systemic turn is to allow for disaggregation of the democratic, epistemic, and ethical functions of deliberation. Accordingly, the deliberative ideal does not apply in full to each instance of public communication. Rather, distinctive parts of the system can host different kinds of communication that serve different functions. For example, highly structured debates in parliament should be regulated to allow for epistemic considerations and should also be ethically sound, but do not have to do much for popular participation. By contrast, at the periphery of the system, a protest movement’s mobilization in social media, even with partisan and uncivil speech and an ensuing political march in the streets, neither has to score high on the criteria of ethical communication nor present well-researched reasons, but can help bring attention to problems through inclusion of public participation (Boswell et al., 2016; Engelken-Jorge, 2018).

This “functional division of labor” is proposed as an answer to the feasibility problem of scaling up the normative expectations towards citizens in a deliberative democracy (Chambers, 2020, p. 77). The systemic, disaggregated ideal, as described in a Habermas-influenced version, does not require every citizen to “engage in high end deliberation,” but expects a well-functioning system to produce “a feedback loop in which ordinary citizens, articulating real problems and concerns bubbling up from civil society, set the agenda” (Chambers, 2017, 2020, p. 77). For some theorists, the distribution can go as far as to free citizens from the demand of developing their own good reasons for an opinion: People can have an informed opinion without being able to justify their beliefs if they depend on judgments made by others, sometimes referred to as an “external standard of well-groundedness” (Christiano, 2015). This tapping of deliberative systems theory provides a solid stepping-stone for operationalizing distribution as a normative concept for citizens’ relations to the public sphere since it simultaneously upholds an equal standing for every citizen and acknowledges diversity in engagement. But how does this normative theory handle social inequality? Will this line of thinking risk relegating those less well-off to a lower standing?

The history of public sphere theory includes prominent and crucial contributions that address the marginalization of different groups especially in Habermas’ early portrayal. Little weight was given to issues of control and exclusion of women and certain social classes, among others. The private/public-dichotomy functioned as a cultural classification used rhetorically to exclude certain interests, views, and themes (Fraser, 1990; Negt & Kluge, 2016). Though the contributions of Fraser and others famously led Habermas to revise his original theory (Habermas, 1990), the important debate has continued (e.g., Dahlberg, 2014). In deliberative theory today, “the analytical critique of socio-economic inequalities and power imbalances remains surprisingly underdeveloped” (Staab & Thiel, 2022, p. 133). More fundamentally, a decolonial critique of deliberative democracy insists that the theory travels poorly beyond the West and that “silences and erasures” remain (Banerjee, 2022).

Indeed, when deliberative theorists address inequalities, it is by and large within the system. Some deliberative systems

theorists have raised concerns regarding the division of functions between different parts of the system, e.g., letting “unrestricted communication” bloom in the public sphere but with substantial independence from the spaces of decision-making (Erman, 2016, p. 78). In some visions, the democratic and epistemic functions are separated to the extent that we end up with “deliberative Schumpeterianism” (Goodin, 2005), which others see as paving the way for elite democracy, contrary to the core principle of deliberative democracy (Chambers, 2017, p. 250). These discussions tend to end with a general concern for the implications of a skewed distribution, expressing hope for such imbalances to be countered through theoretical constructs. If we want to explore such a line in our theory-building, we need to think more closely at how, exactly, people’s public connections vary and how tasks are divided between citizens. We need an operationalized concept of distribution.

### Four elements of distribution as an operationalized theoretical concept

A way to approach the question of how to better account for distribution in normative public sphere theory is via empirical analyses of social inequality. Studies of news use highlight the relationship between social and digital inequality and argue that “news practices and preferences solidify” groups’ positions in a social structure (Lindell, 2018, p. 1; also Hartley, 2018). Studies also find systematic divides in access, skills and participation through digital media more generally (e.g., Helsper, 2021). If we broaden the scope of inquiry as offered by the analytical lens of public connection, a recent study underlines how “those expressing alienation from politics, e.g., also more often agree that news are difficult or stressful to them, have lower interest in political news, lower activity in the national elections and less use of cultural institutions” (Hovden, 2022, p. 217). From this perspective, there are clear correlations between social resources and “attitudes, attention and engagement towards” the cultural and political realms (Hovden, 2022, p. 217).

It can be argued that the main line of division between different groups’ relations to the public sphere is not simply whether they are informed or not but whether they are familiar with “the agents, arenas and discourses of social elites” (Hovden, 2022, p. 223). The closer citizens are to the world of elites, with real power to influence the issues and politics at stake, the more citizens appear to behave as ideal informed and deliberating citizens. Conversely, the further one moves away from this world, the more citizens seem to correspond to “deaf spectators in the back row” (Lippmann, 1925, pp. 4–5). These citizens’ relation with the worlds of elites is fundamentally characterized by disinterest, alienation, distrust, and the lack of knowledge and the skills to participate.

This explains the widespread findings of imbalance and asymmetric distributions of citizens’ connections to the public sphere. With reference to Bourdieu:

(...) a central privilege for the privileged is that their interests (in both senses of the word, investments and attention) are bound up with “important” matters in society—e.g., via their place of work and their friends. In this way, the virtuous interest of the socially privileged in “important” news and debates is not qualitatively different from ordinary people’s interest in “gossip” about their local

community. To be interested or disinterested in politics is also the difference between making and being subject to politics and connecting with a real, as opposed to an imagined community. (Hovden, 2022, p. 226)

The question is what the implications should be for normative public sphere theory. One option is to simply note that different norms imply different class realities and resources, and that the upper middle classes appear to match best the ideal image of the informed and deliberating citizen (Hovden, 2022). Noting this, we could return to polish the basic ideal of a just society some more.

Another option would be to really give attention to the social worlds people feel they belong to and have an interest in, obligations to, and relevant competencies to participate in as citizens. We can think of political interests in the plural, acknowledging that there are different paths and outlets for such interests, which implies that people might connect differently. One might be an exemplary citizen of one’s village but a terrible citizen in the view from above. One might even be a good enough citizen in the digital age without prolonged, routine consumption of national news reports.

Such a line of argument begs for systematic operationalization to account for the different elements along which citizens’ public connection can be distributed. An operationalization, then, can take insights from empirical studies of the public sphere and from deliberative democratic theory, keeping the focus firmly on the identified challenges with inequalities between different social groups. On this basis, I suggest an operationalization divided into four elements:

#### Arenas

Citizens can connect through different arenas for communication in the public sphere. These arenas can be defined by geography (from local, via national to global) and social domains (e.g., work, civil society). The arenas will variously depend on mediated and non-mediated channels, ranging from face-to-face encounters to diverse platforms for mediated communication, including different social media or messaging apps. As such, an arena for public connection can, for example, be a neighborhood Facebook group or a political party’s annual meeting. This element of distribution is central to systems thinking in deliberative theory, as discussed above (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

#### Issues

Citizens may connect to different issues and topics. This is the point expressed in the term “issue publics,” as coined by Converse ([1964] 2006). It resonates with the fundamental empirical insights referred to above: People attend to different issues selectively, and not that many. Issues can cross arenas, for example when the neighborhood Facebook group deals with air pollution, a topic also raised at the political party’s annual meeting. In such instances, public connection might yield attention that translates into engagement in several arenas—or just in one. Empirical political science literature on “issue publics” highlights how such selectivity is widespread across different social groups, yet the same literature is strikingly void of discussion of what the “public” entails beyond being a collection of individual citizens (Bolsen & Leeper, 2013; Krosnick, 1990). Operationalizing distribution means adding a normative expectation of such segmentation:



Citizens' public connection can be distributed along issues (Nærland, 2020).

### Communicative modes

Different citizens can be connected to the public sphere through different modes of communication ranging from argumentative, fact-driven and informative to expressive, emotional and persuading. Keeping in mind that the public connection concept attempts to grasp preconditions for democratic engagement, this entails a broad approach to consumption of media content and everyday communication through and outside digital media. As studies of public connection illustrate, non-deliberative forms of communication can have democratic value (Nærland, 2020; Wahl-Jørgensen, 2020), and such insights need to be coupled with an appreciation for listening as an integral part of communication and as a crucial component of people's relations to the public sphere. This means that analyzing the deliberativeness of manifest political expressions is less central, compared to assessing people's reliance on different constellations of communicative modes to maintain and develop an orientation to politics in a broad sense. This is the third element along which citizens' public connections can be distributed.

### Time

The fourth element needed in an operationalized concept of distribution of citizens' relations to the public sphere is temporal. The temporal cuts across the former three elements: We should neither expect nor demand people to be static in their attendance to a particular issue, participation in specific arenas, or adherence to certain content forms or modes of communication. Quite the contrary, fleeting commitments and interests and dynamic changes over time are a given as well as a normatively unproblematic fact.

In isolation, none of these four elements is novel in thinking about the public sphere. The point I am making is that we need to bring attention to distribution along issues, arenas, modes of communication and concerning time in unison. Together, the elements allow us to study how people's interest in a specific public issue is channeled through a specific arena, where a citizen combines specific modes of communication, to facilitate an ephemeral or enduring engagement. This is important since it allows us to state in a systematic manner what distributed public connection amounts to and how it plays out in people's everyday lives. Equipped with this operationalization, we can assess with more nuance how and when the distribution goes too far and substantially disfavors certain citizens. But this raises another challenge: What role can empirical social science have for normative theory? How can analyses of distributed public connection alert to inequalities in the digital age matter for normative public sphere theory?

### Ethnographic sensibility in normative theory-building

In recent years, political philosophy has been marked by a critique of high-level ideal theory, often ascribed to Rawls' (Rawls, 2001) theory of justice, but sometimes also taking aim at deliberative democratic theory. Portrayed as a counter-movement to the mainstream, democratic realism provides an "empirically informed critique of social and political phenomena" (Prinz & Rossi, 2017, p. 348), and has explicit normative ambitions (Moe, 2020). The debate between proponents

of realism and ideal theory has arguably taken a tangent into a discussion of whether political principles differ from moral principles (Rossi, 2019). However, the main thrust of the challenge posed by realism concerns methodology: Principles of political theory should somehow be responsive to social practice (Sangiovanni, 2016, p. 4).

Here, democratic realism resonates with other, seemingly incompatible traditions in political theory: from Walzer's communitarian immanent critique (Walzer, 1993), via a Habermasian normative reconstruction (Habermas, 2022; Karppinen, 2019), to recent deliberative systems theory amendments (Owen & Smith, 2015). Advocates of ideal theory also acknowledge that theory-building needs to be attentive to "empirically constitutive political realities" (Maynard, 2021). Building political theory is:

(...) not merely a deductive 'working out' of arguments from self-evident first principles – like the formulation of a mathematical solution—but produces new concepts and frameworks that more or less successfully capture aspects of human experience and thereby profoundly shape our normative conclusions. (Maynard, 2021, p. 2)

One specific proposal that should be of particular interest to communication scholars in the social sciences is a call for political theory building to reflect an interest in "what people do as well as why they do it," presented as a call for "ethnographic sensibility" (Herzog & Zacka, 2017; Longo & Zacka, 2019).

Ethnography has a long and complex history in the social sciences. Often used to describe a basic interest in studying people's actions and accounts in everyday contexts over time, ethnography relies on participant observation to watch what is being done and listen to what is being said (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The aim is to "uncover the significant patterns immanent within the taken-for-granted nature of people's ordinary practices" (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016, p. 45). The use of the term is not uncontroversial, especially not within anthropology. One position argues that "ethnographic" exclusively describes the work of writing up or otherwise chronicling "the life and times of a people" based on fieldwork (Ingold, 2014, p. 385). Others oppose the separation of observation and theory that follows from such a delimitation, arguing that ethnography is "a theory of describing" (Nader, 2011, p. 211), a receptiveness to "the lived expectations, complexities, contradictions, possibilities, and grounds of any given cultural group" (McGranahan, 2018, p. 1). This aspect has attracted interest from political science (Schatz, 2009) as well as from political philosophy.

The "sensibility" in the call for political theory with ethnographic sensibility is a reservation. It signals a step back from ordering all political philosophers to leave their desks for extensive fieldwork. The call is for theorists to be "attuned to how individuals understand themselves as situated moral and political agents" (Herzog & Zacka, 2017, p. 764). Values are not unconnected from forms of life, and political theorists should care about both, or else risk losing "sight of what social practices our values depend on, why these values are attractive to us, and how they might evolve alongside our social practices" (Zacka et al., 2021, p. 11). In the discussions about ethnographic sensibility among political theorists, focus is given to "the frame of mind" when meeting empirical material (Herzog & Zacka, 2017, p. 764). Methodologically, what

is required is not just Habermasian historical reconstruction of macro-level societal developments, but engagement with the intricacies of everyday life in today's society, whether in the form of close readings of texts or cultural artefacts, informant interviews, shorter-term stays at research sites (Herzog & Zacka, 2017, p. 764), or other means to facilitate an understanding that is open-ended and attentive to context.

It is easy to critique this interest as a shallow appropriation; the call for "ethnographic sensibility" can be read as a generic embrace of qualitative empirical social science. Yet, that would miss an interesting point about theory-building. The call invokes an understanding of ethnography that aims deeper: "To adopt an ethnographic sensibility is to remain open to the idea that our object of study is not just a 'case' to examine in relation to theories we hold independently, but something that 'tells us more than we knew to ask' (McGranahan 2018, p. 7)" (Longo & Zacka, 2019, p. 1067).

Here, it is useful to take a step back and consider the implications for the role of theory. If we define theory-building as "the formation of key concepts, frameworks and analytical tools for a particular domain of inquiry" (Maynard, 2021, p. 10), the call for ethnographic sensibility resonates with a fundamentally interpretative approach. With an interpretative approach, social phenomena are studied from the bottom up to abductively build "thematic descriptions and abstracted typifications," using concepts to sensitize and orient us to the phenomena, with theory being built "from the iterative process in the interplay between ideas and data" (Blaikie & Priest, 2017, pp. 26–27). With such a logic, scientific accounts are generated from the discovery of the "lay concepts, meanings and motives that social actors use in the area of social life" that we investigate (Blaikie & Priest, 2017, pp. 12–13). This approach has much in common with what is referred to as constructivist grounded theory, which acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher, and looks for "a latent pattern beyond the awareness of the respondents that can answer 'why' questions" (Reichert, 2019, p. 22).

Seeing the endeavor as fundamentally interpretative helps clarify exactly how and when theoretical principles should be responsive to social facts. One fallacy would be to confuse "descriptive ethics with normative ethics," directly concluding "what is actually just or legitimate from various actors' views about what is just and legitimate" (Elster, in Zacka et al., 2021, p. 5). Avoiding such a fallacy requires reflexivity, but also a realization that there are different levels of theoretical abstraction and universality. There might be higher moral principles which serve to justify concrete practices; however, if our goal in theory-building is not to identify or discuss such abstract principles, but rather to generate a better understanding of specific aspects of the political system to formulate operative norms, a back-and-forth between empirical insights and theoretical work is needed. Neglecting "enduring and systematically consequential feature of the phenomena we seek to address" risks hampering later applications of that theory (Maynard, 2021, p. 10).

Political theory with an ethnographic sensibility can serve to identify how people try to interpret and live their lives according to higher-level principles, such as "freedom," "equality" (Herzog & Zacka, 2017), or the role of citizens in the public sphere. The call provides a promising answer to the need for real attention to the different social worlds of public connections. Ethnographic sensibility can help us see which

normative demands people face, how they relate to them, and identify needs not met by the existing norms.

My claim is that ethnographic sensibility helps rethink norms for citizens' relations to the public sphere in the digital age. A starting point for this endeavor is the proposal of an operationalized concept that accounts for social worlds in a more nuanced way than offered by existing concerns with disaggregation in the deliberative system. Adopting an interpretative approach, we can attempt to develop the operationalized concept of distribution to test associations between its elements. In so doing, we need to take people's everyday life representations as a starting point, moving back and forth iteratively between these and social scientific accounts in a process of typification and abstraction (Blaikie & Priest, 2017). The next step, then, is to develop a methodological design for empirically substantiating the proposition.

### Implications: Empirically substantiating the operationalized concept

Distribution means that relations to the public sphere cannot be judged based on individual citizens in isolation, but as embodied in citizens' everyday lives, in their social worlds. Normatively, the operationalized concept of distribution of citizens' public connection should enable us to lay out the baseline requirements for the resources needed to uphold a distribution that serves all citizens in a society.

Equipped with the four-pronged operationalization outlined above and an ethnographic sensibility, we can move into the actual existing public spheres of today's societies. The goal should be deep scrutiny and qualitative understanding of to what extent and how citizens mobilize, draw on and utilize different resources in different circumstances as they relate to different issues, in different arenas through different communicative modes over time. This requires an understanding of citizens' practices as situated in social contexts.

To grasp the uses and meanings of *arenas* requires a cross-media approach (Lomborg & Mortensen, 2017), where news consumption and other forms of media use are seen from the user's perspective, integrated with everyday life practices, spanning a variety of media platforms. Rather than operating with a predefined notion of news, we should look for relative value or relevance as experienced by citizens (Bengtsson, 2023). To explore how these arenas associate with *issues* in people's public connections requires a similarly open-ended design: Contrasting studies that approach citizens as members of existing organizations, movements or predefined issue publics, our further theoretical development will profit from following the specific issues, concerns and interests that different citizens might have or develop over time. Instead of presupposing, e.g., an interest in the issue of immigration policies or climate change, or labeling citizens as belonging to groups such as "anti-vaxxers" or "populists" (Dean & Maignushca, 2020), we should track and scrutinize emerging and shifting issues as they emerge, rise and fade on the horizon of different publics. Being alert to the different *modes of communication* that people encounter and rely on when upholding a public connection, requires study of not just manifest expressions in mediated arenas, but also the viewing, listening and communication that remains ephemeral. Grasping the distribution of public connection entails, then, a longitudinal perspective, and attention both to the resources individuals have at hand (their "media repertoires," but even their social networks

outside media), as well as the “media ensembles” used in specific social domains (Hasebrink & Hepp, 2017).

Methodologically, it is tempting to focus on the digital traces of such distributed public connections. Digital methods aim to use inscriptions from digital media to study collective phenomena (Venturini et al., 2018). These inscriptions would include tracking and logging data of Internet traffic and meta-data on web content. Rather than treating the online media realm as a world apart from the social, digital methods strive for “online groundedness” that uses digital data to make claims about cultural and societal phenomena (Rogers, 2013). Digital methods can yield insights into phenomena that are performed or reflected on Internet platforms. That does not suffice if we are interested in further understanding the public spheres of today. Digital communication, including different social media apps, can play a larger or smaller role for specific informant groups, and the actual uses cannot be predefined by the researcher (Livingstone & Sefton-Green, 2016; Miller et al., 2016). We need to depart from a digital media-centric approach as we study not an online phenomenon, but a social one. This interest requires us to follow citizens’ communications and relations as they move between different arenas off- and online. Here, we can build on anthropologists’ approaches to digital media (Caliandro, 2018; Coleman, 2010), and media scholars’ work with ethnographies for the Internet (Hine, 2015) and digital ethnography (Pink et al., 2016).

This means combining participant observation and iterative informant interviews with ways to get at the details of media use, such as think-aloud protocols (Meijer & Groot Kormelink, 2020). Diaries are another potential component of such an approach, as they create a space that provides participants with freedom for reflection, enabling closeness to everyday experiences. This allows for scrutiny over time of how citizens pay attention to and engage with issues of public concern, within the context of their everyday lives. Depending on the actual circumstances and the groups studied, digital tools can be helpful to instigate reflections from the informants (e.g., Van Damme et al., 2020). Integrating selected forms of digital trace data in the ethnographies, we may allow for the collection of data either through active contribution from a limited number of informants, or a more passive mode where an app is installed with consent on a user device, which then collects and transfers data to the researcher. The result should be a triangulation by a “stitching together” of digital and ethnographic data (Blok et al., 2017), or a “thickening of big data” (Latzko-Toth et al., 2017).

To ground this discussion, consider an example. Socio-economically disadvantaged groups of elderly or senior citizens are often found to be marginalized through a lack of digital media use, also for political information (Ohlsson et al., 2017) and low digital literacy (Hargittai & Dobransky, 2017). In addition, the transition into retirement constitutes a major disruption of networks for public connection, not just through the loss of work colleagues, but also since studies find work and profession to constitute a main channel for political interest and public orientation (Moe et al., 2019). Assumingly, a focus on elderly citizens will reveal public connections to *arenas*, *issues* and with *communicative modes* that differ from the implicit mainstream—and that develop *over time*. If we add a perspective from the geographical periphery of society, we can additionally explore tensions between locally and nationally focused public connections, as well as

differences and conflicts compared to urban centers of power. To achieve that, we need to start from a specific group of citizens—in our example, elderly citizens in a rural community—understand the off- and online arenas they use when connecting to the public, get to know how the work of staying alert or informed is divided according to what issues and communicative modes, and how this develops over time. An ethnographic approach to such a study of how public connection is distributed in and beyond a group of citizens should help us identify how people interpret and live their lives according to norms of informedness. We can assess whether low digital literacy hinders information gathering, or if other resources (family, friends, civil society groups, offline media) compensate.

Emerging work that focus on younger age groups and experiences with social media use underline how citizenship is seen as “a team effort” with people taking up different roles, more or less involved, and with “active spectating” constituting a meaningful mode (Solverson, *in review*, p. 15). Citizens navigate ideals by curating their individual information flows, as well as caring for the discourses they participate in and considering when and how sharing of opinions or information is constructive (Gagrčin et al., 2022). Utilizing analysis of digital trace within long-term ethnographic work with disadvantaged groups—such as elderly in a rural setting—we can further build our understanding of how ideals are translated into operative norms, how those change over time, and how public connection is distributed in everyday life.

The approach should let us see which public issues such a group connects to, how interest and concern are spread out, and what that means for individual citizens’ opinion formation. With such an approach, we can get a better grip on who is unfavored through the distribution of public connection. The intention here is not to prescribe *the* one comprehensive design for research into citizens’ connections to the public sphere. Rather, the point is to develop an approach that takes ethnographic sensibility seriously. Ultimately, the aim of the empirical analysis should be to further our theoretical thinking, to substantiate, through the testing of associations between its elements, the proposal of distribution as a concept for normative public sphere theory.

## Conclusion

Demonstrating distribution as an empirical fact of citizens’ relations to the public sphere, I have pointed to the limits of existing theoretical concern for the nature of, and implications of, such a distribution. Arguing that scholars need to give attention to the different social worlds that citizens feel they belong to and are interested in, the article has suggested a way to operationalize the distribution of public connection among citizens into four elements: issues, arenas, communicative modes, and time. Spelling out and focusing on the associations between these elements allow us to confront social practice and assess how, when and for whom the distribution systematically disfavors specific groups in society.

With this aim in mind, the article discussed ethnographic sensibility to frame the need for theory to respond to social practice. I have described such a sensibility as entailing an interpretative approach to theory-building, requiring an iterative process between ideas and empirical data. This, finally, led to an explication of a way to approach empirical analyses of the distribution of public connection, geared to facilitate



further theory-building. The aim is to advance public sphere theory beyond the conundrum of digital societies' paradoxically uninformed citizens, and to counter the theory's blindness to social inequality.

Considering social inequality and distribution between citizens does not mean anything goes. As a parallel to concerns that increased polarization will lead to unworkable fragmentation of the public sphere (Habermas, 2022; cf. Thiel, 2023), distribution of public connection within groups can go too far. Ultimately, the question is whether the resources citizens have at hand in their everyday life allow them to engage when need be—to pay attention, react and change behavior. The approach I have suggested is meant to allow for more targeted scrutiny of how norms can resonate with social practice, and how in turn the “epistemic infrastructures” (Herzog, 2023) of democracy can be improved to strengthen a public connection for all.

An operationalized concept of distribution does not address all features of the public sphere. I have used recent contributions to deliberative systems theory as a starting point and engaged with debates in political theory about responsiveness to people's experiences but zoomed in on a phenomenon that illustrates the problems with normative public sphere theory: The empirical facts that: (1) people outsource much work in relating to the public sphere; and that (2) different roles are filled by different citizens. It is this specific part of the challenge with public sphere theory in the digital age that the operationalized concept of distribution addresses.

That said, the argument has a more general implication. The proposal puts communication research at the forefront of political theory. It does so neither by insisting on media-centrism nor by launching a new prefix to “public spheres” to label a novel turn in the development of mediated communication (like “networked,” “algorithmic” or “datafied”). Instead, communication research becomes central to public sphere theory by answering a call for ethnographic sensibility in the following ways: by taking an interpretative approach to theory-building, being attentive to existing conceptualizations' blindness to social inequalities, and becoming methodologically adept at understanding social practices through and beyond digital media.

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