# THE "SPACE OF REASONS" AND DIGITAL PUBLIC SPHERE: DEVELOPING CONNECTIONS IN EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

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**Theoretical Framework**

The interest in the concept of the public sphere, above all in the digital era, has been rekindled by a large body of research investigating misinformation, polarization, authoritarianism, and intolerance (Bächtiger and Dryzek, 2024; Calhoun, Gaonkar, and Taylor, 2022; Chambers, 2023).  A new round of studies has dedicated to examining "unedited" and "disruptive" public spheres (Bennett and Pfetsch, 2018; Brunkhorst et al., 2024; Bruns, 2023; Habermas, 2022), threats posed by the "misinformation order" (Bennett and Livingston, 2018; Curato et al. 2019; Splichal, 2022), destructive polarization (Esau et al., 2024; Bennet and Livingston, 2018);  "epistemic crisis" (Chambers, 2020; Dahlgren, 2018), and harmful targeted campaigns (Trenz, 2024). Addressing public debates in this context means accounting for "systemic democratic disconnections" (Hendriks, Ercan and Boswell, 2020), "degeneration of democracy" (Calhoun, Gaonkar and Taylor, 2022) or "deliberation in times of uncertainty" (Maia, Hauber and Choucair, 2023). However, how connections and disconnections can be operationalized in empirical research is less clear.

This article explores the value of investigating substantive reasons for understanding attunements and ruptures in political judgment between social actors in distinct parts of

the political system in a theoretically informed way. A macro research design, in contrast to a micro analysis, requires paying attention to a set of interrelated institutions and a set of interrelated actors; and demands higher levels of generality (Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019; Chambers, 2023; Curato et al., 2019). Building on Habermas' concept of "space of reasons" and the notion of claims (Habermas, 1996, 2017), we argue that focusing on substantive reasons enables incremental research into: i) a set of selected places and a set of selected actors; and ii) reasoning aligning or dividing actors, without losing sight of the situational logic of interactions in different spaces, at different scales according to the research interests.

A recurring challenge derived from systemic thinking is defining the variables for empirical analyses (Dryzek, 2017; Mansbridge et al., 2012). Our approach provides a communication-centric terrain for dealing with complexities of discussion arenas, tracking justifications and entanglements in collective judgment. Rather than aggregating data from different places, focusing on substantive reasons allows investigators to gain direct access to the content embodied in claims and mundane discussions as the fabric of social life – a dynamic that now takes place largely in digital environments (Brunkhorst et al., 2024; Bruns, 2023; Habermas, 2022; Jungherr and Schroeder, 2023; Maia, Hauber and Choucair, 2023). Making claims and giving reasons play an important role in taking a stand or positioning in political discussions, expressing what individuals want, need, recommend or care about (Habermas, 1996, 2017; Maia, 2025). The use of a typology of pro and con arguments is a familiar technique in public debate studies, media and text analysis (Ferree et al., 2002; O'Connor, 2017; Peters et al., 2008). Following Habermas' writings, our key argument is that the reasons one accepts (similar reasons, even if expressed with different words and styles) generate attachments, or a "binding force" (Habermas, 1989, 2017; Maia, Hauber and Choucair, 2023; Maia, 2025). Reasons given in public help people to situate and resituate themselves in relation to collective problems, disclose what one's consider as harms or what should or should not be done. We concentrate on how this theoretical framework also applies to demands from intolerant, authoritarian, and negationist groups (Steiner et al., 2017; Chambers, 2023; Bächtiger and Dryzek, 2024; Maia, 2025). It evinces clashes in social conflicts, disagreements or ruptures anchored in society.

**Demonstrating operationalization in empirical research**

This article seeks to demonstrate that focusing on substantive content of reasons helps researchers move from micro-level analysis of reasoning practices to a more sustained macro-theoretical analysis. Digital environments enable archiving and collecting a wide range of material, data, textual and imagistic content with ever more sophisticated methods. Our study builds on recent developments in Internet Studies to operationalize the notion of space of reasons in empirical research – a process that can be crafted for distinct research interests. In order to achieve the proposed main objective, the work will develop and validate a comprehensive taxonomy of arguments and counterarguments related to controversial issues in the public sphere, including mobilizations against feminism in podcasts and feminist mobilizations via hashtags. To do this, it is proposed to use Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools at different times, the first of which is to map and

systematize arguments mobilized in controversial political discussions. This type of argument classification, which organizes statements into hierarchical layers of increasing granularity, provides a structured view of the rhetorical possibilities mobilized by different discursive actors simultaneously. It is worth noting that the incorporation of AI in the processing and analysis of large volumes of data has redefined methodological paradigms in several areas, including mapping demands and claims about political controversial issues. Recent research has already undertaken similar moves, such as creating a taxonomy of arguments to investigate climate change (Coan et al., 2021) and a taxonomy of online content to analyze fake news (Molina et al., 2021). The difference of our approach is the holistic approach for the creation of a list of arguments and counterarguments about different objects, using AI in the classification process. We assert that appropriate theories must be adopted to adequately distinguish between the matrix of institutions, agents, and reason-giving practices or relationships at play. Against this context, the present paper offers a useful operationalization of the philosophical notion of "space of reasons," which is productive for distinct types of inquiry.

To demonstrate possibilities for researchers to move from micro to macro analysis, including assessment of non-democratic demands now threatening democracies, we take the following steps. First, we explore the feasibility of employing the Habermasian notion of "space of reasons" in empirical research, to systematize the circulation of reasons. Second, we draw on empirical research in order to integrate reason-giving practices into a more complex network of multiple factors and relationships. We highlight that identifying substantive reasoning is applicable to research dealing with intolerance and extremist groups, negationist and authoritarian groups. Third and finally, we contend that mapping and assessing substantive reasons offer a helping hand to the research agenda interested in public discourses and conflict developments over time, congruent with cultural and historical explanations. The conclusion summarizes the limitations and challenges for advancing the macro interests of research, without neglecting normative edges.

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