

RVP International Seminar 2026

*Self, Solidarity, and Civility**

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Meeting Information

- **Date:** September 4, 2026
- **Session:** 9th session of a 5-week seminar (end of Week 3)
- **Location & Duration:** Virtual (multi-country participants) | 3,45 h.
- **Facilitator/Host:** João J. Vila-Chã, SJ
- **Attendees:** João (Washington DC), Lidia (Poland), Oleksandr (Ukraine), Mark (Washington DC), Xin (China / Washington DC), Mohan (India), Dian (Indonesia), Maduabuchi Frank (Nigeria), Nubong (Cameroon), Shiva (Sri Lanka / UK), Michał (Poland), Ravi Vincent (India), Yeping (Washington), Franklin (Peru).

Key Outcomes

Session 9 concluded the three-session study of Jürgen Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962) and introduced his 2022 reflections on digitalization and democratic legitimacy. Lydia delivered a detailed presentation on Part VII of the 1962 book, recovering Habermas's normative concept of public opinion as a graded, comparative standard for evaluating communicative processes rather than a fixed historical institution. Dian and Franklin then presented Habermas's renewed 2022 position, with Franklin specifically analyzing the threats posed by platform capitalism and algorithmic control to deliberative democracy. The session also featured substantial global news exchange — covering Ukraine's cultural infrastructure under attack, Nigerian oil theft fatalities, UK political instability, Cameroon's academic year launch, and geopolitical tensions involving the US, Russia, China, and India. The group agreed to study Hartmut Rosa's work on *Social Acceleration* in Week 4, with three volunteers confirmed as presenters.

* Document elaborated with the Assistance of AI under the Supervision of Prof. João J. Vila-Chã. Before being distributed, the document was submitted to the revision/approval of the Participants in the Seminar.

Global News Exchange

Ukraine

- Russia intensified strikes on **publishing infrastructure** this summer — at least **15 attacks** on printing houses, warehouses, and bookstores.
- Since the full-scale invasion began, at least **10 million new books** have been destroyed, threatening publishers with bankruptcy and leaving schools at risk of textbook shortages.
- Oleksandr characterized these attacks as **cultural terrorism** — deliberate targeting of learning and cultural identity with no military justification, given the cost of missiles and drones.
- João confirmed a Coca-Cola production unit near Kyiv was also recently struck; Trump's reported characterization of US aid to Ukraine as "gifts" was discussed and criticized.
- Oleksandr reminded the group of the **1994 Budapest Memorandum**, under which the US, UK, Russia, and France gave security guarantees to Ukraine in exchange for nuclear disarmament — framing US support as an **obligation**, not a gift.
- João expressed strong concern that Trump's statements undermine trust in the US as an international partner and blur the distinction between domestic and international politics.

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Nigeria

- At least **43–45 people** died in Rivers State after attempting to steal fuel from government crude oil vessels; a gas emission/explosion caused the fatalities. 9
- Maduabuchi Frank explained the root cause as **economic desperation** among youth who view government assets as common property and accept mortal risk for income.
- The incident was linked directly to the seminar's theme: civility cannot succeed where governance fails citizens and the rule of law is widely ignored.
- Political context: Nigeria is approaching a **presidential election in January 2027**, with opposition demanding the president step down over alleged US criminal cases; the presidency denies any such case. 912

United Kingdom

- Former Prime Minister **Keir Starmer** resigned from the PM position last month, then announced he would also resign as a Parliament member to focus on international affairs.

- Shiva noted approximately **7 prime ministers have resigned within 10 years** in the UK, raising questions about governance stability.
- New political dynamics include the rise of **Nigel Farage's party**, with ongoing public debate between racist and anti-racist positions.

Cameroon

- Schools resume the week of **September 7**; the Minister of Secondary Education is touring institutions to launch the academic year.
- The government is pushing toward **digitalization of education**, but this is challenged by a shortage of trained IT personnel and underdeveloped infrastructure.
- Mubong called for stronger investment in **civic education and curriculum reconstruction** from kindergarten through university.

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India / Geopolitics

- Mohan analyzed the geopolitical landscape: Trump as a **transactionalist**, Putin as an **expansionist**, and Modi as playing a carefully balanced game between Russia, the US, and China given India's border tensions with China.
- Mohan argued that both Trump and Putin operate outside the norms of the international public sphere, treating other nations with "no respect, no dignity, no international law."
- João praised India's Prime Minister for publicly telling Putin at Bishkek to "leave Ukraine alone and end this war," contrasting this with Russia's continued, and most hypocritical, peace rhetoric from Lavrov.

Indonesia

- Dian reported very hot weather; the Department of Construction has begun digging tunnels to prevent flooding.

Poland (Michael)

- Three notable items shared: (1) **Shanghai Cooperation Organisation** meeting in Bishkek, with President Xi reaffirming non-interference principles; (2) US State Department's **DRL Office** releasing **\$180 million** by September 26 to strengthen European civil society, independent journalism, and democratic institutions; (3) UK Home Office released a booklet titled *Understanding Behaviours and Expectations in the UK* for asylum seekers.
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Presentation 1 — Habermas, *Structural Transformation* (Part VII), Presented by Lidia

Core Argument and Structure

- Lydia's central question: *Can a normatively meaningful concept of public opinion be recovered after the structural transformation Habermas describes?* Her answer: **qualified yes**.
- The original **bourgeois public sphere** cannot be restored as a historical institution, and public opinion cannot be treated as a unified societal voice.
- What *can* be recovered is **publicness as a graded standard** — an opinion becomes more “public” as access, effective response, autonomy from concentrated power, and influence on collective action increase.

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Section 4 — The Basic Bourgeois Model

- The bourgeois public sphere is defined as **private persons coming together as a public** to debate general rules governing commodity exchange and social labor through the public use of reason.
- Key normative innovation: political power must justify itself **before reasoning citizens**, not through status or tradition.
- Social topology: public authority (state/court) on one side; private realm (civil society + conjugal family) on the other; the public sphere mediates between them.
- The **literary public sphere** (reading, letters, cultural discussion) trained citizens for political criticism; the **political public sphere** connected civil society with the state.
- Critical limitation: the public claimed universality but participation was restricted by **property, education, gender, and social status** — the family appeared free while remaining patriarchal.

Section 23 — Shift to the Social Welfare State

- Liberal rights (freedom of property, press, association) were formally negative freedoms but had a **positive social function**: securing equal participation in markets and public opinion formation.
- Capitalism exposed the limits of this assumption — economic concentration and media power meant **formal freedom did not produce effective participation**.
- The social welfare state attempts to continue liberalism's promise: social rights (education, security, welfare) become **conditions of effective autonomy**, not just non-interference.

- Communication rights must also be interpreted as **rights of participation**, not merely rights of expression.
- **Refeudalization**: powerful organizations negotiate outside open public debate, then present results through managed publicity to win approval — reversing the direction of accountability.
- Two competing tendencies in the welfare state public sphere: **manipulative publicity** (plebiscitary support manufactured from passive audiences) vs. **critical publicity** (transparency, democratic communication inside organizations, effective citizen-institution links).

Section 24 — Crisis of Public Opinion

- Public opinion can function as a **critical authority** before which power justifies itself, or as an **object to be shaped** through advertising and managed communication.
- Constitutional theory faces a problem: democracy claims legitimacy from public opinion, yet the public appears as fragmented moods, organized interests, media reactions, and survey responses rather than a coherent body.
- Two inadequate solutions: (1) granting authority to a small informed elite (preserves rationality, sacrifices openness); (2) identifying public opinion with institutional majorities (preserves effectiveness, removes scrutiny of how opinion was formed).
- Habermas's objection to polling: **an aggregate of private answers is not yet public opinion** — the word “public” refers to the communicative process through which positions are tested and corrected, not merely the number of people holding a view.

Section 25 — Sociological Reconstruction

- Three areas of opinion: (1) **informal/non-public** (families, workplaces); (2) **formal/quasi-public** (governments, parties, major media — may reach large audiences but remain quasi-public without reciprocal debate); (3) **critically public** (when internal organizational publics communicate outward and connect informal experience with formal decision-making).
- Key criterion: **circulation** — can information, criticism, and response move between citizen, organization, and institution, or does communication flow mainly from powerful senders to passive receivers?
- Draws on Mills's **public vs. mass** distinction: in a public, many speak and can answer; in a mass, few speak, many listen, response is difficult, and institutional power shapes opinion and action.

- Empirically usable criteria: distribution of speaking opportunities, availability of challenge and response, transparency of decision-making, effect of criticisms, degree of dependence on concentrated power.

Critical Limits of the Model

- **Exclusion is structural, not peripheral:** property, education, status, and gender shaped who could participate; formal openness coexisted with material exclusion.
- **Colonial blind spot:** Habermas's narrative centers on European bourgeois development while colonial trade and imperial power remain largely outside the model.
- **Counter-publics:** excluded groups (working class, women, anti-colonial movements) can create alternative publics that widen democracy rather than fragment it; the question is how plural publics preserve difference while communicating across boundaries.

Bridge to Later Habermas

- *Theory of Communicative Action:* broadens rational public debate into a general theory of communication based on reasons that can be questioned and defended.
- *Between Facts and Norms:* shows how legitimate political decisions depend on communication between citizens, civil society, and institutions.
- *2024 book — A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere:* digital platforms expand participation but fragment communication and challenge the shared public space needed for democratic opinion formation.

Discussion on Part VII — Key Contributions

- **Franklin** raised the tension between the **emancipatory potential** of the public sphere and the **economic capture** of media by those who fund platforms and advertising — questioning whether this potential can survive platform capitalism.
- **Lidia** responded that Habermas's early model locates emancipatory potential in rational critical debate, but acknowledged this is weakly connected to material conditions; Kant's public reason was structurally tied to social hierarchy, a gap Habermas insufficiently addresses.
- **Yeping/Hu** observed a paradox: public buildings (the physical public sphere) are now guarded and controlled by state authority, which speaks *before* the people

rather than *for* them — suggesting a regression to the pre-bourgeois model where decisions are made in closed chambers and presented to the public.

- **Lidia** connected this to liberalism’s overemphasis on private sphere and individual autonomy, arguing that private autonomy must be connected with **public autonomy** (citing Hannah Arendt’s *Human Condition* and the Greek distinction between *bios* and citizenship).
- **Mohan** pressed the core question: **Who is the public?** If government bureaucrats, bourgeoisie, and media all claim to speak for “the public,” the concept becomes confused and manipulable; Habermas assumes too much.
- **Lidia** responded that for Habermas, the public is not a fixed group — it comes into existence when private individuals gather **as citizens** to discuss matters of common concern, with reciprocity (speaking, answering, questioning, connecting communication to political action) as the defining condition.
- **João** synthesized: publicness is neither an empty constitutional ideal nor a mere aggregate of opinions, but the **result of a comparative critical analysis of communicative processes** — the quality of critical communication is decisive; forming the self capable of critical interaction with media and power is the only sustainable path.

Presentation 2 — Habermas’s 2022 Renewed Position, Presented by Dian (Indonesia)

- Habermas’s 2022 text is not a repetition of 1962 but a **renewed theoretical position** that looks back at the earlier historical analysis as the basis for a broader theoretical framework.
- Rejects a simple empirical/normative split: democratic theory must **reconstruct the normative content already embedded** in modern democratic institutions — theory and social reality are not fully separated.
- Constitutional norms have an **“unsaturated” character** — their normative content is never exhausted by the existing social order, creating space for political protest when reality contradicts democratic ideals.
- In pluralist societies, deliberation becomes more, not less, important; **disagreement is not the absence of deliberation** but can be politically productive within a shared framework.
- The public sphere does not make binding decisions — it contributes to **public opinion and will formation**, which then feed into political institutions (elections, legislation, administration), whose decisions return to the public sphere for evaluation.

- **Democratic legitimacy** requires alignment between constitutional principles, public communication, and institutional decision-making; citizens must be able to recognize themselves as participants in democratic self-legislation.
- Section 3 of the 2022 text addresses **structural tensions** between the capitalist economy (requiring conditions for profit and growth) and democratic government (requiring social justice and citizen autonomy); if economic pressure dominates and citizens lose autonomy, democratic legitimacy weakens.
- Globalization and financialization reduce the room for national governments to respond to social problems, increasing inequality and making democracy appear unable to address citizens' lived conditions.
- Dian's critical reflection: even when democratic institutions provide formal open participation, citizens may lack the **communicative resources** to actually participate — formal openness does not guarantee substantive equality.

Presentation 3 — Digitalization and the Public Sphere (Habermas 2022), Presented by Franklin (Peru)

Media Transformation and Platform Logic

- Habermas describes digitalization as a **communication revolution comparable to the invention of writing and printing** — dissolving spatial and temporal boundaries and enabling cross-network communication as a potential.
- Traditional mass media was **asymmetric and unidirectional** (broadcaster → passive audience); digital platforms enable network communication where users can reply, comment, and create content.
- This potentiality is simultaneously **emancipatory** (active public rather than passive audience) and a source of new problems: fragmentation, echo chambers, and chaotic information environments.

Empirical Evidence (European Data)

- Reach of printed newspapers and magazines declined from approximately **60% in 2005 to 22% in 2020** — a dramatic shift in just 15 years.
- Among people aged **14–29**, print readership fell from approximately 30–40% in 2005 to **6% in 2020**.
- Daily social media use in the EU increased from **18% in 2010 to approximately 48% in 2019** — before the pandemic accelerated this further.

- Television remained the principal source of national political information, but social media (especially YouTube streamers) is rapidly gaining ground; in Peru's recent election, ~35–40% cited TV vs. ~25% citing social media.
- Franklin noted this data is European-centric (echoing the critique of Elias's Eurocentrism) and called for empirical contributions from the Global South.

Why Digitalization Threatens Democracy

- Algorithmic control is driven by the **economy of attention**: platforms need users online as long as possible to sell advertising, so algorithms optimize for engagement rather than quality of discourse.
- Habermas's deeper concern is not the algorithm itself but the **pressure new media exerts on old media** — platforms disseminate truth-sensitive information without the professional gatekeepers (editors, journalists) who traditionally contextualized and verified content.
- Result: **platform capitalism weakens journalism** and fragments the shared public sphere into **self-enclosed semi-public realities** (echo chambers that reinforce rather than challenge beliefs).
- Counter-publics that emerge online are often not genuine democratic alternatives but **ideological fortresses** — reinforcing fragmentation rather than widening democracy.

Franklin's Critical Addition — Transnational Public Sphere

- Habermas's framework remains largely **national** (national public sphere → national public opinion → national government), but the most pressing problems are **transnational**: the 2008 financial crisis, COVID-19, climate change, and geopolitical conflicts like the Iran situation affecting inflation globally.
- Franklin invoked **Nancy Fraser's concept of "misframing"**: justice processes remain national while the causes and consequences of injustice are global — those in the Global South suffer consequences without being participants in the relevant public sphere.
- Called for developing mechanisms for a **transnational public sphere** capable of addressing transnational problems.

Discussion on Habermas 2022 — Key Contributions

- **Oleksandr** proposed extending the analysis to **artificial intelligence** as a further intensification of the challenges Habermas identifies in digitalization.

- **Franklin** agreed AI amplifies the problem — information is multiplied (sometimes falsely) to increase engagement; cited Pope Leo XIV's recent encyclical as evidence of institutional concern; noted from his own programming background that **algorithms are never technically neutral** — they pursue goals set by their owners.
- **Yeping/Hu** highlighted Habermas's **reconstructive political theory** — not prescribing an ideal society but making explicit the normative expectations already embedded in democratic practices; distinguished **agreement** from **compromise** in deliberative politics; raised the question of what gives legitimacy in the digital age.
- **Mohan** challenged whether **Western liberal democracy and laissez-faire capitalism** can genuinely coexist — arguing Habermas gives capitalism too free a hand; pointed to the 2008 financial crisis as evidence that capitalism's claims to deliver welfare are hollow; noted the election of New York mayor Mamdani as a self-described social democrat as a sign of public disillusionment.
- **Ravi Vincent** raised **media illiteracy** as a structural problem: proliferation of sensational coverage, doctored images, AI-generated content, paid news, and coordinated trolling (citing India's "WhatsApp University" phenomenon) undermine the epistemic foundations deliberative democracy requires; called for **media literacy, professional journalistic standards, and platform accountability mechanisms**.
- **Michał** introduced Yanis Varoufakis's book ***Techno-Feudalism and the Fall of Democracy***, arguing that big tech platforms no longer operate within free markets but *above* them — anyone seeking to sell ideas or products must pay rent to platforms for access, creating a new form of feudal rent extraction beyond government regulation.
- **Mubong/Nubong** synthesized four proposals from Habermas's 1962 and 2022 works: (1) strengthen deliberative institutions to integrate fragmented publics; (2) develop normative frameworks for digital media prioritizing inclusivity, transparency, and accountability; (3) invest in civic education to sustain rational critical debate; (4) rebalance capitalism's influence over media to protect democratic discourse.
- **Shiva** highlighted **echo chambers** as Habermas's key concern in the new structural transformation — the way social media channels communication among like-minded people, bypassing critical engagement with opposing views and undermining will formation.

- **Xin/Zhao** connected deliberative democracy's reliance on rational, fact-oriented citizens to the challenge of **AI-programmed values**: different chatbots are guided by different values, raising the question of how pluralism and democracy survive when AI systems embed specific value sets.
- **Dian** raised the question of **neurodivergent participation**: whose mode of participating is recognized as legitimate within the public sphere, given that neurodivergent individuals engage differently from neurotypical persons.

João's Synthesis and Closing Reflections

- The **technological transformation** (from computers to AI) and the **communicational transformation** (how citizens relate to one another and to power) are distinct but intertwined challenges.
- Technology multiplied without communicational formation produces **manipulation and alienation** at scale; the call to action is to invest in **education and political conditions** rather than continuing to accelerate algorithmic development.
- Cited the **European Union's regulatory approach** to platform accountability as imperfect but courageous — Meta in Europe has been forced to pay hundreds of millions in fines for violations, demonstrating that political power can and should limit digital platform power.
- Reiterated Adorno's warning: **"Be careful when people just say one sentence about anything"** — the compression demanded by social media is antithetical to the complexity of genuine thought; philosophers must resist this without becoming obscurantist.
- Rockefeller cited as the archetype of the "when is enough enough?" problem in financial capitalism — applied directly to platform engagement economics.

Action Items & Next Steps

- **All participants**: Read Hartmut Rosa's *Social Acceleration* before Monday's session; read at minimum the chapter assigned to you, ideally the full book.
- **João**: Distribute the book link and chapter assignments to all participants by end of session.
- **Michał**: Share the link/title of Varoufakis's *Techno-Feudalism and the Fall of Democracy* in the group chat. 97

- **João:** Share the UK Home Office asylum seeker booklet (*Understanding Behaviours and Expectations in the UK*) with the group once received from Michał. 23
- **Ravi Vincent:** Send photos from Columbia University (Dr. Ambedkar bust) and continue sharing discoveries from New York. 1598

Week 4 Presenters — Hartmut Rosa, *Social Acceleration*

Session	Presenter	Notes
Monday	Mohan	Part 1, pp. 1-93
Monday	Nubong	Part 2, pp. 97-148
Monday	Zhao Xin	Part 3, pp. 151-207.

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Nubong is kindly asked to present the INTRODUCTION of the book as well. This portion of the book shall be presented before all others and for about just 5 minutes. The book we are now confronting is the following:

Rosa, Hartmut. *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*. Translated by Jonathan Trejo-Mathys. New Directions for Critical Theory. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.