# The instantaneous temporality of the public sphere: an observation of communicative practices in digital media

## A temporalidade instantânea da esfera pública: uma observação das práticas comunicativas nas mídias digitais

## La temporalidad instantánea de la esfera pública: una observación de las prácticas comunicativas en medios digitales

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*Is "time" a significant social category for conceptualizing the public sphere? This question almost inevitably directs our focus toward "space" as a social dimension for reflection and analysis. With the advent of digital media, however, another social dimension of the public sphere comes to the fore: time. We argue that a proper understanding of the digital public sphere must account for its temporal structures.*

***Keywords: Public sphere; Temporality; Presentism; Communication; Digital Media.***

*O "tempo" é uma categoria social de importância para refletir sobre a esfera pública? Este tópico quase inevitavelmente nos leva a tomar o "espaço" como uma dimensão social de reflexão e análise. No entanto, com o advento da mídia digital, outra dimensão social da esfera pública ganha destaque: o tempo. Argumentamos que uma compreensão adequada da esfera pública digital deve levar em conta uma orientação para suas estruturas temporais.*

***Palavras-chave: Esfera pública; Temporalidade; Presentismo; Comunicação; Meios Digitais***



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*¿Es el "tiempo" una categoría social importante para reflexionar sobre la esfera pública? Este tema nos lleva casi inevitablemente a considerar el "espacio" como una dimensión social de la reflexión y el análisis. Sin embargo, con la llegada de los medios digitales, otra dimensión social de la esfera pública cobra prominencia: el tiempo. Argumentamos que una comprensión adecuada de la esfera pública digital debe considerar sus estructuras temporales.*

***Palabras clave: Esfera pública; Temporalidad; Presentismo; Comunicación; Medios Digitales.***



## *Introduction*

The topic of the public sphere almost inevitably leads us to treat 'space' as a social dimension for reflection and analysis. This is for good reason: since its consolidation in the social sciences, the concept of the public sphere has always been discussed in terms of its spatiality. This is evident, for example, in the early writings of Habermas (2011), where the bourgeois public sphere is described as the gathering of people in concrete spaces (places), such as cafés and salons. This spatial dimension also appears in his more abstract considerations on the constitution of a 'social space' generated through communicative action (Habermas, 1997, p. 92), as well as in more recent discussions on a possible spatial expansion toward the formation of a global public sphere (Garnham, 2007; Castells, 2008).

However, space is not the only dimension to explore within the concept of the public sphere. Anthony Giddens (1991, pp. 28-29) argues that modernity radically separates "time" from "space," with "time" gaining priority in the organization of social practices. Yet, with the advent of digital media and the Internet in the late 20th century and their increasing incorporation into daily life, we have witnessed the formation of a digital public sphere (Fuchs, 2021; Schäfer,

2015; Masip et al., 2019). In this context, another social dimension of the public sphere has become more prominent: time. Although a less explored category than space in the study of the public sphere, we argue in this article that a proper understanding of the digital public sphere must account for its temporal structures. The emergence of digital media, as some authors note, inaugurates or, rather, potentiates a new form of temporality defined by the immediate, the instantaneous, and the fleeting (Bauman, 2000; Schulz, 2012; Gehl, 2011). It remains unclear, however, how this new temporality impacts the domains of the public sphere - namely, the practices, networks, and channels for the formation and observation of opinion. If this "presentist" temporal regime is indeed more prominent with digital media, what effects does it have on the formation of communication in digital environments? It is important to note that digital media are not the first communication tools to establish this semantics of presentism. The written press, radio, the telegraph, and television - all these media, each in its own way, superimposed time over space, creating their own production rhythms and forcing social practices to adapt. For example, televised political debates are structured not according to their inherent complexity, but according to the television channel's schedule. Candidates are expected to answer challenging questions such as "how will you improve security?" within a two-minute timeframe. There can be no delays; otherwise, the channel's entire schedule would be thrown into disarray.

## *Aims and Organization*

This paper proposes a model for interpreting the digital public sphere based on its temporal aspects, thereby outlining a framework we term the temporal structure of the digital public sphere. More specifically, we seek to demonstrate how this temporality of the instantaneous and the immediate shapes communicative practices within digital media, rendering them subordinate to time in two key aspects: pointillism and timing. The first aspect refers to the entrapment of topics and agendas in "eternal presents," which precludes communicative gains for future discussions. The second aspect pertains to a radicalization of the dissociation between space and time, whereby participation in communication is no longer guaranteed simply by being present in a given space, but also depends on the activation of that space at the "right" moment. However, this paper does not conduct an empirical investigation of communicative practices, though we suggest this as an avenue for future research. Instead, our endeavor is based on general observations of digital and social media, underpinned by theoretical interpretations. The text is structured as follows: a) first, we will briefly present the concepts of the public sphere and communication we are working with, highlighting the contributions of Jürgen Habermas and Niklas Luhmann; b) second, we will provide an overview of the relationship between modernity and presentist temporality to contextualize and explain the emergence of this temporal mode; and c) finally, we will discuss the two

aforementioned temporal aspects, pointillism and timing, analyzing their consequences for communicative practice and outlining the proposed model of the temporal structure of the digital public sphere.

## *Public sphere*

The public sphere is the social dimension in which communicative practices related to topics of public concern occur. Therefore, following Habermas (1997, p. 92), we interpret the public sphere as a network in which content is communicated and opinions and positions on specific topics are formed. However, with respect to the reality of the digital public sphere, which we mentioned above, we depart from Habermas, as we do not consider the communications that occur within it to necessarily follow a rational dialogical model. With digital media, and even before them (Thompson, 1995), new forms of communicative interaction emerged based on communication models that are less symmetrical in terms of dialogue (equality of speaking positions) (Schrape, 2016) and are not necessarily guided by rational principles (Dahlgren, 2005). Furthermore, we emphasize that the public sphere is not merely about forming opinions and positions, but also about observing them. In this regard, Luhmann (1996, p. 185) defines the public sphere as a medium for second-order observation - that is, for observing what others are observing. In other words, the public sphere is not only enacted through its more "active" aspects - the acts of forming opinions and making comments—but also through its more "passive" aspects of observing opinions and comments that have already been produced. These latter aspects become particularly relevant with the advent of digital media, as these platforms store all communication produced within their environment. A video, a comment, or a social media post does not disappear the moment it is published, but remains available for future observation by any other agent.

Further clarification is also needed regarding our understanding of "communicative practices" or "communication," as the use of these terms affects our intended purpose in this text. Once again, we turn to a definition by Luhmann (1991, p. 203): for him, communication is a unit comprising three processes: a) the selection of information, b) the utterance of information, and c) the understanding of information. Luhmann's model of communication offers several key advantages for analyzing digital media: first, the model is not based on the notion of "transmission" but on that of selection. For communication to occur, a message does not necessarily need to be addressed to a specific recipient. It is sufficient that it reaches someone who then interprets it and derives an understanding from it. In digital media, where communication occurs in a decentralized, many-to-many fashion, as Castells (2007) notes, it is not meaningful to state that communicative practices are directed at specific interlocutors. Second, communication only occurs when these three stages are fully completed; therefore, understanding

is required. But "understanding," here, does not mean grasping the correct meaning of a piece of content. Rather, Luhmann (1991, p. 93) emphasizes that communication is an operation of meaning, which implies that a multiplicity of understandings can be generated from the comprehension of the same utterance. "To understand" simply means to acknowledge that a given utterance has occurred by responding to it. Communication only happens when an agent grasps ("understands") a given message; an utterance alone is not enough. Since it is common in the digital environment to see many comments without a reply or reactions such as "likes/dislikes," it is crucial to emphasize that these "empty messages," in principle, do not constitute communication. However, the fact that a message is "empty" is not an entirely adequate criterion for establishing the boundary between communication and non-communication, as it is perfectly possible for an observer to read these messages without displaying any verbal or non-verbal reaction. For this reason, it is more accurate to say that "empty messages" can have an impact on external readers but do not occur as communication within the digital public sphere (Ocampo, 2022). Finally, separating communication into these three stages clarifies, as we will see, the consequences that instantaneous temporality brings to the communication process in general, deepening the dissociation between them. For Luhmann (1991, p. 70), communication is a process that reproduces itself over time; therefore, changes affecting time also affect the structure of communication.

## *The presentist temporality*

Presentist temporality asserts itself as a way of experiencing time that begins with the advent of modernity. The subject is vast, and it is not our objective to discuss in detail the relationship between time and modernity. We will instead offer general observations to outline the key characteristics of presentist temporality.

Concisely, presentist temporality can be defined as a mode of time characterized by a) an overvaluation of the present over the past and future, and b) a disconnection between these three temporal dimensions. These characteristics are manifest in what Koselleck (2004) calls the "temporalization of history." In modernity, time undergoes a process of acceleration and becomes forward-oriented, constantly moving toward an ideal of progress (economic, political, moral, etc.) - an end believed to be attainable through planning and rational calculation. This acceleration, Koselleck (2004) continues, permeates the realm of lived experience, which is devalued in favor of a supposedly more desirable future. According to him, this creates an asymmetry between experience and expectation, whereby the former (symbolizing the past) increasingly fails to serve as a guide for the latter (symbolizing the future). Simmel (1973) aptly illustrates this erosion of the space for experience in his analysis of

metropolitan life. He argues that human contacts in the urban environment—the quintessential site of the modern ideal—are marked by brevity and lack significant depth, as the modern subject is constantly pressured by a barrage of diverse stimuli.

In his work *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (2013), François Hartog explores in detail the dynamics of presentism in modernity. The experience of time shifts when discussing "early modernity" versus "late modernity." Hartog argues that the 20th century begins as progress-oriented and futurist, and ends as presentist (Hartog, 2013, p. 141), with a closed future and the promise of progress replaced by the threat of transience and uncertainty. However, futurism and presentism, Hartog continues (2013, p. 141), are not radical opposites, since signs of presentism can be found within futurist semantics. For instance, Marinetti's futurist manifesto proclaimed: "Time and Space died yesterday. We are already living in the absolute, because we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed" (Marinetti, n.d., cited in Hartog, 2013, p. 141).

The author's diagnosis offers a compelling overview of how presentism has evolved into the form it manifests today, in "late modernity."[1] There is a tyranny of the moment, driven by the pursuit of immediate gains. It is an era of flows, acceleration, and appreciation of mobility and the ephemeral (Hartog, 2013, pp. 10-11, 148). The horizon of presentism is open to ever-increasing acceleration, establishing a permanence of the transitory (Hartog, 2013, pp. 14-15). The difference is that, in late modernity, the ephemeral and the transitory are not justified in the name of a "hereafter" that promises to be better. They exist by virtue of the pure logic of aimless acceleration. This is a diagnosis shared by Hartmut Rosa in his theory of acceleration. Modern society, Rosa (2019) argues, can only reproduce itself over time through "dynamic stabilization"; it must be in constant motion to keep its structures and institutions functioning, whether in pursuit of a teleological ideal or not. Ultimately, with the rejection of the notion of progress, presentist temporality comes to be experienced as an accumulation of "moments." However fleeting and instantaneous these moments may be, they are overvalued. One cannot miss a moment, for they are unique: they neither return nor repeat. Michel Maffesoli (2003, p. 47) argues that there is little interest in concerning oneself with the future: we live the present intensely because we know it will end.

[1] We use this term suggestively to refer to the period beginning in the late 20th century, which several authors have described as another stage of modernity. However, we do not intend to engage in a debate over which term best characterizes this period (e.g., liquid modernity, reflexive modernity). As the term is employed here merely as a temporal marker, alternative designations could also be used.

## *The Temporality of Presentism in Digital Media*

First, it is worth noting our understanding that there is no separation between technical media and culture. This means that subjects' forms of expression in the public sphere are conditioned by the media they use. We therefore reject an essentialist view of the public sphere that presumes the distortion of a supposedly pristine form of communication by digital media. Wolfgang Ernst (2013) argues that analyzing non-discursive cultural techniques reveals the discourses they are capable of producing. We follow this proposition here. For our purposes, this means that analyzing the networks and media where observation and opinion formation occur allows us to understand the potential and limits of the communication built within these spaces. More specifically, from the perspective of a temporal analysis, we start from the premise that time does not exist in itself; rather, it exists only through concrete processes of temporalization performed by media, as Mark Hansen (2009) states. Time and culture, time and technology, and technology and communication are thus intimately interconnected. The cultural techniques developed in the digital public sphere shape non-human agents that are beginning to dictate the pace of the temporal experience of communication (especially in recent years, with the development of artificial intelligence). In this regard, Hansen (2009) writes about the dissociation between human temporal experience and that which is enacted by non-human agents. As he argues, human cognition is technically distributed across technologies that operate on a non-human basis. As we will see below, this predominance of non-human time manifests both structurally, in the design of social media, and phenomenologically, in the human use of these tools.

In this sense, the presentist temporality that manifests within the digital media environment is a temporality created by these same media, even though they are themselves techno-cultural products of modernity. Modernity, however, is a product that relies on various communication media—for instance, the printing press—as demonstrated in the work of Elisabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Social Change* (1980). The manifestation of technical artifacts as products of an accelerated modern semantics and the construction of modernity by means of technical artifacts that accelerate time are two sides of the same coin.

The emphasis on immediacy is a value shared by multiple platforms, which offer the option to filter for "most recent" content and for content that is being consumed "now." In comment sections, posts are typically read in reverse chronological order, as the most recent comments appear at the top of the page (Gehl, 2011). Facebook, for example, offers three options for displaying comments—most recent, most relevant, or all - but the platform's default setting is to show the most relevant. Furthermore, there is no option to display comments in chronological

order, even when "all comments" is selected. However, it is incorrect to speak of an "annihilation of time" by digital media, as Bauman (2000) suggests. Digital instantaneity ushers in new ways of experiencing time, which can manifest as different temporal sensations: they are immediate, continuous (ongoing), open, and live. With digital media, time becomes even more active, intense, and mutable (Coleman, 2018), compared to its experience in the early stages of modernity.

Among the characteristics introduced by the temporality of presentism and instantaneity, we wish to highlight two that, in our view, offer deeper insight into the workings of the digital public sphere: pointillism and timing. Although these aspects are intertwined in practice, we will analyze them separately for the sake of clarity.

## *Pointillism*

In a similar vein to Hartog, Michel Maffesoli (2003, p. 51) refers to an "eternal instant," a phrase that characterizes the present as an eternal succession of moments. This implies a constant leap from one event to another, with no connection between them. Life is no longer composed of stages, but of moments in which people seek to live intensely (Maffesoli, 2003, p. 48). There is no longer any reason to direct present efforts toward a future experience, because the "future" is nothing more than a new present - that is, a situation disconnected from the past. Paradoxically, on the one hand, the temporality of the instant ushers in a relationship with time composed of an abundance of moments to be enjoyed. On the other hand, precisely because this temporality blocks a vision of the future - of a "beyond" - it becomes difficult to grasp the very notion that other moments will always follow. This contradiction gives rise to the idea of pointillism. A pointillist temporality is one that severs the connections between moments and events. It manifests as a temporal dyssynchrony, in which time is set adrift (Han, 2017, p. 77). It is a time marked by constant ruptures and discontinuities between events, rendering them autonomous monads (Bauman, 2007, pp. 45-46).

Instantaneous temporality transforms social media discussion spaces into ephemeral events. It is insufficient to think of social media as merely multiplying the channels for opinion formation. While this is indeed the case, to limit the argument to this proposition creates the impression that these spaces are perennial and constantly active, where communication, arguments, and validity claims are always being updated. What we observe, however, is the thoroughly ephemeral nature of these spaces. They emerge and vanish as events gain and lose relevance. At the time of this writing, for instance, an intense conflict is occurring between Israel and the terrorist group Hamas. This event is dominating news headlines daily. Consequently, digital profiles of media outlets, influencers, geopolitical YouTube channels, and individual user posts are all creating spaces for discussion and opinion on

this conflict, since the mainstream media holds a certain degree of agenda-setting power (Schrape, 2016; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Esposito, 2013). Applying Maffesoli's and Bauman's aforementioned reflection on pointillism to this example, we can hypothesize that the "aftermath" of these discussions about the Israel-Hamas conflict will be experienced as if the heated deliberations on the topic had never occurred. If subsequent events have no connection to one another, people will simply forget the matter and move on, finding new controversial issues to debate and new content to consume. Should a new conflict between Israel and Hamas arise in the future, the previously used discussion spaces will not be reactivated to continue the debates held within them. Instead, new spaces will be created (new posts, new videos, new comment sections). New discussions will be initiated, but with arguments not drawn from previous debates. If there is no opportunity to participate in the public sphere by observing the arguments themselves - in the sense of the second-order observation discussed above - then there is no cognitive gain. This is due to the continuous pressure from "new" and "trending" topics.

We are not referring to cognitive gain in the sense of an increase in rationality, but rather in the sense of what Luhmann (1991, p. 204) calls "successful communication": agreement with a particular proposition (regardless of whether it is considered "rational" or "irrational"). This agreement establishes a link between past and future communication, as it allows what was learned in a prior conversation to be carried over into a future interaction. When this connection is blocked, communication becomes atomized and temporally desynchronized.

The emergence and disappearance of communicative spaces is not, in fact, a magical occurrence; rather, it is driven by a series of non-human mechanisms. In this regard, Issevenler and Munn discuss a process of temporalization, which pertains to the ways in which human and non-human agents construct their relationship with temporal reference points (Issevenler, 2023). The reference points the author works with is the Facebook feed, but we can also consider other markers, such as Instagram Reels or other mechanisms governed by algorithms. These algorithms continuously steer content to people as they use these platforms and become increasingly "optimized" as they collect more digital user data. Through these mechanisms, what occurs is what Issevenler (2023) calls a "temporal modulation of the subject." Human users attempt to adapt to this temporal flow operationalized by non-human agents: for example, we do not deliberately choose to spend our free time watching short videos on Instagram. Instead, we have leveraged the medium's technical—and, as Ernst (2013) would argue, non-discursive—possibilities to create compatible discursive spaces: ephemeral and personalized ones.

The disconnection between temporal moments is experienced by people through different sensations, which provide cues for observing the paths

that presentist temporality takes. A time adrift is not a static time, but one that updates itself in multiple directions. Coleman (2020) investigates the experience of "updating" among digital media users. "Updating" is an activity and a mechanism common to virtually all digital platforms: pressing the F5 key reloads the page, displaying new information on the screen. However, more than a technical mechanism, the "refresh" points to temporal sensations experienced by users. The prefix "re," the author argues, refers to a non-linear presentist temporality. The "refresh" is flexible, capturing sensations of constancy, return, skipping, restarting, difference and repetition, inertia and movement, thereby emphasizing its non-chronological nature.

These diverse experiences of user non-linearities allow us to consider how they might manifest in the communicative spaces of the digital public sphere, often merging with one another. We will now analyze some of these, without intending to provide a comprehensive framework. Inertia, for example, is expressed by one of Coleman's (2020) interviewees as the feeling that the present fails to develop or move forward. From a communication perspective, this relates to our argument that propositions cannot achieve long-term cognitive gains. Presenting a clever argument in a debate makes no difference, as it will not have a long lifespan, regardless of how many "likes" it receives. The feeling, Coleman (2020, p. 67) notes, is of "a 'cycle' in which nothing 'serious' is achieved." Regarding "skipping," the associated feeling relates to the ability to ignore the full scope of content and find only what is of personal interest. On digital platforms, comments are archived, and there is insufficient time to read everything that is written. Thus, a filter is necessary - a way to "skip." Comments will not necessarily be read, especially with a high volume of contributions. The more people who weigh in, the greater the chance a single comment will be overlooked by others. Return and repetition, in turn, can be seen in the communicative breakdown between a present argument and a future one. A validity claim advanced now will have to be advanced again in the future because, as we have pointed out, cognitive gains are blocked. Debates lack meaningful conclusions and simply fade away as interest in the topic wanes. The same conflicts recur, and not simply due to a lack of consensus among propositions. In our view, the problem lies at an earlier stage: it is difficult to reach consensus in a debate because the instantaneous nature of opinions makes it difficult to even discern the points of disagreement. For example, in one instance, I saw a comment from a man stating he was against discussions of gender identity because science says there are only two genders in nature, male and female. I replied, arguing that science refers to two sexes in nature, not two genders. He retorted: "Oh, here comes the professor!" I replied with a question mark. After that, he did not respond further, and the conversation ended. In this situation, no one learned anything: my counter-argument was met with mockery. As a result, I was unable to learn the basis of his disagreement with my argument, and he could not understand my point, as I was not given the chance to elaborate.

## *Temporality*

If communications in the digital public sphere are characterized by ephemeral flows and moments that are soon forgotten, giving way to new flows completely disconnected from the previous ones (at least, a disconnection visible from a communicative perspective, as AI tools use their own programming to build connections between different content), it becomes necessary for individuals to engage, in some way (if at all), at the right moment—that is, the moment a given flow is active and users are on a platform, page, or group leaving comments and replies. In this regard, David Berry (2011, p. 144) speaks of a new type of public, the "riverine public." The term "riverine" refers to the act of observing information flows in order to capture them. Observers are simultaneously connected to and disconnected from these flows, as it is impossible to keep up with their speed. No matter how skilled an observer is, they will always be in the "middle." The sensation of being in the "middle" is part of a presentist temporality, as Coleman (2020) argues, which replaces a linear movement between past, present, and future with an infinite movement in the present. In communicative practice, being in the middle points to the impossibility of distinguishing the starting and end points of a discussion. The subject is always in motion, though without ever developing into more complex propositions. Despite always being in the middle, users are seen as super-processors: constantly providing updates, seeking content, and staying connected, able to follow every internet trend. This imaginary is not created from nothing but is the result of what Gehl (2011, p. 1234) calls "affective immaterial labor" - a demand from media corporations for individuals to process digital artifacts, which is then converted into information for these companies. Presentism does not pervade the digital environment by mere chance, but because this temporality can be converted into economic capital. We must remember, after all, that the digital public sphere is largely constituted by companies interested in profiting from what millions of social media users post, watch, read, and comment on online. As Hansen (2009) states, it is also the result of the technical expansion of temporalization beyond the "time of consciousness," as we begin to share our cognition with technologies that do not operate in a human mode of thought. Issevenler's (2023) description of the notification mechanism is an example of a tool designed to help users stay attentive to the latest trends.

The concept of instantaneity is also connected to the "riverside public." According to Berry (2011, p. 144), being a member of this public requires the ability to discern patterns and narratives and to aggregate data flows. From the perspective of communicative practice, this "aggregating" can be understood to mean that participation requires the ability to form a synthetic opinion on a given topic—one that is not overly complex, as it would otherwise require more processing time than the duration of the communicative flow itself. In this regard, Coleman (2020) also observed among his interviewees

certain sentiments that reflect these temporal demands, such as the need to react or respond rapidly to communication and the pressure to "keep up" with everything by constantly checking for updates. However, this does not mean a user will continue to check for updates on a conversation over the long term. They will do so only as long as that stream is active and before other content on social media captures their attention. Returning to my personal example, I would have to scroll through numerous Facebook notifications to locate the conversation about sex and gender, and this would be exceedingly difficult because a vast number of notifications on other topics have appeared in the interim.

The relevance of timing - of expressing oneself at the right moment - becomes apparent as the dissociation between space and time accelerates, causing a disconnection between the "enunciation" and "comprehension" stages of communication. In face-to-face environments, the "here" is necessarily linked to the "now"; it is impossible to ignore an utterance, as it is spoken, read, or heard in real time and must be addressed. In the digital environment, however, the mechanisms that ensure presence in space and time are different. Indeed, any form of communication that is not face-to-face establishes its own rules of presence. For example, a book can be read years, or even centuries, after its publication. A radio program can be heard by multiple listeners who are distant from one another. The digital environment also has its own specificities. Since digital communication is stored, it is not enough to merely be in a "place" (a channel, a profile page, etc.). One must also be present at the right moments, when the temporal flows of that environment are activated. This activation animates a new spatial branch of the public sphere, a new moment to be filled with opinions and comments. Otherwise, one risks inhabiting a dead communicative flow, where comments and opinions go unseen or unanswered, thereby preventing the full realization of a communicative practice. This revisits and reinforces our proposition that digital spaces for discussion and deliberation should not be understood as temporally permanent, but rather as temporary flows - as moments that come and go, lacking a coherent structure connecting them.

## *Storage*

A final consideration must be made regarding the storage of communication. The question that arises is: how can it be argued that a logic of instantaneity prevails in digital media when these same media create the possibility of publicly storing all communication produced within their spaces, thereby making it available for future interactions and observations? The storage of digital communication does, in fact, create the technical conditions for others to observe specific spaces and conversational flows and to interact with them through reply functions, which notify the author of a given comment. The storage of communication also enables its use to optimize social media recommendation algorithms and reduce the degree of randomness in the content that reaches

users. Through "likes" and engagement, users signal to the algorithms that a certain type of content interests them, creating the possibility of discursive circulation within a specific content spectrum. However, this technical condition does not translate into an extensive communicative praxis in which old debates are constantly being revived. This is because social media employs other non-human temporal mechanisms that bypass the technical possibility of observing and participating in past discussions. Social media platforms, as previously mentioned, display comments by engagement or, chronologically, from most recent to oldest, thus prioritizing communication that occurs in the present. The same top-to-bottom (or newest-to-oldest) ordering occurs with content posts on platforms like Instagram, for example. The user must make a considerable effort to reach older contributions. Furthermore, the notification mechanism does not compel the author of a comment to reply, or to do so immediately. What is created is merely a potential for the "activation of the subject," as Issevenler (2023) argues. In other words, there is an opportunity for engagement, not an obligation. It is always possible to defer a response indefinitely while engaging with other content the platform offers. Another factor is the constant production of new content on social media, especially via the feed. The feed, as discussed by Issevenler, is another non-human agent that serves to divert users' attention away from older content and toward the "latest" and "new" items displayed on their home pages. From an individual user's perspective, once a piece of content has fulfilled its algorithm-feeding function, it is encouraged to be forgotten, regardless of whether a given topic has exhausted its potential for discussion. In this regard, Issevenler adds:

> *The discursive domain, the principal target of critical cultural analysis, is overcoded by the environmental agency of algorithms, introducing new temporalities that modulate its affective potential. Any content—be it an image on Instagram, a tweet on Twitter, or a post on Facebook—finds its space of expression and its affective potential upon its audience in relation to a fluctuating measure and velocity constituted by the distributed work of algorithms. Ideology does not haunt the subject, but rather notifies and signals to it. Thus, power is subjectivized through temporality.*

## A Synthesis: The Temporal Model of the Digital Public Sphere

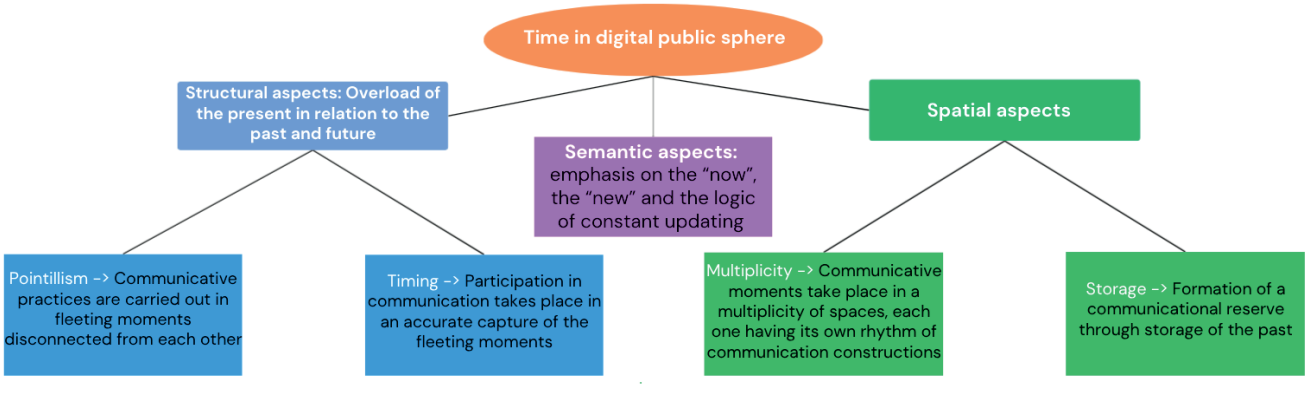
The temporal structure of the digital public sphere can be conceptualized through the argument of David Berry (2011, pp. 142-143), who views the Internet as a network based on real-time information flows. He argues that users can be in several of these flows simultaneously, as they can switch between platforms with just a few clicks. Consequently, we see a spatial and temporal atomization of information flows: spatial, because there are multiple disconnected flows, manifested in the multiplicity of discussion spaces created across various platforms. And temporal, because these flows are not constant like a riverbed. They appear as "moments," ending and restarting in a new flow of

communication that bears no relation to a previous one, even when these flows occur in the same venue (e.g., discussions in the same YouTube channel). However, it is inaccurate to say they occur in real time. Digital media functions more like a real-time "pacemaker," as Coleman (2020a) suggests. In other words, time is not external to these media but is instead produced by them, with each medium generating its own distinct temporality, as previously noted. Each medium, platform, social network, etc., generates its own communicative moments through the creation of new content, making it impossible to predict when a flow of communication and new opportunities for deliberation will arise. The notion of "real time" is misleading, as it suggests that everything we access on the internet is happening concurrently with our viewing of it, when, in fact, we frequently encounter communicative practices that have already concluded, having occurred days, weeks, or months prior. It is possible, indeed, that recent events may dominate the digital public sphere, as exemplified by the Israel-Hamas conflict, but this is not necessarily the case. In more niche communities, other topics may take center stage. In this sense, participants in the digital public sphere must develop strategies to capture these fleeting flows of communication that constantly appear and disappear, in order to ensure their participation, find active interlocutors, and engage an audience that will read and respond to their contributions. This can only be achieved by mastering the interpretation of the non-human mechanisms that drive contemporary digital temporality (algorithms, notifications, feeds, etc.).

Digital storage of communication offers the technical possibility of leveraging past opinions and



*Figure 1.* Schematic Models: The Temporal Structure of the Digital Public Sphere



comments, yet it undermines this very possibility by emphasizing a presentist semantics. In this sense, the landscape of the public sphere shaped by communication storage appears as a horizon of unexplored communicative potential; contributions, comments, and opinions collectively inhabit a vast communicational "junkyard," where the "junkyard" designation arises not from the exhaustion of the communication itself, but from its premature disposal in favor of the new. This "junkyard," in reality, is replete with valuable material in excellent condition that could be used to enrich contemporary discussions, but which is difficult to retrieve due to the very architecture of digital media.

## Conclusion

We demonstrate the importance of time as an analytical category for conceptualizing the public sphere. In this paper, we explore the relationship between a contemporary temporality—one associated with instantaneity and the present—and communication practices within the digital public sphere. We provide a brief overview of how this temporality manifests in modernity and is expressed in digital communication through two aspects: pointillism and timing. Analyzing these aspects has enabled us to propose a new model for the temporal structure of the digital public sphere.

An important consideration must be made regarding digital media. Although they are inscribed within a specific modern temporal logic, and despite their technical structures further promoting a presentist temporality—particularly concerning opinion-forming networks in the public sphere—we do not argue that this exhausts the communicative potential of digital media. In contrast to more traditional communication media, Hansen (2006, 2009) argues that digital media affords individuals greater agency over media artifacts because its modes of use are more diverse. There is, indeed, a tendency to make superficial comments to attract "likes" and on platforms that overvalue recent content while undervaluing older content. However, this state of affairs is contingent; it does not definitively foreclose the structure or experience of the digitalization process. Digital media could well be used as a counter-cultural tool against accelerationism and to foster a practice of deeper discussion and argumentation. For example, compared to televised electoral debates, which last only a few minutes, political candidates could host debates lasting hours or even days on a social media channel. People could not only watch but also comment on the proposed points, enabled by the technical feature of a comment section directly linked to the content. In summary, then, our position is that digital media, with regard to communicative practices in the public sphere, further promotes a presentist temporality, but that these same media, through their uses and technical structures, also allow for other, non-presentist forms of mediation. It is not necessary to radically reject digital media and return to a pure, unmediated communication (if such a thing ever existed). The process of temporalization described by Issevenler, or Hansen's concept of shared cognition, need not be defined by accelerated temporal

markers or technical artifacts. Algorithms, for example, are useful as noise-reduction tools, allowing users to engage with topics of interest more easily, which opens up the possibility for interest groups to cohere and develop their own communicative flows, rather than becoming dispersed. However, a discussion of the unexplored potential of digital media is a topic for a future paper.

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