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HANNAH ARENDT'S  
POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY  
AND THE MODERN AGE:  
THE INTERNET  
AS A PUBLIC REALM

*On the basis of Hannah Arendt's political philosophy, the author analyses the capability of the Internet to fulfil the functions of public realm, as well as the significance and prospects of the World Wide Web as a communication medium for political being.*

*Key words:* Internet, public realm, politics, democracy, communication, civil society.

Hannah Arendt – an eminent American political philosopher – was a passionate fighter for the revival of political life akin to that of antique democracy of the golden age of the polis. In the modern world, she assumed, politics as a sphere of interpersonal communication is dying away. According to Hannah Arendt, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, totalitarian regimes and the development of weapons of mass destruction discredited the politics among a wider audience. Most people, except professional politicians, developed a strong prejudice against active participation in political life. In the modern world, politics is perceived by many as the sphere of authority dominated by subordination relationships. Looking for the way out of the cul-de-sac politics found itself in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Arendt addresses the antique idea, according to which freedom of a person could be actualised only in politics. To be political, to live in a polis meant that all affairs were settled with words capable of convincing rather than through coercion and violence. To inflict violence towards others, to order rather than convince – Greeks regarded it as a pre-political method of interpersonal relations characteristic of family relationships and barbarians.

Unlike, for instance, Aristotle, who considers a human being a "political animal" (*zoon politikon*), i. e. political by nature, Hanna Arendt believes that politics emerges within the space of human coexistence not only because people are capable of acting and speaking, but rather because, except maintaining life, a human being has a need to announce their exis-

tence to the world, which is impossible unless there are other active members in the world: "Speech and action reveal this unique distinctness. Through them, men distinguish themselves instead of being merely distinct; they are the modes in which human beings appear to each other" [4, p. 176]. Participating in the political life of society, a person actualises their individuality and the uniqueness of their personality. This uniqueness manifests itself in speech and actions the people perform in the public realm. At the same time, politics is the only sphere of human activity, where a person can be truly free. Freedom is feasible only in the public realm, i. e. at the place common to "I" and "we".

According to Hannah Arendt, a modern person, who cares only about their utilitarian needs, voluntarily refuses to act in the political public realm, misses the opportunity to reveal themselves to the world, show others their "I". Thus, a human being stops participating in the affairs of the world they live in. They are alienated from the world. Arendt supposes that the concentration of a modern human being on their private life, their retreat to the inner world, and the avoidance of public dialogue constitute the main reason of most social problems of the modern age. They can be solved only through reviving real politics, the politics, within which people, through opposing and trying to convince each other, care about the world common to them. In order to reanimate political life as a modern activity of people aimed at maintaining and improving the common world, a human being should be involved into political activity, be an active element.

But to live an active political life, one needs free time. The tempo of modern life is so high, people are rooted in work-consumption-private life so deeply that they have neither time, nor energy to be politically active. Thus, the political life of many would be limited to small talks and visiting poll station once in several years. Modern democracy, unlike the direct democracy of an antique polis is representative, i. e. the influence on political decision-making is exerted through vesting power in those who chose politics as a career. Maybe, this article is not an appropriate platform for the discussion of the flaws of indirect and representative democracy, however, it is worth noting that, in most modern states, democracy through "face-to-face" communication is just impossible. For example, if the number of full citizens of an average polis was 5–10 thousand people who could gather on the market square, it is difficult to imagine the size of a square that could accommodate more than one and a half billion population of China. Thus, one should admit that, however excellent and just the direct democracy of antique polis is in Hannah Arendt's interpretation, its implementation through "face-to-face" communication does not seem feasible.

However, the development of the Internet and, in particular, free and unrestricted access to it<sup>1</sup> creates a new non-contact communication environment with a high political potential. The political potential of the Internet lies, first of all, in the fact that it is a space that can accommodate an unlimited number of people and give them an opportunity to communicate in the virtual rather than physical space making it possible to participate in political life at any time in any place. Of course, in her books, Arendt described the contemporary condition of political being<sup>2</sup>; nevertheless, it would be of interest to assess the political prospects of the World Wide Web in the light of her political theory.

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<sup>1</sup> Actually, the development of a local network began in the USA under a defence contract as early as 1957. However the internet became generally accessible only in the 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> I. e. that of the 1950s–1960s.

In Hannah Arendt's lifetime, there was no Internet as we know it today. In 1957, the year Hannah Arendt passed away, it was still a project used only by the American military and scholars. Similar to the computer, the Internet was initially designed for military purposes. However, in 1991, the World Wide Web became generally accessible and the number of Internet users has been increasing since.

As of today, the Internet is a unified information space that had transcended state, confessional and ethnic boundaries a long time ago. The effect of the Internet on the development of human civilization is enormous and increasing, nevertheless it is difficult to assess the character of this influence. Many specialists in social sciences are prone to consider the Internet as a chance to renew democracy and encourage citizens to participate actively in political life. But is it reasonable to proclaim the Internet a new public realm, whose very emergence is capable of reanimating the sphere of the political, which Hannah Arendt fought so passionately for?

In this article, I would like to analyse the capacity of the Internet to fulfil the functions of the public realm, which, as Hannah Arendt believed, is necessary for a healthy civil society. For Russia, as a post-totalitarian state, the formation of a true civil society is one of the most important tasks. Thus, it seems important to determine the role of the Internet in the political sphere, as well as its possible influence on the sphere of political being in the future.

### Arendt's understanding of the public realm

What is the public realm Hannah Arendt spoke of?

Arendt gives a twofold definition of the concept of the public realm, which is vital for political activity. Firstly, the public realm is an intersubjective space. In *The human condition*, Hannah Arendt distinguishes three types of human activity: labour, work, and action. Action, in turn, consists of action proper and speech. Action and speech cannot take place in a vacuum, they require a platform common to everybody. Arendt's public realm is such place, which is common to "I" and "we". It always develops there, were people, when acting and speaking, treat each other this or that way: "action and speech create a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere. It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but proclaim their appearance explicitly [4, pp. 198–199]. The *appearance* is the revelation of oneself, of one's position regarding the orders of the common world and, hence, the presentation of oneself and one's essence to "others". Only through *appearing* before others and the world, a human being can be seen and heard by other people.

Secondly, the public realm is the place where people express their opinion openly and expect to be heard by the others. The public realm does not emerge automatically anywhere where several people gather just because people are creatures capable of acting and speaking. On the contrary, even there where it exists, the majority prefers to remain without its boundaries. The public realm is a space, where will is manifested, authority emerges, and judgements and actions are possible, because it enables the manifestation of human diversity. It brings together and separates at the same time. Arendt compares the public

realm with chess, since a chess player is connected to his partner through the board, which brings them apart and together simultaneously, being a part of their own world [2, p. 523].

However, it is worth noting that Hannah Arendt distinguished between the private and public realms. It is a very important element of Arendt's political theory, since she clearly separated politics from all other spheres of human activity. Unlike the private realm, the public one is plural, i.e. contains a vast number of different and even contradictory perspectives. It is this plurality that creates the reality, which *"is not guaranteed primarily by the "common nature" of all men who constitute it, but rather by the fact that, differences of position and the resulting variety of perspectives notwithstanding, everybody is always concerned with the same object. If the sameness of the object can no longer be discerned, no common nature of men, least of all the unnatural conformism of a mass society, can prevent the destruction of the common world"* [4, pp. 57–58].

Only the public realm can guarantee that what the pure private life could never do. The essence of the private is the absence of the others. In private life, a human being behaves as if there existed no other person, their actions in the private realm have no significance for the public one, they concern no one except that very person [1, p. 58]. At the same time, private life creates the private realm – a condition for the possibility of showing one's worth in the public realm. The public and the private realms supplement each other and are integral parts of an organic whole. A lack or deficiency in any of them is distressing and negatively affects the quality and content of a human life in general.

### The Internet as a public realm

Let us try to answer the question as to whether the Internet is a public realm in Hannah Arendt's understanding. And if it is, how does it influence the political life of society and what are its prospects as a public realm?

On the one hand, the Internet is, of course, a public realm, since it reveals human plurality. People interact with each other, express their opinions and expect an assessment of their perspective from the others. The Internet is a space that brings together people of different political beliefs. At the same time, its virtuality helps exclude violence, which is of great importance when the negotiating parties are at war. Moreover, the Internet is an alternative to "big-time" or "official" politics, the participation in which is technically possible but hardly practically feasible due to the preoccupation with work and consumption and the lack of free time. The Internet gives anyone who is willing to an opportunity to participate in the creation of a space for the expression of their opinion. The Internet facilitates the development of new forms of participation of citizens in politics, which do not depend on large political structures and mass media. As Ya.N. Zasursky stresses in his article *The Internet as a basis for the development of information society in Russia*, the Internet gives small groups, including ethnical ones, an opportunity to make their presence felt within the virtual space, bringing together their supporters regardless of state borders and geographical distances. Some peoples that do not enjoy statehood and are scattered on the territories of different states, with the help of the Internet, can create something akin to a virtual state formation, which can facilitate the interaction and communication between the representatives of the people. An example is the virtual state of the Sami, thanks to which a people residing in four different countries (Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia) and divided by borders can feel its integrity,

maintain different contacts and coordinate joint actions. The Internet is of special importance for national diasporas: the Internet links them to the home country and gives them an opportunity to participate in the political life of the country and in discussions of pivotal issues even while being geographically distant from the motherland.

It also holds true for the residents of exclaves (such as the Kaliningrad region in Russia), for whom the Internet is a vehicle eliminating borders and distances that separate the exclave from the mainland. Thanks to the Internet, political parties have an opportunity to work with their electorate with the help of their own information resources, where everyone can get acquainted with the party's programme. In political forums, everyone can take part in a discussion or exchange of opinions on a certain political issue or problem.

On the other hand, communication with other people does not make the Internet a public space, since the private realm also acts as a platform for an exchange of opinions, judgements, and attitudes. However, judgements expressed in the private realm are not meant for public view, their target audience is a limited number of people, relatives, friends, etc., for whom this judgement is expressed. The Internet attracts a wider audience as an opportunity to immerse into a cosy community of likeminded people with similar interests and beliefs. In other cases, a person expresses their opinion regarding certain political issues but prefers to hide their name under a pseudonym. It means that they either are not ready or do not want their opinion to become a topic of a public discussion, enter the public realm, where all judgements are expressed openly. Within the public realm, a person reveals themselves to the world, they publicise that what they want to say to the whole humanity (at least, potentially), rather than an intimate circle of friends and likeminded persons.

The Internet, as a virtual space, should by no means be reduced to the public or private space – it is a more complex phenomenon, which contains the information, economic, commercial, public, and other components. Thus, the Internet brings together all aspects of human life differing from the real, physical public realm only in its virtuality. The Internet becomes a public realm in those cases when anonymity is taken away and a judgement is expressed under the real name rather than a pseudonym. However, there are numerous intermediate states, when it is quite difficult to distinguish between the private and public on the Internet or when this distinction is drawn differently than in the world of immediate communication.

### **The problems and prospects of the Internet as a public realm**

Since Hannah Arendt understands politics as a process of communication, and communication requires an exchange of information, direct transition of politics into the digital dimension seems possible. The Internet as a means of communication has a clearly dual character. On the one hand, it is mass media, since it transmits information from a source to a large number of clients, establishing one-way communication and being no different from newspapers, radio, and television. However, at the same time, the Internet is a means of communication connecting independent from each other users, so that information is circulated in different directions. Due to the dual nature of its communicative function, the Internet has a greater potential for direct democracy, attaching a new meaning to the concept of publicity, and the development of an alternative public realm.

As a virtual public realm, an alternative to the physical one, the Internet has attractive prospects. Its development can activate the political life of society, encouraging an increasing number of citizens to participate in politics directly. The Internet makes it possible to restore the competitive character of politics, since it gives rise to the opposites that were forced out of public life by official politics. Thus, the Internet could play an important role in the reanimation of politics as a public component of human existence. The Internet creates new mechanisms of relations between social institutions and citizens. The Internet gives every individual an opportunity to participate actively in the creation of a platform where they can freely express their opinion.

However, alongside its positive effects, the Internet can have an adverse impact on the development of human society and a destructive influence on the public realm. In his work *The Internet and civil society*, Peter Levine describes five potential risks associated with the Internet: 1) the poorest groups of population lack an opportunity to access, use and produce the Internet content; 2) weakened social bonds; 3) the tendency of certain groups to isolate themselves and deny social contacts with those of other beliefs and avoid discussions with them; the transformation of Internet users into simple consumers, which also includes information and religious performances; 5) the impact of eroding privacy on freedom of association [6].

Another possible negative effect of the Internet relates to its employment by organised criminal groups and terrorists. Moreover, in many countries, there is an apparent increase in the attempts of authorities to control the content of Internet resources, in many cases they are supported by large providers and search engines (for example, Google in China). It is especially evident in totalitarian countries, as well as in those, where the rights and freedoms of citizens are infringed. For instance, in China, the Internet is censored; while in some countries (Cuba, North Korea), Internet access is granted only to certain groups of citizens; in other countries (Iran) Internet access is unavailable. In democratic countries, control over the content of websites is also being tightened, which is explained by combating terrorism and extremism.

Indeed, the Internet also accommodates the websites of extremists of every stripe and radical political parties, which obtain the part of the public realm they are refused by the governments of their countries. It is possible, firstly, because of the anonymity of website creators. Secondly, the founders and ideologists of extremist or criminal Internet resources are out of reach, since they reside without the borders of the state, against which or the citizens of which their activity is directed. It generates a difficult problem of establishing the level of possible state intervention into the Internet as a virtual means of communication. For example, recently, a Russian newspaper, *Novye izvestiya*, published an article claiming that the Ministry of the Interior of Russia entertains the idea of obligatory identification of all Internet users as a crime-fighting measure [8]. According to the head of the Hi-tech crimes department of the Ministry of the Interior of Russia, Colonel General Boris Miroshnikov, the compulsory registration of national ID data of each user will allow the authorities not only to identify the computer that, for example, was used for a hacking attack, but also the name of its owner. However, experts believe that compulsory identification will affect, first of all, law-abiding users. For example, one third of the respondents did not support the idea of control over website content. They explained their position saying that it "limits the freedom of speech", "does not let people communicate normally". They also mentioned that "censors will always go too far" and the "conscience is the best censor".

There are also other opinions. For example, a famous Russian politician, Sergey Mironov stated that "this sphere should be controlled. At the same, there can't be any censorship on the Internet. And I hold to this position". According to the RBC information agency [9], this statement was a comment on a recent discussion of the model law on the Internet by the Information policy commission of the Council of Federation. Sergey Mironov's opinion is shared by a member of the Council of Federation, Sergey Shatirov, who, however, believes that "there should be some restrictions": "almost the whole humanity participate in this project. It is a global problem, which requires legal restrictions so that Internet-assisted law violations can be prevented", he said. As to when such restrictions should be introduced, the senator emphasised: "It is a complex, long-term process, we should not be hasty, but we should start tackling the issue" [ibid]. Evidently, the state becomes increasingly aware of the importance of the virtual space, a part of which becomes a socially significant public realm. Of interest is a situation that took place in Syktyvkar recently. A Syktyvkar musician Savva Terentyev is the first person in Russia to face criminal charges relating to a comment in an Internet blog. The musician is accused under the article on incitement of national, racial, or religious enmity after posting a comment regarding law enforcement officers. The content of Internet resources cannot be always assessed unambiguously in terms of law, as it happened, for example, in the case of Terentyev. On the one hand, the musician calls for violence towards law enforcement agencies, which is a violation of law and is subject to prosecution. On the other hand, Terentyev, expressed his position in his personal blog, which cannot be regarded as mass media and is meant for the friends and relations of the author. In this case, control over the content of personal websites on the Internet becomes intrusion into privacy, which should not happen in a democratic state. Evidently, the problem of distinguishing between the private and the public on the Internet is of importance and should be, sooner or later, solved by all countries throughout the world. At the same time, hopefully, the Internet will not turn into a stronghold of extremist and radical groups, nor be totally controlled by the state, but rather be a platform for a free exchange of opinions and animated discussions.

Last years have seen the appearance of works questioning the role of the Internet as a potential means of the renewal of the political. The authors of these works rely on the traditional interpretation of social relations, according to which, social relations can be developed efficiently only on the basis of immediate contact between people. These authors believe<sup>3</sup> that the new virtual sociality destroys the bases of immediate human interaction. Thus, it destroys the public space and gives the state additional opportunities to exert control over its citizens. Apparently, for the Internet to develop as a virtual public space, it is necessary that its participants take responsibility for their messages. Bernardo Sorj suggests a system of certifying all Internet users in order to filter off all uncertified users. He believes that, soon, it will be possible to introduce a universal certifying system, which would ensure the certification of Internet users and develop a filtering system that would automatically delete the messages of uncertified users [7]. However, if Sorj's idea is put into effect, the Internet — a multiaspect virtual communication space bringing together the private and the public — will turn into a solely public realm, thus, impoverishing its content. It is worth

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, [5].

recalling Hannah Arendt's definition of the public realm, which, although it was reduced to the physical public realm, holds true for the virtual public realm. Arendt believed that the public and the private realms supplement each other and are the parts of an integral whole. It means that the Internet, as a virtual alternative to the physical communicative environment should retain a sensible balance of the public and the private.

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