

Rathenau Instituut



Democracy and Public Debate

Geert Munnichs

Overview

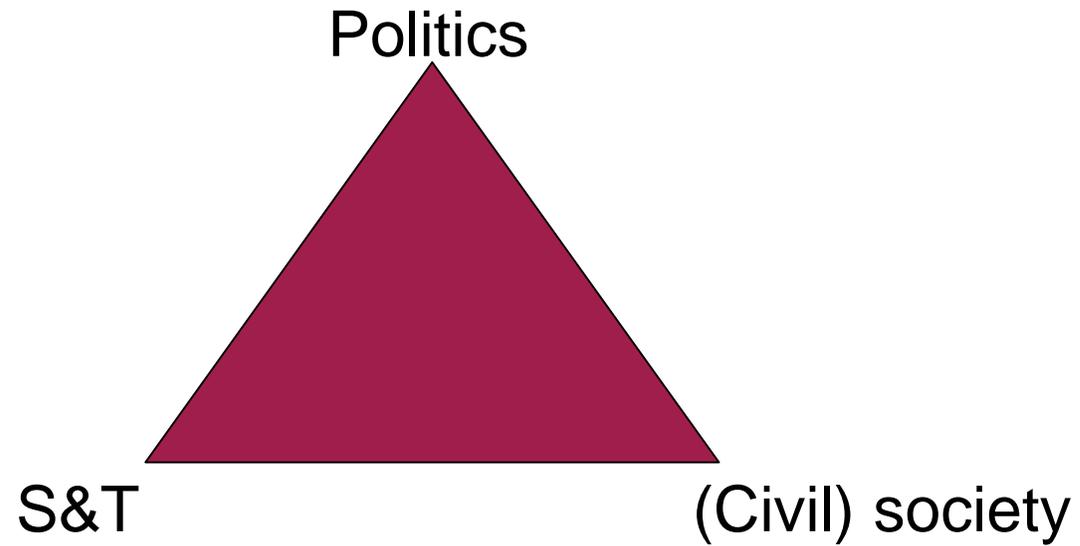
- Polarization of public sphere
- Deliberative concept of democracy
- Public debate and democratic citizenship
- Safeguards for a vital public debate

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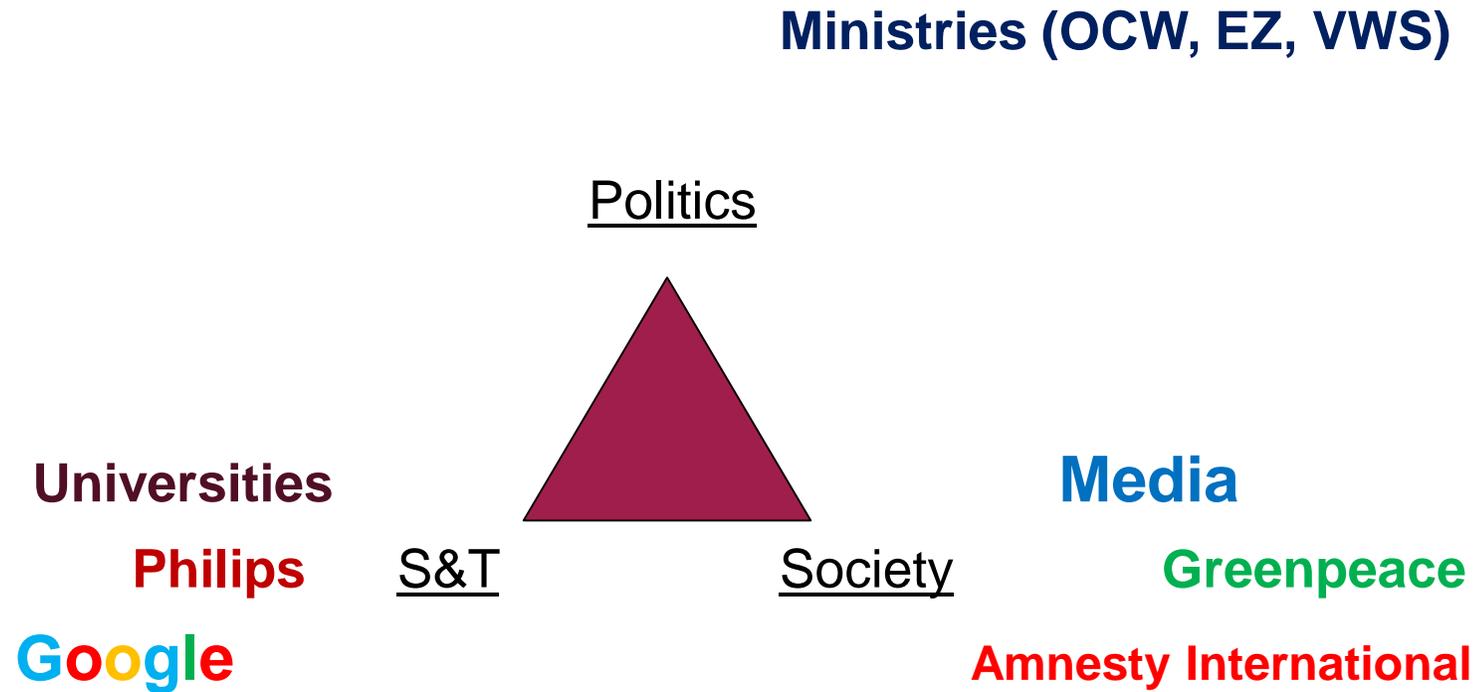
- Study growing impact of S&T on society
- Focus on a public perspective: societal impact of S&T
- (Im)possibilities, profits & risks, expectations & worries
- Task: inform parliament and stimulate public debate
- Purpose: better informed policy making
- Operating close to the parliament



Building bridges



Broader context



Polarization of the public sphere I

- Growing concerns about polarization
- Large amounts of disinformation circulating on social media
- Partly because people more often click on sensational news
- Widely spread by anonymous accounts (bots)
- Reinforcing social prejudices and societal cleavages
- Risk of population groups drifting apart or being set up against each other



Polarization of the public sphere II

- Political micro-targeting
- Cambridge Analytica scandal
- Using large amounts of Facebook data to influence voting behaviour
- Adjusting political messages to voters' individual concerns, needs and wants
- Probably influencing the outcomes of Brexit campaign and US presidential election



Polarization of the public sphere III

- Strengthening social cleavages and political micro-targeting both impair public debate
 - Set people up against each other
 - Fragmentation of the public sphere
 - Reinforcing individual belief systems
 - Lack of shared understanding of public and political matters
 - ‘Echo chambers’; ‘filter bubbles’
- See lecture Robert Talisse



Key elements of democracy

- Democracy often equated with free elections
- But demands more: independent rule of law; free press; civil rights
- Civil rights → equal treatment of citizens by government
- Democratic political decision-making → equal consideration of all relevant interests, values and preferences
- No interests should be given more weight than others beforehand
- **How to understand equal consideration/weighing?**
- Deliberative concept of democracy provides a clear understanding
- Clarifies the vital role of public debate

Public discontent and political credibility



Deliberative democracy



- Coined by Jürgen Habermas (“Between Facts and Norms“, 1992/1996)
- **Central thesis: legitimate (democratic) political decision-making presupposes a vital public sphere in which political claims are debated**
- Dissertation:
 - how to understand this political and public debate?
 - what kind of citizenship required?

Interplay between political and public sphere



Political openness to public wants and needs

- Politicians should know what matters to the people they represent
- Process of political decision-making should be open to societal wants and needs
- Citizens should have the possibility to express their wants and needs publicly



petition.fm
It's time to make a change



Politicians should be accountable I

- Showing that they have heard societal needs and wants
- Showing how they take these into account
- BUT: doesn't mean that all needs and wants will be satisfied
- Political decision-making is weighing diverse, often conflicting values and interests, under circumstances of scarce resources – and making choices



Politicians should be accountable II

- Decision-making implies ‘winners’ and ‘losers’
- Important for politicians to clarify and justify their decisions publicly
- Can be contested in parliamentary and public debate
- It really matters whether proper reasons are provided
- If not, the legitimacy of decisions can be doubted
- Feeling that political games are being played; that certain interests have been given more weight beforehand



Politicians should be hold accountable

- Whether politicians will feel forced to justify their decisions, depends on a critical public sphere
- Depends on a critical civil audience:
 - following the political debate in de media
 - informing themselves about topical issues
 - discussing political issues (school, work, social media)
 - participating in petitions, demonstrations, ...



Interplay between political and public sphere

- A politically indifferent and passive citizenry will give politicians ample room to serve all kind of private interests/lobbies
- A critical and alert civil audience, by holding politicians accountable for their decisions, will reduce this room



How deliberative are Western democracies?

- Do present-day Western democracies live up to this deliberative understanding?
- No, but their functioning can only be understood when taking deliberative elements seriously:
 - politicians do justify their decisions by providing argumentations
 - these justifications are countered by other politicians, the press, ...
 - politicians that can be too easily criticized, do have a problem
- So, the argumentative quality of justifications counts!



Deliberative understanding of democratic citizenship I

- Equal consideration of interests implies that no political preference deserves more weight than others beforehand
- Presupposes that citizens acknowledge each other's right to claim political fulfilment of their demands
- But only those demands may claim fulfilment that appeal to mutually justifiable reasons
- Others should be able to recognize the reasonableness of demands
- Therefore, the perspective of the other should be taken into account
- Merely private preferences do not suffice
- Is basic for a democratic public and political debate

Deliberative understanding of democratic citizenship II

- Shared understanding of public and political matters
- It requires a reflexive attitude of citizens towards their own wants and needs
- No want or need can be stated as 'political fact'
- **Strongly at odds with echo chambers and filter bubbles**

Safeguards for a vital public debate

- Strong civil society, with free associations in which citizens organize themselves
- Diverse media-landscape with a free press:
 - critically testing political and public justifications
 - informing both politicians and citizens about the needs and wants of (other) people
- Media literacy of citizens
- Responsive political culture, with politicians daring to cope with parliamentary and public criticism



Thanks for your attention !

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Sources of pictures

Pictures on slide 3, 12 & 17: <https://creativecommons.nl/>

Pictures on slide 10: cover dissertation Geert Munnichs

Pictures on other slides: <https://www.flickr.com/>