

Are Habermas' Principles of the “Ideal Speech Situation” Applicable to the Global Media Sphere?

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Abstract

One of the foundations of modern civil society is public communication, for which Jurgen Habermas proposed the principles of the “ideal speech situation”. These principles help to avoid a “war of all against all” in public communication and create conditions for achieving mutual understanding on socially significant issues.

Even more relevant is the application of Habermas' principles to the activities of professional bloggers, journalists, and media outlets, whose audiences are much broader than those of individual citizens communicating with each other or writing on social networks. But if globalization, migration flows, and transnational media groups blur the boundaries of national civil societies and communication fields, a legitimate question arises: are Habermas' principles applicable to the global media sphere?

Today, the challenge to freedom of speech comes not only from authoritarian regimes, but also from mainstream publications in the “liberal” media sphere, which control the global “agenda” and impose certain narratives on the audience. This turns liberalism into a type of totalitarian ideology, and the media sphere into a field of “hybrid warfare” with the help of fake news and the suppression of dissent, which contradicts the values of classical liberalism. The essence of the challenge is the possibility of suppressing alternative points of view under “liberal” slogans. In the global context it generates “weapons of mass destruction”, which give some countries advantages in “hybrid wars” and significantly affect the geopolitical situation.

How “liberal” censorship works without the formal-institutional introduction of censorship? The key mechanism is the “production of events,” which allows the formation of the desired worldview without

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direct falsifications. Basic facts are “formatted” and presented within the given ontological framework, and deviations are blocked. The absence of formal censorship is compensated by “cancel culture,” which gives rise to self-censorship. Independence and pluralism retreat under the pressure of media formatting and dogmatic thinking, which devalues the institution of reputation.

Thus, the “liberal” media sphere is becoming a space for “hybrid warfare”, creating a strategic challenge to global security. The response should be joint efforts of independent journalists, publications and states of the “global majority” to protect genuine freedom of speech and pluralism of opinions.

Key words: *public communication; freedom of speech; principles of the “ideal speech situation”; global media sphere; hybrid warfare; fake news; self-censorship; “production of events”; media formatting; cancel culture.*

Introduction: The Global Media Sphere as a Space of Information-Cognitive Warfare

In recent years, one of the pressing challenges to freedom of speech and international information security has been the activities of mainstream “liberal” publications in the global media sphere, which control the “agenda” and impose specific narratives and ontological frameworks for understanding the real situation on target audiences. Such control and imposition have transformed modern liberalism into a form of totalitarian ideology, and the global media sphere into a space for information-cognitive warfare waged through *fake news*, “post-truth,” and the suppression of alternative viewpoints. Essentially, these are “weapons of mass destruction,” giving countries that possess them advantages in “hybrid wars,” in which information-cognitive warfare is combined with the limited use of military force [Kokoshin et al., 2021, pp. 60–61], and significantly influencing the geopolitical situation.

At first glance, the use of this “conscious-affecting” weapon, which attacks consciousness [Gromiko, Krupnov, 1997], contradicts such classical liberal values as free thought, freedom of speech, pluralism, and freedom of information, the promotion of which leading mainstream publications still consider their mission, giving them the moral right to criticize not only “illiberal” regimes and the practices of “unfree” countries but also to silence their own “non-systemic” opposition. In other words, *the essence of the contemporary challenge to freedom of speech lies in the possibility of suppressing alternative viewpoints under “liberal” slogans.*

Habermas’ Principles of “Ideal Speech Situation” and the Global Media Sphere: Statement of the Problem

One of the foundations of modern civil society is public communication, for which Jürgen Habermas, within the framework of his theory of communicative reason, proposed *the concept of the “ideal speech situation.”* It is characterized by four conditions [Habermas, 1984, S. 177]:

- 1) equal opportunities for discourse participants to use communicative speech acts;
- 2) equal opportunities for thematization of opinions and criticism;

3) freedom of expression, preventing the formation of repressed complexes;

4) equal opportunities for the use of regulatory speech acts, ensuring reciprocity among discourse participants and eliminating privileges – unilaterally binding norms of communication.

In a context where citizens have the right to freedom of speech, these principles help avoid a “war of all against all” and create conditions for achieving, if not agreement, then at least mutual understanding on socially significant issues.

Even more relevant is the application of Habermas’ principles to the activities of professional bloggers, journalists, and media outlets, whose audiences are much broader than those of individual citizens communicating with each other or posting on social media. But if globalization, migration flows, and transnational media groups blur the boundaries of national civil societies and communication fields, *a legitimate question arises: are Habermas’ principles applicable to the global media sphere?*

It is commonly believed that freedom of speech is restricted by authoritarian regimes. This was the view of 20th-century political science and philosophy, which considered the fundamental condition of freedom of speech to be pluralism of opinion, which is supported by democratic regimes and suppressed by authoritarian ones. Moreover, freedom of speech, by transforming the media into a “fourth estate” and engendering deliberative public debate, itself becomes a factor in supporting pluralistic democracy [Parkinson, Mansbridge, 2012].

However, in the 21st century, thanks to the development of modern information transmission technologies, the media sphere is becoming global, encompassing countries with different political regimes. In this situation, as shown in the Introduction, we are faced with the activities of mainstream publications dominating the global media sphere and suppressing free speech under the guise of “liberal” slogans.

The paradox is this:

- on the one hand, liberalism rejects censorship for ideological reasons;
- on the other hand, the “liberal” media sphere itself is organized in such a way that the possibility of disseminating alternative points of view is essentially blocked.

To resolve this paradox, *it is necessary to provide a conceptual answer to the question of how the mechanisms that ensure the suppression of alternative opinions and the imposition of the “necessary” narratives without the formal institutional introduction of censorship operate in the “liberal” media sphere?*

The Mechanism of Information-Cognitive Warfare

The proposed hypothesis is that the *global media sphere is organized according to the logic of using the media as a mechanism for informational and cognitive warfare*. The “settings” of this mechanism allow, even while formally preserving the right to free speech, any alternative viewpoints to be treated as “hostile,” either by drowning them out with the “signal power” of mainstream media or by *cancelling* the proponent of that viewpoint.

The scheme of the mechanism of information-cognitive warfare (diagrams 1, 2, 3 – see below¹) is presented within the logic of substantive-genetic unfolding, within which the initial structure (“cell”) is “overgrown” with new elements, transforming into a *matryoshka-like structure*². In this structure, the initial “cell” (the internal matryoshka) acts as a “unit” of the future whole (the external matryoshka), which, in turn, is viewed as an “unfolded” and “developed” form of the initial “cell.” In this sense, all matryoshkas have “the same face,” since they are all a single whole. In this specific case, *the deployment of the information-cognitive warfare mechanism involves three steps*:

- 1) the establishment of an initial unit that defines the principle of *event production* that underlies the entire structure;
- 2) a mechanism for *constructing basic facts* that allows for the interpretation of events resulting from this “production” (step 1) as “real”;
- 3) the placement of event production (step 1) and the construction of basic facts (step 2) within a *system of ontological coordinates and value judgments (narratives)*, reinforced through media formatting and special quasi-institutions that block deviations³.

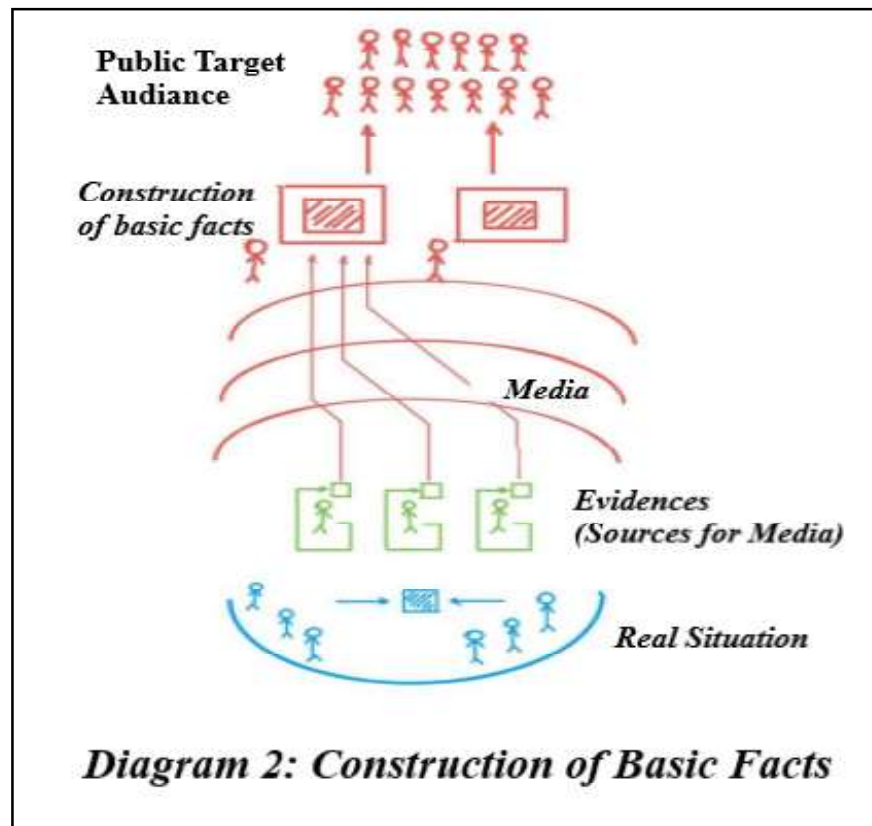
Event Production

The key principle of the modern media sphere, which determines the deep mechanism of its functioning (the internal matryoshka in terms of the previous paragraph), is *the event production* [Champagne, 1990], which allows the formation of the desired “picture” without resorting in most cases to direct falsifications (diagram 1).

Construction of Basic Facts

Event production as a principle (the internal matryoshka) creates the possibility of *constructing basic facts* (the middle matryoshka) presented to the target audience as “reality.” Moreover, event production itself – no longer as a principle, but as a deep mechanism – becomes possible due to the fact that, based on evidence about the real situation, which serves as sources for the media, basic facts are constructed. These facts are “formatted” using specialized media



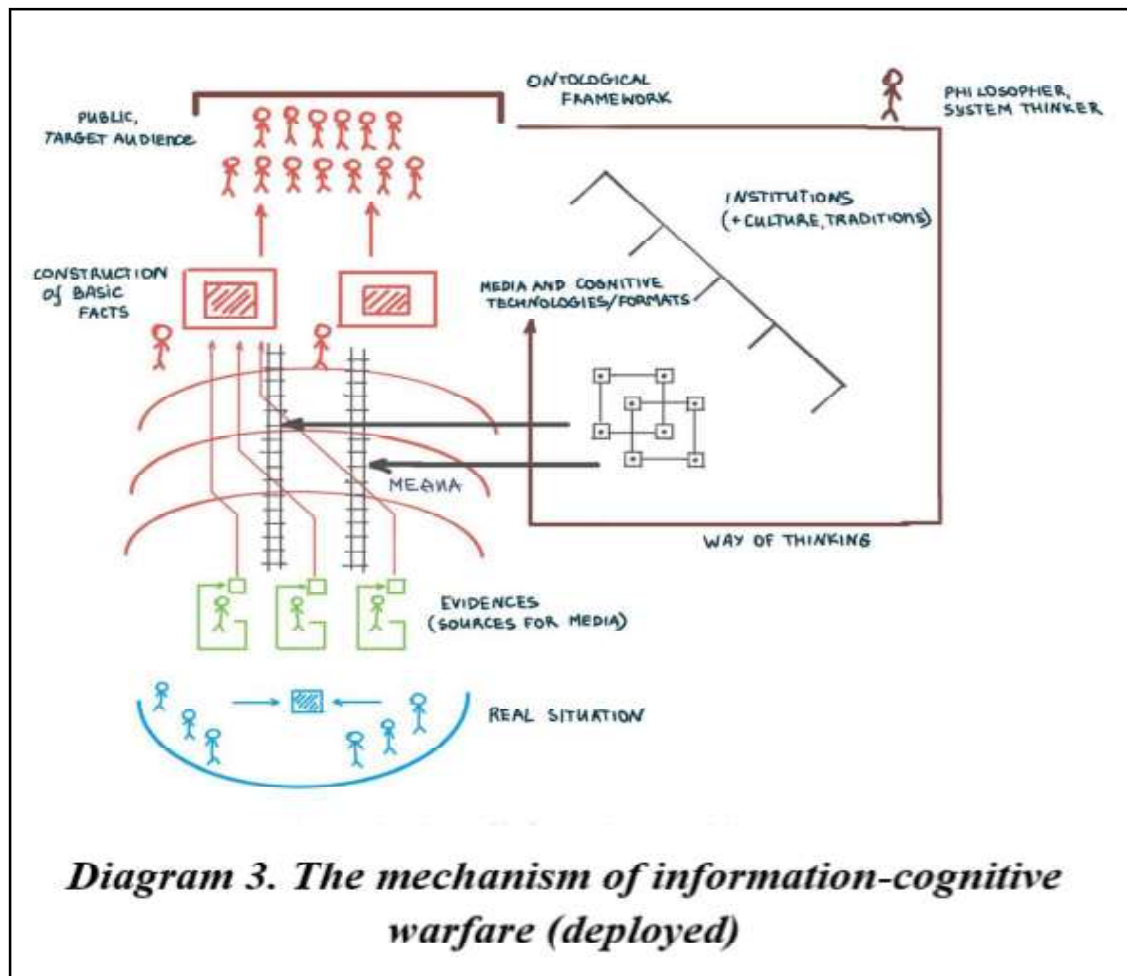


and cognitive technologies and presented to the public (the target audience) within certain ontological frameworks and in the context of “acceptable” narratives (diagram 2).

Essentially, *the media create a virtual reality* [Rozin, 1996], indistinguishable from the “real” one, in two steps: first by deconstructing the original, “natural” facts, and then by constructing new basic facts from the resulting elements. *The production of events acts as such a “reengineering” of facts. The “reporter’s” principle of naturalism (reporting facts “as they are”) is replaced by the social construction of reality* [Berger, Luckmann, 1966; Searle, 1995].

Logically, such constructivism regarding facts and events is justified by the argument that their reality is not directly given to the public. Even witnesses and participants in an event are not given the event in its entirety; they see and perceive it only from their own particular perspectives. Therefore, *the perception of an event as a whole is always mediated by the media* (this mediation is the primary meaning of the term “media”), *and the reality of an event is recreated through the construction of basic facts and their interpretation as “reality.”*

Ontologically, the transition from naturalism to social constructivism is justified by *the distinction between social facts and physical (natural) ones*. Social institutions and language also serve as important conditions for the existence of social facts [Orekhov et al., 2024, pp. 6–13].



Suppression of alternative points of view without formal censorship

In the third step of the scheme's deployment, an external nesting doll is created, which allows *the event production* (internal matryoshka) and *the construction of basic facts* (middle matryoshka) to be placed in a system of ontological coordinates and value judgments (narratives), reinforced with the help of media formatting and special quasi-institutions that block deviations from the given framework (diagram 3).

The Logic of Cancel Culture

Alternative viewpoints and narratives in the global media sphere are treated as deviations from the "general line." They are blocked because *interpretations of basic facts that contradict the "agenda" are simply impossible within the established ontological frameworks ingrained in the target audience's consciousness through media formatting.*

Is it possible to challenge the dominant ontological framework? Theoretically, yes, but practically, no.

Firstly, all mainstream publications are on the side of the “general line,” their combined “signal power” simply drowning out voices that don’t fit into the general chorus.

Secondly, anyone who holds an alternative ontological position is considered “non-standard” by mainstream publications, which rules out even casual support for their position (“system settings” are more effective than any instructions).

And thirdly, for the most persistent and obstinate journalists, bloggers, and publications, the lack of formal censorship institutions is compensated for by the *cancel culture mechanism*, which induces *self-censorship* among professional participants in the media sphere under the threat of becoming outcasts in their professional environment.

The logic of cancel culture as a mechanism of information-cognitive warfare manifests itself in the fact that *“cancelled” individuals are declared supporters, conduits of narratives, or even “agents” of an enemy, who is ethically and metaphysically demonized*. This is reminiscent of the Soviet inquisition trials of the 1930s, in which the accused were portrayed as saboteurs, conspirators, and even intelligence agents of hostile bourgeois states. *Such tactics for combating those who hold alternative viewpoints not only render them “unshakable”, but essentially relegate them to an “untouchable caste.” This allows for the complete exclusion of “cancelled” individuals from social space, and their viewpoints from the media sphere.*

As a result of all of the above, media independence and pluralism are retreating under the pressure of media formatting, cancel culture, and the dogmatic way of thinking that this system fosters. This significantly devalues the institution of journalistic and publication reputation, which underpinned the media sphere during the era of classical liberalism. *Cancel culture, as a quasi-institution of social pressure, is replacing the original meaning of reputation*, which in the “good old days” was supported by pluralistic democracy. Now, “reputation” is not about being independent and reporting the truth, but about not contradicting the mainstream and avoiding becoming a black sheep.

Conclusion

The “liberal” media sphere is transforming into a space for “hybrid” information-cognitive warfare.

This is facilitated by the mechanism of self-censorship, which, without formal institutional censorship, ensures control over the “agenda” by suppressing alternative viewpoints and imposing certain narratives and ontological frameworks for understanding the real situation on the target audience.

At the core of this mechanism is the event production, the construction of basic facts, and the blocking of “undesirable” interpretations and questions through ontological frameworks, media

formatting, cancel culture, and the dogmatic way of thinking that “short-circuits” them, turning modern liberalism into a form of totalitarian ideology.

All of this combined creates a *strategic challenge to international information security*. The answer requires the combined efforts of independent journalists, publications, and the “global majority” states that experience the dictates of the “liberal” media sphere, in defense of genuine freedom of speech and pluralism of opinion.

Notes:

¹ These diagrams have not been previously published. The author drew the original version by hand during the *Media-Dronnitsa Forum*, which took place on March 11, 2023, at the Skolkovo Technopark near Moscow. This forum, dedicated to information and cognitive warfare technologies, was organized by Alexander Lyubimov and Alexey Chadayev.

I thank them for the invitation; I had the opportunity to meet many very interesting people there and discuss highly relevant topics that are rarely discussed publicly.

I also express my gratitude to Veronika Uvarova, who rendered the diagrams on the computer.

² The image of a *matryoshka* (Russian nesting doll) is used here to illustrate the principle of unfolding the scheme.

³ One can note a certain similarity between the structure of this scheme (diagrams 1, 2, 3) and the triad of positions in the media sphere identified by Alexey Chadaev: *newsmakers, opinionmakers, decisionmakers*.

Comparing Soviet, North Korean, and “liberal” mechanisms for ensuring ideological dominance, Chadaev writes:

“Western liberalism, it must be said, is somewhat more cunningly structured, but essentially the mechanics are roughly the same. There is a set of newsmakers, a set of opinionmakers, and a set of decisionmakers. Newsmakers create news (regular or ‘fake’ – it’s increasingly difficult to distinguish one from the other these days), and certified opinionmakers, with a knowing air, explain how to interpret it if you want to remain a decent person. Decisionmakers are left to make decisions based on news and opinions. Then the notorious ‘cancel culture’ comes into its own

– when not just an opinion, but an entire ideological movement or its representatives, is declared a Political Mistake” [Chadaev, 2025].

While agreeing generally with Chadayev’s interpretation, the following correspondences can be established with the author’s scheme: *newsmakers* “produce events,” *opinionmakers* construct basic facts and shape value narratives, and *decisionmakers* determine the editorial policy and media formats of mainstream publications.

However, it should be noted that, in addition to the decision makers described by Chadayev, the expanded version of the scheme (diagram 3) also includes *the positions of the applied philosopher* (or *ideologist*), who defines the ontological framework, and *the systems thinker*, who determines the way of thinking about events, at the “upper” level.

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