



MEDIA AND PUBLIC SPHERES

Edited by Richard Butsch



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Richard Butsch

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1

Introduction: How Are Media Public Spheres?

Richard Butsch

Through the twentieth century, in scholarship and in public debate there have been recurring worries about the impact of mass media upon civic practice. Instead of enabling a public sphere, as print had done in the late eighteenth century, some argue that the new mass media of the twentieth threatened to subvert the public sphere and democracy. Movies, radio and television became large and concentrated industries or government agencies that reached millions of people. They had great propaganda potential to truncate the range ideas in the public sphere and restrict debate.

The success of World War One print propaganda stirred debate among intellectuals. George Creel who had been in charge of US wartime propaganda, published a book boasting about how effective it was on Americans. While some 'realists' such as Walter Lippmann, argued that propaganda was necessary to channel the choices of the masses, many others, including John Dewey and many ordinary Americans, who were the target of the propaganda, were disturbed (Gary 1999, 3). These concerns grew in the 1930s as democracies succumbed to fascism in Europe. New theories of mass culture and mass society explained the vulnerability of modern democracies and the power of radio and film as tools for propaganda (Swingewood 1977, 10ff; Sproule, 1987; Lacey 1996). Central to such theory was the use of media for propaganda to bind the population to the fascist state.

Post-war political theorists continued this work, and began to question whether publics and even democracy could survive in the heightened mass media environment. By the 1950s, right, left and liberal critics all feared that mass mediated culture was overwhelming the common man's ability to play his part in democracy, although they differed on what that part was (Adorno *et al.*, 1950; Rosenberg and White, 1957; Jacobs, 1959; Kornblum, 1959; Giner 1976). Television bore the brunt of this criticism, but everything from comic books to kitsch took a beating from these critics. It was in this era that Jurgen Habermas began his habilitation thesis on publicity and public sphere and the part played by mass communication.

These concerns were supplanted by the upheavals of the civil rights protests in the US, then by Vietnam and the student movements in North America and Europe. The concerns resurfaced only in the 1990s, when there was increasing concern about the 'dumbing down' of public discourse, about the concentration of media ownership and the formation of international media conglomerates, and when that German thesis was translated into English.

Public sphere is, of course, the term used for *Öffentlichkeit* in the English translation of Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989). Published three decades after the original, the translation spawned a voluminous literature in English on this subject. Habermas' theory of the bourgeois public sphere is part of the tradition of Enlightenment liberal political philosophy. It addresses questions about what makes democracy work. Its primary focus is the origins of a bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth century social institutions and political philosophy, from which Habermas draws a normative model of the public sphere. Recent scholarship responding to Habermas is similarly rooted in the scholarly discourse on political theory and political philosophy, leavened with history.

There is a second tradition, of publics, rooted in social rather than political concepts and theory, framed in terms of different issues and questions, but also placing mass media at the center of the idea of publics. Unlike the liberal tradition of public sphere that focuses on deliberation, this tradition considers what actions follow from deliberation. This approach originated with French theorist, Gabriel Tarde, who contrasted publics to crowds in late nineteenth century theory of crowd psychology (Tarde, 1969). About the same time as Tarde wrote, American sociologist Robert Park completed a German dissertation on the same subject, contrasting crowd and public (Park 1972). Tarde and Park wrote at a time when the principle mass medium was the daily metropolitan newspaper, and both considered it central to the functioning of a public. Returning to the US, Park founded the sociological field of collective behavior that included the study of crowds, publics and other collective gatherings. Crowds were masses in action, and the tradition would turn increasingly to talk about masses – and mass media audiences – in contrast to publics, with the advent of radio (Cantril, 1935, 1940). The linking of publics to crowds emphasized a social rather than political approach, contrasting a constructive role in society for publics to the supposed destructive role of crowds. Related to this tradition is the American debate about publics between Walter Lippmann and John Dewey in the 1920s (Gary, 1999). Lippmann considered the mass incapable of performing its role as a 'true' public and in need of guidance through propaganda, i.e. mass media messages, by an educated elite (Lippmann, 1925). Dewey, on the other hand, conceived publics as the natural emergence of community efforts to solve shared problems, with solutions then institutionalized in government (Dewey 1927, 112–13, 149).

Both traditions of the concepts of publics and public sphere include media as a necessary element for public deliberation. But the media presumed in those

traditions were subsidiary to the public sphere. By contrast, given the growth in media variety, size and convergence in the late twentieth century, media have become the primary focus and force for today's public sphere. We now find ourselves in a time of intense debate: What media provide what kind of public spheres? Scholars still disagree about the impact of existing media institutions on the public sphere, as well as about the ideal structure of the public sphere. The recent work on public sphere has generated numerous criticisms and multiple versions of the concepts of public and public sphere. Issues of the media and public sphere revolve around the central axis of whether media enable or undermine a healthy public sphere with widespread participation. Debates about the good or bad impact of media institutions parallel past splits between political economic and cultural studies approaches to media institutions and culture (Clarke, 1990), and between mass culture critics and those who downplayed the effects of media. But what role media play and how effectively they do is still the subject of much discussion and few answers. The debates have produced fewer answers and no consensus on what is a public sphere, or whether or in what form it exists. It has generated relative less empirical investigation into actually existing public spheres.

It is the purpose of this book to explore these questions empirically. These collected chapters present case studies, surveys and interviews, as well as reviews of previous research on media ranging from newspapers to the internet, to ask what kind of public spheres do these media sustain. In the process, the studies suggest a range of inductive definitions of public sphere. The hope is that these inductive definitions will open up further questions and examinations about the nature and the possibility of public spheres in our mediated world.

A systematic examination of the concepts and literature concerning media and the public sphere would require a lengthy book. There are several schema of criticism available in recent literature (Calhoun, 1992; Dahlgren, 1995; Weintraub and Kumar, 1997; Curran, 2000; Hill and Montag, 2000; Crossley and Roberts, 2004; Livingstone 2005; McKee, 2005). Therefore to introduce these chapters, I will confine myself to two works, one on public sphere, the other on media, in order to set the stage for the relevant issues raised in them. But first, I will review Habermas' concept of public sphere.

Habermas: liberal political theory and the public sphere

The Western idea of citizens participating in their governance through public discussion originates in ancient Greece and Rome (Weintraub, 1997). Its modern revival was incorporated in liberal political theory of the eighteenth century that addressed the relations between the state and its citizens in a democracy. Jurgen Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991), in this tradition, is an historical exploration of the development in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe of public institutional space

between the state and the private world of the family. As Habermas interpreted the history, mercantile capitalism required a public space where information could be freely exchanged. This would become, according to Habermas, the bourgeois public sphere, where not only information about business, but about culture and politics might also be freely discussed (1991, 14–26). From this historical analysis, Habermas extracts the characteristics of the public sphere that work to advance a democratic state. Within evolving bourgeois public sphere institutions, such as the coffee house, salon and the press, he finds conversation among equals whose private interests and inequality are temporarily suspended, which in turn allows for rational discussion and debate on questions of state policy and action.

Habermas then assesses modern mass media as a public sphere environment. In this he seems to shift to the social theory tradition of publics, reflecting the mass culture critique of his Frankfurt School mentors, Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, a critique of twentieth century mass-produced and mediated culture as ideological domination rather than as public sphere (Jay, 1973). The large scale media of monopoly capitalism transforms what had been a political public sphere into a medium for commodity consumption. Bread and circuses replaces the forum. A healthy public sphere requires small scale media not motivated by commercial interests (Habermas 181–88).

Commercialization is the result of economic self-interest taking precedent over the collective interest. As media require greater capital investment and as larger and more economically powerful and oligopolistic organizations supplant smaller competitive organizations, power supplants equality and reason as the identifying characteristics of this new mediated public sphere that becomes representational rather than political. Consequently, Habermas refers to the re-feudalization of the public sphere, returning to its function as a place for public display rather than of public discourse and debate.

Criticism of Habermas: Bourgeois vs alternative public spheres

The characteristics of the public sphere have been the subject of debate and controversy: there is no equality; reason is not the necessary foundation; twentieth-century mass media have not destroyed the public sphere. The principle criticism of Habermas has been focused on his historical public sphere (before modern mass media) and this bourgeois public sphere's exclusivity (Negt and Kluge, 1972; Calhoun, 1992). Such critics introduced the ideas of alternative and multiple public spheres.

One of the most influential criticisms after the publication of the *Structural Transformation* in English, was by philosopher Nancy Fraser who noted the absence of subordinate groups, including women and lower classes in these bourgeois public sphere institutions (Fraser in Calhoun, 1992). Fraser disputes four assumptions of Habermas which she identifies: that it is possible 'to bracket status differentials and to deliberate as if they were social equals';

that a single public sphere is preferable to multiple spheres; that private interests must be excluded from the public sphere; and that the public sphere must be clearly separated from the state (117–18). Fraser's contention is that the public sphere did not exist, in the form Habermas claims, in the eighteenth century any more than in the twentieth.

Fraser's response to these assumptions is, first, that bracketing does not work, inequalities continue to operate through cultural hierarchies of everyday habits, for example as described by Bourdieu (1984). Rational deliberation and debate are bourgeois individualistic social practices; other classes are less at home in these practices, putting them at a disadvantage in such situation. In effect, a formal presumption that inequality is bracketed merely masks the actual operation of inequality within the public sphere and gives the impression of universality where it does not exist.

Second, given the weakness of the bracketing assumption, Fraser argues that in a stratified society, 'arrangements that accommodate contestation among a plurality of competing publics . . . come closest to the ideal' (122). In this context, Fraser introduces the concepts of alternative publics and 'subaltern counterpublics' (123, 125). The terms evoke Raymond Williams' concepts of alternative and oppositional cultures that were woven into cultural studies in the conception of resistance to cultural hegemony (Williams, 1977; Hall and Jefferson, 1976). What does it mean for spheres to be alternative? Like Williams' alternative cultures, it implicitly defines each sphere as an identity-based, homogeneous group, rather than a diverse deliberative body (Warner, 2002). Identity (and contestation) also utilize emotion. These all diverge from Habermas' normative rational public sphere.

The idea of multiple spheres raises the issue of the relation among them. Sociologist Graham Murdoch and historian Geoff Eley independently formulate an ideal in which these alternatives are 'staging areas' where different interests prepare their case/voice for presentation in an overarching public sphere (Murdoch in Skovmand and Schroder, 1992; Eley in Calhoun 1992).

Pertaining to the relationship, Fraser disagrees with Habermas' third assumption that deliberation in a public sphere is to seek and advance the common good. Fraser contends that in a stratified society there is limited shared interest and common good. Stratified societies are zero sum societies in which what is good for one group is bad for another. The purpose of deliberation is futile (129, 131).

Consequently, Fraser accepts the idea of competition of interests among publics. In defining their relation to each other as 'contestation' Fraser reintroduces power as a factor. Fraser abandons the method of deliberation that Habermas considered essential and adopts Eley's and Murdoch's proposal of an overarching 'structured setting' in which differences between unequal publics are resolved through contest or other means, but not necessarily deliberation.

As soon as we accept contestation, power and interests as legitimate in the public sphere, collective actions intended to register opinion with the state,

in addition to deliberation, fall into the purview of the public sphere. Suggesting this, Eley makes a stronger assertion, that the relation between publics 'was always constituted by conflict' (Eley in Calhoun, 1992, 306). More recently, Hill and Montag criticize Habermas for opposing reason to force and speech to action (2000, 6). Like Fraser, Murdoch and Eley, they argue for an expanded conception of public sphere, inclusive of force and action as well as reason and speech.

This redefinition opens entirely new vistas for the concept of public sphere, to collective actions based upon solidarity more than individualism, including social movements, union actions, and civil disobedience. The scholarly literature on crowds and social movements then becomes a resource for exploring these enlarged definitions of publics and public sphere. At the very least, such proposals introduce whole new possible forms of public sphere, beyond reasoned deliberation. It also opens it to emotion in public discourse, a motivator to participation and a concomitant of group solidarity and contestation, and to a reconsideration of the very dichotomy of reason versus emotion.

Eley fits his conception of the public sphere to Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Hegemony, according to Gramsci, was achieved not through overt ideas and propaganda, but through the 'whole lived experience' (Williams 1977), thus through persuasion rather than suppression, and it is never complete but always challenged and in process. It is in Eley's public sphere that the lived experience, both persuasion and contestation occur. But balancing Eley's emphasis on the contested nature of hegemony is Williams' idea of incorporation. In that respect, inclusiveness, when not resolving the inequalities Fraser addressed concerning the first assumption, can simply be a veiled form of incorporation. Again the extension of the concept of public sphere raises additional issues for rethinking the public sphere.

Fourth and last, Fraser rejects the idea that public spheres should be free from the state, characterizing it as a *laissez-faire* policy and arguing that, to the contrary, some form of state regulation is necessary to avoid one interest consistently prevailing over others and short-circuiting democracy (133). In the eighteenth century, the center of power was the state, compared to which private organizations (businesses) were small. The need for separation was a need to insulate the public sphere from state control. Today, two centers of power stand on either side of the public sphere, the state and corporations. Either can threaten the public sphere. State owned and operated media run the risk of reducing it to a representative public sphere serving the state rather than the people. Alternatively, corporate-owned media run the risk of serving the interest of private corporations over the people. Both distancing the state from public media and regulating private media then become important to the continued health of the public sphere. This raises concerns about the relations among the state, private economy and the public sphere that are more complicated than simply a hands-off policy (Curran 2000).

Twentieth century mediated public spheres

Having discussed versions of the concepts of public and public sphere before the rise of pervasive mass media, we now come to the core issue of the book, the significance of mediation. Traditional liberal political theory claims three positive functions for media in a democracy: to act as watchdog over the state as an independent fourth estate; to act as an agency of information and debate for citizens to participate in their democracy; and to act as the voice of the people to the state (Curran in Curran and Gurevitch, 2000, 121, 127, 129). In such theory, media are cast as allies of citizens in their role of supervising democratic government through public opinion.

The theory is rooted in an eighteenth century reality in which communication media (the printing press, handwritten notes and the human body) were accessible to many citizens. Hand-operated printing presses were relatively inexpensive and not greatly different in influence than the voices of other citizens (Lee 1937, 167). Likewise, the eighteenth century public sphere encompassed a rather small, exclusive and intimate population engaged in face-to-face interaction and handwritten letters (Darnton, 2000). Today, large populations make media necessary to the public sphere. Media also are different, owned by corporate conglomerates, and pervasive in our everyday lives, available or intruding wherever we may go.

These changed conditions raise entirely different issues: how can media serve the public sphere when also powerfully pulled to serve the state or profit. Perhaps more fundamental today than issues of rational deliberation or inclusion, is this question of how to position and control the means of communication *for* the public sphere. How do we contend with corporate mass media's potential to dominate the public sphere with its own voice or that of the state, drowning out all others. Alternately, how do we utilize new media technologies and niches such as the internet, low power radio, or public access cable tv, to create alternative mediated public spheres.

To understand today's mediated public sphere, Peter Dahlgren (1995) suggests examining four dimensions: media institutions, media representation, general social structure, and face-to-face interaction. With the advent of broadcasting, states took responsibility for establishing media institutions to serve the public sphere. European governments established semi-independent public media, funded by or through the state. Government funding or control, of course, creates the possibility of media used for propaganda and paternalism rather than public service. In the US, commercial media were regulated by the state. Since the 1980s, ideological forces advocating the market over public service, and new technologies, particularly transnational satellite broadcasting, have led to considerable growth of commercial media that is large and wealthy enough to compete with public media. Deregulation has accelerated this by promoting global economic concentration of media corporations (Curran 2000, 121–2).