

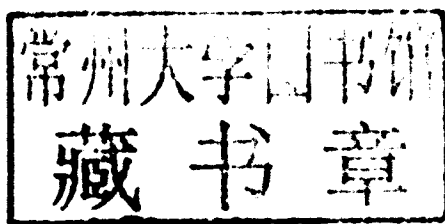
**PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES
AND THE PUBLIC
SPHERE**

WOODRUFF D. SMITH

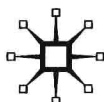


Public Universities and the Public Sphere

Woodruff D. Smith



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PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE
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Introduction

The United States is experiencing a crisis of public discourse. The crisis has many aspects, some of them more widely perceived than others. Everyone who has followed the news for the past decade is aware of the policies proclaimed by the federal executive branch that give agencies of the national government the ability to declare practically any kind of information secret. This situation appears to be a reflection of a general tendency throughout a large part of the world. It represents an obvious threat to the intelligent discussion of issues affecting the public interest, and possibly to the traditional concept of “the public interest” itself. The current administration has begun to reverse such policies, but how far the reversal will go in practice remains to be seen.¹ Most readers of newspapers are also aware of the connected set of issues that involve the ownership and practices of the mass media. Are too many media in too few hands? Do the owners have too much influence over the political positions taken by the periodicals and television networks they control? Is open, rational public discourse being stifled and replaced by dumbed-down gibberish masking the selfish interests of media owners and unscrupulous politicians, and the agendas of the groups they support? Al Gore, among a host of others, warns us that it is.² Then there is the matter of the internet. Is it the most likely source of a satisfactory response to the threat described by Gore, or will it destroy the structures on which informed discussion depends—as defenders of traditional newspapers and opinion magazines predict?³

These are important matters. There are, however, other aspects of the crisis of public discourse that have, at least until recently, received less attention. One is the threat to the existence and independence of the “quality” news and opinion media that is posed by, among other things, unstable or declining subscription rates. The specific problems of the quality media are usually folded into discussions of the plight of the large daily newspapers that have recently faced bankruptcy and closure. This is

not unreasonable, but it leads to an emphasis on the danger to the availability of accurate news at the expense of the equally significant danger to critical debate over issues. Another threat, although it is coming to be more widely understood than it has in the recent past, is seldom seen in the context of public discourse at all: the possibility that the funding of state universities, already in decline for many years, will diminish even more sharply, putting an end to the growth of public higher education that has been a central feature of American society for the past century. Both of these threats are vitally important. They are also intimately related to each other. We will see in the following chapters that recognizing the relationship between them is essential to resolving satisfactorily the overall crisis of public discourse in the United States.

The key to this recognition lies in perceiving that there exists in the United States—as in most other countries—an entity that we will call here the “core public sphere.” It is composed of the quality media, the universities, and an array of other structures such as professional and research organizations, as well as the practices associated with them. The function of the core public sphere is to formulate, develop, and openly debate issues of importance to the public, and to do so intelligently and with reference to the best information available. In order to perform this function, the participants in the sphere must have ready access to a full range of presentations of relevant ideas, the ability to criticize any such presentations that they regard as incorrect or inadequate, and the freedom to advance their own ideas. These are not just passive capacities that can be described in terms of legal rights, although constitutional guarantees of free speech are obviously essential to their exercise. The prerequisites for public discourse must be embodied in institutions that permit their effective realization and in behavior patterns that conform to acceptable standards of logic and civility. They must be regularly put into practice by people who acknowledge a responsibility to participate in public discourse and to educate themselves so that they can do so effectively. Participants in the core public sphere are not only the people who produce materials for publication or transmission, but also—and equally importantly—the people who read, view, as well as think about, discuss, and otherwise respond to what they read or hear: what might be called the “discursive public.” In a wide variety of ways, higher education is central to practically every aspect of the core public sphere.

The core public sphere is neither an abstraction nor something that necessarily appears in modern societies simply as a consequence of modernity. The United States did not possess a core public sphere of its own

until the second half of the nineteenth century, when one was deliberately constructed. China does not possess one now. Core public spheres do not always perform their functions very well. They often display serious weaknesses, the most common of which are tendencies toward elitism and intellectual involution. Nevertheless, societies that do not support effective core public spheres can pay a heavy price—as the United States did before the Civil War and as China does today. Considering the role of the United States in the world and the weakness of public discourse in the only other country that could conceivably play that role in the near future, any serious degradation of the core public sphere in the United States could have serious global consequences.

The chapters that follow will argue that the American core public sphere is facing a serious crisis, a significant aspect of the broader crisis of public discourse. Public higher education, also facing substantial problems, would be in a position both to help resolve part of the crisis of public discourse and to solve some of its own difficulties if it acknowledged its actual roles in the core public sphere and reoriented some of its practices around those roles. A major part of the argument revolves around a historical examination of the connection between higher education and the core public sphere in the United States. The first chapter describes the American core public sphere and the nature of the problems it currently faces. After that, the book considers some of the principal problems of public universities, weaknesses in their self-presentation, and some of the undesirable effects of the academic ideologies that purport to explain, but do not adequately describe, what public universities do. The historical segment begins by outlining the close relationship between higher education and the core public sphere since just before the time of the Civil War. It then discusses the particular contribution of the state-supported colleges and universities in democratizing the public sphere and the vital significance of this function. A chapter describes how this function, together with the nature and implications of the connection between higher education and the public sphere in general, came to be occluded in public discourse in the twentieth century, even as the connection became increasingly central in practice to defining American society. The final chapter returns to the present and suggests what public universities should do to resolve satisfactorily their own crisis, some of the problems of the core public sphere, and the larger crisis of American public discourse.

CHAPTER 1

The Core Public Sphere: What It Is and Why It Needs Help

The German philosopher Jürgen Habermas introduced the idea of “public sphere” into academic discourse in 1962. It came to be widely employed in scholarship and intellectual conversation in the English-speaking part of the world only in the 1980s, after Habermas had achieved international renown for other work, but it has become enormously popular since then. Actually, the word Habermas used was *Öffentlichkeit*, for which no ready English equivalents exist that convey Habermas’s sense. “Public sphere” does as well as anything else.¹

To Habermas, the public sphere was a vital structural component of bourgeois society in the course of its evolution, particularly in eighteenth-century Europe. It appeared at the intersection of several of the crucial developments that created the modern world: the growth of national and international market economies, with their need for expanded sites of communication and exchange and for a clear definition of individual property; the construction of the modern state, institutionally abstracted from traditional systems of status and custom; and the redefinition of the nuclear family as the primary locus of the “private,” the space closed off from legitimate interference by the state and the place where individual personality emerged. One of the results of the confluence of these developments was “civil society,” classically described by John Locke in the late seventeenth century. Although sometimes the terms “civil society” and “public sphere” are conflated, Habermas treats them as either separate, although related, concepts, or else nested historical realities: the public sphere as a distinct part of civil society.² Either way, the public sphere supplements civil society by defining a space separate from the spaces of government and politics where broadly based, free discussions take place

that lead to the formation of public opinion, which among other things guides and legitimates legislation.³

According to Habermas, the structures that constituted the original public sphere—coffeehouses, clubs, newspapers—first appeared in the late seventeenth century in England, flourished there in the next century, and were imitated in other countries in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. He goes on to claim that, to all intents and purposes, the public sphere passed out of existence in the course of the nineteenth century because of the triumph of “mass” society dominated by organized capitalism, “mass” media of low intellectual content, and “mass” political parties.⁴ This last point leads Habermas to formulate a goal. He argues that the *concept* of the public sphere as a necessary condition for an effective civil society is just as valid now as it ever was and that something like the historical public sphere needs to be reconstructed.

To scholars and commentators who employ the model of the public sphere in order to analyze the contemporary world, the idea that at some point it ceased to exist presents an obvious problem. For the concept to be useful, it must correspond in some substantial way to a current reality, not just to a goal. Like most of the people who use the term, I do not agree that the public sphere essentially disappeared in the course of the nineteenth century.⁵ I think that instead it was consciously modified and adapted to new conditions. In various countries and at various times, public spheres were constructed to meet perceptions of changing need. Their construction took place as one aspect of a set of broader developments, including many of the ones that Habermas blames for destroying the classical eighteenth-century public sphere: the appearance of a “mass press,” popular politics, and the consumer economy in particular. Newspapers and magazines that emphasized politics, public affairs, and high culture acted as central institutions of the constructed public spheres in Britain, France, and most other Western European countries. These media embedded themselves in networks of writers, editors, party politicians, officials, and scholars who contributed to them and connected themselves with voluntary associations that supported extensions of their conversations. The growth of the popular press and of advertising toward the middle of the nineteenth century vastly expanded the range of journalism and public opinion, but it did not drive the kind of public spheres developed earlier in the century out of business. Rather, these public spheres remained (and remain to this day) significant features of public life. No distinctive, commonly accepted categorical name has ever been created for them. We will call them the “core public spheres” of

the countries or regions where they exist. If we were focusing just on the nineteenth century, we would almost be justified in using a name such as “elite public spheres.” They were certainly elitist in many respects, but even in the nineteenth century they had a substantial audience among the middle classes—the people who became the principal consumers of periodical literature and the ultimate arbiters of opinion and politics. As we will see, in the twentieth century they became even more democratic, although never completely so.

The Core Public Sphere in the United States

The American core public sphere was deliberately constructed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Americans who built it did not start from scratch, but rather used European models and precedents with which they were already very familiar because Americans had up to that time essentially shared in an Atlantic public sphere, the center of which was Great Britain. The American core public sphere has continued to exist, with modifications, down to the present. It has continued to maintain a strong transatlantic character, but in the 1870s it renounced its dependent status. We will discuss the history of the American core public sphere in Chapter 3. For the moment, we will focus on its elements.

The principal activity or function of the core public sphere can be envisioned as the one that Habermas emphasizes: the open, critical discussion of the whole range of matters of concern to society, with the conscious understanding that both discussing and deciding what is of concern, what is important, are primarily tasks of people qualified to do so by virtue of intelligence, education, occupation, taste, and especially interest. This activity could easily be comprehended in an elitist way, as it certainly was in the late nineteenth century. A number of factors in American culture and society, however, combined in subsequent years to democratize the core public sphere—the most important of which was, as we shall see, the development of public higher education. This principal activity takes place in particular *structures* and according to certain conventional models of *practice*.

The *structures* include what might be called the “quality” media. Some of these, especially weekly, monthly, and quarterly periodicals such as the *Nation*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and the now long-defunct *North American Review*, were envisioned in the nineteenth century as the primary sites of intelligent public discussion and the principal organs of the new public sphere. They were intended to support a conversation among educated

contributors and readers from which ideas and opinions would diffuse through the popular press to the country as a whole.⁶ Parties to the conversation would include not just journalists and writers, but also officials, politicians, and university professors. Periodicals of this sort (including, obviously, some of the very same magazines) continue to perform a central role in contemporary public discourse, despite the decline in their readership relative to the size of the population. So do certain newspapers, preeminently the *New York Times*, whose editors have for over a century deliberately molded it as the chief daily news medium of the American core public sphere. Other media structures were created later: particular departments of general newspapers (editorials, op-ed pages, Sunday “ideas” supplements); equivalent sections of news weeklies; and public affairs television programs (especially on Public Broadcasting). To these must be added a range of other familiar structures: think tanks, foundations, policy centers, scientific research institutes—and of course, universities. For the moment, however, we will focus mainly on the media element.

The core public sphere is also a space for the conduct of certain *practices*—not the exclusive site, but the principal area within which they are applied to articulating and debating issues of importance to the nation. The identities of these practices have changed somewhat over time. In the late nineteenth century, for example, what we are calling the core public sphere was seen as one of main spaces for practicing *science*. Science subsequently became fully professionalized and the principal locations of its practice moved conceptually to specialized institutions (mainly to universities, as universities came to be thought of as lying somewhat outside the arenas of public discourse.) Nevertheless, science has continued to provide the most highly valued model for thought and for discursive practice within the culture of the core public sphere. We presume that the ideal perspective on most matters within the scope of the public sphere is essentially a scientific one, requiring objectivity, detachment, disinterest, and an insistence on rational analysis—or if that is not possible, then at least a frank admission of partiality and interest, a commitment to making arguments in a rational manner with convincing evidence, and a willingness to tolerate the expression of divergent views. (One of the assumptions that we commonly make—correctly or not—is that the more widely read and accessed particular media are, the less they are capable of sustaining the kind of scientific discursive practice that is expected in quality journals and newspapers and that is supposed to be practiced in universities and research institutes.) By the twentieth century, the social and

behavioral sciences took on a particularly important function as the presumed “objective” arbiters on matters of public interest, operating from an institutional position notionally (although seldom actually) outside the arena of debate.⁷

In the nineteenth century, before social science gained the starring role of model for the practices of the public sphere, *history* served in that capacity. History identified parallels between past and present issues. It was supposed to deploy systematic reasoning and carefully assessed evidence to advance interpretations of past events that were relevant to the contemporary world. History made it possible to reconcile a discourse of character and morality with a practice of objective science. The framework of history as a principal practice of the public sphere essentially defined the subject that graduate history programs were established to propound in American universities in the late nineteenth century. Although history lost its position of primacy to the social sciences, it still retains much of its significance as a mode of analyzing and arguing in public discourse.⁸

More broadly, the core public sphere, like Habermas’s classic eighteenth-century public sphere, is a space for the practice of *criticism*. Rational, disciplined criticism, brought to bear on matters of importance, has been its most enduring characteristic. The practice of criticism naturally creates conflict and tensions. One of the many reasons that universities tend to underplay their roles in the core public sphere is that criticism is so central to the latter. University leaders perceive that those who make funding decisions for higher education are frequently very sensitive to criticism and tend to see it as an activity that should be restricted to arenas not supported with public funds.

Many of the practices located conventionally within the core public sphere are associated with *professionalism*—which is a manifestation, in the normal behaviors and attitudes required from members of particular occupational groups, of the objective and scientific practices just mentioned, and also an institutionalization of standards that give such practices ethical standing.⁹ The people who created the core public sphere expected that members of the traditional gentlemanly educated professions (law, medicine, the clergy) would supply many of the active participants in public discourse. Two occupations directly connected to the operation of the public sphere were deliberately professionalized: journalism and college or university teaching. Both occupations had existed in the United States for a long time, but not as recognized professions that required specialized training and that enforced particular forms of practice and ethics. In the late nineteenth century, journalists and reformers

consciously attempted to create a journalistic profession that operated in the public interest. The importation of the German concept of the doctorate based on research into the United States starting in the 1870s was similarly part of an immensely successful attempt to create a professoriate, not only to staff the new and reformed universities but also, as we shall see, to provide a significant professional addition to the personnel of the core public sphere.¹⁰

To summarize: the particular arena of American public discourse that we will be concerned with in this book is the *core public sphere*. It has some of the same functions and characteristics that Habermas ascribes to the classic British public sphere of the eighteenth century: it is supposed to support an open, critical, informed, and intelligent discussion of matters of importance to the country and the world; to make access to the discussion available to people who want to participate, whether actively (e.g., as contributors to publications, on the understanding that what they contribute is open to public criticism) or more passively, as readers and perhaps private or local discussants of issues; and to produce a rational consensus on particular topics that can be presented to a wider body of citizens for acceptance as “public opinion” or else clearly articulate alternative interpretations of topics and, if appropriate, the policy implications of those interpretations.

Unlike the public sphere described by Habermas, the modern core public sphere performs these functions through a complex group of institutions that are expected to interact closely with political and economic structures, among other things in order to obtain information and to ensure that public discussion affects policy. They are also, however, supposed to maintain a separation from these structures so as to retain a critical perspective. These characteristics create familiar problems that are themselves continuing subjects of debate in the public sphere. For example, how do you balance the need of, say, the quality newspapers for revenue from commercial enterprises and for information from government with the need of the public sphere to maintain critical distance and with the desire of governments to shape the news? This is one of the tasks that professionalism is supposed to accomplish, through the ethical framework of journalism. Also, although we expect newspapers and newsmagazines to be “objective” and “neutral” (except on the editorial pages, and even there a degree of balance is demanded), we also assume that “opinion” media (the *Nation*, *National Review*, etc.) will have particular political and ideological tendencies—which are to be clearly expressed rather than dissembled. The *range* of points of view expressed across the

public sphere as a whole, representing in many cases the competing interests of economic and political groups, will supposedly compensate for the inherent inability of the modern core public sphere to separate itself from the institutions of state and economy in the way that Habermas describes the eighteenth-century public sphere as doing. Leaving aside the likelihood that, in reality, the eighteenth-century public sphere was not as detached from political and economic interests as Habermas says, the fact remains that the core public sphere of the contemporary United States, like its counterparts in most other countries, performs a function similar to the one Habermas describes, but does so through structures and cultural patterns that are in some ways quite different. They are literally more *modern*—both the structures and the behavior patterns that are supposed to be characteristic of the core public sphere are quintessential elements of modernity.¹¹

The previous paragraph referred to the “supposed” or “expected” functions of the core public sphere. This usage implies that the core public sphere is something that is recognized as both an ideal form and a structural and cultural reality that can be measured against the form. This is true, with qualifications. There is no accepted name in common usage for what I have called the “core public sphere,” which, as we will see, has been a source of difficulty for a long time. In order to name it, I have adopted and modified Habermas’s terminology. This suggests one of the points that will be made later: although the existence and importance of the core public sphere are recognized in the United States, the recognition is informal and is partly obscured by, among other things, the conceptual framework within which the public sphere is understood.

“Core” suggests the simultaneous existence of a periphery. The people who created the American core public sphere in the late nineteenth century thought—or at least hoped—that public discourse in the United States would actually arrange itself in a core-periphery format. The quality periodicals, the conversations carried on in them, and various ancillary elements (such as universities) would act as the center, while the rest of the press, thought of mainly as popular periodicals, would cluster around them. The center would provide the brain to the body of the discursive public; the rest of the media would supply revenue and careers and the principal means for disseminating the results of the conversations at the center.¹² Things did not quite work out that way. The structure of the American media became immensely complex, and the quality periodicals did not develop as hegemonic centers of public discussion. Nevertheless, for more than 100 years, there has been a general understanding