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## On the relation between audiences and publics

### Book section

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## Chapter 1: On the relation between audiences and publics<sup>1</sup>

### Why audience and public?

In approaching the changing relations between audiences and publics, one may draw on the long and distinguished intellectual history of the study of publics within political science, philosophy and cultural thought. Alternatively, or additionally, one may draw on the study of audiences within media, communications and cultural studies which, although more recent, has nonetheless proved creative, even provocative, in its analysis of processes of mediation, participation and influence. In setting the scene for the chapters to follow, this chapter will outline the widely held view of public and audience as mutually opposed, one in which audiences are seen to undermine the effectiveness of publics. It will then argue that the changing media and communications environment - characterised by both the mediation of publics and the participation of audiences - problematises such an opposition; the emergence of intriguingly ambiguous objects situated between public and audience is used to illustrate the argument.

The relation between audiences and publics is contested less because 'public' refers to a shared understanding or inclusion in a common forum (for 'audiences' may be similarly described) than because 'public' implies an orientation to collective and consensual action, perhaps even requires that action to be effective for a public to be valued. Although some have suggested that it may be easier to collapse the concept of public into that of audience, or *vice versa*, this chapter proposes that a more satisfactory account maintains their analytic separation. The strategy explored here interposes a mediating domain - 'civic culture', or 'civil society' perhaps positioned between 'the public' and 'the audience' or, more accurately, between the sphere of experience and identity and the sphere of collective, politically efficacious action. This, it is suggested, reframes in a more complex but more incisive manner many of the questions being asked, both within and beyond the academy, about the relation between audiences and publics.

### Audience *versus* public

The analysis of 'audience' and 'public' draws on distinctive bodies of theory, prioritising different issues. But they do not refer to wholly separate realities. In a thoroughly mediated world, audiences and publics, along with communities, nations, markets and crowds, are composed of the same people. This apparently

banal observation is significant when we observe that it is commonplace to define audiences in opposition to the public. In both popular and elite discourses, audiences are denigrated as trivial, passive, individualised, while publics are valued as active, critically engaged and politically significant. Bearing in mind that the audience is generally ascribed to the private domain, consider these common associations of public versus private, each of which valorises public over private: rational versus emotional, disinterested versus biased, participatory versus withdrawn, shared versus individualised, visible versus hidden.

Adherents of this oppositional view, often from a political science or political communication approach, tend to ascribe a clear meaning to the public in terms of political citizenship and then ask how the media support or - more commonly - undermine public understanding and public participation. If objective information, informed consent, independent investigation are all prerequisites for a flourishing democracy, the questions for research are clear. And the answers, all too often, tend to suggest that the effect of media on their audience is seen to reposition what was or might be or should be, a public (knowing, thinking, influential) as a mere crowd (watching, sharing and emoting) or mass of consumers (driven by tastes, preferences and motivations) (Gandy, 2002).

This suspicion of the media has a long history that is strongly if implicitly encoded in our present-day tendency not only to oppose mediated communication with face-to-face communication, judging the former as inferior by comparison, but also in the ways that we map onto this opposition our cultural norms of reliability, authenticity, equality, trust, accountability - all of which are associated with face-to-face communication and all of which are routinely questioned in relation to the media. Hence, popular and academic discourses worry - undoubtedly often with good reason - about the extent to which 'media culture generally, with its emphasis on consumption and entertainment, has undercut the kind of public culture needed for a healthy democracy' (Dahlgren, 2003, p.151). Or, to put these worries into the much-used language of moral panics, many are concerned about 'citizens attenuated into measurable audiences and consumers; politics commodified into beauty pageant cum talent show; journalists transmogrified into masters of ceremony, celebrity judges and measurers of the public will' (Barnhurst, 1998, p. 203). The outcome, so the argument goes, is that the media undermine the public sphere (Habermas, 1969/89), transform politics into political marketing (Scammell, 2001), bias the news agenda according to commercial imperatives (McChesney, 2000) and distract citizens from civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). On this view, then, the last thing research should be doing is rethinking those processes of attenuation in potentially more positive terms through studying such denigrated formats as daytime talk shows or reality television, particularly when there remains so much to do to improve the reception of prime-time news or to defend resources for the documentary.

While recognising the force of these and related concerns, it remains problematic that they rely on a traditional and, arguably, limited conception of politics, one that opposes mass and elite culture (or public ideals and audience tastes), asserting a polarised theory of power in which ‘hegemony theory has been used to analyse the struggle over dominance and consent waged through mass culture’ (Ouellette, 1999, p.65). In relation to Habermas’ theory of the public sphere, we have become familiar with the cry of elitism for the theory’s idealisation of a public sphere that has, too often, turned out to devalue or to exclude some people (or discourses or topics) while privileging others (Calhoun, 1992; Eley, 1992; Fraser, 1990). However, alternative formulations, positing non-idealised yet egalitarian and inclusive accounts of the public sphere, remain hotly contested. For the moment, therefore, the role of the media in relation to the public, potential and actual, must surely remain an open question.

In the spirit of openness, rather than from any desire to celebrate the popular tastes of audiences for their own sake, I argue against any reductive polarisation of public and audience (or public sphere and media), agreeing with Dahlgren (2003, p.164) that it is imperative to ‘see beyond the formal political system’. In this volume, we inquire into many phenomena that, at first glance, are of only ambiguous or borderline relevance to politics and the public sphere, asking whether the increasing mediation of people’s engagement with their society transforms our once-contained conception of the audience into something more complex. As the apparent apathy and ignorance of publics, traditionally conceived, forces a broader conception of citizenship, and as it is recognised that participation is increasingly a matter of identity, of belonging, and of lifestyle, research must surely be asking when these spill over into matters of identity politics, social inclusion and exclusion, and new social movements? And here media researchers may be expected to have much to contribute, for if even if the media have proved only partially effective in informing citizens about political issues, they have proved far more effective in shaping identities and lifestyles.

### **Audience or public**

The temptation to oppose publics and audiences is encouraged by the many ways - economic, geographic, political - in which the media appear to be simultaneously expanding the scope of the audience and diminishing the realm of the public, leaving few if any aspects of social or personal life unaccompanied by, or independent of, the media. Yet paradoxically, this very expansion appears to be generating some ambiguous objects in today’s ‘mediascape’ (Appadurai, 1996), which resist traditional or commonsense categorisations as matters of either audience or public. Not only are relations between audiences and publics becoming tangled conceptually, but empirical investigations of the everyday activities of audiences and publics are also revealing puzzling intersections.

As Barnhurst (1998, p.205) notes of his interviews with young people, 'these texts can be read as personal identification but also as moments within a political system'. The talk show, to take another example, portrays ordinary people discussing topical issues in public with experts - yet it refers to its audience rather than to the public; indeed it is often taken as representing the antithesis of rational public debate. The Internet chat room is a similarly ambiguous object, inviting private, individual, anonymous contributions to an - at times personal, at times political - public discussion. Again this may seem a phenomenon of the audience not the public, but witness the attempts by governments to harness such media - both talk shows and online chat - in the interests of governance, whether to bolster representative democracy or to encourage the shift to a participatory democracy. Consider, as a further case, a family discussion after watching the television news - is this an instance of public debate or (merely) a matter of audience reception, and does it make a difference if it occurs in the privacy of the living room or outside the home?

The common use of spatial metaphors to distinguish public and private only serves to exacerbate confusion.<sup>2</sup> Space turns out to be ambiguous or shifting depending on its use (the living room, the chat-room, the television studio, the music festival, the theatre). Even when certain spaces are conventionally associated with publicness or with privacy, people's uses of media in these spaces may contravene these conventions - for example, teenagers communicate privately in space that is conventionally public (using text-messaging in the cinema, for example) and they communicate publicly in space which is conventionally private (entering chat rooms, for example, from their bedroom). On the other hand, space is a resource frequently managed by others - hierarchically and normatively structured, rule-bound and unequally accessible - and hence it operates also as a constraint, 'preferring' some actors or some activities over others. For example, one may argue that it was the considerable constraints exerted on their behaviour in public places which led teens to seize on the mobile phone to subvert, in modest degree, the constraints upon them.

In seeking to understand these ambiguous communicative situations, many of which bridge mediated and face-to-face communication, we might usefully focus on the conditions of their existence. What are their modes of address, communicative conventions, priorities and exclusions, or hierarchies of expertise? How are these variously performed, negotiated, regulated, and transgressed? Intriguingly, where once these borderline phenomena stayed in the margins of academic and popular debate, today they take centre stage: from academic journals through parliamentary debate to the tabloid press, it seems that society is pondering the significance of talk shows or reality television, the transformative impact of mobile phones on social relations, the role of minority media in dividing a heterogeneous public into multiple public spheres, the legitimacy of public funding for elite culture or the meaning of online discussion.

## **Audience as public**

If one widely held view seeks to distinguish, even oppose, audiences and publics, an alternative view sees the changing media environment as signalling the actual or imminent collapse of such a distinction. Characteristic of media and cultural studies approaches, this prioritises the contextualisation of people's engagement with media within everyday life, arguing that the media do not provide a (biased) window on the world so much as a set of resources through which everyday meanings and practices are constituted; these in turn shape identity and difference, participation and culture. The activities of audiences, it is asserted, cannot usefully be separated from the activities of publics; the citizen-viewer (Corner, 1991) supplants the opposition of citizen and consumer. As Silverstone (1990, p.173) declares, the audience is:

*a potentially crucial pivot for the understanding of a whole range of social and cultural processes that bear on the central questions of public communication ... [which are] essentially questions of culture.*

This approach argues further that, since the realm of the unmediated public is shrinking, if it still exists, any response to the so-called crisis of public communication (Blumler and Gurevitch, 1995) or any defence of the public sphere must surely include a role for the very media often taken to undermine that public. Instead of bemoaning the impact of media on publics, let us ask how media (and media audiences) can and do sustain publics.

Elaborating what Fiske termed the double movement of mediation (1987), Corner (1995, p.5) characterises the effect of the media in late modern societies in terms of contrasting forces. Through centrifugal forces, television seems 'to project its images, character types, catch-phrases and latest creations to the widest edges of the culture, permeating if not dominating the conduct of other cultural affairs'. This, I suggest, poses a particular challenge for audience research as, insofar as we are all always part of audiences now, the necessity for any particular theory of audiences (rather than of publics, or cultures, or consumers, etc.) seems to be increasingly questioned. Simultaneously, through a contrary centripetal force, Corner notes 'the powerful capacity of television to draw towards itself and incorporate (in the process, transforming) broader aspects of the culture'. This poses a challenge to political communications research as publics are drawn onto the media stage on which public and private life is displayed, while anything not on the media stage is marginalised, rendered invisible. In response, the analytic criteria for evaluating deliberation, participation or inclusiveness in terms of a valorisation of face-to-face communication must now surely be rethought.

Yet, simply eliding our key terms by redefining audiences as publics does not resolve problems other than those of semantics. And, insofar as this perspective has sometimes overreached itself, overstating or celebrating the perhaps - tangential political importance of everyday activities, one could even argue that the

problems have become obscured. Starting with questions of audience, it seems, tends to lead one to see all aspects of audience as a matter of public or citizenship significance, leaving unresolved the bounding or contextualising of such claims (Livingstone, 1998). The relationship of audiences to media contents is always mediated by culture or cultural identity, but does that make all audience activity a matter of identity politics?

### **An exercise in keywords**

Since both 'audience' and 'public' are terms central to conceptual debates as well as being in common and variable usage in everyday discourse, some attention to definitions may prove helpful in working out a relationship between them that neither opposes nor elides them. Not forgetting the claim by Williams (1961, p. 289) that there are no masses, 'only ways of seeing people as masses', a claim one might repeat also for audiences, markets and even publics, let us consider how our key terms are anchored through their relations with other terms (see Appendix, where we consider further how these are linguistically and culturally specific). And let us not be put off by a notable absence: the standard reference work, Raymond Williams' *Keywords*, lists neither public nor audience, but he does discuss 'public' in relation to 'private', and 'audience' in relation to 'masses'.

### **Public and private**

In *Keywords*, Williams (1983) identifies the origin of 'private' in negative terms, through the contrast with public (as 'withdrawn from public life', from the Latin root *privare*, to bereave or deprive - hence private soldier, private parts). In the sixteenth century, the limited access implied by 'private' came to mean privileged (private property, private view, private education) and was then, in the 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, supplemented by the meanings of autonomy and intimacy (the privacy of the family, private life, private enterprise). But what then is this public life from which the private represents a withdrawal? Hartley (2002, p.189) offers a positive definition of term 'public', noting that since classical times:

*the people comprising the public could gather in a single space within sight of each other (in Greek: agora, in Roman: forum). It was here that free citizens argued, legislated and adjudicated, both in their own interests and on behalf of others who were not free - slaves, women, foreigners, children. With the growth of politics to many times the size of these classical antecedents, the public was 'abstracted' or virtualised - it was either an imagined community or could gather together only by representative means.*

Here we have an abstracted, modern version of 'public', which is frequently characterised in normative terms precisely to distinguish 'fully fledged' publics (Dayan, 2001, p.769) from proto- or quasi- or pseudo-publics as well as from other social groupings such as audiences, communities, fans, crowds and masses.

Allowing for some debate, these features typically include a relatively stable social group, a shared symbolic world-view, a commitment to internal debate, the generation of a political agenda, performative self-presentation to itself and to other publics<sup>3</sup> and a reflexive specification of criteria for belonging.

Furthermore, again unlike other social groupings, this normative, abstracted public - widely theorised today in the terms of Habermas' theory of the public sphere - requires a visible and open space in which to engage in rational-critical discussion in order to build consensus and legitimate democratic government. As Habermas (1984, p.49) puts it:

*By 'the public sphere' we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.*

Far from opposing public and private according to any simple polarity, then, the Bourgeois public sphere is precisely composed of the activities of private individuals (rather than the activities of politicians, officials or bureaucrats), but only insofar as they bracket their differences and do not act out of their private interests, as Calhoun (1992, p.13) stresses:

*the notion of common interest in truth or right policy thus undergirded the 'bracketing' of status differences [and] rational argument was the sole arbiter of any issue ... the public defined its discourse as focusing on all matters of common concern [and] the emerging public established itself as inclusive in principle.*

By contrast, when private individuals, including audiences, engage in conversation, access is generally restricted, interests and status differences are far from bracketed off and truth may not be the goal.<sup>4</sup>

### **Audience and masses**

Under the keyword 'masses', Williams (1983, p.192) captures widespread ambivalence in both popular and academic discussion of the audience according to which the 'masses' is 'a term of contempt in much conservative thought, but a positive term in much socialist thought'. For the former, 'audience' is seen as 'something amorphous and indistinguishable', connoting base, low or vulgar (c.f. also the multitude, mob, rabble and crowd), as opposed to notions of eminence, rational, expert, good standing. For the latter, we see a stress on 'the people', especially 'ordinary' or 'working class' people as a positive force, associated with two other complex terms - democracy and the popular. In audience research, both meanings of audience retain some purchase.

Nonetheless, in defining the audience, Hartley (2002, p.11) draws only on the former meaning of 'mass' when he states:

*The term audience is used to describe a large number of unidentifiable people, usually united by their participation in media use. Given the varying demographics of this group, not to mention variations between nations, the concept itself is a means by which such an unknowable group can be imagined. Naming an audience usually also involves homogenising it, ascribing to it certain characteristics, needs, desires and concerns. The audience is a construction motivated by the paradigm in which it is imagined.*

Hence, he follows Williams in emphasising the amorphous and indistinguishable character of the audience, but underplays work seeking to valorise audiences as plural and as contextualised within the popular. More important to Hartley is the way in which the notion of audience is co-opted by powerful institutions to further their own interests, most notably media institutions (Ang, 1990).

McQuail (1987, p.215), by contrast, eschews the 'rather simple surface meaning [of audience] as the aggregate of persons forming the readers, listeners, viewers for different media'. Instead, and more neutrally, he stresses the 'fundamentally dual character' of the audience as:

*a collectivity which is formed either in response to media (channels and content) or out of independently existing social forces (when it corresponds to an existing social group or category or the result of activities by a social group to provide itself with its own channels of communication media). Often it is inextricably both at the same time.*

This second meaning of audience intersects with that of public, for 'the key element in this version of the audience is the pre-existence of an active, interactive and largely autonomous social group which is served by particular media, but does not depend on the media for its existence' (p.219). In other words, a pre-existing social group may be both part of an audience and part of a public; clearly, in the analysis of each, much rests on the viability of the distinction between being served by and being dependent on the media.

### **Contested concepts**

This keyword analysis of 'audience' and 'public' reveals some points of connection and contrast between them. Far from asserting any grand resolution or prescriptive definitions of terms, the remainder of this chapter will attempt to clarify the consequences of particular conceptual choices, particularly seeking to identify which of these provide constructive if contestable opportunities for analysing the changing media environment.

Those who wish to prefer publics over audiences argue that ‘audience’ is descriptive while ‘public’, although sometimes used descriptively (as in public opinion, the general public), is essentially normative (as in public service, public sphere), encoding consensual, strongly-held values (of inclusivity, rationality, disinterestedness, etc). Hence, only certain groups, certain forms of communication, certain channels of participation meet the demanding criteria for ‘the public’ or ‘publicness’; others fail to qualify. Intriguingly, not only does this appear to exclude groupings that we may wish to call publics, on some grounds at least, it may also include some less than ideal groupings. If we pluralize ‘the public’ as ‘publics’, then one public must represent the out-group for another, becoming not ‘we’ but ‘them’, leading Dayan (2001) to ask if some publics can be irrational, even hateful. For although ideally a public should strive for a common and inclusive discourse, bracketing interests and investing in efforts to translate across experiences, in practice many social groupings commonly labelled as publics operate irrationally at times, or in a prejudiced or competitive manner.

Not only are publics held to encode consensual, and positive, values but they are also held to be collectivities, more than the sum of their parts, while audiences by contrast are merely aggregates of individuals (Harré, 1984). However, as with the broader distinction between public and private, this distinction works better in the abstract than when applied to any particular situation. What can one claim empirically for ‘publics’ that cannot also be applied to audiences - who know of each other, are reflexively aware of their membership of a larger group, who may even meet and discuss their viewing or listening, sometimes sending feedback to broadcasters, and certainly sharing in national media events?<sup>5</sup>

Given the difficulties of sustaining both collective and normative claims for ‘the public’, one might more modestly claim to seek an account of when and under what conditions people - qua publics or audiences - constitute a collectivity. According to which values might this be characterised, when is this mediated, and with what consequences? This is to consider ‘public’ as an adjective rather than a noun: doing or saying things publicly, making things public, conducting relations in public - these distinguish ‘public’ from ‘private’ but they set less stringent requirements for identifying ‘the public’. Moreover, they suggest some obvious ways in which the media could enhance publicness, through publicising, making actions visible on the media stage, promoting reflexivity, bringing matters into the open, and so forth.

However, while adjectival use of the term need activate only one of the multiple criteria for ‘the public’ identified in more idealistic definitions, it postpones the question of when these variously public deliberations, actions or interests merit the attention, the weight and seriousness, traditionally accorded to ‘the public’. Often, as noted earlier, such weight is reserved only for public deliberation that has political consequences, although this in turn begs the question of whether political institutions are receptive towards their various publics.

For those who prefer to prioritise 'the public' as a noun, something is lost by applying the term loosely - sloppily some would suggest - to any public discussion, any community-based activity or any forum for mass-mediated gossip or chat merely because it is visible or popular. For others, setting such demanding standards for 'the public' brings its own problems. First, too stringent a definition includes little and excludes most of human activity, resulting in the pessimistic conclusion that public life is dead. Second, it has generally proved that those activities which meet these high standards are characteristic of elites, excluding from view the heterogeneous if conflicting activities of the majority. Third, and perhaps least explored but most interesting, is the suggestion that it is precisely these broader, diverse forms of social activity - which are 'public' but not yet 'the public' - that demand a rethinking of the relation between public and private, state and civil society, for this new, and heavily mediated century (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991).

### **Mediated publics, diffused audiences**

How should these themes be explored in the context of changing media and changing Europe? We begin by observing that one cannot now imagine how the public can be constituted, can express itself, can be seen to participate, can have an effect, without the mediation of various forms of mass communication. Making something public today means representing it in the media, especially on the scale required in a globalised society; keeping something out of the media spotlight is to symbolically annihilate it (Tuchman, 1972). Can publics retain, or even gain in, vigour and integrity once they are no longer simply served by but rather dependent on the media? Crucially, the media mediate: they select, prioritise, shape, and so on, in accordance with the institutions, technologies and discursive conventions of the media industry. To make something public is to transform it in ways that media theory and, especially, audience research, has long sought to analyse.

Not only is the public changing, so too are audiences (see Butsch, 2000). There have been several attempts to periodise the history of audiences. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998), to take but one, identify three broad phases of the audience: first, the simple co-located face-to-face audience; second, the mass audience - lasting throughout modern history - aligned to the boundaries of the nation state and so most readily identified both with public service and with the needs of citizens; and third, the diffused audience, no longer containable in particular places and times, but rather part and parcel of all aspects of daily life, certainly in industrialised nations and increasingly globally. As they put it, today 'the qualities and experiences of being a member of an audience have begun to leak out from specific performance events which previously contained them, into the wider realms of everyday life' (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p.36-7). Hence, a stress on the process of mediation, rather than on discrete media influences on the audience or public, is called for.<sup>6</sup>

The mediation of the public is widely regarded with pessimism - as a refeudalisation of the public sphere by which public discussion is downgraded into publicity: 'the deprivatized province of interiority was hollowed out by the mass media; a pseudo-public sphere of a no longer literary public was patched together to create a sort of superfamilial zone of familiarity' (Habermas, 1989, p.162). By contrast with face-to-face communication, where one can check whether communication is trustworthy, authentic and reliable, the increasing mediation of the public opens the door to inauthentic, motivated and divided discussion (Curran, 1991; Dahlgren, 1995). Yet this is too simple an account of the media, as Habermas himself acknowledges. In his essay on *The Critical Society* (in Outhwaite, 1996, p.320-1), Habermas critiques Adorno and Horkheimer for positing (commercial) media as displacing (authentic, public) face-to-face communication:

*According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the communication flows steered via mass media take the place of those communication structures that had once made possible public discussion and self-understanding by citizens and private individuals. [...] On the one hand [the electronic media] transforms the authentic content of modern culture into the sterilized and ideologically effective stereotypes of a mass culture that merely replicates what exists; on the other hand, it uses up a culture cleansed of all subversive and transcending elements for an encompassing system of social controls, which is spread over individuals, in part reinforcing their weakened internal behavioural controls, in part replacing them.*

Here Habermas draws on contemporary media research, including audience research, to identify a series of problems with the 'styling oversimplification' of Horkheimer and Adorno. These include the competing interests which influence broadcasting institutions (economic, political, aesthetic, ideological, professional); competing obligations guiding content producers (especially, tension between commercial imperatives and professional journalistic codes of conduct); the polysemic character of media texts, even the most popular or trashy (for texts incorporate both dominant and critical messages); the lack of simple mapping between textual content and audience reception (because encoding and decoding contexts differ systematically); and a tension in technological development between tendency towards centralisation/standardisation and diversification /innovation.

These complexities suggest lapses or failures in the 'encompassing system of social controls' that, more optimistically, open up opportunities for authentic and diverse dialogue between government and citizens. Notably, in the face of the rise of voter apathy and the decline of civic society, we are witnessing considerable efforts and initiatives to engage audiences in civic or political fora, these being aided - or so many hope - by new forms of interactive and participatory media. Thus, governments are regarding the potential civic or political participation of what were once 'merely' audiences with some optimism, spawning a series of

mediated initiatives in cultural citizenship, political socialisation, participatory deliberation, e-democracy, citizen engagement, and so forth (Scammell, 2001; Bentivegna, 2002).

As publics extend their scope, encompassing greater heterogeneity, they seem to lose power, fragmenting under internal dissent or the dissipation of shared values. Consequently, government-sponsored initiatives to enhance participation find they need the media if they are to manage communication within and across ever-larger publics. Unlike publics, as audiences extend their scope, even beyond national boundaries, they do not necessarily lose power, thereby rendering audience participation potentially a source of strength rather than threat to the interests of publics.

Initiatives to enhance public participation not only question the assumption that the media have undermined politics, seeking instead to harness the power of the media to democratic ends, but they assume more fundamentally that politics has been undermined by other, deeper causes. In other words, rather than treating the public and the political as synonymous, which as Warner (2002) points out is a commonplace confusion which leads to the marginalisation or neglect of any public discourse or activities for which no direct political consequences can be traced, we might even propose instead that 'the public' embodies higher ideals, worthier practices and values than are often evident in the messy world of politics.

Warner returns to Kant's enlightenment philosophy to explain how, for Habermas, it is precisely those discourses and activities of the public which do have direct political consequences that should be regarded critically, rather than those which do not. Thus:

*Kant recognises that there are publics, such as the reading world, that do not correspond to any kind of polity. They enable a way of being public through critical discourse that is not limited by the duties and constraints of office or by loyalties to a commonwealth or nation. These critical publics may, however, be political in another or higher sense. They may set a higher standard of reason, opinion and freedom - hence the subversive potential in his picture of enlightenment.*

*(Warner, 2002, p. 45-6)*

### **The private in the public**

Implicit in this more optimistic reading lies a view of the public as dependent on the private (rather than politics or the state). The resources, the competences, the motivations which lead people to participate in public draw - in a manner little understood - on the lived experiences and activities, the conditions and constraints, the identities and relationships of people in their status as private individuals. In other words, rather than denigrating certain kinds of sociality as

'less than public' - as pre- or proto- or quasi-public - we could ask, what does it take for people to participate in public, what does the public require, what are its preconditions? We need an account of the formation of public opinion and of citizens - early expressions of interest, exploration of experience, tentative trying out of viewpoints. This may not happen in the public sphere but the public sphere depends on its happening. Again Habermas leads the way, suggesting that, 'the subjectivity the family nurtured was "audience-oriented" because it was played out in dramas staged for the other members of the family' (quoted in Calhoun, 1992, p. 10-11), 'audience' here taking on its traditional meaning as 'an audience with the King', rather than referring to the mass media.

This subjectivity, for Habermas, sustains the Bourgeois public sphere: 'The public's understanding of the public use of reason was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented subjectivity of the conjugal family's intimate domain' (Habermas, 1969/1989, p. 28). Calhoun (1992, p. 35) takes Habermas to task here for treating 'identities and interests as settled within the private world and then brought fully formed into the public sphere'. However, such an assumption is not necessary in considering whether our family arguing about the news at home has an element of publicness to their apparently private discussion, particularly insofar as they reproduce (or co-produce) their identities, relations of in/equality, tactics of in/exclusion, motives for participation, and so on. As Hermes and Stello (2000, p. 219) argue from their reception study of reading detective fiction, this 'may not in itself be a political act, but as a cultural practice it is ... the domain in which we deploy a sense of self and of identity, of our place in society, the obligations we have and the rights that are due to us'. Since people not only discuss media at home - news, soaps, talk shows etc - but also use the media as an occasion, even a cover for discussion of relationships, politics, values, and so forth, arguably the domestic stage is as important for the public sphere as the media stage, albeit in different ways. Van Zoonen (2004, p. 39) extends a similar argument in relation to emotion (c.f. Madianou, this volume), pointing to the parallels between participating in a private leisure-based group - the fan community and participating in a public group - the political constituency, and arguing that:

*The analogy between the two is structural to begin with: both come into being as a result of performance. Second, fan communities and political constituencies resemble each other in terms of activity: both are concerned with knowledge, discussion, participation, imagination of alternatives, and implementation. Finally, both rest on distinct emotional processes that range from habituation to excitement and anxiety. These emotions are differently but intrinsically linked to rationality, and lead - in concert - to 'affective intelligence'. The representation of politics on television, while generally thought to be dismally and destructively entertaining, can be seen as provoking the 'affective intelligence' that is vital to keep political involvement and activity going.*

Undoubtedly, attempts to eliminate the private (identity, lifestyle, interest, emotion, difference, etc) from the public have proved doomed to failure. This stubborn persistence of the private has stimulated proposals for an oppositional or alternative or pluralised public sphere, even including an emotional public sphere (Lunt and Stenner, in press). In any case, the public agenda is today occupied by issues once considered private, 'such as affirmative action, abortion, and the rights of sexual minorities ...issues about which large publics are either disinterested or unalterably divided. Either way, the impossibility of compromise has undermined support for many institutional remedies' (Bennett, 1998, p. 749). Fraser (1990) argues therefore that a sustainable public sphere need not, or should not, fit Habermas' ideal model of a rational-critical debate leading to a consensus among a large public ('the public'), but should instead facilitate a debate tolerant of diverse discursive modes, leading to a compromise among a range of interested rather than disinterested publics (plural). Media scholars have argued, in turn, that the media can and should play a key role in facilitating such debate. Through innovative formats, the media can promote diverse discursive modes. Through their unprecedented scope and reach, the media can bring together a range of publics. And while an argued consensus may lie beyond the conventions of most audiovisual genres, these same genres are fit for purpose for expressing heated contestations and, on occasion, for reaching a workable compromise (Curran, 1991; Dahlgren, 1995).

### **The public in the private**

If private activities have public consequences, if audiences are not to be opposed to publics, how far should the normative expectations of publics be required of audiences? To be sure, audience research has shown that people are, in their everyday reception of television and other media contents, often participatory seekers after meaning, not always accepting but sometimes negotiating or even resisting textual meanings. But do they have a moral responsibility to question and resist the problematic (biased, stereotyped, prejudiced or conservative) yet taken-for-granted assumptions of media messages? Are they culpable if they accept media messages with uncritical passivity? Silverstone (2002, p. 762) poses the challenge thus:

*insofar as the persisting representational characteristics of contemporary media, above all in our media's representation of the other, remain unchallenged - as for the most part they are - then those who receive and accept them are neither mere prisoners of a dominant ideology nor innocents in a world of false consciousness; rather they are willing participants, that is, complicit, or even actively engaged, that is, collusive, in a mediated culture that fails to deliver its promises of communication and connection, with enduring, powerful and largely negative consequences for our status as human beings.*

It seems that, in countering the conception of audience as victim (commodified,

passivised, institutionally managed through the use of publicity, statistics and marketing; Ang, 1990) or role, audience research has made audiences too vulnerable to the charge of villain, accountable for their activities, failing to sustain the public and therefore acting to undermine it. For often audiences do not contest mediated representations, accepting the preferred reading with little renegotiation. And as Dayan (2001) points out in his critique of Morley's *Nationwide Audience*, those audiences who do make oppositional readings are those who are simultaneously organised as active publics.

Some defence of audiences' claims to publicness without taking on the full burden of public responsibility may be offered. First, while reception studies find only a minority who whole-heartedly counter the dominant reading of media texts, it finds many who seek to negotiate with it (Liebes and Katz, 1990; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). In each case, this renegotiation is stimulated not by formal membership of an *a priori* public but by a conflict between the cultural claims of the text and the lived experiences of the audience, this requiring face-work at a minimum or, more ambitiously, some more active identity work through dialogic engagement (Billig, 1991).

Second, as audience research has also demonstrated, audiences act in response to their circumstances - that structured array of opportunities and constraints that is, for the most part, beyond their control, a matter of social stratification and which, undeniably, operate to make contestation or opposition difficult. Third, audiences surely encompass more than the raw material required for an effective democracy: unless we collapse the private into the public, there must be legitimate opportunity for such private pleasures as enjoyment, personal interest, relaxation and domesticity free from the glare of 'the public'. In another context - that in which educational ambitions are being institutionalised through policies for informal learning, accompanied by a moral discourse to evaluate 'well-spent' or 'beneficial' leisure time - Buckingham develops a Foucauldian critique of the 'curricularisation' of leisure (2001). A similar critique might be developed in relation to citizenship, as private leisure is scrutinised and judged - as successful or failing - for its potential or actual contribution to the public sphere, leaving no realm of public or private life free from official regimes of governance.

### **Between public and audience: civic culture and the citizen-viewer**

Audiences are, generally, neither so passive and accepting as traditionally supposed by those who denigrate them nor generally so organised and effective as to meet the high standards of those defining public participation. Rather, they sustain a modest and often ambivalent level of critical interpretation, drawing upon - and thereby reproducing - a somewhat ill-specified, at times inchoate or even contradictory sense of identity or belonging which motivates them towards but does not wholly enable the kinds of collective and direct action expected of a public. That, after all, is the point: it is precisely such context-dependent yet under-determined, plural

and hybrid identities, understandings, practices and relationships that must and do shape people's engagement with others, in private and in public. This gives rise to the complex and ambiguous relations between audiences and publics and that we address in this volume.

Lest the evidence of mediated publics and diffused audiences seems to argue for a collapsing of publics into audiences, and vice versa, and in order to identify an alternative proposal, I conclude by asking whether between public and audience lies an intermediate realm. As several scholars have argued, this may usefully be understood in terms of the 'civic'. The introduction of a third term usefully allows us to avoid the woolly expansion of the normative public sphere concept to encompass all forms of (arguably or ambivalently) public discourse and participation, while recognising the importance of those fuzzy or ambiguous phenomena, grounded in the civil society and the lifeworld, that fascinate empirical researchers - the row over gender politics in the living room, the heated conversation in the talk show, the incipient new social movements mobilising online, and so on. Two strands of thought can be discerned in relation to the civic, paralleling the above review of ideas on publics and audiences: one concerns the decline of civil society and the growing evidence of citizen disengagement, cynicism and apathy; the other seeks to reconceptualise audiences as 'citizen-viewers' (Corner, 1995) so as to recognise the civic significance of audience activities.<sup>7</sup>

Dahlgren (2003, p. 155) suggests that instead of analysing media for their direct influence on publics, resulting in the decrying audiences for their apathy or the media for their refeudalisation of the public sphere:

*'civic' should ...be understood as a prerequisite for the (democratically) political, a reservoir of the pre-or non-political that becomes actualised at particular moments when politics arises ... The key here is to underscore the processual and contextual dimension; the political and politics are not simply given, but are constructed via word and deed.*

It becomes our task, then, to recognise the significance of particular words and deeds, mediated or otherwise, as they occur at particular moments when politics does or does not arise.

From a political science perspective, and hence motivated to address the challenge of an apparently increasingly apathetic and depoliticized public, Bennett (1998) also tackles the relation between audiences and publics. He is particularly concerned to critique one recent, headline-grabbing claim that denigrates audiences, that of Putnam's *Bowling Alone* (2000). While Putnam blames television for the decline in civic participation, Bennett's critique is not motivated by the desire to rescue audiences from attack but rather in order to seek a more satisfactory account of why the public has withdrawn into the privacy of the home,

away from the local community activities that generate the social capital necessary to sustain political engagement. Although both theorists postulate civic culture as mediating between the private realm of individualised domesticity and leisure and the public realm of societal debate and politics, Bennett (1998, p. 744) argues for a more fundamental economic and cultural shift over the past half century, rendering television viewing merely a consequence rather than the cause of the problem:<sup>8</sup>

*What is changing about politics is not a decline in citizen engagement, but a shift away from old forms that is complemented by the emergence of new forms of political interest and engagement... civic culture is not dead; it has merely taken new identities, and can be found living in other communities.*

Although Bennett (1998, p. 745) perhaps confusingly labels these new forms of culture ‘uncivic’ (to discriminate them from hostile or anti-public sentiments), he invites a debate over those new forms of public activity which could be supported by new forms of media, although how this may work - how far lifestyle and identity really translate into identity politics and new social movements - remains to be seen. Intriguingly, in the face of new possibilities for an expanded, even global public, it seems that the grounding of face-to-face, daily experience comes increasingly to the fore: perhaps in response to doubts regarding the trustworthiness or exploitability of globalised, mediated publics, ‘the new concerns of lifestyle politics are more personal and local than national and governmental in scope and relevance’ (Bennett; 1998, p. 748).

Dahlgren (2003, p. 154) similarly turns to the lifeworld, the realm of experience, for a source of renewal for the public sphere, stressing that ‘such dimensions as meaning, identity and subjectivity are important elements of political communication’ and so central to explaining how people become citizens and how they participate in public. Conceptually he argues:

*If the more familiar concept of the public sphere points to the politically relevant communicative spaces in daily life and in the media, civic culture points to those features of the socio-cultural world - dispositions, practices, processes - that constitute pre-conditions for people’s actual participation in the public sphere, in civil and political society.*

This leads him to the empirical question (2003, p.152), ‘what are the *cultural* factors that can impinge on the actions and communication of people in their roles as (multifarious) citizens?’ To address this, Dahlgren sketches an analysis of civic culture that combines questions of formal membership and consequential action with the subject dimensions of citizenship, identifying a range of distinct dimensions, each of which is acted on or influenced by the media, and each of which may work to support or undermine democracy.<sup>9</sup>

A diversity of projects may be located under this umbrella agenda for empirical

research on audiences, civic culture and publics. For example, Barnhurst listens out for the intervention of both personal and media influence through a series of life history narratives, in trying to understand how young people become citizens when their main resources for decoding the world come from the mass media. Where Liebes (1992), some years before, revealed the reflexive difficulties of parents in attempting to mediate between the reductionist 'us' and 'them' framework of television news and their often right-wing teenagers, Barnhurst (1998, p. 215) suggests that young people themselves recognise that they cannot escape the media's framing of political events; indeed they seek and puzzle over 'primary experiences', touchstones for their own reflexive political judgement:

*The stories young adults tell are intensely personal and local. They respond to media content in the context of a television set at home with parents, or at the bar with friends. They discuss their emerging selves, in reference to the media, with peers. They find more sources and expose themselves more widely to alternative media because of teachers. They are what can be described as active citizens in the interstices of power/knowledge, even if not in the modes and regions prescribed by democratic theory.*

In pursuing this agenda, it must be as important to ask about the limits as the scope of these and similar claims. So, one wonders about the limits to Barnhurst's claim: are there ways of discussing the media in everyday life that do not constitute an incipient or actual citizenship? If 'understanding an issue comes scattershot, as in the case of the famine essay, from pop songs, TV commercials, documentary films and - most importantly - personal discussions more than from journalists' (Barnhurst, 1998, p. 216), then do any and all media contribute to informed citizens, to public opinion and public discussion? And, are all audiences ready and willing to participate thus? Perhaps, as he concludes, 'these young people, far from being dummies, are deeply committed to finding the truth about the political worlds they inhabit' (p 216). But if this is the case they do not appear to act on this commitment in conventionally recognised ways (Bennett, 1998).

Barnhurst and Liebes were concerned with the role of the news. But if we interpose civic culture - the locus of identities, values and cultural understandings - between the audience and the public, then other media forms and contents may surely also contribute. Hermes and Stello (2000) consider how far participating in an audience, in a complexly mediated late-modern world, means participating in a public. They ask whether 'reading a mass-marketed genre such as crime fiction be construed as a form of cultural citizenship (p219)?' Again, this frames citizenship in terms of experience rather than formal participation in political structures: 'citizenship is first of all the ways in which we feel connected to the different communities we are part of, ranging from formally organised communities such as the nation state to virtual communities such as feminism' (Hermes and Stello, 2000, p. 219). Their conclusions, however, are equivocal - unsurprising for a reception study, since audiences rarely speak with one voice, their views being as

polysemic as any media text. As Livingstone and Lunt also argued (1994), such text-reception research provides stronger evidence for cultural citizenship as a questioning of belonging, positioning or equality than as a means of mobilising active participation or radical critique. According to Hermes and Stello (2000, p. 230):

*Cultural citizenship is about confusion and near-irresolvable dualities, but also about a particular type of pleasure and reflection on those dualities and identities that will by and large keep conservative and progressive forces in balance ... it is structured as a domain of pre-political consideration, of unease with states of being, rather than as a monument to specific rights, duties or identities.*

Finally, I note that in my current research project, conducted with Nick Couldry and Tim Markham at LSE, we are exploring whether and in what ways the media offer a means by which people seek to participate in a shared public, a means by which the public sphere reaches out to the people and invites them to participate. Or, perhaps, the media close doors instead, excluding or distracting people from public connection or inviting escape into a more private world. Through detailed qualitative work with a diverse group of respondents, we are examining two common assumptions about democracy: first, that most people share an orientation to a public world where matters of common concern are, or should be, discussed (we call this orientation ‘public connection’); and second, that public connection today centres on mediated versions of the public world (i.e. that public connection is increasingly sustained by a convergence in what media people consume). Hence, we hope to discover not just people’s political values and their cultural attachments, but also their views on what are appropriate topics for political discussion and action, the range of people they regard as legitimate political actors, and the spaces or sites that they feel appropriate for political discussion and action.<sup>10</sup>

## Conclusion

In setting the scene for the chapters to follow, this chapter has argued that, in the late modern societies of Europe and elsewhere, the distinction between audience and public is increasingly hard to draw, as the media become ever more deeply embedded in all aspects of society. Telling the story of audiences means telling a story of changing forms of media and hence of changing forms of communication among peoples. The analysis of publics, by contrast, centres on an attempt to understand the significance and consequences of public - by contrast with private - forms of activity or spaces for activity. While historically sensitive, this also foregrounds the normative by seeking to understand how publics not only do but also should act, for the benefit of democratic society. The analysis of audiences and publics is becoming entangled insofar as it can be said that audiences are on the rise while publics are in retreat, but also that the two are linked. Such questions are not solely theoretical: there is ample justification for the careful empirical analysis

of those diverse circumstances in which claims are made regarding either or both 'public' and 'audience'. Research must address whether, when and how the activities of particular, located audiences constitute a form of cultural engagement that matters to the public sphere and, as diverse media become integrated into public and civic processes, whether the media might transform - for better or for worse - the activities of publics as they ever more closely overlap with audiences.

Contemporary dilemmas regarding the relation between public and audience may be encapsulated in the following case study. Ouellette, influenced by Tony Bennett's (1995) Foucauldian analysis of the museum as a governmental apparatus, critiques the attempt to use public service media to socialise or engage otherwise apathetic audiences by focusing on the policy debates leading to the introduction of the public broadcasting service channel (PBS) in 1960s America. These, she shows, were motivated by an explicit policy of 'transforming television viewers into active citizens', proposed as a deliberate alternative to the 'consumer sovereignty promoted by commercial television' (Ouellette, 1999, p. 63). This vision informed Lyndon Johnson's State of the Union address announcing PBS in 1967, where he promised to 'make our nation a replica of the old Greek marketplace, where public affairs took place in view of all the citizens' (Ouellette, 1999, p. 67, from Miller, 1993, p. 136). However, PBS was highly controlled, materially and discursively. Never permitted to threaten the dominance of commercial broadcasting, instead it socialised audiences into 'good citizens' according to familiar Enlightenment ideals, embodied in the forms of rational-critical dialogue that characterises public service television. For Ouellette, this extension of governance to the once ill-disciplined audience has resulted in a normative and self-disciplining 'public' that reproduces middle-class standards of order and good taste, hence undermining rather than furthering the radical ideals of an enlightened and empowered public.

This chapter has similarly argued for a transcendence of the audience/public opposition for, as a growing body of literature makes clear, such binary thinking no longer fits either the subtleties of media texts or the complexities of media power in late modern societies. However, I part company with the Foucauldian critique, as asserted by Ouellette, Bennett and others against the Habermasian position, instead ending with a question. Undoubtedly, the now-familiar critique of the public sphere is fair, for through its rigorous, perhaps even rigid, norms of access, discourse, topic, and consensus-seeking, the Bourgeois public sphere legitimates only a narrow portion of the population as 'the public', excluding others. But does this make Lyndon Johnson's ambition fatally flawed in principle or only flawed in its implementation? Surely there can be mediated spaces, which invite and valorise participation from more diverse publics? And surely these can not only encompass debate on minority or alternative topics but also contest the very norms of rational-critical debate or consensus politics themselves? After all, the media are not so successful in managing their complex institutions, texts and audiences so as to exclude deliberation, contestation, even transgression. Perhaps the media can,

under certain conditions, play a role in exploring or challenging the limits of governmentality rather than merely serving as the instrument of its ever-more efficient control. Where else, after all, could such contestation occur if not in mediated spaces? These, then, are the issues to be pursued in the chapters to follow.

## Notes

1. Many thanks to the colleagues with whom these ideas have been discussed: Nick Couldry, Daniel Dayan, Kirsten Drotner, Angela Livingstone, Peter Lunt, Mirca Madianou, Tim Markham, Dominique Mehl, Ulrike Meinhof, Dominique Pasquier, Roberta Pearson.
2. As Warner (2002, p. 47) comments acidly in relation to Habermas' Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, 'the "sphere" of the title is a misleading effect of English translation; the German *Öffentlichkeit* lacks the spatializing metaphor and suggests something more like "openness" or "publicness". The French translation, *L'Espace Public*, is worse.'
3. Habermas explains the performative thus: 'the concept of *dramaturgical action* refers primarily neither to the solitary actor nor to the member of a social group, but to participants in interaction constituting a public for one another, before whom they present themselves' (*Aspects of Rationality*, in Outhwaite, 1996, p. 135).
4. Does this provide a clear means to divide publics from audiences? Unfortunately, as Habermas' critics have made clear, differences are rarely bracketed in practice and, as some argue further, nor should they be. Notably, those developing discourse norms for alternative or oppositional formulations of the public sphere find they must begin by unpacking any categorical boundary between public and private.
5. Indeed, under reflexive modernity, the claim that the audience has no representation of itself *qua* audience (e.g. Hartley, 2002), being a statistical aggregate described by others, seems untenable. Today, all category memberships are reflexively discussed. As Dayan (2001) observes, a member of the audience - alone in the living room or otherwise - is always aware of the wider collectivity sharing the experience with them, and so is only one step away from the way in which 'a public both knows itself to be - and wishes to be - seen' (Dayan, 2001, p. 752).
6. Silverstone (2002, p. 762) defines mediation as 'the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalised media of communication are involved in the general circulation of symbols of social life. That circulation no longer requires face-to-face communication, though it does not exclude it.'
7. Two terms are often conflated here: 'civil society' refers to the realm of social order, of common or shared understandings, norms and values; 'civic culture' refers more to the realm of collective interest and mobilisation, the values, institutions and practices geared towards social and political outcomes that enhance democracy. The opposite of the former is uncivil, the opposite of the latter is disengaged. As used by Bennett, Dahlgren and others, civic culture

seems to refer to something less political than politics and something less ideal than the public.

8. Bennett identifies a third cause, one that accounts both for growing individualisation and for declining political engagement, namely the dramatic shifts in the labour market and the economy in the post-war period. Guided by accounts of late modernity developed by Giddens, Beck and others, Bennett amasses evidence that questions simplistic accounts of a decline in trust, interest or participation among the public, instead demonstrating the more complex links among growing economic insecurity, gendered division of labour, career uncertainty, and labour market instability on the one hand, and changing group structure, loss of tradition, growth in risk and altered sense of belonging or loyalty on the other. The result is that 'replacing traditional civil society is a less conformist social world ... characterised by the rise of networks, issue associations, and lifestyle coalitions facilitated by the revolution in personalized, point-to-point communication' (1998, p. 745).
9. These are: values, anchored in the everyday, formally articulated as the basis of democratic principles; affinity, the minimal sense of commonality and trust required for collective or community action; knowledge, the literacy required to make sense of the world so as to select among competing directions; practices, the traditions, habits and performances that mobilise meanings and bring about democratic society; identities, the reflexive sense of social belonging and subjective efficacy required to mobilise people as a public or citizenry; and discussion, the means of communicative interaction that embodies principles of inclusiveness, visibility and problem-resolution.
10. The project is entitled 'Media Consumption and the Future of Public Connection', with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council ('Cultures of Consumption' Programme, grant number RES 143-25-001); see [www.publicconnection.org](http://www.publicconnection.org).

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