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Media studies' fascination with the concept of the public sphere: critical reflections and emerging debates

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Introduction

Discussions of the public sphere have enjoyed an enduring place in the pages of *Media, Culture & Society* with 346 articles referring to the concept to date. Initially (1979–89), articles were sparse (23) and mainly focused on bringing German scholarship to English-speaking scholars (cf. the 1982 special issue, vol. 4:2); yet these articles already offered a range of applications of the concept as well as critiques. From 1990 to 2000, *Media, Culture & Society* published 58 articles referring to the public sphere which, again, concentrated on the problems of the mass-mediated public sphere. But in the last decade, interest in the public sphere has expanded hugely, with 247 articles in *Media, Culture & Society* (and many more in other journals), covering a diversity of themes and greatly stimulated by the advances of globalisation and mass internet use.

For those who find the public sphere newly fascinating in a globalising network society, such interest is encouraging. For those who consider the concept to have been roundly critiqued or already superseded, this fascination merits pause for thought. It is in this context that the editors of this special issue invited us to initiate a conversation over what we might term 'the rise and rise' of the concept of the public sphere within media studies. Scholars are already familiar with the trajectory of the concept in academia, and most can outline Habermas's original theory, detail the many critiques it has attracted and discuss whether these undermine the concept, its continuing relevance and how it can be researched. But in what follows, we have selected contributors keen to mine the undeveloped potential of the public sphere concept so as to address the pressing concerns of 21st-century media studies.

This provides a fresh look at some lively debates, among which constraints of space forced us to select just three. First, recognising the huge interest stimulated by mass internet access (at least in the global North), we invited Terje Rasmussen to re-examine critical analysis of the public sphere insofar as it illuminates mediated politics in a networked society. Lilie Chouliaraki considers the critical and ethical challenges of scaling up a concept developed for the heyday of the nation-state given contemporary conditions of globally mediated visibility. Last, Alan McKee and Luke Goode debate the cultural blurring and borderlands of the public sphere, now that the concept's very popularity has led it to become so stretched (viz. the cultural public

sphere, the literary public sphere, the online public sphere, etc.). Each author has selected a topical case to focus their arguments – those of European identity, of cosmopolitanism and of user-generated pornography respectively.

To locate these contemporary debates, we first review the intellectual context within which *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989 [1962]) was received before outlining how Habermas's subsequent work significantly develops the public sphere concept. Notably, of the hundreds of articles discussing the public sphere in media studies, most refer only to this early book, first published 50 years ago in 1962 but not translated into English until 1989. A few refer to his synoptic and engagingly written encyclopaedia article published in English (Habermas, 1984), although by then his position had already changed. But in his subsequent work, Habermas has significantly advanced his thinking about participation and the public sphere, as is beginning to be recognised in media studies (see, for example, Breese, 2011; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Ferree et al., 2002; Jensen, 2010; Moe, 2010). More influential in media studies than Habermas's own subsequent work, however, has been that of his English-language interpreters responding to the 1989 translation of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* – notably, Calhoun's (1992) influential volume of critical and alternative conceptions of the public sphere along with publications by Garnham (1992), Keane (1991), Dayan (2001) and Dahlgren (2009), among others. What do these debates and unfolding arguments, now spanning half a century, have to offer today's media studies?

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere

“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.”
(Habermas, 1984, p.49)

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas (1989 [1962]) grounds his critique of modernity through the method of historical comparison. He examines the changing relations between public opinion and political processes – including changes associated with the rise of the mass media – during, first, the emergence of bourgeois capitalism in the UK and Germany in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and then the mix of monopoly capitalism and the welfare state in post-war western liberal democracies. Informed by the overriding pessimism of the Frankfurt School regarding the threat that the dynamic nature of capitalism poses to democracy, via the effects of rationalisation and individualisation, Habermas sought opportunities within liberal capitalism that could counter these effects of modernity. One such opportunity, he proposed, was the emergence of a public sphere of informal discussion and debate as part of the expanded cultural and political realm afforded by the growth in print culture and literacy through books, pamphlets and, especially, the press.

The social and cultural lives of the bourgeoisie, it appeared, enabled a novel political subjectivity to emerge – the articulation of a consensus representing the opinion of a sovereign public with a legitimate claim for recognition by established power.

Fascinatingly to media studies, Habermas' historical account shows how a free press supported citizens' exercise of autonomy, via the deliberation and expression of public opinion among other forms of political action in the public sphere. This complemented citizens' increasing autonomy via legal rights, entrepreneurial opportunities and consumer choices in the private sphere. Indeed, for Habermas the homology between market and social freedoms is significant – just as the market requires transparency of pricing, consensus over value and an unfettered marketplace for transactions, so too does the realisation of citizenship require transparency of information, accountability regarding procedure and fair rights to participate.

By the mid 20th century, however, notwithstanding widespread social consensus and contentment (Almond and Verba, 1963), Habermas identified a democratic deficit fuelled by conditions that would soon lead, in the late 1960s and 1970s, to turmoil and crisis in civil rights, life politics, Cold War tensions, union protest and economic instability. Eschewing the liberal view that such problems could be addressed through technical adjustments of welfare or taxation, Habermas pointed to problems of political apathy (linked to the rise of consumer society), representative democracy (which distanced the public from politics) and the welfare state (which created a softening of class divisions and increasing intrusion of public administration into private lives). Together, these problems exacerbated the process of individualisation, leading to a loss of political consciousness, especially class consciousness (Villa, 2008). At the same time, Habermas identified a now destructive role for the media – instead of being a source of creative disorganisation that promoted public autonomy and public life, the press had become a vehicle for established power. Outhwaite (1994: 10) sums up Habermas' scepticism thus:

The principle of the bourgeois public sphere, the critical assessment of public policy in terms of rational discussion oriented to a concept of the public interest, turns into what Habermas calls a manipulated public sphere in which states and corporations use 'publicity' in the modern sense to secure for themselves a kind of plebiscitary acclamation.

This narrative of first optimism and then growing pessimism proved fruitful for late 20th-century media studies. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* was translated just as academics were getting to grips with major changes. Because of globalisation, media, polity and culture were no longer neatly aligned (if they ever had been) with the nation-state. Media organisations were converging across borders while genres hybridised, platforms digitised and audiences diverged within and across cultures. And the 'mass' of mass media was irrevocably undermined (though not displaced) by the burgeoning of interactive and networked media.

Appropriation of the public sphere in media studies

Those who put Habermas' ideas to work within media studies found themselves engaging with a stimulating array of intellectual and interdisciplinary debates regarding the crisis of modernity. For example, looking back on our own work of that period, audience participation shows seemed to encapsulate these changes, being a new infotainment genre that purported to give the public a voice on an equal footing with representatives of established power and yet, at the same time, attracted

widespread condemnation for staging a managed show, even a freak show, of manipulated public opinion (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994). Following Habermas, and without being naïve as to commercially motivated machinations aimed at ‘plebiscitary acclamation’, we nevertheless discerned moments of genuine public access, deliberation and engagement among audiences both on and in front of the screen. What we did not identify, however, was either the public consensus or political consequence that Habermas expected of the public sphere, leading us – along with many others – to turn to alternative conceptions of the public sphere that instead valorised the visible inclusion of otherwise-marginalised voices and the at-times agonistic expression of difference (Fraser, 1990; Mouffe, 2000).

Those who appropriated Habermas’s analysis of the public sphere in media studies also had to engage with the many criticisms levelled at the concept of the public sphere. These concerned Habermas’s account of history (regarding the press, the bourgeoisie, relations of state and civil society), his political analysis (particularly, his ideal of civic republicanism based on a form of direct democracy that could not accommodate the complexity and scale of modern society) and, last but not least, his apparent blindness to the many varieties of exclusion (based on gender, class, ethnicity, etc.) endemic to the public discussions he so lauded. For although their radical significance was little anticipated in the early post-war period, by the late 20th century the advance of life politics and human rights movements had resulted in a thoroughgoing rethinking of the relation between politics and the everyday, supporting a politics of recognition that, at least in his early work, Habermas had vastly underestimated.

The delayed publication of Habermas’s work in English meant that discussion of the potential and problems of the public sphere coincided with a normative turn in the academy which ran counter to Habermas’s own growing pessimism regarding the media. In the UK, following first a decade of socioeconomic crisis and then a substantial dose of neoliberalism courtesy of Margaret Thatcher, left-leaning media scholars were tiring of Frankfurt School-style critique and seeking, instead, to advocate a positive vision for public institutions. For example, Thatcher’s Conservative government so forcibly attacked the BBC as to bring media critics out in its defence: Curran (1991), Garnham (1992) and Scannell (1989) all sought to articulate how public service broadcasting could and should underpin the public interest and civic culture in a realm otherwise dominated by commercial or state power. For Habermas’s public sphere to provide the theoretical framework for such ideas, his suspicion of established institutions would require rethinking and, though this did not occur in his early work, such concerns have been a preoccupation in Habermas’s subsequent work.

Also problematic for scholars appropriating the public sphere concept within media studies was the way in which Habermas’s early analysis of power, although it drew on the subtleties of Weber’s work, was challenged by the growing influence of Foucault’s (1977) incisive analysis of power. Undermining a clear distinction between system and life-world, for Foucault power operates at a distance from the state, focusing on persuasion more than domination, being dispersed across an array of institutions connecting state, civil society and the public in complex plural societies. So, if deliberation is to play a role in modern liberal democracy, this must be enacted through multiple paths of connection and dependency, enabled or impeded at different

levels and by a host of agencies; the result is the constitution of multiple public spheres rather than a unified expression of popular sovereignty. In short, while Habermas's conception of the public sphere – and of the media – was embedded in the constitutional unit of the nation-state, Foucault's work seemed better suited to the sub-, supra- and transnational power flows and allegiances of a globalising world.

So it is with ambivalence that media scholars have continued to work with the concept of the public sphere. Many adopt the pragmatic view that the concept establishes a good starting point, a framework against which to test one's ideas and assumptions. But his account of the media was surely better suited to mass media in the context of post-war social reconstruction and Cold War politics of America and Europe than to the complex, multimedia environments that we now inhabit (see, for example, Dahlgren, 2009). Notwithstanding Habermas's scepticism concerning the ability of the media to support deliberation through social engagement in late modernity, is his theory insightful for exploring the potential of new media (see Rasmussen, this volume)? Given his emphasis on an ideal sovereign public based on a unitary public sphere creating social integration through consensus, can his ideas illuminate today's radically pluralistic societies (see McKee and Goode, this volume)? And given his account of political subjectivity anchored in the nation-state, can he help us understand whether contemporary media support the expression of diverse voices in mediated public life (see Chouliaraki, this volume)? To advance these questions, it is crucial to recognise how Habermas has rethought his analysis of public sphere to fit the still-changing conditions of modernity (Holub, 1991). Much of this rethinking centres on his analysis of communication.

Rethinking the concept of the public sphere

Habermas remains committed to his long-term aim of producing a normative democratic theory centred on how public participation, through discursive processes of deliberation, could legitimately influence political decision-making. But he changed his ideas in response to his critics, particularly in relation to the sociological assumptions of public sphere theory. These changes in Habermas's thought arose from a range of ambitious and wide-ranging intellectual engagements in the philosophy of the social science and of language, and sociological theories of power, rationality and law. The starting point was Habermas's involvement in the positivism debate of the 1960s, which led him to argue for a rapprochement between nomothetic and hermeneutic methods, and for a conception of critical reconstruction in place of the historical comparative methods that characterised his earlier work. Though the arguments are complex, they focus on clarifying the relations between knowledge and human interests, enabling Habermas (1987) to move away from a conception of the critical that examined political subjectivity through the method of historical comparison, replacing this with the idea that the potential for public autonomy resides not in political consciousness but in the emergent qualities of communication conducted for the purpose of mutual understanding. In the inevitably sketchy account that follows, we identify key changes relevant to the critical analysis of media and communications.

- First, acknowledging the increasing complexity of modern pluralistic liberal democracies, and the increasing importance of globalisation and

regionalism, Habermas has moved away from a commitment to a singular conception of the bourgeois public sphere so as to recognise a plurality of public spheres. As indicated in his 1984 quote above, Habermas now thinks of the public sphere less in terms of a geographical metaphor (a place where people gather) and more as the consequence of certain forms of communication, wherever and whenever they take place. Consequently, the rethought public sphere is inevitably dispersed, and its legitimacy rests less in the nature of the place where communication occurs and instead in the nature of the communication itself.

- Second, instead of deliberation ideally resulting in consensus and a sovereign public, Habermas now embraces the contested nature of public life, the importance of recognition of diverse identities and, therefore, the legitimacy of multiple forms and sites of deliberation. He retains the idea that the political realm is of special significance in human affairs, arguing that even in complex, pluralistic societies, it is only politics that has the capacity to draw threads of common understanding out of the diversity of worldviews and values. He theorises this distinction by distinguishing the articulation of difference (ethics) from attempts to resolve or reach compromises on differences or disputes (morals).

- Last, Habermas has significantly relaxed his scepticism towards institutions, thus allowing him to explore the conditions under which institutions might play a vital role in creating and sustaining processes of deliberation and public engagement. Accepting much of Foucault's account of power and the arts of governance and Luhmann's (1995) systems theory, Habermas explores the case of the law to illuminate how institutions can play a positive role in establishing the conditions for public life.

No longer is bourgeois conversation specifically idealised, as in Habermas's original formulation of the public sphere, because he has moved away from conceiving of the idealised political consciousness of the participant in the public sphere. Rather, Habermas has created a minimal ethics by which to evaluate all kinds of communication, thus inquiring into the ethical commitments – the normative claims that free individuals make of one another – that can occur in any kind of communication (cf. his inquiry into 'discourse ethics'; Habermas, 1984, 1996). He identifies four kinds of validity claims – namely that we aim to speak the truth, to be comprehensible, to say what we are entitled to say, and to express what we are sincere about – that capture the reciprocity necessary for communication to reach mutual understanding. Through communicative action, individuals submit their claims for comparison with competing claims and interests. What results is a continuing commitment to critical flexibility that implicitly recognises the claims of others and that is willing to be guided by the better argument. Reflecting, for instance, on the Gilligan–Kohlberg debate over moral development, Habermas (1984) acknowledges the merits of Gilligan's ethic of care, arguing that in a post-traditional society, where fixed points of identity are thrown into question, a reflexive rather than principled or universalist attitude among participants in communicative action better fits them to reach agreement or compromise and thereby realise political community through the exercise of their public autonomy (White, 1988).

Habermas now embraces the indeterminacy and context-dependency of a discursive

(rather than psychological) conception of the political subject. Yet, in an audacious intellectual move, he remains committed to the view that modernity, including the post-traditional discursive subject, is not just another way of living or another set of conventions but, rather, represents a significant achievement in human and social development. Certain aspects of modern subjectivity, he suggests, can transcend the immediate social conditions of action, offering universal validity to social action without the metaphysical commitments associated with grand narratives grounded in the philosophy of the subject. In particular, he argues that communicative action, being oriented to mutual understanding, differs from other forms of rationalisation (such as instrumental reason, or conventions that reinforce a social group or community) precisely because entering a dialogue aimed at mutual understanding commits the participants to accept the terms and the outcomes of deliberation. For Habermas, this creates two significant consequences: first, that public discourse can legitimately claim to be recognised as offering more than the mere expression of interest; second, that through such communication, deliberation can extend beyond the political sphere in a way that is not prone to manipulation and control.

Implications for institutions in the public sphere

Habermas's effort to understand how modernity creates the conditions in which a distinct kind of public autonomy could be realised through communicative action leads him to be critical of Weber's account of rationalisation. He argues that Weber neglected the potential benefits of post-traditionalism, leading him to overstate the loss of freedom and of meaning in a disenchanted world. For Habermas, modernity enables the value sphere to be grounded in specialist institutional contexts that develop specific forms of knowledge and argumentation linked to corresponding cultural spheres. Specifically, he considers the relation of science to technology, morality to the law, and aesthetic knowledge to the practice of art and literature. Each of these specialised forms of expertise, and each of the cultural spheres that they underpin, is premised on forms of reasoning not limited to instrumental aims or the expression of interest. Science establishes rules of evidence, testing and argument in a manner independent of doctrine, morality and tradition. Ethics, instead of being dominated by religion, can be subjected to examination in political theory and jurisprudence, tested through the legal process and scrutinised by wider public debate. And through the practice of art and literature, aesthetics escapes the dominance of ecclesiastical and aristocratic patronage, thereby affording the development of a public realm of art criticism and debate (Habermas, 1984; White, 1988).

So, where Weber understood rationalisation as resulting in the dominance of purposive rationality, Habermas understands the rationalisation of worldviews (through considerations of truth, value and aesthetics) to provide a new model of thinking about and engaging with the world – via a decentred subject, communities of scholars and professionals, and the broader public. Consequently, rather than seeing the life-world as dominated and polluted by power, he sees it as being rejuvenated by the critical faculties of individuals engaged in communicative action informed by the ways of thinking, engaging and arguing developed in the specialist spheres, providing models of argument and ways of engaging as decentred subjects. What does this mean for institutions? In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), Habermas asks how the fact of power can be integrated with the norms of consent. Of the various forms of expertise, Habermas (1996) is most interested in the law, which he sees as successfully

integrating power (the law can coerce and control us) and legitimation (the formulation, revision and application of the law operates through consent). Drawing on the sociology of the law, Habermas then identifies a set of ideals according to which institutions could act and by which they can be held accountable if they are to enable civic republican values.

These we found insightful in our critical analysis of the UK media and communications regulator Ofcom, a regulator precisely set up to further the interests of citizens and consumers (Lunt and Livingstone, 2012). Thus we end by summarising Habermas's ideals for institutions acting in the public sphere, noting their particular relevance to media studies.

- First, institutions can support deliberation by addressing their audiences in different ways – as individuals, as citizens, as representatives of civil society. This address may take different forms, and it matters whether the individual is treated as the liberal individual (or consumer, making choices and expressing preferences), a bearer of rights or as a participant in public life. Institutional address to the public could appeal to various public virtues, including active political participation.

- Second, a progressive media ethics would combine tolerance for diverse ethical positions (ways of living) with the moral view that different ethical positions should be addressed in terms of the broader public interest. Then, the media, insofar as they instantiate public values or ambitions, should combine an ethnographic sensibility to difference with a public interest approach to conflict arising from such differences.

- Third, journalists and media institutions should contribute to creating the conditions of possibility for participation and deliberation by adopting the position of an institution operating in the public sphere. This should include inviting (or researching) the expression of public discourse and then translating the key issues and concerns of the public into a language that is intelligible to the political administrative complex.

- Fourth, media institutions should contribute to the constitution of a civic republic by actively engaging the public in the production of news and current affairs by creating a public sphere around each institution as part of the dispersed institutional sites of the new governance structures.

In conclusion, we have discussed how, in his later work, Habermas has accepted the sociological critiques levelled at his original account of the public sphere, now recognising the importance of inclusivity, diversity, identity, the end of consensus government, distributed governance, and the complexity of social systems. But he does not regard these developments as challenging his normative approach, retaining the public sphere as an ideal if not a sociological reality. Indeed, his updated engagement with the sociological conditions of late modernity allows him to finesse his concept of norms in relation to discourse ethics and communicative action. The question for media scholars is, then, is this normative vision valuable (shall we retain it – as debated by Goode and McKee?), sufficient (are other norms compatible with it, as discussed in Chouliaraki's article about recognition of the vulnerable who cannot speak for themselves) or sustainable (as interrogated in Rasmussen's examination of

the implications for the public sphere of the digital networked society)?

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