

Community Broadcasting: Publics, Participants and Policies

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The Public Sphere

In the middle of the 20th century, new technologies such as radio and film were gaining mass audiences, extending the ubiquitous reach of newspapers, to form what Horkheimer and Adorno (1992) named the “culture industries”. They theorized that the rise of large cultural industry players had created a structured, supply-driven system that: “integrates its consumers from above” and was negating the opportunities for individuals and small groups of producers to comprise “a more diverse and pluralistic platform for societal understanding” (Adorno 1991, 99). The phenomenon of “media” evolved to gain acceptance in the collective consciousness of western societies, but also retained the components of social and cultural activities (Briggs and Burke 2009). Horkheimer and Adorno also recommended that sociology needed to take a deeper look at how individuals and structures interact, and that researching the development of public policy should include not just an examination of the actors' behavior, but also an exploration of the value systems upon which the actions were based. Jurgen Habermas, a student and protege of Horkheimer and Adorno at the Frankfurt School, published his 1961 habilitation thesis *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, a landmark work that explores themes of democracy, social developments, civil society and the role of media. It also generated numerous critiques and further discussions on these subjects that still resonate today and form a theoretical foundation for this research project.

The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere argues that a participatory bourgeois public sphere of real discourse among equals that transformed into a site of spectator politics manipulated by elites who took control of the medium (Habermas 1989, 159). For Habermas, the public sphere merged the private concerns of literate individuals regarding family and social integration with the larger public concerns of society. These concerns were presented in spaces reserved for open discourse among citizens and delineated through argumentative discourse intended to identify and prioritize interests for the common good. Individuals could inform and influence public opinion, even if it was in opposition to the current political status quo. Habermas stated: "The public sphere as a functional element in the political realm was given the normative status of an organ for the self-articulation of civil society with a state authority corresponding to its needs" (74).

Populating this public sphere are the citizens who, through their participation, seek communication, representation, and association. They participate as individuals initially, but also constituting groups that, aggregating around shared issues and/or interests, become “publics” (Newman and Clarke 2009). Enabled by the democratic revolutions of the late 18th century, participation in these public meetings became protected by law, representing early examples of free speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the press (Antonio and Keller 1992). The resulting protections facilitated the role of the public sphere as a secure place for individuals and groups to discuss issues of common interest and organize against what they viewed as the sources of social and political oppression.

According to Habermas, the degradation of the public sphere began in the late 19th century concurrent with the societal transition to a system marked by merging economic and political forces, the decline of the individual, and the manipulation of the culture industries. In this new environment, public opinion became the province of newspapers with large circulations controlled by powerful corporations seeking to direct the masses away from participatory discourse, and towards a passive consumption of information, opinion and culture. In this new 20th century dynamic of mass media as the public sphere, citizens become mere spectators, reverting from participants in discursive activity into commodities of a consumption society, reminiscent of their original feudal status in the Middle Ages. He also noted the problem was exacerbated with the development of the newly powerful broadcast media: "With the arrival of new media [radio and television] the form of communication as such has changed; they have had an impact, therefore, more penetrating (in the strict sense of the word) than was ever possible for the press...They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under “tutelage,” which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree" (Habermas 1989, 170).

Despite his somewhat dire view of the state of post-modern society and the re-feudalization of its public sphere, Habermas did not end the volume in a defeatist manner. He instead responded by postulating on some tentative solutions to the revitalization of the degraded public sphere. Early in his text, he described the evolution of the public sphere and participatory democracy as existing first in the exchange of texts and discussions of culture, then later including political content, distributed to the public via pamphlets and newsletters. He wrote: "The public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters; through the vehicle of public opinion it put the state in touch with the needs of society" (Habermas 1989, 31). Proposing a solution to the degradation of the public sphere, he suggests a return to that original form, ostensibly after the reform of current mass media structures and environments. He hoped it would enable true discourse in a "critical process of

public communication through the very organizations that mediatize it" and foster "a critical publicity brought to life within intraorganizational public spheres" (232).

Because of its iconic stature, Habermas' *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* has come under considerable scrutiny by media scholars. Critics argue that the theory has flaws, chiefly concerning the questions of how his idea can be applied universally in democratic societies (Burnett and Jaeger 2008). They contend, for example, that even the idealized version of the public sphere described by Habermas excludes large portions of society, such as women and marginalized groups (Fraser 1992). Others argue that he mistakenly limits public discourse to a single sphere when in fact many spheres (and counter publics) of discourse can be identified (Thompson 1995, Hauser 1999). Michael Edwards (2004) asserts that public spheres are present at different levels in most societies, varying according to societal and political influences. He says "a single, unified public sphere would be impossible at any significant scale" (57). Habermas himself questioned the overarching primacy of the concept, suggesting a more fragmented form for discussions of social cultural and political representations not effectively propagated in society by the mainstream media, conceding that he presents a "stylized picture of the liberal elements of the bourgeois public sphere" (1992, xix).

Another important societal dynamic that critics contend Habermas' original work generally ignores is the division of class, and the resulting divisions in spaces for discussion represented by alternative public spheres (Garnham 1986). Habermas' original conceptualization of the bourgeois public sphere afforded access to citizens as equal parties. However, he acknowledged in his preface the existence of an alternative sphere - the plebian public sphere - that arose as a counter public to the literary public sphere in the late 19th century period of the French revolution. While holding similar philosophies of access and participation as their literary contemporaries, the plebian public sphere was the product of an underclass of workers and peasants. Habermas wrote in his later critique that "from the beginning a dominant bourgeois public collides with a plebeian one" (1992, 430), and that the original work "underestimated the significance of oppositional and non-bourgeois public spheres".

That class division is further exemplified by the concept of the "proletariat public sphere". Following the 19th century transformation of Europe into a more consumer-centric society, the upward mobility of participants from business and government created a new more exclusive bourgeois class. These new more powerful individuals then proceeded to co-opt the phenomenon for their commercial and political interests. That led to the development in the 20th century industrial age of another alternative counter public, labeled in the Marxist context as the "proletariat public sphere" (Knodler-Bunte 1975). This form arose among groups of

workers, anarchists and Marxists in the political spectrum, and progressed to be a formidable site for discourse counter to the dominant narrative of wealthy oligarchs and the corporations they controlled. Scholars have identified a similar dynamic in the formation of alternative public spheres by other societal groups seeking sites for discourse and inclusion. Nancy Fraser (1992, 123) argues that minority groups: "have repeatedly found it advantageous to constitute alternative publics or subaltern counterpublics engaging in parallel discursive arenas in order to invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs". However, this dynamic has created publics that are: "differentially empowered or segmented" leading to: "the weak character of some public spheres in late capitalist societies that denudes public opinion of practical force" (ibid, 137).

Alternative media often provide the frameworks for citizens' participation in a public sphere of democratic processes, not just as a receiver of media outputs, but through the production and delivery of their own opinions (Langlois and DuBois 2005). In alternative media, citizens can actualize their political power and protect themselves from dominant powerful political forces by mitigating the inherent imbalance of societal power relations (Held 1996). The critical theorist Foucault (1980) recognized the significance of discursive activities in developing and producing ideas in a political sphere where power could be generated in a multidirectional fashion, countering the hegemonic stature and top-down structure of mainstream media. Indeed, this meaning also applies to media organizations and their philosophy of external interrelation in the democratic media and political environments, as this interrelatedness contributes to the dialogue necessary for an open and functional democracy (Dahl 2001). The interactive approach to political action is also noted by Sandoval and Fuchs (2009, 4), who assert "rooted in social political and historical contexts, the interrelations between individual media actors and media structures constitute the societal impacts of the media system".

The concept of media power is also illustrated in the debate over media ownership. When communities are mere users, but not owners of the platform, they have limited control over the ultimate role the medium plays in society. For many alternative media advocates, this system is merely an endorsement of Habermas' contention that the public sphere, while initially providing a real opportunity for citizens' participation, is subsequently co-opted by the acquisition and concentration of ownership by power elites (McChesney 2008). In addition, negative stereotypical misrepresentations by dominant mainstream media can be especially damaging to many marginalized segments of society, causing deep feelings of resentment towards otherwise recognized and respected societal institutions. According to the American civil rights activist Malcolm X (1963) "The media is the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, because they control the minds of the masses".

The function of community broadcasting as an independent site for political engagement and action is an important one for the organizational development behind ideology. These alternative broadcasters can be seen as “discursive spaces”, according to the political scientist Susan Herbst (1994, 4). She writes: “Within marginal publics, community building is critical. Political groups create parallel public spaces where they develop political community and mobilize political resources”. Both internal and external development of communication and collaboration in the organizational context of community broadcasting are seen as effective platforms to build media power. Indeed, the media power of community broadcasting is generated by individuals and communities with strong ideological agendas constructing and elaborating narratives in a genuine public sphere of democratic discourse (Price 2007).

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