

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

Book review: Ruth Wodak & Veronika Keller (eds.), Handbook of communication in the public sphere. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008

## Journal Item

### How to cite:

Alevizou, Panagiota (2010). Book review: Ruth Wodak & Veronika Keller (eds.), Handbook of communication in the public sphere. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008. *Language in Society*, 39(4) pp. 555–561.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2010 Cambridge University Press

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:  
<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1017/S0047404510000448>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

RUTH WODAK & VERONIKA KOLLER (eds.), *Handbook of communication in the public sphere*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2008. Pp. xx, 462. Hb. \$257.

Reviewed by PANAGIOTA ALEVIZOU  
*Institute of Educational Technology, Open University*  
*Walton Hall*  
*Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA, UK*  
*p.alevizou@open.ac.uk*

***[Author's accepted manuscript]***

The linguistic turn in media and communications has led “discourse” to become a key category for bringing together a variety of traditions in the field. Likewise, due to an expansion in applied linguistics in recent years, this field has also come to explore the extent to which communication in various public domains is typified by power patterns and asymmetries. Exploring the tensions surrounding definitions of the “public” or the nature of “participation” requires linking recurring communicative patterns to a variety of fluid societal practices; it requires making connections between institutional processes and ideological positions that prevail in mediated articulations of citizenship, domains of governance, and accountability. It is in this context that nineteen contributors from four continents and five traditions have come together to illuminate the diversity of discursive meaning in the public spheres of business, politics, and media.

Each of these domains comprises chapters in intersecting area(s) of scholarship: organizational and corporate communication, political communication and rhetoric, philosophy of communication, media studies, and language and social interaction. From this variety of intellectual standpoints all of the essays touch upon debates in the public sphere, which are central to the democratic functioning of societies. Some essays address the troublesome ambiguity of the concept. Others offer renewed articulations of the “public” within emerging

discourses of security, humanitarianism and environmentalism, especially at the points at which these are heightened by conditions of cosmopolitanism and internetworking.

In the introduction, Ruth Wodak & Veronika Koller explore the three strands in public-sphere research that offer enunciated critiques of the Habermasian model: (a) the critical division between the “system” and the “life-world” that are central in sociolinguistics and critical discourse analysis (e.g. Wodak 1996), (b) the breakup of homogenous, reasoned debate into a myriad of practical and habitual modes regulating counter and parallel discursive arenas of public dialogue (e.g. Fraser 1995) and (c) the contradictory and contested nature of dialogue and participation, whereby rationality is replaced by “heteroglossia” and a semiotic understanding of meaning creation is required (Bakhtin 1986). While the first two strands—informed by late modern and postmodern traditions—emphasize the intersections of language and representation through notions of life-world and plurality respectively, the third school stresses the interplay between different historical milieux and the wider social relationships that shape the multiplicity and hybrid nature of the public sphere. It is this third tradition that informs the conceptual organization of the book, which presents institutional and social arenas in which the public sphere is defined as a contested participatory site, as a communicative space for overlapping individual as well as political orientations and negotiations.

The theoretical foundations for the study of communication in the public sphere are explored in the first section of the book. Analytically, the focus here is on the ways in which the “public” and “participation” function as discursive tropes and communicative constructs, historically, and under conditions of globalization and mediation. The first chapter, by Scott Wright, offers a critical discussion of the Habermasian concept and the various debates that have informed its critique. Juxtaposing a theoretical discussion of “public space” and “common

goods” with contemporary manifestations of the “proprietary” as “exclusionary,” Phil Graham, in Ch. 2, also emphasizes the centrality of language in the production and maintenance of political, social, and economic commonalities. Phil Graham offers a novel critique of debates on public opinion from a cultural political economic perspective. He goes on to argue that the more recent tensions surrounding intellectual property battles – and the interrelated colonization of cyberspace by corporate interests – are embedded in dominant discourses of fear, risk protectionism, and surveillance. Though interesting, this approach does little to contextualize the evolution of cyberspace or the hybrid tensions among public spaces, private interests, collaborative ethics, and collective identities manifested in open source/content communities, for example. Nonetheless, the chapter offers a useful framework for analyzing the ways in which fluid processes of communication and mediation shape our understanding of action in public space(s). Tracing the movements of discourse about and within public space(s) through linguistic analysis certainly reveals changing meaning potentials at different levels of social organization. Exploring, too, the ways in which processes of mediation are manifested—at institutional, representational and cultural levels—, may reveal the symbolic power under which language is shaped (Thumim, 2009).

Also seeking to disentangle the dialectic of discourse and social practice through processes of mediation, Nick Couldry addresses the challenge that has confronted media effects/reception traditions through a reworking of Émile Durkheim’s notion of CATEGORY. To operationalize this, Couldry combines Pierre Bourdieu’s conceptions of habitus/taste as an interpretative resource with the Austrian tradition of critical discourse analysis. He argues that media discourse can naturalize social categories in two principal ways: first, through gentrified typologies (such as “celebrity” and “liveness” or “directness” and “reality”) that are involved in

media organizations' continuous attempt to legitimize their authority as central, social institutions, and second, via specific categories of social description whose reinforcement through media is coupled with structural conditions of media production and transmission. Broadening our understanding of the ways in which media texts can shape social action, this approach also offers a rethinking of media influences, not only by seeing them as resources with which individuals are able to interpret media texts, but also, more broadly, by locating them within the patterns of social organization through which media-oriented practices are situated or certain instances of interpretation are made to appear natural (84). The case of reality TV's power to endorse celebrity values—through a hybridization of the public and the private, the spectacular and the mundane, the scripted and the spontaneous, the familiar and the ritualized, thus contributing to effects of apparent cultural democratization while reinforcing established social distinctions—is emblematic of this relationship between media texts and social action (Couldry 2004, Lunt 2004).

Closing the first part of the book, Michelle Lazar (Ch. 4) considers the ways in which language and communication constitute, reflect, and challenge gendered power asymmetries that underscore participation in public spheres. Drawing on a critical overview of liberal feminist and postfeminist traditions, Lazar more specifically proposes the dismantling of the public/private divide and a radical revision of gender order that accounts for “politicization of the personal” as a means for assessing participation in educational and professional domains.

The blurring of boundaries between the public and private and the tensions between inclusion and exclusion are themes that prevail throughout the volume. The sections on business and political communication highlight the tensions and contradictions surrounding the public and the private, tensions that are necessitated by the alignment of corporate discourse in several

public and political domains, and the blurring of boundaries between the citizen/consumer categories expressed in debates surrounding policy agendas and regulation markets. Ch. 5, by Guy Cook, considers the construction of the public by PUBLIC RELATIONS—a form of persuasive communication akin to propaganda deployed by the forces of the market as well as by practitioners and lobbyists in politics and policy alike. A case in point is the “technologization of discourse” (Fairclough 1996) in public and nongovernmental organizations, discussed by Gerlinde Mautner in Ch. 6. While public organizations’ tendency in professionalizing communications design and strategies of branding is considered a response to competing and global forces for media visibility and stakeholder engagement, an equally important agenda has to do with political branding. The interdiscursive alignment of public relations and sphere(s), with the CORPORATION and the NATION as core components, features in analytical accounts in the press coverage of New Labour’s first term (1997–2001) in Britain. Lidia De Michelis (Ch. 9) argues that such changes in the construction of nationhood can be seen as a vehicle for an ideological attempt to alter the process of political culture by adapting to managerial ritualization of politics along quasi-corporatization. Interestingly, such changes have given rise to a new style of regulatory bodies, regimes, and styles, seeking to represent the interests of the “public” as “citizen-consumers” (cf. Livingstone et al. 2007).

Brand image and political accountability have both reemerged in the field of what is commonly known as CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY (CSR). Aud Solbjørg Skusltad, in Ch. 8, offers a historical account of the corporate environmental report as an emergent genre for understanding the visual and linguistic rhetoric of this form of CSR. The communication of organizational identity and inscribed alongside actual reception are objects of analysis in a number of chapters about corporate and political communication. Veronica Koller’s contribution

(Ch. 7) offers a novel method for analyzing internal and external discourse in researching the processes of production, distribution, and reception of corporate identity and impression management. Accounting for the circuits of corporate identity mediation may be difficult, because capturing the cultural circuits of mediation requires more sociocognitive input than the texts themselves demonstrate. This may require conducting more systematic analyses stemming from audience research/interpretation or accounting for the socioeconomic context in which such textually mediated interactions take place, as Koller points out (169).

The interdiscursive alignment of corporate communication with various areas of the public sphere may involve a reconsideration of, as Dahlgren (1991:16) puts it, “the interactions between members of the public, the media-public interface, as well as media output itself.” On the one hand, this leads to the reconceptualization of the public as a PROCESS within a framework of particular communities, accounting thus for sociocultural traits and contingencies. On the other hand, it may lead to a reconsideration of the nature, definition, and nuances of public discourse, accounting not only for hybrid or universalizing political terminologies and campaigning/press strategies, but also for novel structures of participation, inclusion, and exclusion. Treating political actors as members of particular communities of practice with shared semantics and typologized vocabularies does not mean that variations in polity do not exist. Tracing commonalities in the Anglo-American polities, Paul Chilton opens up Part 2, “Language and communication in politics,” with a theoretical account of shared semantics in key political terms. Ch. 11, by Martin Reisigl, extends the treatment of language in politics from the lexical level to the level of genre. Typifying political speeches on the basis of thematic, functional, or rhetorical criteria and genre mediation, this impressive contribution demonstrates how orally performed speeches may realize conventionalized activity patterns with inscribed and actual

audiences. The positionality of audience in political oratory is addressed, and the historical delimitation of the genre(s) is considered. Yet, aside from implied reception, evidence of public engagement and interaction are not addressed, especially with respect to the contemporary context of multimodality and mass media dispersal and reception.

Analyses of the media–public interface at the textual level have led some contributors in both the political and media sections to offer accounts of exclusion. Intrinsic to the hybrid corporate–polity model are renewed models of propaganda in the form of public relations for securing consumer loyalty, political majorities, or media attention. These may lead to novel forms for manufacturing consent, as Florian Oberhuber’s contribution on the dissemination and implementation of political concepts demonstrates, such as covertly structuring consensus-based hegemonic media forms, as Kay Richardson’s study (Ch. 17) of public-debate formats illustrates. And while participation is redefined by new media, coming to purport new forms of civic engagement, degrees of influence or access to the public sphere may be constrained by long-standing structures of inclusion and exclusion pertaining digital and socioeconomic divides (Helmut Gruber, Ch. 16). Normalized discourses around nationhood and ethnic identity, the creation of stereotypes and exclusionary prejudices through the naming, framing and interrelating of Difference and the construction of the Other are characteristic of populist right-wing rhetoric at pan-European level, as Ruth Wodak argues (Ch. 13), demonstrating a constant negotiation of subject positions and social identities. Discussing exclusion from public discourse in its extreme form, Christine Anthonissen’s study (Ch. 18) of censorship in South African newspapers is evocative of a political culture whereby silencing no longer required political legitimating.



The hybrid boundaries of the private and public, the political and the personal, the informational and the entertaining, pertaining to civic engagement and public participation are expressed in various articulations. Werner Holly's (Ch. 14) contribution on the tabloidization of political communication, for example, charts common ground in the media and politics interface. Akin to the Habermasian account of the colonization of the political by the media system, Holly contributes an analytics of tabloidization leading to spectacle, dramatization, aestheticization. Holly argues that either "depoliticized contexts" or "politainment"—a stylized blurring of the boundaries between the emotionality of popular culture and the informative relevance of political news—may be threatening the formation of informed public opinion and civic engagement. The author is careful to point that the positive dimensions of popularization of "symbolic politics" and the reorientation of the political in the entertaining does not necessarily lead to apathy or disempowerment. Yet, this account exaggerates the media effects at the intersections of consumer civic culture, failing to take into account the interactions of the public precisely at the point of such intersection, or the ways in which journalism helps or hinders stimulating dialogue, debate and participation (Dahlgren 1991, Gitlin 1998).

Computer-mediated communication has the potential to reenunciate the double meaning of virtual and self representation, allowing people access to numerous imagined communities, opening space for new discursive practices of expression, identity, and participation (Rodney Jones, Ch. 19). Far from being celebratory, Jones' theoretical account of participation in online, networked spaces considers the intersection of media genre and identity politics through the intersections of power, action, and literacy. Though this account of two Chinese teenagers' appropriation of online networks points to some interesting insights about peripherality, representation, or resistance to, and renegotiation of, strict parental and educational boundaries,

its anecdotal nature neither considers the power–action–literacy challenges outlined in the first part, nor permits generalization.

The complex of continuities with a variety of popular and professional communicative forms in the field of corporate, political, or popular communication creates a horizon of assimilation in cases such as corporate social responsibility or personalized (corporate and political) identity formats. At the same time, it affords hybridity and dynamism in genres such as broadcast “debate” formats, news reality TV, and celebrity, in formats that are globally accepted in a discursively diverse world (Theo van Leeuwen, Ch. 15; Hmut Gruber, Ch. 16).

The quest to define power in potentially global discourse communities—and globalization is the third prevailing theme in this volume—is perhaps most obviously the case for both multinational corporations and large NGOs, who metaphorically style themselves as “global players” seeking to communicate a unified brand image, while addressing diversity of the ways in which they understand their accountability. Global media corporations are being seen as homogenizing forces communicating similar formats in their diversified media outlets. At the same time, active uses and spheres of reception indebted to local histories and cultures are also accounted for (Chs. 4, 18, 19). Given the tension between global and local forces in shaping public discourses, the book offers a diversity of views ranging from the pessimistic (see Graham, Ch. 2) to the cautiously optimistic (Mautner, Ch. 6).

This interdisciplinary volume combines fields such as critical discourse analysis, genre analysis, multimodality, pragmatics, and cognitive semantics. What the approaches have in common “is that they link social theories and social change back to concrete textual instances of a whole range of genres that shape public communication and culture” (15). This range of genres

would have been more diverse if it had included studies of language and communication in the interactions of the public and in subaltern spheres or alternative media.

#### REFERENCES

- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1986). *Speech genres and other late essays*. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (eds.), Verne W. McGee, (trans.). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Couldry, Nick (2004). Liveness, “reality” and the mediated habitus from television to the mobile phone. *The Communication Review* 7(4):353–61.
- Dahlgren, Peter (1991). Introduction. In Peter Dahlgren & Colin Sparks (eds.), *Communication and citizenship: Journalism and the public sphere in the new media age*, 1–26. London: Routledge.
- Fairclough, Norman (1991). Technologisation of discourse. In Carmen-Rosa Caldas-Coulthard & Malcom Coulthard. (eds.), *Texts and practices*, 71–83. London: Routledge.
- Fraser, Nancy (1995). Politics, culture and the public sphere: Toward a postmodern conception. In Linda Nicholson & Steven Seidman (eds.), *Sociological postmodernism: Beyond identity politics*, 287–314. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gitlin, Todd (1998). Public sphere or public sphericules. In Tamar Liebes & James Curran (eds.), *Media, ritual and identity*, 175–202. London: Routledge.
- Livingstone Sonia, Lunt, Peter; & Miller, Laura (2007). Citizens, consumers and the citizen-consumer: Articulating the citizen interest in media and communications regulation. *Discourse and Communication* 9(1):63–89.

Lunt, Peter (2004) Liveness in reality television and factual broadcasting. *The Communication Review* 7(4):329–35.

Thumim, Nancy (2009) ‘Everyone has a story to tell’: mediation and self representation in two UK institutions’. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(6):617-638.

Wodak, Ruth (1996). *Disorders of discourse*. London: Longman.

(Received 12 October 2009)