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## **Media, Space and Representation Disembodying Public Space**

Clive Barnett

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I want to make a case for the continuing importance of the concept of the public sphere for helping us to understand the role that modern media and communications play in constituting the meanings and practices of democracy. In the first section, after introducing Jürgen Habermas' influential account in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989), I will focus upon the way in which the relationships between media, communication, and representation should be conceptualized. Having established that the public sphere can be understood as referring to various mediated spaces of cultural and political representation, the second section considers the ways of thinking about the geographies of the public sphere that follow from this. The final section illustrates how media publics connect the distinctive rationalities of everyday cultural practices and strategic political action. The elaboration of the concept of the public sphere will be supplemented by examples drawn from research on South African media reform in the 1990s, which illustrate the practical working through of normative assumptions about media, culture, and democracy in a context shaped by contradictory imperatives of national development, democratization, and globalization.

### **Representing: The Public Sphere**

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*,<sup>1</sup> Habermas (1989) argues that the historical emergence of an infrastructure of protected public discussion marks a key moment in the transformation not just of *who* holds political power (the people, as enshrined in the principle of popular sovereignty). It also fundamentally alters the nature of political power itself by transforming *how* power is exercised. Political domination is subordinated to democratic scrutiny by virtue of the accessibility of information to the public, guaranteed by effective rights of free speech, association, and assembly. These enable the active participation of individuals in public discussion and debate. In this way, the exercise of power passes through institutionalized mediums of public deliberation, giving publicly agreed norms a practical efficacy over the actions of economic organizations and political institutions.

The public sphere has a very precise meaning in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. It is one element in a four-way division of the social field. The patriarchal family and the market economy belong to the 'private' realm, while the state is the locus of 'public' authority. The public sphere is defined as an inter-mediating zone between these two realms: the concept refers to the set of practices through which *public opinion* is formed and articulated. In the terms of Habermas' (1984) later social theory, one can divide these four realms into a more complex pattern of cross-cutting relationships: a private realm of communicatively integrated *lifeworld* relations (the family); a private realm of *system* relations (the capitalist

market economy); a public realm of *system* relations (the state); and a public realm of *lifeworld* relations (the literary and political public spheres). 'Public' and 'private' therefore refer to a distinction between practices governed by an orientation towards universal values (the state and the public sphere) and those governed by particularistic values (the family and the market).

The main limitation of Habermas' original account of the public sphere is his tendency to derive the normative significance of public forms of deliberation and decision-making from very specific historical models (see Calhoun 1992; Hohendahl 1979; 1995). In particular, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* privileges a particular set of cultural institutions that are shaped by inequalities of both class and gender. This specificity is reflected in the implicit cultural theory that identifies particular literary capabilities as the conditions of democratic inclusion. The emphasis on the cultivation of literary competencies is related to the consolidation of capitalist property relations. These define the autonomy of the private (masculine) citizens who engage in public deliberation, and also facilitate the circulation of a politically free, commercialized competitive market for information and opinion, in the form of books, newspapers, and pamphlets. This cultural theory of democratic competence underwrites the tragic narrative of the decline of the public sphere in the second part of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which the gendered sub-text of Habermas' account becomes evident. The primary cause of the transformation of the public sphere in the twentieth century is the interweaving of the public and private realms, as the modern state progressively took on responsibilities for the reproduction of the social relations of commodity production and exchange. This is associated with a process in which both the content of politics and the modes of public communication are presented as becoming progressively feminized, not least by the commodification of public communication with the rise of electronic mass media of radio and television (see Lacey 1996; McLaughlin 1993). In turn, the critical function of the public sphere is progressively eroded as the media of public debate are transformed into mediums for the expression of particularistic interests rather than the formation of a universally agreed general interest. The increasingly commodified, as distinct from merely commercialized, mass media become arenas for winning mass approval.

It is when public opinion becomes a mere representation, embodied in intermediaries like opinion polls, pollsters, and experts, rather than being formed through active citizen participation in undistorted communication, that the critical role of the public sphere is undermined. In this model, democratic participation is equated with involvement in rational forms of communication that are oriented to universality, requiring the exchange of ideas between subjects who should properly be indifferent to their own particularistic interests and embodied identities. Accordingly, any attempt to re-shape identities through public action is considered a symptom of a back-sliding towards symbolic forms of so-called representative publicity, in which centralized power is displayed before a passive public. Habermas' narrative of the re-federalization of the public sphere is therefore characterized by a deep *distrust of representation* (Peters 1993). This is most strongly signalled in a particular conceptualization of print-based cultural practices. The textuality of communicative action is the source of the founding ambivalence of Habermas' original account of the media and the public sphere (Lee 1992; Saccamano 1991). On the one hand, the classical liberal public sphere depends upon various print media (pamphlets, newspapers, and novels). However, these mediums are understood merely as conduits for the transmission of information between locales. Habermas explicitly subordinates

the disseminating force of writing to the bounded continuities of idealized conversation (Habermas 1989: 42). The spatial and temporal extension enabled by print media is not therefore allowed to disrupt a model of consensus formation through undistorted dialogue amongst an essentially homogenous reading public.

Habermas' conceptual reduction of print to an idealized norm of conversation drastically narrows the modes of communication through which the problematization of the 'public interest' and the delineation of 'politics' are allowed to take place. Spectacle, display, and other non-verbal forms of communication are understood to reduce citizens to passive spectators, rather than active participants in deliberation. One line of critical elaboration of Habermas' theory has therefore focused upon positively affirming the role that rhetoric, passion, spectacle, and other modes of affective communication play in public life (Calhoun 1997; Keane 1984; Young 1993, 1997). This conceptual critique itself reflects a shift in the repertoires of political action pursued by a diverse range of social movements (Young 2001). If this critical work broadens the range of the legitimate forms of democratic communication, it simultaneously acknowledges that identities of participants are formed and transformed through public communicative practice. And this suggests a revised understanding of the nature of acts of representation. The struggles for representation by a variety of subaltern political subjects replaces an expressive understanding of representation, understood as a means of restoring to presence an already formed identity, with a more strongly constructive, transformative sense of representation. There is no transparent relation of representation because representation is a supplementary process which reveals that identities, interests, or the will are always already non-identical, hence the need for supplementation by an act of representation (Laclau 1993).

Acknowledging the irreducibility of representation<sup>2</sup> in democratic theory suggests that the concept of 'public' is not best understood as a synonym for a social totality or a collective actor, and nor should it be immediately understood as referring to particular public spaces of bounded social interaction. Rather, the sense of the public that can be gleaned from reading Habermas' original account against the grain refers to a set of processes that exist in relation to a temporally and spatially distanced network of circulating texts, images, and symbolic acts (see Warner 2002). The exemplar of this sort of *strung-out, open-ended* public would be those publics constituted by the indeterminate address of various forms of electronic mass media (Scannell 2000). This understanding is implicit in Habermas' original discussion of a public constituted by circulating print media, but his account needs to be freed from the conceptual containment of writing within a closed circuit of dialogue. Lifting this restriction points towards the conceptual and practical relevance for democratic theory of Claude Lefort's account of the imaginary institutionalization of popular sovereignty in democracy (1988: 9-20). According to this understanding, democracy installs 'the people' as the highest sovereign authority, but in so far as the exercise of this sovereignty is necessarily *staged* through the representational medium of public debate, the public is always already dispersed and constitutively pluralized. This post-foundational understanding of democracy depends on abandoning the normative presumption that the public refers to a self-identical collective subject that could be made present in a space of assembly. Rather, the public is always non-identical with itself (Lefort 1986: 273-306).<sup>3</sup> It follows that democratic representation is properly thought of as performative, that is to say, as a set of re-iterative acts that bring into existence the identities that they appear to be merely re-presenting (Derrida 1982; Honig 1991). This is not the equivalent of saying that the public is a mere fiction. This

rejectionist position depends on an all-or-nothing understanding of representation, underwritten by a singularly undemocratic logic of identity and authentic presence (Dostal 1994). Rather, affirming the irreducibility of representation rests on the acknowledgement that democracy depends, at a minimum, on maintaining the right to question the legitimacy, authority, and accountability of unavoidable claims to speak on behalf of absent others.

This sense of the performative character of democratic representation also points to the crucial dimension of temporal non-coincidence of deliberation and decision implied by the concept of public sphere. The distinctive temporal constitution of normative democratic principles is easily elided by the privileging of space as the medium in which multiplicity and plurality can be acknowledged (Massey 1999). The constitutive relationship between democracy, difference, and conflict finds its clearest practical resolution in the weaving together of overlapping temporal rhythms. The meaning of democratic norms is distilled in the development of mechanisms that institutionalize *contingency*, *reversibility*, and *accountability* into decision-making procedures. This folding of different temporal registers is the means for facilitating legitimate binding decision-making in contexts of non-reconcilable difference, enabling the formation of consensual decision-making freed from a horizon of transcendence but maintaining an orientation to the future (Derrida 1992; Dunn 1999).

Acknowledging the temporal dimensions of democratic norms leads to the conclusion that the public sphere should not be thought of as having a definitive, once and for all material form, whether this is understood to be properly embodied in spatial archetypes (e.g. coffee-shops, streets corners, or the idealized heterogeneous public spaces of the cosmopolitan metropolis), or specific institutional configurations (e.g. public service broadcasting). Rather, the public sphere refers to certain sorts of *processes*, ones that certainly has social, institutional, and organizational conditions of possibility, but which should not be conflated with any particular configuration of these. This process-based understanding helps us to specify the significance of principles of free speech in democratic theory. It is a commonplace that, in modern democracies, public deliberation is carried on by professional communicators, including pundits, politicians, and journalists (Page 1996). At one level, this can be seen as a necessary result of a division of labour that follows from the numerical size, geographical scale, and functional complexity of modern societies. More abstractly, however, this returns us to Lefort's argument that democratic authority is an essentially empty place only ever occupied temporarily by proxies (1986: 279). This idea points to the constitutive role of freedom of speech and freedom of the press principles in democratic theory, as well as the irreducibility of the former to the latter. The significance of free speech principles derives in large part from the distinctive temporal relationship between performative *representation* and retrospective *accountability* that characterizes modern democracy. The protection of basic communicative freedoms works, in principle, to prevent the people's representatives from substituting themselves fully for the represented, thereby appropriating the place of power: 'Freedom of public opinion keeps open the possibility that the represented might at any time make their own voices heard' (Manin 1997: 174). Media of public opinion give institutional form to the relationship between the irreducible movement of representation, the folded temporalities of deliberation and decision-making, and the originary dispersal of the public that defines democratic norms. This leads onto the conclusion that the public sphere should be thought of as 'structurally elsewhere, neither lost nor in need of recovery or rebuilding but defined by its resistance to being made present' (Keenan 1993: 135). And this might in turn help us to better understand

where the analytical focus of a political geography of the public sphere should be directed.

### **Rethinking the Geographies of the Public Sphere**

#### *Where is Public Space?*

One of the recurring problems in discussions of Habermas' original theory is the tendency to over-substantialize the public sphere in specific spatial and/or institutional configurations. In geography and urban studies, reference to *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* usually serves as the preliminary to arguments that Habermas' conceptualization needs to be grounded in relation to an analysis of real, material public spaces. The assumption is that Habermas' original conceptualization of the public sphere depends on a metaphorical understanding of material spaces. Debates around the meanings of the public sphere are consequently registered in geography and related fields by a series of discussions of exemplary forms of public, typically urban, spaces (see Goheen 1998, Howell 1993, Light and Smith 1998, Mitchell, D. 1995; Mitchell, K 1997; Zukin 1995). However, the argument that Habermas' public sphere is insufficiently material seems wrong-headed. The problem with *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* is not that it ignores real spaces, but that it conceptually constructs locales of co-presence as the norm for judging the publicness of historically variable practices of social interaction. Furthermore, geographers' determination to translate the public sphere into bounded public urban spaces of co-present social interaction elides Habermas' consistent focus upon the goal-oriented dimensions of public life. It also illustrates a long-standing under-estimation of the significance of communications practices in critical human geography (Hillis 1998).

In contrast to the tendency to romanticize real and material urban public spaces as privileged locations for political action,<sup>4</sup> I want to argue that in a strong and non-metaphorical sense, the media constitute the 'space of politics' implied by the idea of the public sphere (see Dahlgren 2001: 83-86; Bennett and Entmann 2000). This claim rests on recognizing the extent to which the normative significance of the notion of the public sphere is dependent on a strong understanding of political practice as a form of communicative action. That this in turn implies a geographical dimension to public action is captured by Mitchell's (1995, 115) definition of public space as 'a place within which a political movement can stake out the space that allows it to be seen. In public space, political organizations can represent themselves to a larger population'. It is noteworthy, however, that this definition in no way supports a sharp, evaluative distinction between real public spaces and virtual spaces of the media. There are two reasons for this. First, while city spaces might serve as one model for public communication, it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that the important spaces of political communication so defined are just as likely to be radio and television stations, shopping centres, billboards, or even the envelopes through which public utilities bill their clients (Fiss 1996; Sunstein 1995). Second, any stark opposition between real material spaces and virtual media spaces does not hold up because it fails to register the extent to which various social movements deploy a range of dramaturgical strategies of protest that construct 'real' spaces as stages through which to mobilize media attention and thereby project their presence through spatially extensive media networks (e.g. Adams 1996; Calhoun 1989; Barry 2000). On both these counts, if public space is defined in relation to opportunities for addressing and interacting with audiences, then there is no reason to assume that such spaces are

exemplified by shared locales of either spatial or temporal contiguity, rather than distanced media and telecommunications networks (Samarajiva and Shields 1997).

The normative privileging of spaces of contiguity in geography's discussions of public space, as well as reflecting a dominant disciplinary focus upon urban spaces, also derives from a tendency to think of publicness primarily in terms of *sociability* (see Weintraub 1997). This is an understanding that defines public space primarily as a space for the encounter with pluralistic difference. The emphasis on pluralism as a key element of publicness is certainly important, as is focus upon the cultural dimension of this pluralism. However, this emphasis easily slides towards a purist conception of 'the political' defined in stark opposition to more instrumental, purposive understandings of politics. Defining 'the political' as a space of pluralist sociability puts the normative cart before the pragmatic horse, in so far as the qualities of sociability that many writers often define as the essence of public life actually depend on 'a range of decisions, actions, and policies that cannot emerge from the flow of everyday sociability alone' (ibid: 24). In so far as the meaning of politics implies, at least in part, some consideration of the question 'what is to be done?' (Mulhern 2000: 169-174), then it follows that 'we cannot exclude the element of strategic action from the concept of the political' (Habermas 1983: 181). In short, the geography of the public sphere should not be narrowly defined in terms of selected spaces of co-present social interaction, for two related reasons. Normatively, the determination to elide the dependence of *communication* on means of *communications* (Peters 1999) betrays an idealized image of political action as the expression of authentic identity and clear-cut interests. Empirically, the idealization of real and material spaces closes down a full consideration of the geographical constitution of those strategic practices of needs-interpretation and legitimate decision-making that establish the broader conditions of possibility for social interaction guided by norms of civility and respect.

### *The Spatiality of Communicative Power*

One of the fields where Habermas' emphasis on the linkages between the broad cultural conditions of citizenship and the strategic rationalities of political action has been most usefully explored is in media and communications theory. Habermas' ideas on the public sphere have been used to analyze and evaluate the ways in which the organization of mass communications, and broadcasting in particular, have served as mediums of political citizenship, for inculcating broader habits of sociability, and for expanding the scope of care networks (Murdock 1993; Scannell 1989).

Policy discourses and academic theories of the appropriate relationships between media and democratic citizenship have developed in a historical context where broadcasting emerged as a complex of technologies, organizations, and markets that articulated two spatial scales of social activity, the national and the domestic. Broadcasting thus contributed to a process whereby social life became increasingly focused upon the private nuclear family at the same time as the real and imaginary horizons of domestic life were stretched over broader spatial scales through improvements in transport, communications, and mass media (Moore 1993). The fundamental indeterminacy built into the relationships of power and influence characteristic of spatially extensive communications media has been resolved through a combination of paternalism and protectionism. National institutions determined the sorts of programmes that audiences should and should not have access to, in order to

assure the cultivation of appropriate models of citizenship (Collins 1990). These compromises underlie the elevation of an ideal model of public service broadcasting as the embodiment of public sphere principles (see Collins 1993). In turn, the paradigm of mass communications, national integration, and liberal democracy has been deployed in a variety of non-Western contexts (Samarajiva and Shields 1990).

Over the last two decades, stabilized patterns of national regulation of media and communications have been transformed by a set of related processes, including the restructuring of corporate ownership and market control; the development of new communications technologies, such as internet and mobile telephony; the increasing convergence of computing, telecommunications, and media; and the reorganization of the scales at which regulatory and policy decisions are made. The dynamic behind these processes is the drive to produce new material and institutional infrastructures for the extension of capital accumulation over larger spatial scales at accelerated pace. Satellite television, video, the Internet, the Walkman, and mobile telephony are all cultural technologies that have been institutionalized in a round of policy-making and corporate restructuring that has been motivated by an explicit aim to re-scale the stable national regimes of policy and regulation that have historically characterized broadcast radio and television cultures. This process has involved a reorientation of the discourses linking media and citizenship. Champions of globalization and the information revolution deploy an understanding of citizenship that focuses upon the expanded choices of media commodities available to citizens as *consumers*. In contrast, there is a strongly pessimistic strain of policy analysis that sees the increasing accessibility to new media forms made available through globalization as heralding the end of effective national policy regulation in the public interest (e.g. Price 1995; Tracey 1998).

At one level, these debates turn on different understandings of the appropriate scale at which media, citizenship, and political power should be connected up (see Morley and Robins 1995; Schlesinger 1993; 1997). From another perspective, however, they turn more fundamentally on different understandings of the *spatiality of scale* (Low 1997). Nicholas Garnham provides the clearest application of the theory of the public sphere to the analysis of media globalization and its implications for cultural citizenship. Garnham's interpretation of globalization is premised on the assumption that the territorial scope of political power must be matched by the territorial scope of a singular universal media public. The public sphere concept, he argues, necessarily implies a strong concept of universality, understood in a procedural sense as a minimum set of shared discursive rules necessary for democratic communication (see Garnham 2000). On these grounds, globalization is seen as leading to a disempowering fragmentation of the public sphere: 'the problem is to construct systems of democratic accountability integrated with media systems of matching scale that occupy the same social space as that over which economic and political decisions will make an impact. If the impact is universal, then both the political and media systems must be universal. In this sense a series of autonomous public spheres is not sufficient. There must be a single public sphere, even if we might want to conceive of it as made up of a series of subsidiary public spheres, each organized around its own public political sphere, media system, and set of forms and interests' (Garnham 1993: 264). From the assumption that democratic citizenship requires a singular and universal public sphere coterminous with the territorial scale at which effective political power is exercised, Garnham deduces that 'the process of cultural globalization is increasingly de-linking cultural production and consumption from a concrete polity and thus a realizable politics' (Garnham 1997: 70). Consequently,



globalization not only disconnects media systems from the hollowed-out nation-state, but also in so doing it also generates a feeling of powerlessness, expressed in the rise of identity politics.

Garnham's evaluative opposition between the ideal of a universal and singular public sphere versus pluralistic fragmentation triggered by globalization depends upon an unquestioned assumption that political power is naturally territorialized. In order to avoid the rather glum prognosis that this analysis presents, I want to follow John Keane's (1995: 8) suggestion that the public sphere is better understood as 'a complex mosaic of differently sized, overlapping, and interconnected public spheres that force us radically to revise our understanding of public life and its 'partner' terms such as public opinion, the public good, and the public/private distinction'. In contrast to the assumption that political power is always exercised within a territorialized power-container of one scale or another, Keane argues that the conceptual relationships between media and democracy should be based on a networked conception of political power. He suggests that the power of large-scale organizations, like states and corporations, depends on 'complex, molecular networks of everyday power relations' (1991: 146). From this capillary perspective on power, conceptualizations that prioritize unified and territorially bounded media publics are ill-suited to assessing the progressive potential of contemporary transformations in the spatial organization of media and communications, because they underestimate the possibility for a multiplicity of networked spaces of communicative practice to induce changes in organizations and political institutions. It follows that the key analytical question is not whether effective democratic media publics can be constituted at the same global level to match the jump of scale by capital and by administrative and regulatory authorities, but rather whether (and how) actors embedded at different territorial scales are able to mobilize support and resources through spatially extensive networks of engagement (Cox 1998).

### *Media, Movements and the Politics of Scale*

South African media reform in the 1990s can be used to illustrate this reformulated understanding of the relationships between media, politics, and the networked spatiality of scale. Formal democratization has been associated with an opening up of a previously tightly controlled media system to international investment, a diversification of radio and television outlets, increased levels of competition and commercialization, and the heightened commodification of audiences (Barnett 1999). At the same time, as part of a broader emergent culture of transparency and public accountability, an infrastructure of independent media regulation has been established. Taken together, these developments have encouraged a shift in practices of journalism, changes in source strategies, and new norms of what counts as 'newsworthy'. In certain circumstances, these structural and organizational shifts have opened up new opportunities for locally embedded social movements to mobilize media attention as a means of applying pressure on local, provincial, and national political elites. For example, environmental activists in Durban have been able to project local protest against industrial pollution upwards to a national scale of radio and television news by gaining extensive coverage in Durban-based newspapers (Barnett 2003b). There has been a significant increase in the number of stories on 'brown' environmental-justice issues during the 1990s. Furthermore, these stories are increasingly framed to represent the legitimacy of local community mobilization, and

which, since 2001 especially, ascribe significant policy changes to this sort of political action. And the relative success of this example of activism has been in part facilitated by an extensive network of support, maintained through routine Internet and web-based communication with US-based organizations. These networks provide access to various resources, including scientific expertise, discursive frames, and new repertoires of protest, all of which have been critical to the media-oriented strategies of Durban-based activists. In this case, media and communications restructuring has therefore opened up opportunities for new forms of political action. These changes are indicative of a genuine transformation of the scope and effectiveness of the South African public sphere in providing critical public scrutiny of government and corporate power in a context of the formal institutionalization of a liberal representative democratic settlement.

In introducing this example, I do not want to idealize the progressive political potential of 'new media'. Rather, I want to suggest two things. Firstly, this case illustrates that the political significance of communications media is not technologically determined, but in large part depends upon the capacity of social actors for mobilization, organization, and self-representation (Scott and Street 2000). Secondly, the ability of activists to pursue a new form of political action *through* media spaces and communications networks has been dependent on the sorts of politics that have been going on *around* the media in South Africa in this period. The example of environmental activism in Durban illustrates that the material geographies of the public sphere are made up of flows of information, opinion, and ideas that articulate different institutional sites (the media, the home, the workplace, the state) and spatial scales. There is nothing virtual about the publics bought into existence through these networks, whether their medium is the Internet, newspapers, talk-radio, television, or 'zines, if 'virtual' is meant to imply that they are somehow immaterial. These networks are material in a double sense: they are embedded in a tangible infrastructure of institutions, organizations, technologies, and social configurations that are every bit as produced as roads, railways, and buildings (e.g. Streeter 1996); and they are material in the sense of being effective in shaping opinions, decisions and outcomes. Understanding the *production of communicative spaces* (Barnett 2003a) therefore requires us to consider both the geographies of collective action constituted through media and communications networks, and the sorts of organization, mobilization, and interest-group representation that emerge around issues of media access, cross-media ownership, privacy, universal service and so on (see McChesney 1993; Schiller 1999).

By insisting upon the importance of analyzing broader patterns of political organization, I also want to counter a tendency to present new media and communications technologies as providing solutions to unfortunate empirical obstacles of mediation, distancing, and representation. Images of new communications technologies inaugurating a new age of direct democracy should be treated with deep suspicion. Presenting the Internet, for example, as a technological fix that enables instantaneous plebiscites on any number of topics betrays an atomistic model of democracy understood as the expression of privately formed preferences (Elster 1986). By effacing the public formation of interests and identities, it is an understanding that elides a set of crucial questions about the social determination of preferences (see Sunstein 1992).

Again, the South African case provides an example of why the rhetoric of technologically induced direct democracy fails to capture the full complexity of the relationships between media, democracy, and the formation of citizenship.

Historically, South African press, publishing, and broadcasting has not provided a common space of shared public communication. These media have been used to reproduce notions of separate and distinct populations, with their own separate cultures, belonging in separate geographical areas. Consequently, South African citizens have starkly unequal capacities to express their cultural and political preferences through individualized, commodified forms of media provision. Since 1994, broadcasting and telecommunications policies have aimed to foster national integration in an international context of increasing globalization of both sectors (Horwitz 2001). In seeking to overcome the divisive legacies of apartheid media policies, the role of various collective actors from ‘civil society’ in arguing for a politically independent and financially viable public service broadcaster, as well as an accountable system of independent media regulation, has been critical in opening up opportunities for the expression of tastes, interests, and identities that would have otherwise been silenced by a shift towards a fully privatized, de-regulated and market-led media system. One of the most important impacts of international media and telecommunications policy in the 1990s has been the proliferation of independent communications regulators, set up to oversee newly or soon-to-be privatized and liberalized national communications sectors. In this process, the shaping of independent regulatory authorities has become a new site through which citizen participation can be channeled. In South Africa in the mid-1990s, the politics of independent communications regulation saw significant successes for progressive organizations in embedding procedures for accountability, transparency, and public participation in communications policy. This success has been pivotal in the pluralization of media cultures and the democratization of news agendas. However, the ongoing internationalization of South African communications policy has more recently seen the degree of civil participation and democratic accountability curtailed by a prioritization of investment-led regulatory principles. In turn, there is an emerging network of Southern African media activism, sharing information and expertise, and engaging in multiple policy contexts (Barnett 2002a). This internationalization of media reform movements underscores the point that the success of campaigns for the continuing democratization of mass media *within* South Africa will be shaped by the capacity of nationally embedded actors to draw upon networks of political support and institutional resources that stretch beyond the confines of the nation-state.

### **Cultural Public Spheres and Mediated Deliberation**

My argument to this point has been that a process-based understanding of the public sphere, understood as an institutionalized space of representation, directs attention to the role of media and communications practices in mediating the possibilities for an expansive politics of scale. In this final section, I want to argue that, as well as being important for facilitating certain sorts of explicitly political action in the strong sense, the public sphere concept also directs attention to the ways in which the media articulate the distinctive rhythms of everyday cultural practice with the imperatives of strategic political action. In their critical revision of Habermas’ original account of the public sphere, Negt and Kluge (1993) develop an understanding of the public sphere

as a diffuse medium of cultural democratization. They extend the notion of the public sphere to include the relationships which constitute the very conditions of possibility for social and individual experience: 'Public sphere refers to certain institutions, establishment, activities (e.g. public power, press, public opinion, audience, publicity work, streets, and squares); but at the same time it is also a general social horizon of experience, in which what is really and supposedly relevant for all members of a society is summarized. In this sense the public sphere is a matter of a few professionals (e.g. politicians, editors, officials or federations); on the other it is something that has to do with everybody and which is only realized in the heads of people, a dimension of their consciousness' (*ibid*, 1-2). This emphasis upon multiple publics is linked to a pluralization of the modes of public communication through which interests, needs, identities, and desires can be legitimately articulated. This pluralization requires that Habermas' focus on the literary formation of democratic competencies be recast in terms of a cultural public sphere (McGuigan 1998). This term refers to a wider array of affective communicative and expressive practices of popular culture, in contrast to narrowly cognitive and rational understandings of deliberation, and to the institutional and social determination of the distribution of the cultural capabilities.

The notion of the cultural public sphere implies a broader understanding of how the cultural articulates with the political, without reducing the latter to the former. A fruitful way of understanding this relationship is provided by Nancy Fraser's analytical distinction between *weak* and *strong* public spheres. Weak publics refer to those activities 'whose deliberative practice consists exclusively in opinion-formation and does not encompass decision-making'. Strong publics, more directly connected to institutionalized power, are those activities 'discourse encompasses both opinion-formation and decision-making' (Fraser 1997: 90). In his recent work, Habermas adopts this distinction, and accords considerable importance to weak publics, understood as a 'wild complex' of informal processes of opinion formation (Habermas 1996: 307-308). Habermas' use of the weak/strong distinction is related to an abandonment of his earlier pessimistic 'siege' model of relationships between lifeworld and system, in which social movements were understood as being in an essentially defensive posture against the 'colonization of the lifeworld' (Habermas 1984). At a conceptual level, Habermas has become notably more optimistic about the possibilities for the effective democratic oversight of administrative and economic power. His revised conception of radical democracy is premised upon a decentred image of society: 'The public sphere cannot be conceived as an institution and certainly not as an organization. It is not even a framework of norms with differentiated competencies and roles, membership regulations, and so on. Just as little does it represent a system; although it permits one to draw internal boundaries, outwardly it is characterized by open, permeable, and shifting horizons. The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions' (Habermas 1996: 360). Thus, in his recent work, Habermas develops a conception of the public sphere as a network of decentred 'streams of public communication', without any *a priori* restriction placed on their precise form or medium. This shift is reflected in the argument that communicative action in weak publics articulates with centres of decision-making through a series of 'sluices', which provide effective critical leverage over economic and political systems.

Although Habermas' earlier suspicion of electronic media has been significantly revised (Habermas 1992), there is still a degree of ambivalence in his approach to this topic. He is still prone towards interpreting the detachment of public communication from the concrete presence of an audience as leading to a problematic differentiation 'among organisers, speakers, and hearers; arenas and galleries, stage and viewing space' (Habermas 1996: 363). The tone of this description is indicative of a residual attachment to a dichotomy between active participation and passive spectatorship. I want to make two related points in this respect, in order to more strongly defend the irreducible role of mediated communicative action in shaping the possibilities for the sort of decentred and subject-less streams of communicative power that Habermas identifies as being central to any radical democratic vision.

Firstly, the dispersal of the public through electronic mass media (and now digital communications technologies) underscores the need to rethink the relationships between abstraction and embodiment in political theory. In Habermas' original account of the public sphere, abstraction and universality are opposed to embodiment and particularity, as indicated by the conceptual containment of writing. Representation is hence restricted to the representation of ideas. Following Michael Warner, it is more appropriate to see pluralized public spheres as being characterized by communicative practices that involve a two-way movement between self-abstraction and self-realization. Contemporary forms of identity politics simultaneously affirm particular embodied identities while reaching out to broader identifications in an orientation towards universality without transcendence (Warner 1993: 252). The decline of the norm of a single public thus disembodies *the* public, understood as a collective subject made present in spaces of assembly, while opening up a cultural politics where the representation of ideas is supplemented by a 'politics of presence', in which the representative value of certain irreducibly embodied identities is acknowledged (Phillips 1995). The media have become the key site for this sort of cultural action, in both formal politics and in popular culture. The ascendancy of 'audience-democracy' (Manin 1997: 235), in which the relationship of accountability between representatives and their constituencies becomes centred upon *trust*, suggests that successful political communication has a lot to do with the ability to credibly embody and perform certain sorts of persona (Corner 2000). This notion can, of course, confirm a self-righteous denunciation of the recidivist dumbing-down of rational political discourse. But it might be given an alternative inflection, as indicative of a much more fundamental cultural democratization of formal politics that is in large part determined by the most intimate characteristics of distanced mediums of public communications, through which the norms of the everyday take on a heightened significance in disciplining the conduct of formal public life (Thompson 2000; Scannell 1995).

If this first point suggests that rethinking the performative aspects of embodiment amongst selected actors in public media cultures is an important counterpoint to overly rationalistic accounts of the public sphere, then it still needs to be attached to a sense of the unprecedented enlargement of public participation that modern media cultures facilitate. My second point here, then, is that rather than thinking of the differentiation between 'speakers' and 'hearers', 'stage' and 'viewing space' in terms of an opposition between active participation and passive spectatorship, we should instead consider the media as opening up spaces of *mediated deliberation* (see Thompson 1995: 125-134). At its simplest, this refers to the re-embedding of mass circulated symbolic materials into contexts of face-to-face dialogical interaction. In this way, modern media and communications technologies vastly expand the range of

information, ideas, and opinions made available to larger numbers of ordinary people than ever before. John Dewey (1927) saw this as one of the main contributions of modern communications technologies in expanding the scope and power of public action. However, the concept of mediated deliberation suggests a stronger emphasis, upon the necessarily mediated character of any and all deliberative practice. And this points up the extent to which the sort of civil, reciprocal, rule-bound talk often idealized by theorists of deliberative democracy is in fact dependent on the provision of an infrastructure of technologies, institutions, and social and cultural norms that cannot be bought into existence through conversation alone (Schudson 1997). The notion of mediated deliberation therefore reminds us that the main focus in assessing the social, cultural and political significance of different media practices should remain upon the socio-economic and institutional distribution of the 'capabilities' to engage in the streams of discourse that effectively articulate with centres of decision-making (Garnham 1999).

I have argued that any analysis of the geographies of the public sphere needs to acknowledge that public participation in spatially extensive and functionally complex societies is necessarily mediated. There are two senses in which this is the case. Firstly, participation in discourses about matters of public importance consists of innumerable practices that revolve around the consumption of books, newspapers, radio, television programmes, pop songs, and other symbolic resources circulated by media and communications industries and institutions. Secondly, these dispersed cultural practices are shaped by, and in turn shape, conflicts between collective actors of various sorts, who speak and act in the name of broader constituencies, and struggle over the framing of the form, content, and scope of 'politics' and 'culture'. These two points underscore the need to avoid an excessively media-centric approach to assessing the relationships between media, democracy and citizenship. As Craig Calhoun (1989: 68-9) observes, in modern societies 'democracy depends on the possibility of a critical public discourse which escapes the limits of face-to-face interaction. This means, in part, finding ways to make the space transcending mass media supportive of public life. It also means developing social arrangements in which local discussions are both possible and able to feed into larger discussions mediated both by technology and by gatherings of representatives'. In closing, I want to briefly discuss one example of public policy that demonstrates the relevance of using this broad understanding of connections between media, everyday life, and public space as the means of assessing the contribution of media practices to broader processes of formal and informal democratization.

The example is a South African television drama series, *Yizo Yizo*, first broadcast by the national public service broadcaster, the SABC, in 1999, with a second series aired in 2001. The series is one example of a strong commitment that the newly independent SABC has shown since 1994 to innovative and broadly conceived educational uses of its radio and television services. These initiatives use locally produced programming as one element of a very broad strategy of education for citizenship, illustrating the ways in which media can be made supportive of public life by expanding the horizons of normative debate. The series focuses upon the lives of the children, teachers, and parents of a fictional township school. Made in collaboration with the Department of Education, the series was intended to reveal the depth and complexity of the crisis facing South African schools, to encourage a culture of learning and teaching, and to stimulate discussion of key educational issues. *Yizo Yizo* is broadcast at prime time in the evenings, in order to ensure maximum

audience exposure amongst both children and adults, and it rapidly established a large audience, making it the most watched programme on South African TV.

*Yizo Yizo* has been highly successful in its primary public policy-related objective of opening up the educational crisis in South Africa to broad public debate and inter-personal discussion. The significance of the series lies in making visible a set of issues concerning the conditions of South Africa's school system, opening up to debate sensitive issues such as sexual harassment, rape, gangsterism, and drug abuse. This success illustrates the potential for public broadcasters to use television as a means of localizing the norms of a global audio-visual culture in an attempt to shift the norms of everyday conduct and stimulate public debate. *Yizo Yizo* deploys a range of popular culture styles and genres to address both young and adult audiences. In particular, the series' success depends in no small part on its conscious use of the aesthetic conventions of an increasingly internationalized and commercialized South African popular culture. In its formulation and development, the series acknowledges the existence of youth audiences who have sophisticated cultural literacies. This dimension of the series' success is reflected not simply in the programmes themselves, but also in the extensive multi-media strategy developed by the SABC and Department of Education to support the broader objectives of the series, including a magazine, a radio talk show, and soundtrack CD featuring local *kwaito* artists. These resources are aimed at fostering public debate around the issues addressed in the series, by providing resources for students, teachers, and parents to engage with the issues raised by the series. This form of educational broadcasting serves as an example of a developmental use of electronic media to expand the capabilities of citizens to exercise effective and substantive communicative freedoms.

*Yizo Yizo* therefore illustrates the potential for broadcasting to link up the everyday experiences of ordinary people with broader political debates, by facilitating a set of mediated discussions in homes, classrooms, playgrounds, as well as on radio, television, and in newspapers. Again, I do not want to idealize this example (see Barnett 2002b). The ability to participate in the sort of extended, mediated public debate stimulated by *Yizo Yizo* remains socially uneven, shaped as it by inequalities of access to social and material resources which are the conditions of participation in informed debates about both public policy and popular culture. The series also raises a set of issues about the role of an increasingly commercialized South African broadcasting system in the commodification of 'black youth markets', and how this process might contribute to the broader segmentation of social groups that will entrench inequalities of access to media technologies and cultural competencies. Nonetheless, *Yizo Yizo* demonstrates the continuing potential for radical participatory media paradigms to flourish by re-deploying the norms of global culture for progressive democratic ends. In an era of media abundance, traditional forms of media regulation have been rendered problematic by the spatial restructuring of media markets and new technologies. What the example of *Yizo Yizo* suggests is that that supporting citizenship-participation by using locally produced media programming works best when the multiple and increasingly globalized cultural literacies of citizens is acknowledged.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have suggested that the constitutive relationship between norms of democratic discourse and acts of cultural and political representation requires a

conceptualization of the public sphere as a range of institutionalized *processes* of public communication. While I have argued for ‘stretching-out’ the public in light of a consideration of the importance of media practices in public communication, I have also indicated that the media needs to be de-centred from an evaluation of the relationships between the public sphere and the media. Habermas’ recent account of the subject-less streams of public communication re-directs our attention to the fact that the vitality of any public sphere depends not simply on structures of media organization, ownership, and use, but more broadly depends on the existence of a plurality of modes of social organization and association. This was the theme pursued through the examples of the politics South African media reform over the last decade. They illustrate three overlapping themes: that media systems facilitate different forms of political action by grassroots organizations; that the sorts of political opportunities opened up by new media and communications technologies are shaped by a politics of regulation that goes on *around* media; and that the *public* significance of media and communications practices has as much to do with everyday cultural practices and norms as it does with more obvious forms of political action. A critical geographical analysis of contemporary public space therefore needs to consider how media and communications practices serve as both weak and strong publics. This requires moving beyond a disciplinary privilege accorded to ‘real spaces’ as the paradigm of public space, and analyzing communications media as mediums for the spatial and temporal articulation of different forms of social practice, oriented towards different rationalities, and stretched out across different territorial scales. Increasingly, media publics articulate cultural norms that are no longer contained within national regulatory spaces. And the dimensions of media publics are shaped by a politics of collective action that itself reveals media and communications practices to be central to a networked politics of scale that connects up territorially embedded interests with spatially extensive networks of resources.

In short, the notion of the public sphere is a crucial conceptual and evaluative resource for assessing the role of media and communications practices in sustaining democratic social practices. But the continuing salience of this concept depends upon revising some cherished assumptions that often shape academic discourses about media and democracy. These include assumptions about what counts as rationality, what counts as politics, and about what counts as proper conduct in public life, as well as assumptions about the public value of popular media cultures. In a sense, then, it is academic understandings of the relationships between media, culture, and citizenship that are most in need of being democratized.

## Notes

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1. Originally published in German in 1962.
2. Throughout this chapter, I use ‘representation’ in a deliberately multi-faceted sense, although always referring to the notion that representation is the act of making present in some sense something that remains literally absent (Pitkin 1967). See Barnett (2003a: Ch. 1) for further discussion of this paradoxical sense of representation and its significance for thinking about the spatiality of democratic publicity.
3. There is a strong family resemblance between Lefort’s account and Habermas’ (1996: 463-490) recent procedural theorization of democratic popular sovereignty.



4. See Keith (1996) and Staeheli (1996) for counterpoints to this conflation of political action with particular spaces.

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