Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere

John Keane*

We are living in times in which spatial frameworks of communication are in a state of upheaval. The old hegemony of state-structured and territorially-bound public life mediated by radio, television, newspapers and books is being rapidly eroded. In its place are developing a multiplicity of networked spaces of communication which are not tied immediately to territory, and which irreversibly fragment anything resembling a single, spatially-integrated public sphere within a nation-state framework. The conventional ideal of a unified public sphere and its corresponding vision of a republic of citizens striving to live up to some "public good" are obsolete. Public life is today subject to "medievalization", not as Habermas defined it in Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit, but in the different sense of a developing and complex mosaic of differently sized, overlapping and interconnected public spheres. This restructuring of communicative space forces us to revise our understanding of public life and its "partner" terms, such as public opinion, the public good and the private/public distinction.

GENEALOGY

The term 'public sphere' is among the most popular within contemporary studies of media and politics—indeed, it is so much part of their common sense that its genealogy is normally overlooked. Broadly speaking, in modern times there have been three overlapping historical phases in the invention, refinement, and popularization of the concept and such "partner" terms as public opinion, public life, and the public good. It is imperative to recall this genealogy, for an understanding of the history of these terms deepens our appreciation of their multiple meanings, empirical utility, and normative potential—and the political pitfalls of using early modern terms such as "the public sphere" in the much-changed circumstances of the late twentieth century.

1. The modern prominence of the public sphere concept was initially bound up with the struggle against despotic states in the European region. The language of 'the public,' 'public virtue,' and 'public opinion' was a weapon in support of 'liberty of the press' and other publicly-shared freedoms. Talk of 'the public' was directed against monarchs and courts suspected of acting arbitrarily, abusing

*Centre for the Study of Democracy, Faculty of Business, Management & Social Studies, University of Westminster, 70 Great Portland Street, London WIN 5AL UK

© 1995 OPA (Overseas Publishers Association)
Amsterdam B.V. Published under license by Gordon and Breach Science Publishers SA
Printed in Malaysia
their power, and furthering their 'private,' selfish interests at the expense of the realm. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the normative ideal of the public sphere—a realm of life in which citizens invented their identities under the shadow of state power—was a central theme of the republican politics of the middling classes. Republicans like the 'Commonwealthmen' simultaneously looked back to the Roman republic (and sometimes to the Greek polis) and forward to a world without mean-spirited executive power, standing armies, and clericalism (Robbins, 1961). Republicans were sharply critical of the ways in which absolutism induced apathy among its subjects, promoted conformity in matters of religion and statecraft, and corrupted its rulers, to the point (as Molesworth emphasized in his attack on Danish absolutism) where even the town clocks of Copenhagen chimed in unison with the time-pieces of the palace. Republicans accordingly emphasized the importance of cultivating public virtue and public spirit. They yearned for the radical reform of existing polities by means of the right of free expression of citizens and constitutional devices to secure the rule of law, mixed government, and freedom from 'party' and 'faction'—especially that promoting internal dissension and the 'private' designs of monarchs, ministers, and ambitious men of wealth.

2. With the growing power and dynamism of modern capitalist economies, the ideal of the public sphere came to be used principally to criticize the monopoly grip of commodity production and consumption upon areas of life considered to be in need of protection from considerations of rationally calculated profit and loss. My Public Life and Late Capitalism (Keane, 1984) traced the growing concern within twentieth-century German political thought, especially after the death of Max Weber, to define and to protect a public sphere against the expanding power of organized capitalism, advertising agencies, and other professional bodies bent on divining 'public opinion' and making it speak in their favor. Ferdinand Tönnies's Kritik der öffentlichen Meinung (1922) highlighted the dangers of deifying public opinion in an era in which organized interests, especially the capitalist press, profited from its manipulation. Karl Jaspers (1969) defended the value of 'unlimited communication' in an age of market-driven, rational calculation. Hannah Arendt's Vita Activa (1960) mourned the modern loss of public life, understood as the capacity of citizens to speak and to interact for the purpose of defining and redefining how they wish to live together in common; according to Arendt, such public interaction has been gradually corroded in modern times by the acid of consumerism trickling through a society of laborers ignorant of the joys and freedoms that result from communicating in public about matters of public importance. Jürgen Habermas's Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit (1962) refined and extended this pessimistic thesis by tracing the rise in early modern Europe of a bourgeois public sphere and the subsequent 'replacement of a reading public that debated critically about matters of culture by the mass public of culture consumers' (p. 168). Common to each of these interpretations of public life is the insistence that commodity-structured economies encourage moral selfishness and disregard of the public good;
maximize the time citizens are compulsorily bound to paid labor, thereby making it difficult for them to be involved as citizens in public life; and promote ignorance and deception through profit-driven media manipulation.

3. The first two phases of defining and defending the public sphere highlighted, respectively, the uniquely modern problems of territorially defined state power unaccountable to its citizens and the business-biased egoism of organized market capitalism. During the third, most recent phase of usage of the public sphere concept these twin problems characteristic of modern societies are simultaneously emphasized and the public sphere ideal is linked to the institution of public service broadcasting, which is seen to have an elective affinity with public life and to be the best guarantee of its survival in the era of state-organized, consumer capitalism.

The 'Westminster School' of Nicholas Garnham, Paddy Scannell, and other researchers has arguably done most to invent, refine, and popularize this third version of the theory of the public sphere. Among its most influential contributions is a series of essays by Nicholas Garnham, who has proposed the thesis that debate about broadcasting policy has hitherto been conducted too narrowly in terms of the state/market dualism (Garnham, 1990). Borrowing explicitly from Habermas (who curiously ignored the public service broadcasting model), Garnham argues for a third term, 'the public sphere,' for the analytic-empirical and normative purpose of identifying a 'space for a rational and universalistic politics distinct from both the economy and the state' (p. 107). Garnham insists that the best guarantor of such a politics is the public service broadcasting model, which is designed to mediate and counter balance state and corporate power and can in fact do so because it is bound by neither the imperatives of maximization of political power nor the maximization of profit. While Garnham admits that the actual practice of public service broadcasting is an imperfect realization of the Habermasian ideal of a public sphere of deliberating citizens, he is adamant about its superiority 'to the market as a means of providing all citizens, whatever their wealth or geographical location, equal access to a wide range of high-quality entertainment, information and education, and as a means of ensuring that the aim of the programme producer is the satisfaction of a range of audience tastes rather than only those tastes that show the largest profit (p. 120). Market-driven media, Garnham insists, are inimical to public life. In stark contrast to public service broadcasting, market-driven media narrow the scope of what it is possible to say publicly. The number of enterprises which control (or strongly influence) the production and circulation of information and culture is reduced; inequitable power relationships develop between dominant, metropolitan enterprises and cultures and subordinate and peripheral identities; and these market-produced inequalities in turn reinforce deep-rooted social inequalities, which future market-driven technological change in the field of communications will almost certainly deepen—unless the castles of public service broadcasting are protected through guaranteed tax-based funding.
THE DECAY OF PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING

The proposed defense of the public sphere through public service media accurately spot the limits of market rhetoric and practice. It is moreover an important contribution to the task of clarifying and amplifying publicly felt concerns about the future of electronic media in the old democracies of such countries as Britain, France, and the Netherlands. The proposed defense of public life also serves as a vital reminder of the important practical achievements of public service media. The twentieth-century project of providing a service of mixed programs on national radio and television channels, available to all citizens, often in the face of severe technical problems and pressuring financial constraints—as Garnham and many others have argued—has kept alive public spirit and widened the horizons of citizens’ awareness of the world. For half a century, the ‘provision of basic services’ (Grundversorgung as the German Federal Constitutional Court put it) helped to decommmodify electronic media. It reduced the role of budget-conscious accounting and corporate greed as the principal qualities necessary to media management. The public service model also enforced specific national rules covering such matters as the amount and type of advertising, political access, ‘balanced’ news coverage, and quotes of foreign programming. It succeeded for a time in protecting employment levels in the national broadcasting industries of countries such as the Netherlands, Canada, Norway, Britain, and the Federal Republic of Germany. The public service model—partly in response to challenges posed by market-based tabloid media—also legitimized the presence of ordinary citizens in programs dealing with controversial issues. It helped to make respectable vernacular styles by publicizing the pleasures of ordinariness and creating entertainment out of citizens playing games, talking about their private experiences, or immersing themselves in events as disparate as tennis matches, skiing competitions, religious ceremonies, and dancing to rap, rock, and reggae.

While these achievements of the public service model are impressive, there are major problems inherent in the argument that existing public service media are a bulwark of the public sphere. For reasons of space, I shall set aside questions about the fault lines evident in Garnham’s attempt to synthesize an originally seventeenth- and eighteenth-century ideal with the peculiarly twentieth-century practice of electronic broadcasting. I also want deliberately to overlook another bundle of problems, internal to Garnham’s account, such as his silence about the rise and survival of public controversy within the market-dominated sector of print and broadcasting media, or the question of whether a ‘rational’ and universalistic politics’ was descriptive of either the intended aim or the actual practice of public service broadcasting in its heyday. I shall instead concentrate for a moment on the mounting difficulties faced by contemporary public service broadcasting and, hence, on the perilous strategy of attempting to tie the fortunes of the public sphere ideal to an ailing institution.

There is today a long-term crisis settling on the public service model. The status quo is ceasing to be an option. Public service media in Europe and elsewhere are slipping and sliding into a profound identity crisis — the same
identity crisis that from the beginning has dogged American public service media, which have suffered permanent insecurities about their financial basis, legal status, and public role. Deeply uncertain about their sources of funding and the scope and nature of their contemporary political role, European public service media are enmeshed in a wider political problem, evident in all the old democracies, in which political parties, professional associations, trades unions, churches, and other means of defining, projecting, and re-presenting citizens' opinions to decisionmakers are either losing their vibrant or prompting new disputes about their own degree of 'representativeness.' Such controversies about the best means of publicly re-presenting citizens' opinions are symptomatic of an upsweep in the modern democratic revolution first outlined by Tocqueville; contrary to many Western observers, the defeat of the Soviet Empire, the chief enemy of parliamentary democracy, is leading not to spontaneous outbursts of self-satisfied applause within the old democracies but to loud questioning of the legitimacy and effectiveness of the entrenched procedures of liberal democracy.

The contemporary malaise of public service broadcasting has several deep-seated causes, three of which bear directly on the theory of the public sphere:

1. Fiscal Squeeze

The financial footings of public service broadcasting in the European region are tending to crack and crumble. As Nowak (1991), Blumler (1995) and others have shown, license fee income increases, which resulted during much of the postwar period from the steady diffusion throughout civil society of black-and-white and then color sets, peaked during the 1970s. With the saturation of households with televisions and radios, the onset of inflation, the proportionately steeper increases in program production costs, and government cutbacks, license fee revenue then began to decline in real terms—for example, by 30 percent during the period from 1972–73 until 1983–84 in Sweden. This fiscal squeeze not only pinched the prospects for a vigorous public service response to those critics favoring 'deregulation,' for whom market competition and more advertising is the key condition of press and broadcasting freedom, understood as private broadcasters' freedom from state interference. The long-term fiscal squeeze also ruled out any sustained involvement of public service broadcasters in the current technological revolution—except here and there, as exemplified by modest teletext initiatives or satellite services operated by BBC and the German broadcasters, ARD and ZDF. Most of the pioneering interventions in the field of communications were consequently left in the hands of national and international private entrepreneurs—an instructive symbol of which was the inability of BSB, the British satellite operation licensed as a public service venture by the Independent Broadcasting Authority, to survive cut-throat financial competition from Rupert Murdoch's Sky television. Finally, the long-term fiscal squeeze on public service broadcasters has forced them to intensify co-production deals, to privatize or subcontract parts of their programming and production facilities, to engage in international marketing ventures, and in
general to speak the language of profit-conscious business executives. Such trends toward ‘self-commercialization’ arguably weaken the legitimacy of the public service model by diluting its programming distinctiveness and heartening deregulators in their crusade to marginalize public media.

2. Legitimacy Problems

Public service broadcasters could in principle exercise the option of publicly campaigning to renew the appeal of their activities, but in practice such fightbacks tend to be hamstrung by a growing legitimacy problem. Defenders of the existing public service model typically understate the ways in which the alleged ‘balance,’ ‘quality’ standards, and universalism of existing public service media are routinely perceived by certain audiences as ‘unrepresentative.’ For their part, public service broadcasters routinely perceive that the repertoire of programs channeled through existing public service media cannot satisfy the multitude of opinions in a complex (if less than fully pluralist) society in motion. In other words, both audiences and broadcasters sense that the public service claim to representativeness is in fact a defense of virtual representation of a fictive whole, a resort to programming which simulates the actual opinions and tastes of some of those at whom it is directed.

The fate of music programming on public service radio well illustrates this legitimation problem. Although, for obvious reasons, music has always occupied the bulk of radio time, it has proved impossible in the long run to provide programming with general appeal on public service radio because in any one country a nationally shared musical culture has never existed in the past, and certainly does not exist in the present. Different forms of music appeal to different publics, whose dislikes are often as strong as their likes, and that is why the twentieth-century history of public service radio has been the history of the gradual recognition of the fragmentation of mass audiences into different taste publics. Trends in the world of music illustrate the key point here: The public service model coronets its audiences and regularly violates its own principle of equality of access for all to entertainment, current affairs, and cultural programming in a common public domain. The corset is tightened further by the fact that, for reasons of government pressures, threatened litigation, and a stated commitment to ‘balance,’ the public service representation of such topics as domestic life, sexuality, and political dissent is perceived by some audiences as too timid. It is routinely thought that certain things cannot be transmitted, or not in a particular way; or that when they are transmitted, their troublesome or outrageous implications are choked off. The sense that public service media are prone to ‘bias’ is further reinforced by the fact that public service media—here they are no different from their commercial competitor—unevenly distribute entitlements to speak and to be heard and seen. They too develop a cast of regulars—presenters, reporters, academic experts, professionals, politicians, businesspeople, showbiz figures—whose regular appearance on the media enables them to function as accredited representatives of public experience. The combined effect of these corsetting effects is to
decrease the legitimacy of public service media. Audiences tend to become restless; as broadcasters know, they gradually lose their ‘ontological’ status by becoming less predictable in their tastes and more receptive of commercial forms of media (see Ang, 1991).

3. Technological Change

A third difficulty faced by the public service model—the advent of cable, satellite television, community radio, computerized networks—is arguably the most serious, since it has destroyed the traditional argument that the scarcity of available spectrum blesses public service broadcasting with the status of a ‘natural monopoly’ within the boundaries of a given nation-state. Contemporary technological change is not simply encircling public service broadcasting and forcing it to compete with privately owned firms within a multichannel environment. Less obviously, it is exposing the spatial metaphor deeply encoded within the public sector model, according to which citizens, acting within an integrated public sphere, properly belong to a carefully defined territory guarded by the sovereign nation-state, itself positioned within a wider, englobing system of territorially defined states.

The assumption that public service media properly function as servants and guarantors of territorially fixed nation-states preserved intact a similar geographic metaphor encoded within nationally demarcated systems of print journalism (as Benedict Anderson’s study of print capitalism and nation-states has shown [Anderson, 1982]. It nevertheless had to be fought for politically during the infant stage of broadcasting, as evidenced not only in the global struggle of European fascism and Soviet communism to tailor radio and film to their respective expansionist states, but also in the desperate efforts of early public service broadcasters to justify publicly why broadcasting media could be organized in a ‘third way’—incorporating them into a parliamentary democratic state in which electronic media could serve to generate and sustain public life within a given territory. The famous document prepared for the Crawford Committee in 1925 by John Reith, the first director-general of the BBC, made the point explicitly. Public service broadcasting, Reith argued, should function as a national service. It should act as a powerful means of social unity, binding together groups, regions, and classes through the live relaying of national events, such as the first broadcast by King George V at the previous year’s Empire Exhibition, which had the effect of ‘making the nation as one man.’ (Reith, 1925, p. 4) A half-century later, Sir Michael Swann, chairman of the BBC’s Board of Governors, argued before the Annan Committee that an ‘enormous amount of the BBC’s work was in fact social cement of one sort or another. Royal occasions, religious services, sports coverage and police series all reinforce the sense of belonging to our country, being involved in its celebrations and accepting what it stands for.’ (Annan Report, 1977, p. 263).

Still today this same assumption that the public service model is the principal forum which enables the whole nation to talk to itself is sometimes stated explicitly, as when French Presidents dub their television and radio services ‘the
voice of France' and BBC policy documents reiterate the principle that 'publicly funded broadcasters have a primary obligation to the public' and style the corporation as 'the national instrument of broadcasting.' The point is echoed in virtually every recent academic study of the public service/public sphere nexus (see Peters, 1994; Scannell, 1989; Curran, 1991). I want to argue that such talk—the talk of those who suppose an elective affinity between public service broadcasting and 'the public sphere'—is hardening into dogma, precisely because the leading spatial metaphor upon which it rests is now out of touch with long-term media trends in the old parliamentary democracies. We are living in times in which spatial frameworks of communication are in a state of upheaval. The old dominance of state-structured and territorially bounded public life mediated by radio, television, newspapers, and books is coming to an end. Its hegemony is rapidly being eroded by the development of a multiplicity of networked spaces of communication which are not tied immediately to territory, and which therefore irreversibly outflank and fragment anything formerly resembling a single, spatially integrated public sphere within a nation-state framework. The ideal of a unified public sphere and its corresponding vision of a territorially bounded republic of citizens striving to live up to their definition of the public good are obsolete. In their place, figuratively speaking, public life is today subject to 'refeudalization,' not in the sense in which Habermas's *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* used the term, but in the different sense of the development of 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.

Although these public spheres emerge within differently sized milieux within the nooks and crannies of civil societies and states, all of them are stages of power and interest-bound action that display the essential characteristics of a public sphere. A public sphere is a particular type of spatial relationship between two or more people, usually connected by a certain means of communication (television, radio, satellite, fax, telephone, etc.), in which nonviolent controversies erupt, for a brief or more extended period of time, concerning the power relations operating within their given milieu of interaction and/or within the wider milieux of social and political structures within which the disputants are situated. Public spheres in this sense never appear in pure form—the following description is *idealtypisch*—and they rarely appear in isolation. Although they typically have a networked, interconnected character, contemporary public spheres have a fractured quality which is not being overcome by some broader trend toward an integrated public sphere. The examples selected below illustrate their heterogeneity and variable size, and that is why I choose, at the risk of being misunderstood, to distinguish among micro-public spheres in which there are dozens, hundreds or thousands of disputants interacting at the sub-nation-state level; meso-public spheres which normally comprise millions of people interacting at the level of the nation-state framework; and macro-public spheres which normally encompass hundreds of
millions and even billions of people enmeshed in disputes at the supranational and global levels of power. I should like to examine each in turn—and to explore their implications for a revised political theory of the role of public spheres within democratic republics.

**Micro-Public Spheres**

The coffeehouse, town-level meeting, and literary circle, in which early modern public spheres developed, today find their counterparts in a wide variety of local spaces in which citizens enter into disputes about who does and who ought to get what, when, and how. John Fiske’s *Power Plays* (1993) has made a convincing case for the importance of bottom-up, small-scale locales in which citizens forge their identities, often in opposition to top-down ‘imperializing’ powers bent on regulating, redefining, or extinguishing (or ‘stationing’) public life at the local level. While Fiske (following Foucault) correctly emphasizes that these micro-public spheres take advantage of the fact that all large-scale institutions ultimately rest on the cooperation of their subordinates, and that challenges and changes at the micro-level therefore necessarily have broader macro-effects, he underestimates the importance of internal disputes within these locales—instead preferring to emphasize the contestatory relationship between ‘imperializing power’ and locales—and unfortunately ignores the rich significance of these localized disputes for the conventional theory of the public sphere. Two examples will help to clarify these points—and to illustrate what is meant by a micro-public sphere.

Micro-public spheres are today a vital feature of all social movements. As Paul Mier, Alberto Melucci, and others have observed, contemporary social movements are less preoccupied with struggles over the production and distribution of material goods and resources and more concerned with the ways in which postindustrial societies generate and withhold information and produce and sustain meanings among their members (Melucci, 1989). The organizations of the women’s movement, for instance, not only raise important questions about the material inequalities suffered by women. They also, at the same time, challenge dominant masculinist codes by signaling to the rest of society the importance of symbolically recognizing differences. While the movements have millenarian tendencies, their concentration of defining and redefining symbolic differences ensures that they are not driven by grand visions of a future utopian order. The supporters and sympathizers and actors within the movements are ‘nomads of the present.’ They focus upon the present, wherein they practice the future social changes they seek, and their organizational means are therefore valued as ends in themselves. Social movements normally comprise low-profile networks of small groups, organizations, initiatives, local contacts, and friendships submerged in everyday life. These submerged networks, noted for their stress on solidarity, individual needs, and part-time involvement, constitute the laboratories in which new experiences are invented and popularized. Within these local laboratories, movements utilize a variety of
means of communication (telephones, faxes, photocopierns, camcorders, videos, personal computers) to question and transform the dominant codes of everyday life. These laboratories function as public spaces in which the elements of everyday life are mixed, remixed, developed, and tested. Such public spheres as the discussion circle, the publishing house, the church, the clinic, and a political chat over a drink with friends or acquaintances are the sites in which citizens question the pseudo-imperatives of reality and counter them with alternative experiences of time, space, and interpersonal relations. On occasion, these public spheres coalesce into publicly visible media events, such as demonstrations in favor of gay male and lesbian rights or sit-ins against roadbuilding or power plant projects. But, paradoxically, these micro-public spheres draw their strength from the fact that they are mostly latent. Although they appear to be ‘private,’ acting at a distance from official public life, party politics, and the glare of media publicity, they in fact display all the characteristics of small group public efforts, whose challenging of the existing distribution of power can be effective exactly because they operate unhindered in the unnewsworthy nooks and crannies of civil society.

Micro-public spheres may also be developing among children within households, as the disputed example of video games illustrates. For many adults, particularly those without children, the widespread appeal of video games remains incomprehensible; contemplating a four-button keypad leaves them with a powerful sense of wasted time, ignorance based upon innocence, even disgust at the thought that the current generation of children will grow up as the first ever in modern times to learn to compute before they learn to read and write. But for most children, at least most boys between eight and eighteen, the experience of playing video games and creating an everyday culture of schoolroom stories, swapping and sharing videos, and a new critical lexicon (fetched with codewords like ‘crap,’ ‘smelly,’ and ‘cacky’) that generates tensions with adults has become a routine part of childhood— as routine as old-fashioned ways of hating parents or squashing a worm or overfeeding a goldfish to death. The growth within households of micro-public spheres of this kind has been dramatic. Within the past five years in the United Kingdom, for example, the video games market, dominated by the Japanese companies Sega and Nintendo, has grown from virtually nothing to a turnover of around £800 millions per annum. Eight out of ten children between eleven and fourteen now play video games; six out of ten have their own game consoles (the hardware needed to play games on television monitors); while in 1992 alone, around two million new consoles were sold. Industry figures like to cite the power of the advertising ‘hook’ to explain their marketing success, but this underestimates the way in which the popularity of video games among children is chosen by subjects striving, if only intuitively, for the power to co-determine the outcomes of their electronically mediated play. It is true that the currently marketed form of video games normally thwarts children’s choices. The sex-typing of women as figures who are acted upon, and often victimized as kidnap victims in need of rescue, is a typical case in point (Provenzo, 1991). Video games nevertheless challenge
Transformations of the Public Sphere

children to come to terms with the new media of digital communication. Their appeal stems not only from the fact that for brief moments children can escape the demands of household and school by becoming part of an alternate world of bionic men, damsels in distress, galactic invasions, and teenage mutant turtles. Video games also promise interactivity and actually encourage users to improve their hand-eye coordination and interpretative skills by browsing through texts in an orderly but nonsequential manner. Unlike the process of learning to read books, which reduces children initially to mere readers with no freedom but that of accepting or rejecting the rules of a text, the playing of video games confronts children with a form of hypertext (Nelson, 1987). Players are required to choose their own pathways through texts composed of blocks of words, images, and sounds that are linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails that are unfinished and open-ended. Video games blur the boundaries between readers and writers by encouraging their users to determine how they move through a forest of possibilities to do with rescue and revenge, and good versus evil, constrained only by the permitted household rules governing playtime, the manufacturers' *mise en scène*, and the child's capacity for inventiveness in the face of persistent adult suspicion or outright opposition to the phenomenon.

Meso-public Spheres

The treatment of meso-public spheres can be comparatively brief, since they are the most familiar of the three types of public sphere examined here. Meso-public spheres are those spaces of controversy about power that encompass millions of people watching, listening, or reading across vast distances. They are mainly coextensive with the nation-state, but they may also extend beyond its boundaries to encompass neighboring audiences (as in the case of German-language programming and publishing in Austria); their reach may also be limited to regions within states, as in the case of the non-Castilian-speaking regions of Spain like Catalonia and the Basque country. Meso-public spheres are mediated by large-circulation newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *die Zeit*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the Catalan daily, *Aqvi*. They are also mediated by electronic media such as BBC radio and television, Swedish Radio, RAI, and (in the United States) National Public Radio and the four national networks (CBS, NBC, ABC, and Fox).

Although constantly pressured 'from below' by micro-public spheres, meso-public spheres display considerable tenacity. There is no necessary zero-sum relationship between these differently sized public domains, in part because each feeds upon tensions with the other (readers of national newspapers, for instance, may and do consult locally produced magazines or bulletins, precisely because of their different themes and emphases); and in part because meso-public spheres thrive upon media which appeal to particular national or regional language groupings, and which have well-established and powerful production and distribution structures that sustain their proven ability to circulate to millions of people certain types of news, current affairs, films, and entertainment
that daily reinforce certain styles and habits of communication about matters of public concern. The strength of reputation, funding, and distribution is certainly an important reason why public service media, notwithstanding their self-commercialization, are unlikely to disappear as props of public life. There is another, more surprising reason why public life at the meso-level is unlikely to disappear. The above-mentioned examples of the media sustaining meso-public spheres highlight the point—foreign to recent attempts to tie the theory of the public sphere to the fate of public service media—that public controversies about power are also regularly facilitated by privately controlled media of civil society. There is plenty of evidence that just as public service media are ever more subject to market forces, market-led media are subject to a long-term process of self-politicization, in the sense that they are forced to address matters of concern to citizens capable of distinguishing between market ‘hype’ and public controversies. The entry into official politics of commercial media figures such as Ronald Reagan and Silvio Berlusconi are extreme instances of this trend. The British tabloids’ ruthless probing of the private lives of monarchs and politicians during the past decade is symptomatic of the same trend. So also are popular current affairs programs such as CNN’s Larry King Live and the remarkable proliferation of fast-cut television talk shows like Ricki Lake, which, amid advertisements for commodities such as mouthwash, chocolates, inner-spring mattresses, and pizza, simulate raucous domestic quarrels about such matters as teenage sex, pregnancy, and child abuse, in front of selected audiences who argue bitterly among themselves and, amid uproar, talk back to the presenter, experts, and interviewees, contradicting their views, calling them ‘real asses,’ urging them to ‘get real,’ and insisting that something or other ‘sucks with a capital S.’

Macro-public Spheres

The recent growth of macro-public spheres at the global or regional (e.g., European Union) level is among the most striking, least researched developments running contrary to the orthodox theory of the public sphere. Macro-publics of hundreds or millions of citizens are the (unintended) consequence of the international concentration of mass media firms previously owned and operated at the nation-state level. A prior form of concentration of media capital has of course been under way for a century, especially in the magazine and newspaper industries and in the core group of news agencies, dominated by American, British, German, and French firms that carved up the world within the spheres of influence of their respective governments. The current globalization of media firms represents a projection of this process of concentration onto the international plane. It involves the chain ownership of newspapers, cross-ownership of newspapers, the acquisition of media by ordinary industrial concerns, and significantly, the regional and global development of satellite-linked communications systems.

The development of globe-girdling communications firms such as News Corporation International, Reuters, Time-Warner, and Bertelsmann was not
driven by the motive of funding the development of international publics. Although research on the perceived motives and benefits of globalization remains limited, it is clear that the process, which is virtually without historical precedents, is driven by reasons of political economy. Media firms operating at the global level have certain advantages over their nationally based counterparts. Headed by a tiny group of people who have become adept at ‘turning around’ ailing media firms and fully utilizing their assets, transnational firms take advantage of economies of scale. They are able to shift resources of expertise, marketing skills, and journalistic talent, for instance, from one part of the media field to another; they can also reduce costs and innovate by tapping the specialist work forces of various societies. These firms can also effect synergies of various kinds, such as trying out a novel in one country and producing a movie based upon it in another, or releasing a work successively through such media as cable, video, television, magazines, and paperback books, without the difficult rights-negotiation and scheduling problems that inevitably arise when a diversity of competing national companies is involved. Highly important as well is the advantageous fact that transnational media firms are often able to evade nation-state regulations and shift the core energies of the whole operation from one market to another as political and legal and cultural climates change.

Among the central ironies of this risk-driven, profit-calculating process is its nurturing of the growth of publics stretching beyond the boundaries of the nation-state. Most of these public spheres are so far fledglings. They operate briefly and informally—they have few guaranteed sources of funding and legal protection, and are therefore highly fragile, often fleeting phenomena. International media events, which are now staged virtually every week, are cases in point. As Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992), Daniel Hallin (1994), and others have shown, global media events like summits are highly charged symbolic processes covered by the entire media of the world and addressed primarily to a fictive ‘world audience.’ In the three major summits hosted by Reagan and Gorbachev—at Geneva in 1985, Washington in 1987, and Moscow in 1988—audiences straddling the globe watched as media channels such as CNN, ABC’s Nightline, and the Soviet morning program 90 Minutes relayed versions of a summit that signaled the end of the Cold War. It is commonly objected that such coverage spreads rituals of pacification, rendering global audiences mute in their fascination with the spectacle of the event. That could indeed be legitimately said of the heavily censored Malvinas War and Gulf War coverage, but still there are signs that the global casting of summits and other events tends to be conducted in the subjunctive tense, in that they heighten audiences’ sense that the existing ‘laws’ of power politics are far from ‘natural’ and that the shape of the world is therefore dependent in part on current efforts to refashion it according to certain criteria.

The dramatic emphasis upon the subjunctive, combined with the prospect of reaching a worldwide audience, can incite new public controversies about power stretching beyond the limited boundaries of meso-public spheres. During the Reagan-Gorbachev summits, for example, political arguments about the dangerous proliferation of nuclear and conventional weaponry were
commonplace among the citizens and governments of various countries at the same time; and in the Soviet Union, where autonomous public life had long been considered a counter revolutionary crime, the supporters of Boris Yeltsin were heartened by the way in which the demoted party leader's interviews with CBS and the BBC during the Moscow summit forced Mikhail Gorbachev to respond with a televised press conference; meanwhile, Soviet religious dissidents successfully lobbied President Reagan to grant them a public meeting, at which there was a frank airing of conflicting views about elections, the future of religion, and the comparative 'standards of living' of America and the Soviet Union.

Probably the most dramatic example so far of the way in which global media events can and do incite public controversies about power before audiences of hundreds of millions of people is the crisis in Tiananmen Square in China during the late spring of 1989. Broadcast live by CNN, twenty-four hours a day, the Tiananmen episode was a turning point in the development of global news. Not only was it perceived as the most important news story yet to be covered by international satellite television; it was also (according to Lewis Friedland [1992] and others) the first occasion ever when satellite television directly shaped the events themselves, which unfolded rapidly on three planes: within national boundaries, throughout global diplomatic circles, and on the stage of international public arguments about how to resolve the crisis. CNN's wire-service-like commitment to bring its viewers all significant stories from all sides of the political spectrum helped to publicize the demands of the students, many of whom had traveled abroad and understood well the political potential of the television medium in establishing public spheres in opposition to the totalitarian Chinese state. Not coincidentally, they chose 'The Goddess of Democracy' as their central symbol, while their placards carried quotations from Abraham Lincoln and others, all in English for the benefit of Western audiences. The students reckoned, accurately, that by keeping the cameras and cellular telephones (and, later, 8 mm 'handicams' carried around on bicycles) trained on themselves they would maximize the chances of their survival and international recognition. Their cause certainly won international recognition from other states and citizens. By damaging the international reputation of the Party, the global coverage of the Tiananmen events may also have boosted the long-term chances of a nonviolent self-dismantling of the communist regime (along the lines of Kádár's Hungary). In the short run, the coverage almost certainly prolonged the life of the protest, which ended in the massacre of between 400 and 800 students. According to CNN's Alec Miran, who was executive producer in China during the crisis, 'People were coming up to us in the street, telling us to "Keep going, keep broadcasting, that they won't come in while you're on the air." That turned out to be true. The troops went in after our cameras were shut down' (cited in Friedland, 1992, p. 5).

The pathbreaking development during the past two decades of an international system of computerized communications networks provides a final illustration of macro-public spheres. Based upon such techniques as packet
switching developed during the 1960s by the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) for the United States Department of Defense, a worldwide network of computers funded by governments, businesses, universities, and citizens, is beginning to draw together users from all continents and walks of life. Internet, the most talked about and talked through network, comprises an estimated 3 million computers serving as hosts that are in turn directly connected to millions of other computers used by up to 30 million people. The number of Internet 'citizens' is growing rapidly (by an estimated 1 million users a month), in part because of heavy subsidies that keep access costs to a minimum, partly because of peer pressure to get an e-mail address, and in part because of the lack of constraints, globality, and informality currently enjoyed by users communicating for a variety of self-chosen ends. Some 'surf' the Internet, logging on to servers throughout the world just for the hell of it. Companies and other organizations conduct banking transactions and transmit financial and administrative data by means of it. Live telecasts of speeches and transmissions of scanned images of weather maps, paintings, and nude photographs are commonplace. Still others use 'the Net' to obtain detailed print-outs of data downloaded from libraries or to 'chat' with a friend on another continent.

The manifold purposes for which Internet can be used at reasonable cost or free of charge has led some observers (e.g., Krol, 1994) to liken its users, in neo-Romantic terms, to eighteenth-century travelers seeking food and shelter in houses they reach at nightfall. While correctly drawing attention to the contractual or voluntary character of electronic interactions, the simile is arguably misplaced. It not merely understates the way in which the often clumsy organization of information sources generates confusion among users who are posting items—with the consequence that travelers on the information highway find themselves hazy about their routes, their means of travel, their hosts' house rules, and (insofar as messages are frequently forwarded several times, often by unknown receiver/senders) their ultimate destinations. More pertinent is the fact that the simile fails because Internet stimulates the growth of macro-public spheres. There is a category of users with a 'net presence' who utilize the medium not as travelers but as citizens who generate controversies with other members of a far-flung 'imagined community' about matters of power and principle. The Association for Progressive Communications (APC), for example, functions as a worldwide partnership of member networks dedicated to providing low-cost and advanced computer communications services for the purpose of network-strengthening and information-sharing among organizations and individuals working for environmental sustainability, economic and social justice, and human rights. Within the APC framework, spheres of public controversy ('public discussion forums') stretching to all four corners of the earth have a permanent presence. So too do reflections upon the power relations operating within the global networks themselves. 'Netizens' whose approach to the public forums of the Internet exudes selfishness—taking rather than giving—can generally expect to be abused ('flamed'), as unsolicited advertisers find to their embarrassment. Controversies are erupting about the
merits of state-subsidized, cost-free access of citizens to the Internet; proposals are surfacing (in the United States) for the formation of a Corporation for Public Cybercasting that would serve as a clearing house for federal funds, help to increase the density and tensility of the network, and lobby for citizens’ access; and fears are expressed that the telecommunications and entertainment industries are building advanced communications systems that would enable them to control parts of internet and thereby levy considerably higher access charges.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The above attempt radically to rethink the theory of the public sphere, like all lines of enquiry that transgress the limits of conventional wisdom, opens up new bundles of complex questions with important implications for future research in the fields of politics and communications. The most obvious implication is that the neo-republican attempt to tie the theory of the public sphere to the institution of public service broadcasting has failed on empirical and normative grounds and that, more positively, there are empirical reasons alone why the concept of ‘public spheres’ should be brought to bear on phenomena as disparate as computer networking, citizens’ initiatives, newspaper circulation, satellite broadcasting, and children playing video games. Public spheres are not exclusively ‘housed’ within state-protected public service media; nor (contrary to Habermas) are they somehow tied per definitionem to the zone of social life narrowly wedged between the world of power and money (state/economy) and the pre-political group associations of civil society. The political geography supposed by both the Habermasian and public service model theories of ‘the public sphere’ is inadequate. Public spheres can and do develop within various realms of civil society and state institutions, including within the supposed enemy territory of consumer markets and within the world of power that lies beyond the reach of nation-states, the Hobbesian world conventionally dominated by shadowy agreements, suited diplomacy, business transactions, and war and rumors of war.

Whether or not there is a long-term modern tendency for public spheres to spread into areas of life previously immune from controversies about power is necessarily a subject for a larger enquiry. Yet among the implications of this reflection upon the theme of public life in the old democracies is the fact that there are no remaining areas of social or political life automatically protected against public controversies about the distribution of power. The early modern attempt to represent patterns of property ownership, market conditions, household life, and events like birth and death as ‘natural’ is gradually withering away. So too is the older, originally Greek assumption that the public sphere of citizenship necessarily rests on the tight-lipped privacy (literally, the idiocy) of the oikos. As the process of mediated publicity spreads—television talk shows like Ricki Lake and children playing video games suggest—
supposedly private phenomena are being drawn into the vortices of negotiated controversy that are the hallmark of public spaces. The realm of privacy disappears. The process of politicization undermines the conventionally accepted division between ‘the public’ (where power controversies are reckoned to be the legitimate business of others) and ‘the private’ (where such controversy is said to have no legitimate role before the thrones of ‘intimacy’ or individual choice or God-given or biological ‘naturalness’). Politicization exposes the arbitrariness or conventionalism of traditional definitions of ‘the private,’ making it harder (as various figures of power are today painfully learning) to justify any action as a private matter. Paradoxically, the same process of politicization also triggers a new category of public disputes about the merits of defining or redefining certain zones of social and political life as ‘private’—and therefore as nobody else’s business. Legal authorities publicize the problem of rape while insisting upon the need to keep private the identities of those who have suffered the crime; gay males and lesbians campaign publicly for their right to live without intrusions by bigots and gawking journalists; advocates of the right to privacy press publicly for data protection legislation; meanwhile, embattled politicians and scandalized monarchs insist publicly that the media has no place in their bedrooms.

Such developments cannot adequately be understood from within the orthodox perspective on the public sphere, wedded as it is to a version of the early modern division between ‘the public’ and ‘the private.’ Its defenders might reply that at least some of the public spheres mentioned above are bogus public spheres, in that they are neither permanent nor structured by rational argumentation, or what Garnham calls ‘a rational and universalistic politics.’ Certainly—as the impermanent public controversy generated by social movements shows—not all the examples of public life cited above display longevity, but that arguably signals the need to question the conventional assumption that a public sphere is only a public sphere insofar as it persists through time. The point about rational argumentation is more difficult to answer, although it is again clear that there is no reason in principle why the concept of the public sphere must necessarily be wedded to the ideal type of communication orientated toward reaching consensus based upon the force of the best argument (or what Habermas calls verständigungsoorientierten Handelns [Habermas, 1976]. In their study of television talk shows, Sonia Livingstone and Peter Lunt (1994) usefully highlight the several ways in which audience discussion programs defy the dominant philosophical notion of rationality, derived from deductive logic, according to which there exists a set of formal reasoning procedures that express tacit inference rules concerning the truth or falsity of assertions independently of the content or context of utterances. Following Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations (1958) Livingstone and Hunt defend the legitimacy of lay or ‘ordinary reasoning,’ such as quarrels (characterized by emotional intensity and a commitment to assert one’s point of view at all costs) and preaching, political oratory, and story-telling, in which points are built up in a haphazard manner by layering, recursion, and
repetition. Their move is convincing, but their conclusions remain a trifle too rationalist. Early modern public spheres—as I proposed from a post-Weberian perspective in Public Life and Late Capitalism (Keane, 1984) and Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972) insisted from a neo-Marxian standpoint in Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung—did not conform to the Habermasian ideal type of rational discussion. Music, opera, sport, painting, dancing were among the forms of communication propelling the growth of public life, and there is therefore no principled reason, aside from philosophical prejudice, why their late-twentieth-century popular counterparts—the rambunctiousness of MTV’s annual video awards, the simulated uproar of Ricki Lake shows, or the hypertext of video games—should not be understood as legitimate potential media of power conflicts.

To suppose that public controversies about power can and should unfold by means of a variety of modes of communication is not to fall into the relativist trap of concluding that any and every power struggle counts as a legitimate public sphere. Violent confrontation among subjects does not do so, since, as the originally Greek understanding of war as external to the polis maintained, it seeks physically to silence or destroy outright its antagonists. The essential point (detailed in Keane, 1988; 1991) is this: the plea for a pluralistic understanding of the variable forms of communication that currently constitute public life shares an elective affinity with a nonfoundationalist understanding of democracy as a type of regime which enables a genuine plurality of individuals and groups openly to express their solidarity with, or opposition to, others’ ideals and forms of life. By abandoning the futile and often dangerous high roads of supposed transhistorical Ideals and definite Truths, the plea for a pluralistic account of public life implies that there is no ultimate criterion for determining which particular type of public controversy is universally preferable. The most that can be said, normatively speaking, is that a healthy democratic regime is one in which various types of public spheres are thriving, with no single one of them actually enjoying a monopoly in public disputes about the distribution of power. In contrast, a regime dominated by television talk shows or by spectacular media events would compromise its citizens’ integrity. It might prove to be as stifling as a regime in which seminar-style ‘rational discussion’ or demagogic political preaching served as the sole ‘civilized’ standard of disputation about who gets what, when, and how.

The emphasis here upon pluralism brings us back to the subject of space, which was the point of departure of this broad reconsideration of the structural transformations of the public sphere in the old democracies. Within the republican tradition of political thinking that extends through to the recent attempt to tie public life to the public service model, it is normally assumed that power is best monitored and its abuse most effectively checked by means of ongoing argumentation within the territorial framework of the nation-state. Republicanism supposes that public-spirited citizens can best act together within an integrated, politically constructed space that is ultimately rooted in the physical place occupied by state power. This supposition needs to be rejected,
since a growing number of public spheres—internet and global media events, for instance—are politically constructed spaces that have no immediate connection with physical territory. Public life, one could say, is presently subject to a process of de-territorialization which ensures that citizens' shared sense of proximity to one another in various milieux bears ever less relationship to the places where they were actually born, where they grew up, fell in love, worked, and lived, and where they will eventually die.

It might be objected that the attempt to categorize contemporary public life into spaces of varying scope or 'reach' is mistaken on both empirical and normative grounds. Empirically speaking, it could be said that the public spheres discussed in this essay are not discrete spaces, as the categories micro-, meso-, and macro-public sphere imply; that they rather resemble a modular system of overlapping networks defined by the lack of differentiation among spheres. Certainly, the concept of modularization serves as a useful reminder of the dangers of reifying the distinction among micro-, meso-, and macro-public spheres. It is also helpful in understanding the growing complexity of contemporary public life. But this does not mean that the boundaries among variously sized public spheres are obliterated completely. To the contrary, modular systems thrive on internal differentiation, whose workings can thus only be understood by means of ideal-type categories that highlight those systems' inner boundaries. The recent development of computerized communications is illustrative of this point. Computer networks originally linked terminals to mainframes for time-sharing, but during the past two decades a pattern of distributed structures at the micro-, meso-, and macro-levels has come to predominate. During the 1980s, local area networks (LANs) providing high-speed data communication within an organization spread rapidly; they have subsequently been linked into metropolitan area networks (MANs) that are often associated with a 'teleport' of satellite dishes, and into wide area networks (WANs) that may cover several continents—and yet still the differentiation between micro-/meso-/macro-domains remains a vital feature of the overall system.

The triadic distinction among differently sized public spheres can also be contested on normative grounds. During the early years of the twentieth century, at the beginning of the era of broadcasting, John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (1927) famously expressed the outlines of the complaint that modern societies are marked by the fragmentation of public life. 'There are too many publics and too much of public concern for our existing resources to cope with,' wrote Dewey. 'The essential need, he added, 'is the improvement of a unified system of methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion, that is the problem of the public' (p. 142).

This kind of appeal (repeated more recently by Robert Bellah (1967) and others) to revive republicanism is questionable. It fails to see that the structural differentiation of public spaces is unlikely to be undone in the coming decades, and that therefore the continued use of 'the' public sphere ideal is bound to empty it of empirical content and to turn the ideal into a nostalgic, unrealizable
utopia. We are moving, as Henri Lefebvre (1974) predicted, from a society in which space is seen as an 'absolute' toward one in which there are ongoing 'trials of space' (p. 116). Orthodox republicanism also ignores the undemocratic implications of its own hankering after a unified public sphere. The supposition that all power disputes can ultimately be sited at the level of the territorially bounded nation-state is a remnant from the era of state-building and the corresponding struggles of its inhabitants to widen the franchise—and, hence, to direct public controversies primarily at the operations of the sovereign state. In the present era of the universal franchise, by contrast, it is not so much who votes but where people vote that is becoming a central issue for democratic politics. From this perspective, the proliferation of mosaics of differently sized public spheres ought to be welcomed and practically reinforced by means of political struggle, law, money, and improved modes of communications. Exactly because of their capacity to monitor the exercise of power from a variety of sites within state and social institutions, public spheres ensure that nobody 'owns' power and increase the likelihood that its exercise everywhere is rendered more accountable to those whom it directly or indirectly affects.

The trends described in this essay are admittedly only trends. Within the old democracies, there are plenty of antidemocratic countrends, and it should therefore not be supposed that we are at the beginning of the end of the era of unaccountable power. All political classes, Harold Innis (1991) once remarked, have sought to enhance their power by utilizing certain media of communication to define and to control the spaces in which their subjects live. Statues of military and political heroes sited in public squares are only the most obvious example of a much older and highly complex history of rulers' attempts to define space in their honor, and thereby to inspire devotion among their subjects by making the exercise of power seem unblemished—and unchallengeable.

When reflecting upon the twentieth century, Innis doubted whether this struggle by dominant power groups to regulate their subjects' living space could be resisted. He supposed that space-biased media such as newspapers and radio broadcasting, despite their promise to democratize information, in fact entrench new modes of domination. Was Innis right in this global conviction? Is modernity, just like previous epochs, distinguished by dominant forms of media that absorb, record, and transform information into systems of knowledge consonant with the dominant institutional power structures? Is the era that lies beyond public service broadcasting likely to prove unfriendly toward public life? Is the vision of a democratic plurality of public spheres nothing more than a bad utopia? Or is the future likely to see a variety of contradictory trends, including not only new modes of domination but also unprecedented public battles to define and to control the spaces in which citizens appear? In the disciplines of politics and communications such questions are at present poorly formulated, while the tentative answers they elicit are by definition neither yet available or highly speculative. Perhaps the most that can be said at present is that a theory of public life that clings dogmatically to the vision of a unified public sphere in which 'public opinion' and 'the public interest' are defined is a chimera—and that for the sake of democracy it ought now to be jettisoned.
REFERENCES

Innis, H. 1951 The bias of communication. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
Livingstone, S. & Lunt, P.  

Melucci, A.  

Negt, O. & Kluge, A.  

Nelson, T. H.  

Nowak, K.  

Peters, B.  

Provenzo, E. F.  

Reith, J.  
1925 Memorandum of information on the scope and conduct of the broadcasting service. Caversham, Great Britain: BBC Written Archives.

Robbins, C.  

Scannell, P.  

Tönnies, F.  

Wittgenstein, L.  