The Public Sphere:
An Introduction

What is happening to public debate in Western cultures? Is our public sphere disintegrating? In the face of popular tabloid newspapers, new forms of reality television and an increasing lack of respect for traditional authorities, many critics are concerned that our society no longer has a rational, informed and unified space where everyone can communicate about the issues that affect us all.

In this book Alan McKee answers these questions by providing an introduction to the concept of the public sphere, the history of the term and the philosophical arguments about its function. By drawing on many examples from contemporary mediated culture, McKee looks at how we communicate with each other in public — and how we decide whether changing forms of communication are a good thing for the 'public sphere'.

Addressing the questions of commercialisation, trivialisation, spectacle, fragmentation and apathy, *The Public Sphere* provides a unique overview as it draws together the philosophical perspectives of academic writing with the insights provided by *Big Brother*, women's magazines, hip hop, community newspapers and Internet sites to clarify the way our public world works today.

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Acknowledgements

Preface

You could write a lot of different books with the title *The Public Sphere: An Introduction.* The concept of the 'public sphere' is a metaphor that we use to think about the way that information and ideas circulate in large societies. It's a term in everyday use to describe information when it's made generally available to the public: we say that it's in 'the public sphere' (see, for example, Furedi, 2004: 4). But the phrase also has a more precise meaning in academic writing about culture and politics, where it's a central and well-developed concept for thinking about how democratic culture should work. This double existence makes it difficult to decide which kind of *Introduction* to write about the topic.

You could, for example, write a description of the public sphere as it currently functions in Western democracies (listing the main institutions, how they work, who are the most powerful figures, and so on). Or you could write a book exploring the current debates about the public sphere that are taking place in public culture itself (tracing the ways that television, newspapers, popular writers and public intellectuals are discussing the public sphere *within* the public sphere). Or you could write a book that traced the academic history of the term 'public sphere' (looking only at academic writing on the topic, surveying the most important academic writers and their contributions to academic debates). Or you could take any of a number of other approaches, any of which could accurately be described as an introduction to 'the public sphere'.

What I've done with this book is to try to present a mixture of the first three approaches: to provide an overview of the current functioning of the public sphere, while tracing both popular and academic contributions to discussions about the issue. Such an

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approach has its risks: most obviously that the book will try to do too many things, and end up doing none of them well. There's a danger that it won't have quite enough detail about the functioning of the public sphere for audiences who are only interested in description; that it won't give enough space to popular thinking about the topic for those who want to trace vernacular philosophy; that it won't spend enough time explaining academic writing for those who are most interested in that approach.

Another risk of such an approach is novelty. The book tries to present academic ideas about the public sphere alongside popular ideas on the topic. In writing about the public sphere the tendency has been to privilege one or the other: either to focus on academic writing with little interest in popular examples; or to explore popular culture in detail using one or two ideas taken from academic writing, but without exploring that academic writing in detail. To try to bring the two kinds of culture into dialogue is surprisingly rare (some impressive exceptions are the works of John Hartley, 1992, 1992b, 1996, 1999; and Jane Shattuc, 1997), and the fact this book doesn't easily fit into either one tradition or the other might count against it. I've taken this risk because it also has potential gains. Such an approach allows me to show how various areas of debate relate to each other. How have academic ideas developed in relation to popular thinking about the public sphere? And how has discussion *about* the public sphere taken place *within* — and changed the nature of — the public sphere itself?

I've also chosen to write *The Public Sphere: An Introduction* to serve as an entry level text for readers with no specialized training. I could have pitched it at a higher level and assumed a level of expertise in the history of popular culture, or the tradition of political philosophy. Instead, the book aims to be as accessible as possible, to explain the concepts that are used in popular and academic discussions of the public sphere as clearly as I can. This necessarily involves sacrificing a degree of subtlety and detail, and it's necessary to emphasize this from the outset. Many of the concepts discussed in this book have been on the agenda of philosophy and academic writing for hundreds — or in some cases, even thousands — of years. They've been written about by thousands of thinkers. This book doesn't do justice to such histories: it simplifies concepts, arguments and the

positions of popular and academic thinkers in order to try to engage
the reader with the general thrust of the debates. It isn't a suitable
book for a reader who already has some familiarity with debates
about the public sphere and is looking for a more sophisticated and
detailed account of this area.

For the same reason, I've chosen to structure the book around a
series of debates about the public sphere that are familiar in both
popular and academic thinking on the topic. The advantage of this
approach is that, by focusing on everyday issues that will hopefully
be familiar to all readers, the book can make clear that 'the public
sphere' is an important issue, both for academics and for people
working outside of the university sector. In newspapers, magazines,
on television and in everyday conversation as well as in university
textbooks, people are concerned about what is happening to our
public culture. Again, there are drawbacks to such an approach. In
particular, it means that I've chosen to refer to popular and academic
thinkers only when they have something useful to say about the core
issues that I've focused on. This means that the book doesn't do
justice to any single writer, in the sense of providing the reader with
an overview of their career, their ideas or their changing arguments.
Instead I've used a methodology called 'theory shopping' (Amad,
1994: 13), where you pick and choose from previous writing in order
to find the material that's most useful for the project you're working
on. This has the advantage of allowing the writer to range widely
across a variety of popular and academic approaches to the public
sphere, without accepting wholeheartedly the approaches taken by
previous writers; but it also has the disadvantage that it doesn't
provide the reader with a fully developed intellectual biography of
any of the previous writers mentioned.

In response to all of the above points, the book closes with some
suggestions for further reading. For readers who want to follow up
on one particular approach in more detail — finding more detail
on popular thinking about the public sphere, or tracing the history
of academic writing on the topic — this will hopefully prove useful,
allowing you to find more difficult work in the area, or to read the
oeuvre of the writers mentioned here.

Finally, I should point out that this isn't an objective book about
the public sphere. It doesn't present all of the positions that previous

thinkers have taken in equal detail or with equal approval. Person-
ally, I don't think this is a problem — simply because I don't believe
that any piece of culture can ever be 'objective', where I take that term
to mean 'presenting a description of something that every informed
party would agree to'. No matter how neutral you try to make your
language or your argument's structure, there will always be biases
in your writing: ideas which seem marginal to one writer seem to
others to be centrally important; previous thinkers whom one per-
son believes make worthwhile points others see as being irrelevant,
and so on. So there are writers on the public sphere who would not
agree with the arguments made and the descriptions presented in
this book. The book takes a 'postmodern' approach (see the Intro-
duction) to this issue. My own position, to summarize it briefly, is
that there's no *single* true representation of any aspect of the world:
rather, there are *multiple* true ways of making sense of the world
(McKee, 2003: 9).

In the book I survey the work of popular and academic thinkers
about the public sphere. Most of the writers in the area, both pop-
ular and academic, are in agreement about our basic project — we
want to expand democracy, to see a public culture motivated by
Enlightenment values (see the Introduction) of equality, justice,
freedom and comfort. We agree these are good things; and we're
basically on the same side as we argue for their importance. There
are, however, differences between us as well. We often disagree,
for example, on what these terms *mean*, exactly; and on how we
might best achieve them in our societies. As I survey popular and
academic thinking about how the public sphere functions, I also
make an argument for my own — postmodern — way of making
sense of it. But I don't think that this is the single truth about the
question. Other writers on the topic, who are at least as intelligent,
well-informed and well-intentioned as I am, see a different truth
about the functioning of the public sphere. They're not, in any
simple sense, wrong. We have productive disagreements about how
to make sense of the societies in which we live. As I explain in the
book, because the intellectual differences that we have lie at the level
of *attitudes* rather than *facts*, we can never prove that one of us is
right and the other wrong. We have to accept that we have different

ways of seeing the truth about the issue. As Egon G. Guba puts it in
The Paradigm Dialog:

> Of course I have my own preference . . . I recognize that what I am
> about to say is my own construction, not necessarily an objective
> (whatever that may be) analysis. Indeed . . . [I] not only abjure
> objectivity, but celebrate subjectivity . . . The reader should not,
> therefore, read this chapter in the mistaken notion that it represents
> gospel or even a widely agreed to position. I offer it as *one* way
> to understand the . . . issue . . . [I]t is quite possible for me to
> entertain *any* construction, . . . that is proposed by reasonable and
> well-intentioned persons.   (Guba, 1990: 17–18)

This raises the question of how people with different attitudes
might attempt to engage in debate with each other — I discuss this
in Chapter 4. What I offer in this book is an overview of debates
about the public sphere, structured around an argument supporting
my own way of making sense of these. It doesn't prove that my
perspective is correct, because, as mentioned above, the differences
between myself and writers who disagree are attitudinal rather than
factual. The disagreements we have don't allow for resolution using
purely rational forms of argument. So the book explains how I
make sense of things, in the hope that for some readers there may
be a sense of recognition — that it makes sense to you as well. If it
doesn't, and you're more interested in the perspective of one of the
writers with whom I disagree, then hopefully the book will provide
enough detail for you to understand the opposing arguments; and
the list of suggested further reading that closes the book will be
useful for finding out more about the ideas of other writers.

To the kids of B Block