

## Introduction

It's common, both in everyday conversations and academic writing, to hear people suggest that the public sphere — or 'the media' — are degenerating.<sup>1</sup> Frank Furedi's complaint in a newspaper article about politics and the media is typical:

The growth of a managerial political style [in Western countries] has gone hand in hand with a shift from politics to the personal. Personalities and individual behaviour dominate the presentation of contemporary politics. As public life has become emptied of its content, private and personal preoccupations have been projected into the public sphere. Consequently, passions that were once stirred by ideological differences are far more likely to be engaged by individual misbehaviour, private troubles and personality conflicts, such as Bill Clinton's affair. The private lives of politicians excite greater interest than the way they handle their public office.

(Furedi, 2004: 4)

At the same time, other voices claim that public communication in Western societies is actually *improving*; as Catharine Lumby argues in her book *Gotcha!*:

The tabloidisation of our media has been accompanied by as many benefits as problems . . . the past few decades have seen an overwhelming democratisation of our media — a diversification not only of voices, but of ways of speaking about personal, social and political life . . . the contemporary media sphere constitutes a highly diverse and inclusive forum in which a host of important social issues once deemed apolitical, trivial or personal are now being aired.

(Lumby, 1999: xiii)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54990-5 - The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Alan McKee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 2 The Public Sphere

*The Public Sphere: An Introduction* is about these issues and these positions. It asks, firstly: is the public sphere changing in Western countries? If so, should we be concerned about these changes? And if that is the case, should we be fighting against them, or working to support them?

There are five major themes common to popular and academic concerns about the public sphere in Western countries at the start of the twenty-first century: that it's too *trivialized*; that it's too *commercialized*; that it relies too much on *spectacle* rather than rational argumentation; that it's too *fragmented*; and that it has caused citizens to become too *apathetic* about important public issues.

So, taking these in order, some people worry that the public sphere is currently too full of trivia. Consumers, they suggest, are more interested in unimportant news about celebrities, diets, and sex tips than about really important, serious political issues:

tabloid media . . . comprises large circulation newspapers and magazines, which either trivialise significant events and give unbalanced and populist treatment to important themes or provide disproportionate coverage to frivolous subjects. (Jabbar, 2003: np)

Secondly, there's a concern that the media don't care about the quality of material in the public sphere. They simply want to make money, and so dumb down to the lowest common denominator

There has been a relentless pursuit of populism and ratings, and the outcome is that TV plays to the lowest common denominator. In a land where [British tabloid] *The Sun* is the newspaper that sells more copies than any other, TV is becoming increasingly tabloid-oriented. The low, and declining, profile of opera, ballet, music, theatre, world cinema, and the arts generally, is a sign of declining standards. (Birchmore, 2003: np)

Thirdly, public culture is too *spectacular*. Audiences have short attention spans. They only want flashy visuals and superficial distractions — not serious, in-depth discussions about important issues. People do not read enough — they are passive couch potatoes in front of the media:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54990-5 - The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Alan McKee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The bogus, the derivative, and the flashy and gaudy now catch the attention of the mass, who, sans sense, are captive to a superficiality of response based on degraded attentional abilities . . . the audience is only able to take in simple concepts in simple language, the snippets of speech perhaps broken up with pop music to allow the audience a break of attention so that the task of listening is not too arduous. (Birchmore, 2003: np)

Fourthly, some commentators worry that public culture is becoming too *fragmented*. Niche audiences and the demands of various identity groups are breaking up the common national cultures that we once enjoyed. We can no longer be confident that everybody will be interested in, and informed about, the same things:

A lot of very smart people see the Balkans in America's future. They point to the L.A. riots and say race relations are worse than ever. They look at immigrants pouring in from Third World nations and say (on the left) that we must accommodate diverse cultures and (on the right) that we must shut the doors. They worry about a fragmenting nation — too many ethnicities, too many religions, even too many cable TV channels. They're afraid America will disappear. 'Unless a common purpose binds [Americans] together, tribal hostilities will drive them apart,' says liberal historian Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., neatly encapsulating the centrist position. (Postrel, 1993: np)

And as a result of all this, public culture in Western countries is leading to *apathy*. Citizens no longer engage with politics or their own governance. They become lazy and passive. They don't care about issues any more:

Media [are] to blame for voter apathy . . . The voters blame the politicians. The politicians blame the voters. Nobody takes responsibility for the uninformed, uninterested population. And nobody blames what may be the largest source of voter ignorance yet: the media. ('Media', 2002: np)

This book discusses each of these issues, looking at the arguments that various commentators have made, and the historical context in which these discussions take place. It argues, agreeing

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54990-5 - The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Alan McKee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4 The Public Sphere

with Catharine Lumby, that the changes taking place in the public sphere are actually worthwhile improvements; but this is only one perspective on the issue, and the book makes clear that other thinkers disagree. This isn't a book that tells you the single truth about the changing nature of the public sphere. It argues for one side of the case, but also shows you what the other sides are saying.

### The public sphere

This book is an introduction to 'the public sphere'. This term appears in everyday conversations about society, discussions in the popular media and in the writing of academics interested in political culture. In this last context there's a history of detailed analysis of the topic, systematically investigating its meaning and importance — and the book will provide an introduction to that tradition as well as to popular thinking on the topic. As defined in the work of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (a central figure in these discussions, as I'll explain below), the public sphere is:

A domain of our social life where such a thing as public opinion can be formed [where] citizens . . . deal with matters of general interest without being subject to coercion . . . [to] express and publicize their views. (Habermas, 1997: 105)

The public sphere, is not, of course, a sphere. It's a metaphorical term that's used to describe the virtual space where people can interact (see Hartley, 1992: 1). We often use metaphors to make sense of the world around us — particularly when we're describing abstract things. The World Wide Web, for example, is not actually a web; cyberspace is not a space; and so with the public sphere. Where people's conversations, ideas and minds meet — that's public space (Robbins, 1993: xvi). It's the virtual space where the citizens of a country exchange ideas and discuss issues, in order to reach agreement about 'matters of general interest' (Habermas, 1997: 105). It's the place: 'where information, ideas and debate can circulate in society, and where political opinion can be formed' (Dahlgren, 1995: ix; see also Fraser, 1990: 57). It's where each of us finds out

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54990-5 - The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Alan McKee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

what's happening in our community, and what social, cultural and political issues are facing us. It's where we engage with these issues and add our voices to discussions about them, playing our part in the process of a society reaching a consensus or compromise about what we think about issues, and what should be done about them.

As I suggested above, there's a slight variation in vocabulary between everyday and academic discussions about these issues. While academic writing systematically uses the term 'public sphere' to describe the virtual space where communication about public issues takes place, in everyday discourse we often talk about 'the media' instead. In the way that they're used in their different contexts, these two terms refer to similar things: although they aren't exactly interchangeable. Academics worry that 'the public sphere' is becoming too commercialized, just as journalists worry that 'the media' is becoming too commercialized. Academics worry about trivialization, spectacle and fragmentation of 'the public sphere', while popular commentators say the same things about 'the media'.

The relationship between these two terms is complicated. On the one hand it's true that the public sphere is a bigger thing than just 'the media'. If we think about the way that issues are circulated in our culture, processed by individuals and institutions and then recirculated until we reach some kind of agreement about what to do about them, it's not only the media that are involved in this process. We hear a story on the news, and then we talk about it with friends; we exchange ideas on email groups, down the pub, at the hairdresser; we telephone a talkback radio station, write a letter to a magazine, stop buying a newspaper because we disagree with its political stance. These human interactions are all parts of the public sphere, just as much as the mass media is (see Chapter 5). But on the other hand, the mass media obviously play a central role in the public sphere (see John Hartley's sophisticated and innovative discussion of the relationship between these two concepts — 1996: 78–81. See also McNair, 2000: 1; Garnham, 1992: 360, 364–365). It's only in the mass media that vast populations of people can come together to exchange ideas. You can't fit the entire population of America, or Britain, or Australia, into a town hall where they could all discuss issues that affect them. The media is the place where we

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54990-5 - The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Alan McKee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 6 The Public Sphere

find out about ‘the public’ — the millions of other people that we share a country with:

when the public is large this kind of communication requires certain means of dissemination and influence: today, newspapers and periodicals, radio and television are the media of the public sphere.

(Habermas, 1997: 105)

The ‘public sphere’ isn’t exactly the same thing as ‘the media’. But these terms are used in two different situations — academic writing and popular discussions respectively — to think about similar issues: how does a large community circulate ideas, discuss possible responses, and come to some kind of agreement on them? For the rest of the book, I’ll use the term ‘the public sphere’ to avoid confusion: but remember that the debates that the book covers are also a part of popular thinking about culture, even if the language used there is sometimes slightly different.

### The public sphere and modernity

The concept of ‘the public sphere’ is a useful one for thinking about how modern liberal democratic societies function. It attempts to describe the way in which millions of citizens reach consensus about the running of their society. This makes it useful for understanding how political communication works in these countries; for thinking about how wider social and cultural issues are addressed; and for trying to make sense of how agreement about what is acceptable in a culture is reached. I see five main ways in which its usefulness can be explained.

In order to understand the first of these ways in which the concept is useful, it’s necessary to look at the background of academic debate about the topic. In this book I explore both academic and popular thinking about the public sphere. Academic writing on the topic isn’t uniformly more intelligent, more informed or more insightful than popular thinking: it is, however, more systematic. It provides a series of useful terms and arguments that we can use to consider the changing nature of the public sphere. One useful perspective that a study of academic writing gives us is an insight into the periods

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54990-5 - The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Alan McKee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

into which Western history is usually broken down. Most historians agree that during the seventeenth century the nature of Western societies changed dramatically. Before this time Western cultures were organized as feudal systems. They were strictly hierarchical; the monarch was the absolute power, often directly appointed by God. The monarch's subjects were, literally, 'subject' to her or his rule (Lewis, 2002: 78).

During the seventeenth century, a radical new set of ideas began to emerge: based around the outrageous concept that every person in a society should be treated equally (Carpignano et al., 1993: 97). Western societies began to enter the period that historians call 'modernity':

Modernity is a historical period that began in Western Europe with a series of profound social-structural and intellectual transformations in the seventeenth century and achieved its maturity as a cultural project with the growth of the Enlightenment and later with the development of industrial society. Modernity is associated with order, certainty, harmony, humanity, pure art, absolute truth.

(Sarup, 1996: 50, citing Zygmunt Bauman)

Modernity involved a different way of seeing the world, and of seeing the place of people in it. Thinkers developed 'Enlightenment' values (enlightenment coming after 'the dark ages' of history) as a guide to organizing society: all citizens were of equal worth and importance (equality); everyone should be treated fairly (justice); everyone should have control over their own lives (freedom); and everyone had a right to a basic level of material welfare (comfort).

These ideas have now become common sense across Western societies; because of this, it's difficult to see that, at the time, they were revolutionary (literally, in America and France; see Hartley, 1996: 8–13). Because the existing societies were feudal and hierarchical, in order to organize them around the idea of equality it was necessary to radically restructure social organizations. Until this point, for example, ordinary citizens had no input into politics: the monarch decided what was to be done, and it was done. When a society embraced the idea of equality, it implied that citizens should somehow have some kind of input into the political decisions made:

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54990-5 - The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Alan McKee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 8 The Public Sphere

but there was no way of doing that within existing political structures (Habermas, 1989: 26). So citizens had to find ways of exchanging information and ideas, reaching agreement about what they wanted done, and communicating that information to the members of society who had the appropriate power. They had to form public venues and publications to do so. And so the ‘public sphere’ (in German, ‘Öffentlichkeit’) emerges as a vital part of modernity, and its Enlightenment commitment to equality (Habermas, 1989: 2):<sup>2</sup>

In both Britain and France, from the later seventeenth century, new bodies and organizations, new forms of sociability, as well as new, more pervasive and faster means of communication, did come into being to give more visible form and force to public opinion.

(Harris, 1996: 104)

From around 1750 ordinary citizens were increasingly involved in discussions — public discussions — about issues of common concern (Habermas, 1989: 43; Baker, 1992). When ‘ordinary’ people were allowed to become involved in making decisions about how the country should be run — that is, when an element of democracy was introduced — a public sphere began to emerge. The power for making decisions moved away from the absolute ruler and towards ‘the people’. ‘The state’ — the apparatus that governs the country — was separated from the ruler. Previously the ruler *was* the state. Now the state — the system for governing the country — emerged as something separate, of which the ruler was only a part. The state itself was disembodied, it was abstract — and thus everybody could conceivably contribute to it. This was an important political shift, and one that still underlies our current forms of social organization — the state is not the same thing as the individual ruler (prime minister, president, or premier — see Calhoun, 1992b: 8, 14). Many people have an input into deciding how the state is run — not one single person. There’s a system in place that allows input into public discussion. We even have ‘opposition’ parties, who get to speak in public against the current ruler. Before the eighteenth century, this wasn’t the case: ‘Until then political opposition at the national level had been possible only . . . by resorting to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54990-5 - The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Alan McKee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

violence' (Habermas, 1989: 64). We no longer live in feudal political systems.

So the concept of the public sphere is useful for understanding how societies are organized in this historical period called modernity; in cultures that are structured by Enlightenment values of equality, freedom, justice and comfort, rather than by feudal values of strong hierarchy, tradition and respect for authority.

Secondly, the concept of the public sphere is useful for understanding how 'liberal' societies function, rather than totalitarian ones. Liberal forms of social organization are characterized by a commitment to the idea that individuals should have a 'private' realm of their life, over which they are allowed some control. This is unlike totalitarian societies in which every element of the individual's life — how much they are paid, what they eat, what culture they consume — is managed by the state. Again, it's only in liberal forms of social organization that the idea of a public sphere makes sense (Hohendahl, 1992: 99; Aronowitz, 1993: 91). In a totalitarian society, public opinion doesn't emerge from individual voices discussing issues: it's worked out from above by the state itself, and then given back to people — telling them what they will think about particular issues. It's only if you have a form of social organization that makes the individual the basic source of ideas that a public sphere — a place for individuals to exchange their ideas in order to reach a consensus — is necessary (Gripsrud, 1999: 37). The public sphere is separate from the state. It's a place where individual citizens work out what the community thinks about an issue — and then turns to the state to deal with it. In the public sphere, importantly, one of the issues that citizens can discuss is whether they are happy with the performance of the state. The public sphere is not set up by government, and not managed by government — it has to be separate in order to provide: 'counterweights to absolutist states . . . [and] mediate between "society" and the state by holding the state accountable to "society"' (Fraser, 1990: 57, 58). The public sphere belongs to what political philosophers call 'civil society' (Calhoun, 1996: 453). Although this term is 'fuzzy' (Hoynes, 1994: 163) in political philosophy, with differing traditions giving it contradictory meanings (see Habermas, 1992: 433; Garnham, 1992: 363; Outhwaite, 1996b: 368), at its most basic the term describes

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-54990-5 - The Public Sphere: An Introduction

Alan McKee

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 10 The Public Sphere

those forms of social organization which are not organized by the government — communities, audiences, social groups, and so on. The public sphere is part of this civil society — separate from the state.

Thirdly, the concept of ‘the public sphere’ is useful in political thinking because ‘it insists that an ideal democratic polity be defined by features beyond those that formally enable political participation’ (Schudson, 1992: 147; see also Dahlgren, 1995: 9; see also Garnham, 1990: 109). It’s useful for writers who believe that politics is more than simply what happens in parliament, as it makes us think about ‘a broader sense of political practice as the constitution of ways of living together’ (Calhoun, 1996: 451).

Fourthly, ‘the public sphere’ is a useful metaphor because it lets us think about the role that ordinary people might play in the creation of public culture, public policy and the running of the state. Alternative metaphors for describing the political work of the media work best for totalitarian societies. Some writers use the idea of ‘ideology’ to describe how the media work. The word means a false view of the world that’s in the interests of powerful groups, which those powerful groups impose on less powerful citizens in order to keep them oppressed. This description of the political work of the media doesn’t allow for the possibility that ordinary citizens may also be involved in producing or circulating ideas. Similarly, the idea of ‘hegemony’ — the process by which the ruling classes persuade oppressed groups to give their assent to an unfair social structure — suggests that powerful groups create and circulate all the ideas in a society (Fraser, 1990: 56; Robbins, 1993: xvii).

This is also true of the ‘hypodermic’ model that’s still sometimes used to describe the work of advertising, public relations, and so on — that ideas are created by powerful groups and injected into helpless consumers, who then go out and buy what they are told to. The concept of the ‘public sphere’ is a useful one for researchers who believe that ordinary citizens play a role in the creation and distribution of ideas about how society works.

Fifthly, ‘public sphere’ is a useful term because it reminds us that the media aren’t reality — or, in more academic language, that the public sphere is not the same thing as private experience. One of the dominant ways to understand mediated representations in current