

## I

## Introduction

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1.1	Recurrent Questions about Media and Public Life	3
1.2	Media and Public Life Today: Preview of Chapters	6
1.2.1	Living in a Datafied World	7
1.2.2	Journalism in Times of Change	10
1.2.3	Media and Problems of Inclusion	13
1.2.4	Engagement with and through Media	15
1.2.5	The Role of Scholars	18
1.2.6	Media Research and Mediated Shifts and Crises	20
	References	21

The great changes rocking media in the networked era come with profound implications for public life that give new urgency and relevance to the work of media scholars. The evolving practices, platforms, and algorithms that shape digital communication; the dawn of simultaneously massive and precise data-sweeping and -sorting technologies; and the rise of new infrastructures raise questions about how public attention is being steered and toward what ends. Shifts in media industries like journalism, public relations, and marketing give new force to old questions about who produces news and information and for whom. The expanded range of voices seeking to influence public life, overtly and covertly, creates novel forms of potentially liberating and empowering engagement while also thinning the force of established sources of authority, including the news media, scientific research, and political parties. At the same time, growing levels

of social polarization, increasing economic inequality, rising authoritarianism, and declining trust in major institutions of public life cast doubt on the potential for media to meaningfully engage individuals across various lines of social difference. In this roiling landscape, to what extent has the work of scholars of media and public life changed? To what extent should it?

There has been no shortage of scholars calling for communication research that does more to make sense of – and engage in debates about – these transformations. Lance Bennett and Barbara Pfetsch have argued that real-world changes in media and public life necessitate a “fundamental rethinking” (2018: 245) of core concepts in the field, rather than the continuation of research on long-studied topics using well-established research methods. Sonia Livingstone has written that the “nature of media power is shifting substantially, along with deeper geopolitical changes,” and warns that these developments leave “critical scholarship scrambling to keep up” (2019: 174). Rasmus Nielsen has observed that communication scholars are often “irrelevant” in public debates about issues pertaining to media and public life, and suggests that they do more to engage in “the ‘rough process’ of public discussion” (2018: 149).

The purpose of this book is to explore how scholars working at the intersections of journalism, politics, and activism make sense of and relate to some of the most pressing issues concerning contemporary developments in media and public life. Each contributor to this volume was asked to identify what they saw as the most pressing issue for scholars of media and public life to engage. By starting from the basis of asking questions, we hope to bring to the fore issues and topics worth knowing, rather than what extant theories, concepts, or methods enable one to know. In doing so, we aim to demonstrate some of the ways that real-world concerns can be translated into scholarly research topics. While the contributors are disparate in their theoretical, empirical, and normative orientations, they agree on the importance of revisiting issues of long-standing concern while also engaging in themes and topics brought into focus by contemporary developments in politics, technology, and culture. Together, the contributors offer a diversity of perspectives on the role scholars can, do, and ought to play in making sense of current developments and demonstrate the strength of strong theoretical frameworks in shaping how scholars perceive and position themselves in relation to research questions.

I. I RECURRENT QUESTIONS ABOUT MEDIA  
AND PUBLIC LIFE

Scholars have of course long studied the role media play in public life by considering what media do to people, and what people in turn do with media. As Silvio Waisbord points out in the epilogue to this volume, that work is typically built on normative assumptions about the nexus between media and a well-functioning society. Such assessments are further spurred by perceived crises in public communication that stem from political turmoil, economic crisis, and media transformations. What media? For what public life? Indeed, asking questions about the role of media and public life has always been central to the work of communication scholars. Implicit in these questions is the idea that scholars have something distinctive to add to contemporary discussions of media and public life.

Consider the inaugural issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, which in 1937 brought together leading thinkers from across the social sciences, including Harold Lasswell, Paul Lazarsfeld, Robert Merton, and Margaret Mead, and asked them to examine threats and opportunities created by shifts in the media environment. The editorial introduction – penned amid growing concerns about the rise of fascism in Europe – sounded themes not entirely dissimilar from those articulated by many scholars of media and public life today. The editors wrote that the “miraculous improvement of the means of communication” (p. 3) opened up “new dimensions” and “new intensities” that influence how political and economic power are wielded. They noted the growing prevalence of opinion polling conducted by private firms and the implications of such developments for democratic governance: “Private polls are taken on public issues. The fate of representative government grows uncertain” (p. 3). They underscored the growing use of propaganda by governments, even as the rise of “new agencies of mass impression” (radio, motion pictures) created “difficult problems of private editorship and government control” (p. 4). Finally, they highlighted the development of advertising as both “a science and art” as well as the need for businesses to retain public relations support. To the editors, the shifts appeared fundamental and thoroughgoing; their “surging impact upon events become the characteristic of the current age” (p. 3). Then, as now, the question was whether transformations in media served to benefit or to damage public life.

Amid the transformations of their era, the editors emphasized the need to refine concepts, revisit questions, and define the terms of their scholarly

engagements. Most obviously, given the journal's title, they sought to refine their understanding of public opinion. "Under these conditions the clearest possible understanding of what public opinion is, how it generates, and how it acts becomes a vital need touching both public and private interest" (*Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1937: 4). But they also sought to revisit core questions about public opinion posed by earlier generations of scholars. With nods to Alexis de Tocqueville and Ferdinand Tönnies, among others, they dedicated themselves to using recent developments to test prior hypotheses and introduce "greater precision of thought and treatment" in their analyses (p. 3). They also articulated a clear position in relation to their objects of analysis. While acknowledging that their research might inform politicians, civic groups, business leaders, and others, they tasked themselves not with "evaluating these proffered causes or of discovering new ones" (p. 4). Rather, they endeavored to strictly maintain a "wholly objective and scientific point of view."

Of course, *Public Opinion Quarterly* and the people around it represented merely one way – and hardly a uniform one at that – of approaching these transformations. The contrast with thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School, a term first used in 1937, is instructive (Horkheimer, 1972). Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1944), writing as exiles living in North America, sought to explain the "barbarism" wrought in World War II by linking it to long-term historical developments in capitalism and Enlightenment ideals of progress, and more. For them, the chief development in media and public life – though their explanation for the ascent of fascism was broader – was the rise of the "culture industry," and its primary effect was to produce docile and passive citizens rather than engaged and informed citizens. They criticized efforts among scholars to identify invariant universal laws based on cumulative knowledge, which was precisely the sort of knowledge that many of their colleagues at *Public Opinion Quarterly* sought to develop. In its place, they introduced new concepts (culture industry) that could serve as a basis for developing a critical (rather than affirmative) stance vis-à-vis contemporary social arrangements (Horkheimer, 1972). These concepts could help to answer important questions – such as how culture may have influenced the rise of fascism – that built on long-running debates, including those found in the works of Marx, Weber, and Freud. The Frankfurt School also articulated a different sense of engagement than their peers at *Public Opinion Quarterly*. Horkheimer and Adorno were relatively cut off from social movements and offered largely theoretical arguments rather than detailed

empirical engagements. At the same time, they argued that emancipation is found in concrete historical circumstances and that part of the role of the scholar was to identify possible steps on the road to liberty.

Questions surrounding how to think about and relate to transformations in media and public life are thus basic to media scholarship, and the answers given are as varied and complex as the scholars who propose them. The examples in preceding paragraphs, however, suggest several more general points regarding scholarly engagement with media and public life that are reflected in this volume. First, engaged scholarship does not stand in binary opposition to disengaged or detached scholarship. As Norbert Elias (1956) once argued, some degree of both involvement and detachment is required for scholarly engagement with any research object. On the one hand, time and distance from the objects they study create the potential for scholars to produce knowledge rather than merely express their opinions. It affords the perspective necessary to theorize a problem, challenge or integrate extant views on that problem, and design and develop research that enables a systematic exploration of the issue. On the other hand, some degree of involvement is needed to identify, conceptualize, and operationalize the topic that one will or does research. Knowing where to look, and what to examine, depends in no small part on the everyday engagements and experiences of scholars living in the world. Focusing singularly on either involvement or detachment can easily become problematic (i.e., complete involvement raises questions about what makes scholarship distinctive vis-à-vis other perspectives on media and public life; total detachment runs the risk of ignoring the very realities that one claims to study). While our contributors vary in the degree to which they see their research as more or less engaged, they all generally navigate the tension between involvement and detachment.

Second, and relatedly, stances that scholars adopt can calcify over time, moving from highly involved to problematically detached. Whatever their other differences, the individuals associated with both the inaugural issue of *Public Opinion Quarterly* and the Frankfurt School understood themselves to be intimately engaged with making sense of their own most pressing contemporary problems. They studied the effects of media on public opinion and the rise of the culture industries, for example, because doing so provided insights into important forms of social power, which could only be challenged or altered to the degree that such power was understood. Yet the very success of these research agendas sometimes leads to inertia, as later generations of scholars adopt the agenda separated from the context – the historical and scholarly realities – that

prompted its initial development. This is what Bennett and Pfetsch (2018) perceive and criticize when characterizing political communication as a field that “increasingly studies itself” – that is, that seeks to develop knowledge within a preexisting framework while paying less attention to whether real-world social transformations expose that framework as obsolete or in need of substantial revision. The more general question this poses, and which our contributors address, concerns how and in what ways scholars engage with prior research paradigms. Should they revisit core concepts with the aim of refining them for the current era, or should they seek to develop new tools that might be better adapted to the contemporary moment?

Third, these debates raise a range of questions about the standpoint of scholarship. Then and especially now, academic researchers are asked to make their work relevant to a number of stakeholders (e.g., project funders, community groups, state bureaucracies, business organizations), which brings to the fore issues regarding whose interests and perspectives are represented in the research, as well as academics’ capacity to act as counterweights to the worldview defended by those holding substantial amounts of power in a particular time and place. Put simply, how well can scholars of media and public life act as critics of extant social arrangements when, in many cases, the capacity to collect and analyze data is held by large, for-profit companies with an interest in promoting their own interests? This can be connected more broadly with the question of whose standpoint ought to be represented in scholarly research of media and public life. Should scholars adopt the view of particular – typically subaltern – groups, or should they instead seek to construct a space in which sense can be made of the varying forms of collaboration and competition across a range of groups? The debate is long-running and familiar, especially to feminist scholars, who have for decades debated the relative merits of adopting the standpoint of women in order to challenge dominant conceptions of gender, family, and society more broadly. But the issue touches on nearly every domain of scholarship, including scholars studying media and public life, and can be seen in the different ways our contributors position themselves in relation to their chosen research problems.

## 1.2 MEDIA AND PUBLIC LIFE TODAY: PREVIEW OF CHAPTERS

Authors included in this volume came together in the fall of 2018 for a symposium at the University of Washington. Prior to the symposium,

each person was asked to write an essay detailing what they saw as the most pressing question with which scholars of media and public ought to grapple. At the symposium, the first drafts of these essays were discussed collectively and in detail; invited faculty from a wide range of departments and disciplines at the University of Washington, including communication, philosophy, sociology, history, information sciences, and human-centered design and engineering, served as discussants, probing the issues raised from their theoretical and disciplinary vantage points. Each author then revised and expanded their contributions for the current collection, integrating the cross-disciplinary perspectives on their work articulated at the symposium. The different perspectives taken up by the authors result in part from the varied ways they each relate to their object of research. Moreover, the heterogeneity of the concerns included in the collection hints at the great diversity of approaches that scholars can and do assume regarding complex topics surrounding media and public life.

The book is organized into five parts based on themes that emerged as core areas of concern throughout our conversations. These themes hardly exhaust the range of issues that might be explored; however, we do hope that they collectively suggest ways that scholars might do similar work regarding different problems. They are: living in a datafied world; journalism in times of change; media and problems of inclusion; engagement with and through media; and the role of media scholars. In the parts that follow, we briefly introduce the core issues discussed under each of these themes, while also highlighting points of agreement and disagreement across our contributors. The volume concludes with an epilogue written by Silvio Waisbord that extends the scope of discussion by addressing what changes in media and public life might mean to communication as a field more broadly.

### 1.2.1 Living in a Datafied World

Chapters in Part I address the ways new communication tools and infrastructures fuel the collection and analysis of unprecedented amounts of personal data. In this “datafied” environment, digital platforms play host to a widening array of political, commercial, professional, and social interactions, producing digital footprints that are the object of pervasive corporate and government collection and surveillance. While data have long been a byproduct of political, economic, and social activities, their volume and value have vastly increased due to the advancement in

technologies that manage so-called big data, or large data sets that can be manipulated to reveal the patterns and associations of our concerns and behavior, and to make predictions about what we will be concerned about and how we will behave in the future. A growing number of scholars therefore argue that big data not only measure but also shape reality (Hintz et al., 2018; Turow, 2012; Zuboff, 2019).

These developments can be viewed on a number of discrete fronts. Industries use data obtained from our digital lives to better understand and target customer preferences. Banks and insurance companies use data to predict customer risk profiles. Police use such information to predict crime. So-called smart cities gather data through sensors to improve the efficiency and sustainability of urban spaces by measuring traffic patterns, air quality variations, public transportation efficiencies, and the behavior of its publics. Data activists use data to make visible social problems that are being ignored or denied. For example, the group Freedom for Immigrants<sup>1</sup> maintains data on the US immigration detention system gathered from government offices, a national call hotline, and a network of volunteer detention-center visitors.

While technology developers, digital rights groups, and surveillance experts have long been concerned with the implications of mass corporate and government surveillance, it was not until whistleblower Edward Snowden exposed the surveillance activities of US and UK intelligence agencies in 2013 that pervasive collection of personal data became a prominent issue of public concern (Hintz et al., 2018). The Cambridge Analytica scandal, which revealed that the company harvested the personal Facebook data of 87 million users in an effort to manipulate how they vote, marked another high point of attention around the issue (Cadwalladr, 2018). The story revealed the ways data collection and sorting practices have transformed election campaigns and other political communication strategies through the use of psychometric data to micro-target advertisements, amounting to covert and deceitful messaging, including massive efforts to dissuade people from voting (Howard and Bradshaw, 2017).

The chapters included here focus on the ways personal data is used as a source of profit as well as a proxy for public opinion. In his chapter, “The Corporate Reconfiguration of the Social World,” Nick Couldry explores the challenges for scholars approaching the contours of a social

<sup>1</sup> See [www.freedomforimmigrants.org](http://www.freedomforimmigrants.org).



world in which every layer, as he puts it, has been “reconfigured. . . so that it becomes ‘naturally’ extractable for profit.” Couldry argues we are living less through a new phase of capitalism and more through a new phase of colonialism. Rather than appropriating land or bodies, the new colonists appropriate data. He argues that data collection is so pervasive that it has become a basic “condition of human life.”

As a central point, Couldry considers the normative values that ought to drive communication researchers engaged with corporations. He suggests scholars recognize Facebook’s response to the Cambridge Analytica scandal, for example, as an unabashed attempt to camouflage continued and concerted antidemocratic practices that serve to bolster economic and social trends that benefit the company. CEO Mark Zuckerberg publicly apologized for his company’s involvement with Cambridge Analytica on CNN, calling it an “issue,” a “mistake,” and a “breach of trust.” But the extended use of personal data is not a departure from but rather the foundation of Facebook’s business model. That is, Facebook is not a victim of but rather an accomplice to Cambridge Analytica crimes. Couldry encourages media scholars to be at the forefront of the effort to break down the contradictions between what networked-era data companies say and what they do.

Melissa Aronczyk’s chapter, “Public Communication in a Promotional Culture,” also explores the implications of a datafied life. By illustrating the gap between the principles and practices of corporate data mining, Aronczyk takes up what Couldry (2015) has elsewhere called “the myth of us,” or the belief that our exchanges on social media platforms are a natural form of social connection rather than a manufactured arrangement for the creation of economic value. Her critique of datafication focuses less on the fact of its existence, or on how data are deployed in the service of promotional culture, and more on what we assume we can know about public opinion through data. She argues that the data collected by private media companies are often relevant only to specific behaviors carried out in a predetermined context. It reflects behaviors shaped less by user interests, concerns, or habits than by the way the system is engineered to maximize attention and profit and to adhere to security and privacy regulations. These factors, Aronczyk argues, create data sets that are highly specific to conditions of their collection and that cannot – and indeed should not – stand in for any more general public opinion. She suggests that personal data is “a tool but not a condition of public life.” By examining how the United Nations uses data sets donated by private companies to address their

agenda for climate mitigation, for example, she questions the reliability of that data for making inferences about human behavior. More broadly, Aronczyk interrogates the wisdom of taking our cues from corporations by adopting the same assumption they make about what their data mean. “As media and communication scholars increasingly turn their attention to the inequities of our digital platforms,” she writes, “we need to devote more energy to investigating the disparities between the affordances of these platforms and the actual social and cultural truths of the people using them.”

### 1.2.2 Journalism in Times of Change

Authors in Part II turn their attention to the challenges and opportunities for journalism in the contemporary era. On this front, few would dispute that journalists confront major challenges. Nearly every news organization is undergoing some form of restructuring. This is discussed most prominently among “legacy” news media, which employ the majority of professional journalists, and for whom traditional revenue sources are declining or threatened, as is the case for many public service media (Nielsen and Selva, 2019). Yet even so-called new (e.g., online) or what we might think of as “newish” (e.g., cable) media outlets find themselves undergoing restructuring of one sort or another. In January 2019, for example, three prominent US-based digital startups – BuzzFeed, Vice, and Huffington Post – laid off hundreds of journalists in an effort to reduce costs (Peiser, 2019). While the empirical specifics vary across organizations and national contexts, uncertainty is a core feature of contemporary journalism, both with respect to the work that journalists ought to be doing and the types of organizational and political economic structures that might realistically support such work.

To be sure, these challenges come with a number of possible upsides. Technology-enabled collaboration among journalists – as seen in the Panama Papers, for example – allows for the creation of reporting that would otherwise be too costly for a single organization to pursue on its own (Sambrook, 2018). New publishing ventures, moreover, have the potential to expand the range of voices and viewpoints in the news, in part by cultivating relationships with civil society actors or historically underrepresented groups (Russell, 2016). Civic engagement is also in some ways being deepened, with members of the public, at least in some circumstances, using digital tools to create, circulate, and interact with news to