»Mediated« Transformations of the Public Sphere

An Essay by Anil K. Jain

1. A Negative Definition of the Public

The public sphere can only be understood in a »negative« approach to its space – that is in contrast to privacy. But the *sharp* distinction and differentiation between these two »fields« did not always exist (and it is possibly now again dissolved). Accordingly, the *reality* of the public sphere cannot be conceptualized statically, it alters its character along with the changes of the socio-cultural framework and the development of economic and technological conditions. To analyse how the public sphere reshapes through the influence of (new) media is the primary task of this paper. But therefore, however »fluid« it is, one would first need to »ideally« define the meaning of the term »public«. And, as initially mentioned, this is only possible through a (dialectical) reference to its »counterpart«: the notion of privacy (which is indeed closer to us than the public sphere).

But how then is privacy »imagined«? Structurally, privacy is seemingly bound to the existence of a (concrete) space: the »hideaway« of one's own house or room or any other »secured« space of one's own (see also Beck 1995). It is therefore, on a very palpable level, the individual »possession« of a space of one's own disposition, which characterizes and defines privacy. That any individual needs (a) space for his/her existence was already clearly revealed by Erving Goffman (1971). He writes about the »territories of the self«. To ensure the individual claim, these territories are marked and demarcated (e.g. with a garden fence). The minimal territory of the self is, however, the body. What is more, the self-territories may include a special pool of knowledge. We, for example, would most probably not like to be watched by our neighbours while dressing or bathing, and we would definitely not like (most of the) others to know about our financial situation or our love life. The space of privacy has thus an exclusive character, it excludes others – from access to our possessions and »matters«, from our thoughts and knowledge. Only we decide whom we »let in«, since privacy (not so much in reality but in our idealized imagination) is a space of closeness, of trust, of intimacy, in which social control is not (fully) effective – which is why it is all the more important to control access.

Now that the (counter-)sphere of privacy was outlined in this way, what distinguishes the public? The public sphere can obviously not be a space of exclusion, *it is a space of inclusion and openness* (see also Thompson 1995, pp. 120ff.). This characterization effects both: the possibilities of physical access and of access to (specific) information. And the public sphere is, unlike privacy, a space of distance and (self-)control. For Niklas Luhmann (2000, pp. 283–298) it is therefore a crucial characteristic of »publicity« that people, entering public space, are aware of the possibility of being observed – that is they observe their observation. In this manner, the »public (wo)man« is »disciplined«: we internalise our public role(s) and the perspective of the others to us. Indeed, this is a very similar mechanism to that which Foucault (1977) described in reference to Bentham's

idea of a Panopticon: the prisoner in the vitreous panoptic prison internalises the perspective of the watchman – and the established power relation. Accordingly, the public sphere may be interpreted as a humongous Panopticon. Or formulated with reference to Freud: the public sphere is a space of the dominance of the Super-Ego.

2. THE FOUR STEPS OF THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE PUBLIC (MEDIA) SPHERE

Now, that the meaning of the public has been constructed in »opposition« to the term privacy, the task is to trace how the reality of the public sphere depicts in the course of history and changed through the influence of media.

A) THE CONCRETE AND »IDLE« PUBLIC OF PREMODERN TIMES

The public of premodern times had the character of concreteness. It was denoted by the presence of »another« who – in the regular case – was not a stranger but a person coming from the direct life environment: a neighbour, a fellow citizen of your village or quarter, a friend, an enemy, a relative, an acquaintance. Public actions were face-to-face interactions, which took place in a distinct space. The degree of »mediation« was low, and – as Habermas (1989 [1963]) highlights – public space was not (yet) so much a medium of political communication but a ground for the representation of status. This goes along with an unclear distinction between the public and the private sphere. Many actions that are today conceived as being private in character (like bathing) were performed in the public (see e.g. Mumford 1961). And the moments of distance and control were not pronounced (see Elias 1994 [1939]).

B) THE POLITICISED AND CODIFIED PUBLIC OF THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Due to an enormous growth especially urban milieus lost the concreteness which I pointed out for premodern times. Therefore, rules for an anonymous communications had to be developed. As Elias (1994 [1939]) showed, a highly codified system of courtesy rules emerged. To identify the social position one drew upon criteria such as clothing, habitus and speech. The relevance of such formal »symbols« was high (which is why it is well justified to call the public of the age of Enlightenment »representative«, too). The expression of personal feelings played a very minor role in public interaction of the »Ancien Régime«. This (deflective) »anti-intra-zeption« is, according to Sennett (1977), even a characteristic of a well functioning public. Similarly, Habermas (1989 [1963]) argues that along with the emergence of the capitalist central state and the printing press a bourgeois model of the public developed, which was characterized by a relatively high level of politization, and this built the basis for a rational mode of communi-

cation. This means that the bourgeois public of the Enlightenment carried a utopian moment for Habermas. Although it was in fact limited to the bourgeois class, it was, according to its ideology, open to everybody; and although being a sphere of their class interests, public opinion (in its rhetoric) was committed to general well-being. Thus, (the idea(l) of) the bourgeois public comes quite close to the general understanding of the public sphere that was developed in the beginning.

In this context, it is, however, important to realize that the public space, at that time, was increasingly marked by significant exclusions. The different and the deviant had to be banned from visibility and were therefore interned (see Foucault 1977). Additionally, the bourgeois public was indeed a gendered, masculinist model, that was practised in the private drawing rooms (see e.g. Landes 1988).

C) THE ANONYMOUS, INVASIVE AND HIERARCHICAL PUBLIC OF INDUSTRIALISED MASS SOCIETY

Along with industrialisation and the appearance of electronic media the character of the public sphere again changed dramatically. This change was characterised by three moments: *hierarchy, anonymity and invasiveness.*

The modern public is a mass media public. Following Florian Rötzer (1996), television, however, constituted the only real mass media as mass media are defined by a parallel distribution of information to as many people as possible. This is obviously not the case for books, magazines, etc., which are mass media just in the sense of mass production. So it was only TV (and maybe radio) which created what Marshall McLuhan (1964), referring to the global spread of communi-cation channels, called the »global village«. It succeeded to do so by evoking a feeling of compre-hensive transparency by contemporary transmission and world-wide access. Through simultaneity it created a global public consciousness. But by its mass character it created a force to the preselection and filtering of information and a concentration on a minority of actors. A split into actors and audience was established, which at the same time created a hierarchy: there are persons who may (co)define the contents, there are individuals who are at the centre of public media attention – Sennett (1977) calls it thus a »star system« – and there is the passive audience. The border between the two is cemented by unidirectional media channels. For the political system the result is that political programmes and competence count less than charisma. (Mass) media, especially TV, are used as means of dramaturgic deflection through symbolic politics (see also Edelman 1964 and Jain 2000).

As an effect of the »star system« and a general tendency of intimisation (see also Lasch 1979), we face a trend of depolitisation. The stress on entertainment, which is also sustained by the specific media format of TV, supersedes the information function of media. But unlike Sennett,

Habermas (1989 [1963]) does not primarily blame intimisation for the impending depolitisation. On the contrary, he points to commercialisation and the dominance of systems actors, which results in a lack of representation, a marginalisation and evacuation of the »life world« in media space.

The actual tendency of a personalisation in the »star system« is not opposed to this argument. Indeed, the faces shown on TV and on cover pages of magazines attain remarkable »familiarity«, and many people create a »personalized« relationship with their idol by making him/her to an object of wishful dreams. However, this relationship is – by necessity – unilateral and only works from distance. The star (as a public actor) is known but stays (as a real person) an unreachable stranger. Usually, communication in modern mass media public has the character of a unidirectional and anonymous »communication in absence«.

In spite of this moment of anonymity and distance the character of modern mass media is invasive. This invasiveness becomes apparent through the analysis of the structures of private space. The »display« of the (TV-)screen is a space within a space. It carries the public, the news and reports and advertisement messages, into the private dwelling spaces. First radio receivers, then TV sets (and nowadays increasingly computers) conquered the living rooms. Even the spatial setting, the configuration of cabinets, couches and tables, etc., is arranged according to the best access to entertainment media. Of course, it is by our own free will that we press the power button, and we may switch off whenever we want to. But who wants to switch off; who can afford to lock out from the fictional worlds which are delivered to our homes? What is more: the media are everywhere, we cannot escape them.

D) THE DIFFUSE, FRAGMENTED AND INTERACTIVE PUBLIC OF THE (MULTI MEDIAL) COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SOCIETY

The new (interactive) media operate in a similarly invasive manner as the modern mass media, and their networked structure, which connects private spaces to the network of a virtual public (e.g. by devices like Web-cams), has dramatically increased the possibilities of (information) access. Further, we face a »continuous« (or rather exponential) growth of knowledge in our communication and information society. Accordingly, one would expect an even more pronounced hierarchisation in knowledge than the one that characterized industrial mass society (see also Tichenor et al. 1970). However, there are empirical studies that suggest rather constant gaps (see e.g. Jäckel 1994). How to explain this?

In analogy to Ulrich Beck's (1992 [1986]) argument of an economic »elevator effect« one could refer to this phenomenon as an »informational elevator effect«: we all (perforce) are absorbing ever more information. At the same time the relative inequality remains stable (or is even enlarged)

– but information use is »lifted« to a higher general level. This shows a significant effect: on account of the generally higher level of information and the new technological possibilities for realizing individual preferences there comes about an *individualization of information patterns and modes of media consumption*, which finally results in a *diffusion and fragmentation of the public sphere*. As one thing is clear: even a disproportionately higher overall willingness to receive information does not suffice to manage the increased information density and latitude; we must be highly selective regarding the information on offer and here individual preferences become crucial. This leads to the creation of fragmented partial publics, which disintegrate more and more.

An important intermediary step was the evolvement of various special channels in TV. Along with the splitting of the programme a (not yet finished) splitting of the audience emerged. New technological possibilities like »video on demand« or interactive TV will lead to a blow-up of the fixed programme schemes of conventional TV, and, using special Internet services, already these days it is possible to assemble an electronic newspaper according to one's personal interests. Referring to such developments Nicholas Negroponte (1995) points to the realistic threat of an »audience of one« in the »post-information age«, as he calls it.

Due to its atomisation, its dissolution into separated flows, the public, as a collective sphere, loses distinctness, and it is no longer clear who is actually reached by the media messages. It is an inward-driven medial spiral of individualisation, caused by information overflow, in which the public sphere is reduced to a smudgy, infinitesimal, imaginary point in the virtual nothing of cyberspace. Consequently, as an effect of the digital revolution, the old leftist fight for the creation of a counter public is doomed to fail. The media no longer do mobilize and create (»critical«) masses and »publicity« (see Agentur Bilwet 1996).

We thus find ourselves situated »*Beyond the Global Village*« Clarke (1992) – a development which, according to Baudrillard (1978), could possibly mark the end of the panoptic system. This can also be interpreted positively. Alwin Toffler (1980 and 1995), for example, identifies – after the agrarian and the industrial revolution – a »third wave« of radical change through digital technologies. According to him, they do not only allow a transposition of economic production tuned to higher ecological and social standards but lead to a political reinvention, as the new technologies promise by their inherent democratic potential an electronic inclusion, that is a growing consideration of minorities, and they carry possibilities for direct democracy (see also Grossman 1995). Additionally, they defeat the distinction between actors and audience by their interactive character.

The new media therefore demand interactive ways of political (re)presentation, which, unfortunately, have not yet been developed by traditional (political) actors. The pages of political parties and organisations put on the Net are mostly limited to self-advertisement and general information.

This means they do not create an active public but attract an already existing and interested user-audience.

On the other hand, NGOs and activists found possibilities to organize political protest by using the network of the Net (e.g. by the sending of chain letters), and the cyberpunk movement fights for the right of free information – even by illegal (hacker) methods. Following the critique of Vivian Sobchak (1994) one can, however, be sceptical about the (radical) politics of cyberpunk anarchism. Some of their principles come close to a libertarian attitude, so Sobchak fears a privatisation of the electronic public sphere by an ideology of free information, which is quite compatible to individualism as well as »corporative capitalism«.

Along with the diminishing of a locally/nationally centred mass public new possibilities for decentred global political networks unfold which could shovel up influential »subpublics« using technological tunnels. This, however, implies the danger of a dissolution of the public – as a sphere of political action – in the virtual landscapes of cyberspace. In the »space of flows« of the network society, we might lose connection to concrete space (see Castells: *The Rise of the Network Society)*. What is more, we might face an extension of (state) control to the digital worlds (see already Beninger 1986) – the panoptic aspect, which was pushed back in the age of mass media, comes thus to the fore again. This is parallelled with an increasing commercialisation of the Net and a commodification of information, which becomes in the computerised society a highly embattled good (see also Lyotard 1984 [1979]). It is to await if that leads to an elimination of (sub)political potential or if a niche for a »free« and oppositional political public is kept. But more and more claims are laid: by the registering of domain names, by the extension of copyright and trademark law, etc. The public of the interactive media is thus endangered to lose its »public« character. It allows vast access to (specific forms) of knowledge – for all those who have access to the digital worlds of the Net (see in relation to that problem esp. Rifkin 2000). But – in spite of its interactive suction – it is no longer a collective open sphere. And this raises indeed the questions of inequality and participation anew (see also Stevenson 1999).

REFERENCES:

- Agentur Bilwet: *The Digital Society and Its Enemies*. In: Maresch, Rudolf (ed.): *Medien und Öffentlichkeit*. S. 361–366

- Baudrillard, Jean: *Agonie des Realen*. Merve Verlag, Berlin 1978

- Beck, Ulrich: *Eigenes Leben – Skizzen zu einer biographischen Gesellschaftsanalyse*. In: ibid../Vossenkuhl, Wilhelm/-Ziegler, Ulf E.: *Eigenes Leben*. Pp. 9–174

- Beck, Ulrich: *Risk Society – Towards a New Modernity*. Sage Publications, London 1992 (1986)

- Beck, Ulrich/Vossenkuhl, Wilhelm/Ziegler, Ulf E.: *Eigenes Leben – Ausflüge in die unbekannte Gesellschaft, in der wir leben*. Verlag C. H. Beck, München 1995

- Beniger, James R.: *The Control Revolution – Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge/London 1986

- Castells, Manuel: *The Rise of the Network Society [The Information Age, Vol. I]*. Blackwell, Oxford/Cambridge 1996

- Clarke, Arthur C.: *How the World Was One – Beyond the Global Village*. Bantam Books, London 1992

- Dery, Mark (ed.): *Flame Wars – The Discourse of Cyberculture*. Duke University Press, Durham 1994

- Edelman, Murray: *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*. University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1964

- Elias, Norbert: *The Civilizing Process*. Blackwell, Oxford 1994 (1939)

- Foucault, Michel: *Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison*. Vintage Books, New York 1977

- Goffman, Erving: *Relations in Public – Microstudies of the Public Order*. Basic Books, New York 1971

- Grossman, Lawrence K.: *The Electronic Republic – Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age*. Viking, New York 1995

- Habermas, Jürgen: *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. MIT Press, Cambridge 1989 (1963)

- Jäckel, Michael: *Auf dem Weg zur Informationsgesellschaft? – Informationsverhalten und die Folgen der Informationskonkurrenz*. In: ibid./Winterhoff-Spurk, Peter (ed.): *Politik und Medien*. Pp. 11–33

- Jäckel, Michael/Winterhoff-Spurk, Peter (ed.): *Politik und Medien – Analysen zur Entwicklung der politischen Kommunikation*. Vistas Verlag, Berlin 1994

- Jain, Anil K.: *Politik in der (Post-)Moderne – Reflexiv-deflexive Modernisierung und die Diffusion des Politischen*. »edition fatal«, München 2000

- Landes, Joan: *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca 1988

- Lasch, Christopher: *The Culture of Narcissism – American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations*. Warner Books, New York 1979

- Luhmann, Niklas: *Die Politik der Gesellschaft*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 2000

- Lyotard, Jean-François: *The Postmodern Condition – A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984 (1979)

- Maresch, Rudolf (ed.): *Medien und Öffentlichkeit – Positionierungen, Symptome, Simulationsbrüche*. Klaus Boer Verlag, München 1996

- McLuhan, Marshall: *Understanding Media – The Extensions of Man*. McGraw-Hill, New York 1964

- Mumford, Lewis: *The City in History – Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. Hartcourt, Brace, & World, London 1961

- Negroponte, Nicholas: *Being Digital*. Vintage Books, New York 1995

- Rifkin, Jeremy: *The Age of Access – The New Culture of Hypercapitalism*. Tarcher/Putnam, New York 2000
- Rötzer, Florian: *Interaktion – das Ende herkömmlicher Massenmedien*. In: Maresch, Rudolf (ed.): *Medien und Öffentlichkeit*. Pp. 119–134
- Rötzer, Florian (ed.): *Digitaler Schein – Ästhetik der elektronischen Medien*. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1991
- Sennett, Richard: *The Fall of the Public Man – On the Social Psychology of Capitalism*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1977
- Sobchack, Vivian: *New Age Mutant Ninja Hackers – Reading Mondo 2000*. In: Dery, Mark (ed.): *Flame Wars*. Pp. 13–28
- Stevenson, Nick: *The Transformation of the Media – Globalisation, Morality and Ethics*. Longman, London/New York 1999
- Thompson, John B.: *The Media and Modernity – A Social Theory of the Media*. Stanford University Press, Stanford 1995
- Tichenor, P. J./Donohue, G. A./Olien, C. N.: *Mass Media Flow and Differential Growth in Knowledge*. In: *Public Opinion Quaterly*. Vol. 34 (1970), pp. 159–170
- Toffler, Alvin: *The Third Wave*. Bantam Books, New York 1980
- Toffler, Alvin/Toffler, Heidi: *Creating a New Civilization – The Politics of the Third Wave*. Turner Publishing Inc., Atlanta 1995

INFORMATION SHEET

Author(s):   Anil K. Jain
Title: »Mediated« Transformations of the Public Sphere
Subtitle: na
Year of Origin: 2002
Version/Last Updated: 04/04/2006
Original Download-Link: http://www.power-xs.net/jain/pub/mediatedtransformations.pdf
First Print Publishing in: na

In case that you want to cite passages of this text, it is preferred that you quote the PDF-version (indicating the version number/update date) – even if a print-version is available – since the PDF-version may be more profound and/or corrected and updated.

Find other texts of Anil K. Jain and further information at: http://www.power-xs.net/jain/
E-Mail contact: jain@power-xs.net

Feedback is welcome! (However, there is no guarantee of a reply.)