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Imagining the Public

In contemporary society, the public has both a ubiquitous and an invisible presence. In its most vigorous form, as the sovereign *demos* of democracy and the ever-demanding consumers of the marketplace, the public demands to be acknowledged, served, appeased, informed, consulted, and respected. While not wielding power itself, the public knows that those who do possess power can only claim legitimacy by speaking in its name and acting in its interests. The inescapable competition of modern society is for the eyes, ears, tastes, and sympathies of the great amorphous public.

Given that the public occupies such an apparently pivotal social position, it is surprising just how uncertain scholars have been about their capacity to define or recognize it:

> Publics have become an essential fact of the social landscape; yet it would tax our understanding to say exactly what they are.[1]

> It is a place, but you can't walk into it, and it is a group of people – a vast group of people – but they never meet. The place and the people are familiar figures, but although you know them well, you have never seen them and you never will, even though you're one of them.[2]

The public has to be invented – or, at least, imagined – before it can be addressed. The sovereign public has been described as a "phantom" of the social imagination (Lippmann), "an idea, a postulate" (Schlegel), a "monstrous nothing" (Kierkegaard), "a ghostly figure, only ever made present through various proxies."[3] Never meeting in one place or

speaking with one voice, the public is unable to represent itself. It is doomed to be represented.

   Imagining the public is further complicated by the ambivalence of its role as both actor and stage. As social actor, the public comprises the people who make up society – although, as we shall see, not necessarily all the people all the time. As stage, the public refers to a zone of social openness and transparency, as opposed to privacy and exclusion. But here too, the notion of public space is complicated by a distinction between the official realm of "public affairs," which tend to be highly regulated, and the inclusive public sphere which concerns everyone by virtue of its embeddedness in the daily routines of everyday life. Given these disconcerting ambiguities, it is the aim of this opening chapter to explore the various ways in which the public is imagined, as both a social actor and a social space.

The Public as Social Actor

The roaring public

In recent years, television audiences have been invited to observe a curious weekly ritual in which the inhabitants of the *Big Brother* house await the judgment of the voting public that will lead to the inevitable eviction – from the house, the show, and the passage to celebrity status – of the least popular housemate. It is a climactic moment of tension in which, as Scannell has observed, "two different temporalities encounter each other: time-in-the-house and time-in-the-world."[4] The voters' verdict is announced by the celebrity presenter who, in the fashion of a children's game, instructs evictees to leave the house with the words "I'm coming to get you!" The evictee leaves to re-enter worldly time, at which point the remaining housemates perform a bizarre but functional ritual: they go to the outer wall of their televized enclosure and contort themselves into positions that will enable them to hear the roar of the crowd. The volume, tone, and message of this roar are then discussed for hours, sometimes days. The remote and disembodied voice of the crowd is their only access to the world beyond their voluntary incarceration. It is their one remaining witness to the elusive barometer of public opinion.

The *Big Brother* crowd, which assembles each Friday night in the hope of being seen on television and immersing itself in the drama of a rarely popular electoral event, is neither the mass public that watches the show nor a representative sample of those who voted in the electoral popularity contest. It is a random, symbolic chorus which exists to articulate the mood of public opinion. Its presence indicates that people resembling the millions of domestic viewers are "there" in real time; that the televized event has a live – and living – element. Compare it with election night coverage on the BBC: screens filled with anxious, ambitious, professional politicians, suited players of the game (counters, cam-paigners, commentators), but hardly a voter to be seen. The *Big Brother* crowd serves as a surrogate embodiment of the public. The incarcerated housemates must press their flesh to the closest possible point of contact with it and interpret its mysterious chants, cheers, and con-demnations, just as politicians must spend much of their lives listening out for the murmurs and roars of the public they claim to represent.

Crowds do not have a good historical reputation. As McClelland notes, the record of crowd behavior is dominated by a series of distinctly malignant images:

> the crowd hounding Christ to his death; the crowd bawling for blood in the circus; crowds of mutinous legionaries looking round for some-one to raise to the purple . . . Roman mobs making trouble for popes; medieval crowds volatile at great festivals and fairs . . . the barbarism of crowds during the Wars of Religion; Wilkite and Church and King mobs in London; liberty mobs in Boston; the crowd in the French Revolution; lynch mobs; the mobs of industrial discontent.[5]

All of these images have contributed to theories of crowd psycho-pathology, first articulated in the writings of Taine and Carlyle and sub-sequently synthesized in the populist account of Le Bon. Taine argued that crowds are characterized by "a steady substratum of brutality and ferocity, and of violent and destructive instincts,"[6] while Carlyle regarded the crowd as comprising "wild inarticulate souls, struggling there, with inarticulate uproar, like dumb creatures in pain, unable to speak what is in them."[7] Few writers have been less sympathetic to crowds than the novelist, George Gissing, who described the 1887 street celebrations for Queen Victoria's Jubilee as "the most gigantic organised exhibition of fatuity, vulgarity, and blatant blackguardism on record" and puts into

the mouth of his protagonist, Piers Otway, in *The Crown of Life* the assertion that "at its best" the crowd is "a smiling simpleton; at its worst, a murderous maniac."[8] Gustave Le Bon's characterization of crowds has served as the leading articulation of this tradition:

> Whoever be the individuals that compose it, however like or unlike be their mode of life, their occupations, their character, or their intelligence, the fact that they have been transformed into a crowd puts them in possession of a sort of collective mind which makes them feel, think, and act in a manner quite different from that in which each individual of them would feel, think, and act were he in a state of isolation.[9]

The image of the crowd as united by unarticulated emotions, intolerant of individual thought, prone to manipulation by demagogic rabble-rousers, and incapable of distinguishing between collective fantasy and reality has prevailed in modern times as a source of elitist fear as well as a justification for authoritarian control of public gatherings.

Nineteenth-century legislation was dedicated to maintaining order by preventing the gathering of crowds. In 1817 the British Parliament passed the Six Acts which required the organizer of any public meeting to notify the local magistrate at least five days before it was held; forbade non-local people from attending such gatherings; and threatened those assembling without permission with a penalty of seven years' transportation. Defending the Act in Parliament, Lord Castlereagh asserted that

> Any assembly of the people, whether armed or unarmed, whether using or threatening to use force, or not doing so, and whether the avowed object was illegal or legal, if held in such numbers, or with such language or emblems, or deportment, as to create well-grounded terror in the King's liege subjects for their lives, their persons or their property, was an illegal assembly and might be dispersed as such.[10]

This strategy of dispersal was typical of the pre-democratic approach of governments confronted by visible publics. The Chartists, who campaigned for universal male suffrage, regarded the spectacle of the gathered crowd as a symbol of a *demos* in waiting. To gather in vast numbers was to claim legitimacy as a public demanding acknowledgment. As one Chartist put it, "What is visible in the streets . . . is only a representative tranche of what lies beyond: the threat is not so many thousand

massed bodies, but so many millions of potential voters here signified corporeally."[11] Plotz has argued in his excellent analysis of Chartist crowd strategies that the movement's decision to hold simultaneous meetings in different parts of the country served to indicate its strength and transformed it from a dispersible crowd into a homogenous public.[12] For once a gathering expands from rooted place to diasporic space it ceases to be a crowd and becomes a public, its character defined not by its physical, but by its social presence. As Dayan and Katz have argued, some publics do congregate, but that is not their defining feature. Crowds must be congregative, or they stop being crowds."[13]

Even after universal male franchise was granted, there were pervasive elite fears of the crowd-like propensities of the newly empowered public. The introduction of the secret ballot, far from simply being a means of protecting voters from intimidation, could be interpreted as a technique of crowd control, designed to prevent the gathering together of the newly enfranchised public. The great Victorian journalist and constitutionalist Walter Bagehot, for example, declared that he was "exceedingly afraid of the ignorant multitude of the new constituencies" and warned that "massing men in concourses" could give rise to "wild excitement among the ignorant poor, which, if once roused, may not be calmed."[14]

The increased sophistication and reach of mass mediation within the past century has made it easy to transmit messages to spatially dispersed publics. More than any previous medium, television enables the public to see itself. Crowds which once took to the streets now head towards the cameras. Public opinion, to be taken seriously, must be registered and graphically displayed via television, although the Internet is now also a significant space of mediated publicity. Appeals to the public by political leaders are made through press releases which compete for media attention and staged interviews in which they pose as ventriloquists of the public's true voice. Witnessing public events is increasingly vicarious: what we believe we have seen for ourselves, we have in fact been shown.

For members of the public seeking to advocate a cause, be it opposition to an unpopular law, an unjust war or the local presence of an alleged child molester, gathering as a crowd is often a first move in setting out a claim to represent the public. Like the Chartists, such campaigns seek to assert their authenticity by mounting a symbolic display of looking and sounding as if they were the public as a whole. When, for example, Chinese students took to the streets to demand the acceleration of the

political reforms initiated by the mysteriously deceased Communist Party Secretary, Hu Yaobang, in April 1989, their actions were directed towards the mediated public, reachable through global television, as much as to a domestic Chinese audience. Their banners were written in English; they took advantage of the media corps that had come to Beijing to provide satellite coverage of the state visit of Mikhail Gorbachev; their symbolic use of the "Goddess of Democracy" statue, erected in Tiananmen Square on May 30, 1989, was intended to resonate with Western values of freedom. The mediatized crowd, which is no longer rooted in space or time, depends upon satellites rather than soapboxes for its impact.

The measured public

The specter of the autonomously mobilized multitude led pre-democratic governments to adopt strategies of repressive legislation, intended to prevent or defuse crowd formation. When these did not work, they introduced pacifying reforms, aimed at appeasing the menacing anger of discontented urban crowds. While both of these strategies constituted a response to the immediate threat of crowd disorder, neither provided a sustainable technique for managing the diffuse opinions of the dispersed public. It was the recognition of this task that gave rise to the concept of public opinion.

To imagine public opinion is to envisage the possibility of a homogenous public which can be made visible. The two historical conditions which made this possible were the development of techniques of quantification, by which vast populations could be counted, categorized, and regulated, and democratic politics, the legitimacy of which depended upon the counting in of the public. As Rose has argued,

> Democratic power is calculated power, and numbers are intrinsic in the forms of justification that give legitimacy to political power in democracies. Democratic power is calculating power, and numbers are integral to the technologies that seek to give effect to democracy as a particular set of mechanisms of rule.[15]

Ironically, one of the first exercises in systematic opinion quantification was developed in the early decades of the twentieth century in order to estimate the size of physically gathered crowds.[16] It was the transition

from this place-based quantification to attempts to measure the elusive thoughts of dispersed citizens that gave rise to the emergence of public opinion polling in the 1930s. Pioneers such as Gallup believed that scientific sampling techniques could test "the pulse of democracy" by asking questions to "representative" population groups as if they were the public at large. The history of opinion polling over the past 80 years has constituted a striking attempt to attribute ideas to the public in ways that are discrete and cohesive, descriptive and predictive, illuminating and shaming. The public cannot appeal against misrepresentative claims about its opinions, for opinion polling not only defines such opinions but appears to define the public itself. In short, the public's scientifically measured presence has come to be regarded as a more legitimate reality than its autonomous attempts to speak for itself. The crowd came to be seen as wholly observable, explicable, and pre- dictable. As Auden's famous poem, "The Unknown Citizen" suggests, the point of opinion research is to ensure that the public is known better to the government than to itself.

On election-night results' programs the pollsters' "exit polls" precede news of the actual results of legally cast votes – and when the two do not tally media-hired experts are invited to pontificate at length (often self-servingly, for their expertise is intimately related to the legitimacy of the exit polls) about how the public has voted anomalously. For example, approximately 66 million US television viewers watched the third Obama–McCain debate in the run-up to the 2008 presidential election. After the debate was over CNN had a studio packed with pundits, there to tell the viewers what they'd really seen. The overall verdict of the experts was that McCain was the winner on points. Then came the result of a flash poll of Ohio swing voters, conducted online seconds after the debate ended. They pronounced Obama the clear winner. This left the pundits in a peculiar position, predicting an effect that had already happened in their absence and contrary to their judg- ment. In the past, opinion polls had followed the media-driven "debate about the debates"; public opinion was often little more than an echo of expert punditry. Now that technology has made it possible for public opinions to be captured prior to expert exposure, the impression that an authentic, uncontaminated public voice is somehow being assembled enhances the status of the opinion poll as an x-ray of the public mind.

While the value of opinion survey research as a crude method for identifying snapshot responses by selected subjects to carefully framed

questions should be acknowledged, the scientific claims of the pollsters should not be accepted uncritically. Following the critiques of Blumer and Bordieu, the extent to which opinion polling is a study of an objectively existing reality should be questioned.[17] Verba's assertion that "surveys give the researcher access to the 'public,' an otherwise broad, amorphous, and hard-to-deal-with phenomenon"[18] is typical of claims made for polling as an inclusive and incisive tool for extracting and aggregating public opinion. We would argue that polls are always discursively situated, constitutive techniques which do not merely capture preexisting opinion, but conjure it into existence. In other words, what political scientists refer to as "public opinion" is in fact what pollsters decide to poll. A sceptical view of the so-called neutral scientificity of opinion surveys accords with our constructivist conception of the public. Furthermore, Ginsberg's claim that polls allow "governments a better opportunity to anticipate, regulate, and manipulate popular attitudes"[19] and Tilly's observation that social surveys were invented so that "the wealthy and powerful" could "know the nature of the beast that now roared below"[20] help to reveal the sense in which opinion research is an essentially political project. These critics of opinion survey research are not concerned to highlight its methodological shortcomings or even to reject pollsters' capacity to illuminate trends, but to question the very project of seeking a set of opinions which can be attributed to the public as a collective actor. The search for public opinion is never neutral; like all social techniques, it is prompted by particular intentions which are often left unstated.

The motivation for measuring public opinion, we would argue, is anxiety within governing elites. When those who exercise political authority know what they want to do and how to do it, and when they believe that they can do as they wish without provoking the presence of disruptive crowds, there is no need to solicit public opinion. On settled issues of normalized and routinized social practice (companies making profits, children being educated in schools, animals being killed for human consumption), there is no need to resort to the court of public opinion. The jury is brought in when issues are unsettled. To quote Rose once again, "where mistrust of authority flourishes, where experts are the target of suspicion and their claims are greeted with scepticism by politicians, disputed by professional rivals, distrusted by public opinion, where decisions are contested and discretion is criticized, the allure of numbers increases."[21] In short, the counting of the public

serves as a court of appeal, whereby unsettled socio-political claims are tested. But not all unsettled claims are tested in this way, for not everyone has access to the technologies of public opinion polling or the means of authoritatively disseminating the results of such measurement. Just as crowds must appeal to the media to be acknowledged, numbers carry little weight until they are reported in a certain voice: the tone of the scientifically incontrovertible; the measured voice of one who has the measure of the inchoate public.

It should be noted that opinion polling has not been the only route of access to the thoughts and experiences of the public. In the same decade that Gallup established the American Institute of Public Opinion, a rather different, more qualitative approach to the capture of the public mood was initiated in the UK by Madge, Harrison, and Jennings, the founders of the Mass Observation research movement. Mass Observation used a team of volunteer field-workers to engage in indirect observation, direct interviews, and survey production in order to create accounts of everyday conversations about issues of the day, ranging from the Coronation of King George VI in 1937 to clothes-rationing. As well as issue-based studies, Mass Observation was interested in human interactions within popular cultural settings, such as pubs, cinemas, and shops. From these field studies, which Mass Observation referred to as an "anthropology of ourselves," they aimed to produce what they called a "weather map of popular feeling." Madge and Harrison were of the view that the media were failing to reflect the thoughts and feelings of the public. Mass Observation has been described as an attempt "to socialise the means of documentary production by providing ordinary people with a channel through which they could communicate what went on around them, within the ambit of their day-to-day lives."[22] Rejecting quantitative research methods, Mass Observation sought to capture the mood of the public through a montage of documentary-like observations and almost poetically structured impressionism. The demise of Mass Observation occurred when it moved towards a more managed approach to opinion-gathering, first during World War II when it agreed to be commissioned by the Ministry of Information to produce "morale reports" on the state of public feeling, and then after the war, when it constructed increasingly "narrowly focused surveys for commercial companies with products to sell, such as its surveys on washing habits, on the domestic use of paint and on the public taste for cosmetics, custard powder, baked beans and frozen fish."[23]

By 1949 the original movement was superseded by Mass Observation Ltd., which was effectively a commercial market-research company. Nonetheless, in the decade after 1937 Mass Observation produced over 20 published volumes from which a remarkable qualitative account of contemporary publics, if not *the* public, could be derived.

Post-war political journalism has been increasingly dominated by apparent evidence from opinion polls, as if these are the only means of sensing public consciousness, prompting some commentators to describe the media coverage of US presidential campaigns as "a poll orgy." Reports of polls are often confusing and contradictory in terms of identifying public opinion, especially when read against the less frequent people-on-the-street interviews which offer a more nuanced picture. The establishment of such a complex picture – not in the mimetic sense of capturing a pre-existing reality, but of enabling publics to emerge in ways that reflect the affects and ambiguities of quotidian speech – entails a movement away from the simplistic claims of polling research to "reveal" the public by reducing it to mere data.

The attentive public

Thus far we have conceptualized the public as a source – of threatened disorder, in the case of crowds, and of scientifically ascertainable opinion in the case of polling. A third way to think about the public is as an active recipient of messages. The geographer, Clive Barnett, has defined the public as "the figure for the uncertain addressee of communicative acts oriented towards universality."[24] In this sense, the public is not a fixed, objective reality, but a way of speaking to strangers with whom one needs to share social space. When Queen Elizabeth II, in her annual Christmas speech, addresses "her" public, she is, in one sense, taking a gamble that the recipients of her message are (a) listening to her and (b) prepared to accept this definition of themselves within the ecology of British social power. When the government of North Korea at one time paid for the regular placement of full-page advertisements in broadsheet British newspapers, explaining how Kim-Il-Sung had been misrepresented by the Western media and was in fact the defender of the "proletarian masses," it assumed (mistakenly, as it turns out) that an attendant public would emerge and then act in some way upon its message.

In his seminal work on publics and counterpublics, Warner argues that for an appeal to be made to the public it must be impersonally addressed to strangers, while at the same time personally addressed to putative fellow citizens: "Public speech can have great urgency and intimate import. Yet we know that it was addressed not exactly to us but to the stranger we were until the moment we happened to be addressed by it."[25] The suggestion here is that the public comes into being dynamically, through historical action, rather than ontologically, as an essential social form. "The existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity, however notional or compromised, and not on its members' categorical classification, objectively determined position in the social structure, or material existence."[26]

Appeals to the public are predicated, therefore, upon expectations about what that public will be like once it is formed. Such expectations are not always met, for actual, historical publics can be creative and recalcitrant in determining their own lifeworld. Nonetheless, these formative anticipations (which Warner refers to as "the poetic function of public discourse"[27]) are critical to the emergence and definition of publics. For example, nation-states address their citizens not only as a public, but as a distinctly characterized and normatively admissible public. When the US President speaks to "my fellow Americans" he is not only claiming that a public which will recognize itself as "fellow Americans" exists and will hear him, but that they are of a specific, historical texture that will respond to his words in predictable and approved ways. Of course, this does not always happen when leaders address their followers, as was witnessed when the Romanian president, Nicolae Ceauşescu, addressed "his public" on December 21, 1989 and they began by booing and ended by executing him. All attempts to connect with a public entail the risk of rejection. Public communication is inherently promiscuous, insofar as any appeal to the public necessarily abandons "the security of [a] positive, given audience" and "commits itself in principle to the possible participation of any stranger."[28] It is the discourse of the soapbox on a street corner, where words must be directed to whoever happens to be passing by, rather than the gentleman's club, where everyone knows everyone else.

Thinking of the public as a product of social circulation is helpful in countering notions of the public as a pre-existing entity waiting to be discovered. It enables us to think of the public as a mediated presence which emerges, atrophies, and reforms in response to a diverse array

of messages directed towards it. As a ceaselessly risky ecology of antici-
pations, avoidances, silences, connections, and miscommunications,
public culture can never be relied upon, but forever tested by verbal and
semiotic gestures designed to secure its attention.

   Nothing embodies this ongoing testing more vividly than media
ratings systems, devised to estimate the percentage of people or house-
holds in a given market exposed to a particular channel, station,
program, or newspaper. Ratings have come to dominate mainstream
media production at every level, treating audiences, like publics, as tar-
gets of attention. Whereas public opinion pollsters claim to measure the
outcome of attention, media ratings systems measure attention itself.

> Basically, it is people's shared orientation toward some focal point – a
> centre of transmission, a centre of attraction – that turns them into
> "audience members." In this context, the idiosyncrasies of the individual
> people making up an audience, as well as the specific interrelations
> between these people, do not matter: audience as taxonomic collective
> is in principle a term of amassment.[29]

What, we might ask, is the difference between an audience, as collect-
ive beholders of a spectacle, and publics? If the principal function of the
public is to receive messages, it becomes difficult to distinguish between
the viewer – especially the active viewer of recent reception theory –
and the citizen – especially the apathetic citizen lamented by political
commentators. As Livingstone has suggested, "Instead of bemoaning the
impact of media on publics, let us ask how media (and media audiences)
can and do sustain publics."[30] Suggestive as this argument may be,
there remains a strong sense in which it leaves thinking, experiencing,
imagining human beings with too little work to do. Just as the imagined
crowd is required only to congregate and make a noise and the public
whose opinions are polled are required to report their views to experts
without having to act upon them, the attendant, message-receiving
public is in one sense little more than a stake in a speculation about
the potential effects of publicity. As an historical force, it lacks the kind
of agency that the humanist Enlightenment celebrated in its project
to bring "things into such a shape that the members of the human
species will no more be thwarted in their urge to act according to the most
human of their natural endowments: the power to pass rational judge-
ment and behave according to the precepts of reason."[31] Embodying

these highest attributes of humanity, the Enlightenment public was conceived as a rationally and ethically discriminating social actor whose role was to pursue its own emancipation from mystery and falsification. Although twentieth-century history dented such confidence in the public's capacity for self-emancipatory virtue and the dehumanizing experiences of Fascism and Stalinism encouraged an intellectual retreat into caricatures of the fickle, malleable, and ultimately reckless public, there remains one role that cannot be abstracted from collective humanity: that of the historical witness.

The witnessing public

The emergence of both mass society and technologies of mass communication in the past 150 years have led us to depend more than ever before upon a particular kind of moral and political force: the power of public witnessing. As Ellis has rightly observed, "We know more and have seen more of this century than the generations of any previous century knew or or saw of theirs . . . Certainly, 'I did not know' and 'I did not realize' are not open to us as a defence."[32]

Of course, witnessing has always been a vital element in human activity and reflexivity. The role of the witness is central to any conception of justice. Even before secular governance became prevalent, the witnessing of miracles, divine presence, and moral retribution were regarded as essential public functions. To give witness, in the sense of translating the sensation of direct observation into words or images that can be shared by others who then become vicariously complicit in an indirect experience, is what makes humans historically conscious animals. "Witnesses," argues Peters, "serve as the surrogate sense-organs of the absent."[33] Witnesses are also time-travellers, transmitting the past into the present and the present into the future. While such witnessing has always constituted a dimension of public culture, it has only been in the past 150 years that technologies of mass witnessing have come to play a central role in determining and disseminating historical and political reality. The public as witness of its own history has come to be a defining characteristic of late modernity.

In one sense, the witnessing public is a response to the processes whereby our different worlds are increasingly sharing the same single space. This process is closely related to the compression and separation

of global time and space which Giddens refers to as "time-space distanciation":

> In conditions of late modernity we live "in the world" in a different sense from previous eras of history. Everyone still continues to live a local life, and the constraints of the body ensure that all individuals, at every moment, are contextually situated in time and space. Yet the transformations of place, and the intrusion of distance into local activities, combined with the centrality of mediated experience, radically change what "the world" actually is.[34]

It is impossible to live in the globalized world without depending upon events, information, and expertise which originate from far away. We cannot hope to rely upon direct, sensual experience as our principal means of accessing the world. The strangers who are our fellow citizens are mainly people we will never meet; the news that makes and shakes our world might take place thousands of miles away, but it will still have major local ramifications. The local is increasingly lived under the shadow of the global. In such circumstances, the "we" who constitute the public is widely dispersed and dependent for self-knowledge upon mediated and indirect accounts of itself. Only through technologies of mediated witnessing can publics emerge and come to know themselves. From "reality TV" depictions of "ordinary" and "extraordinary" people to YouTube videos of war zones and exotic practices, there prevails a common rhetoric of witnessing, seeming to say "Look at this; for in doing so, you will come to know yourself better." As we shall argue in subsequent chapters, both mainstream and alternative media are tied into an ongoing battle to characterize the public; to make particular accounts of the public familiar while marginalizing others. Claims by media producers to get close to, reflect vividly, or even embody the real cannot be separated from the competing intentions, strategies, and deceptions inherent to this battle to characterize the public.

The Public as Social Space

As well as referring to an historical actor, the term "public" also describes a set of spatial relations within which social action takes

place. Public space should not be understood in a narrowly topological
sense, as a physically dimensional place, but as a social configuration
comprising practiced and experienced relationships of interaction. As
Kohn states, "Spatial configurations naturalize social relations by trans-
forming contingent forms into a permanent landscape that appears as
immutable rather than open to contestation."[35] In recent years social
theory has been influenced considerably by what has been called a
"spatial turn," which describes a broad set of enquiries related to the
production and significance of space. Foucault and his adherents have
attempted to show how the design and management of space constitute
primary instruments of social control, as in the case of panoptic archi-
tecture which exposes all social action to the surveillant gaze of author-
ities.[36] Others argue that spatial practices can be emancipatory as well
as disciplinarian, and have undertaken research into specific spaces of
transformative micropower. Key to such investigations are distinctions
between public and private space.

Private space is closed off, invisible to outsiders, and governed by
internally specific rules. The most typical example of a private space
is the home – and within the home there are spaces that are particu-
larly private, such as bedrooms and toilets. These are reserved spaces
in which certain forms of behavior are shielded from public view.
Such behavior is often described as "personal," insofar as it is not the
business of the public. In recent years, however, this rigid distinction
between the personal affairs of private life and the wider domain of
public affairs has been open to critical question. A number of people,
particularly feminists, have argued that "the personal is political" and
that intimate relationships that were once considered inviolably private
– such as those between parents and children, or between sexual
partners – should be open to public debate, and even interference if
they are deemed to be exploitative or harmful. While the boundaries
between public and private have become blurred in ways that would
shock a time-traveller from the nineteenth century, they persist as the
most significant categories of contemporary social life. Even in the age
of Big Brother and *Big Brother*, in which there is one CCTV camera in
the UK for every 14 British citizens and in which permanent surveillance
has become a major feature of reality TV, vulnerable distinctions remain
between public and private spaces. Three defining characteristics of
public space are of particular significance: accessibility, universality,
and visibility.

Accessibility

Public space is open for all to enter. While often governed by constraining rules of conduct, such spaces are defined by allowing unrestricted access and rights of way. For example, parks are public spaces because anyone can enter them, without distinction of status, wealth, or beliefs. Non-tangible public spaces are also characterized by their accessibility, such as the expectation in democracies that the legal system should be open to all – not just physical places, like police stations and courts, but intangible aspects of legality, such as rights, judicial precepts, and the language of the law. In practice, such public spaces might not be as accessible as they purport to be, but they are at least open to criticism for failing to meet generally agreed standards of openness. In contrast, private spaces, such as boardrooms or bedrooms, are not open to criticism for excluding the public.

Because accessibility is a defining feature of public spaces, attempts to exclude people from them often results in contestation. Mitchell's case study of the battle to retain free access to People's Park in Berkeley, California, provides an excellent example of how "by claiming space in public . . . social groups themselves become public."[37] In this specific case, an attempt was made to drive homeless people out of a park that had hitherto been open to an inclusive public. By redefining the terms of spatial inclusion, the homeless were effectively excluded from membership of the public. The battle to keep the park open to all was not simply about the governance of a particular place, but the nature of the public, both spatially and civically.

In an earlier episode, the Reform League demanded the right for citizens to assemble in Hyde Park, London, to discuss reform of the franchise. The League, which had 600 branches, called a mass meeting in Hyde Park for July 2, 1866. Sir Robert Mayne, the Superintendent of the Metropolitan Police, at first banned the gathering, but then relented and a crowd of 50,000 people assembled. A further meeting was planned for July 23, but this time the Home Secretary, Spencer Walpole, issued a ban on "meetings for the purpose of delivering or hearing speeches, or for the public discussion of popular and exciting topics."[38] On July 23, Hyde Park was surrounded by 17,000 police, but the crowd outnumbered them and broke through the railings, forcing their way into the park. According to the next day's press report, the

police responded with ferocity: "Wherever there was a skull to fracture, they did their best to fracture it; everybody was in their eyes an enemy to whom no mercy was to be shown."[39] Nonetheless, the crowd stayed in the park and returned on the two following days to make speeches and assert their right of access to an acknowledged public space. On July 28, the Government's law officers declared that it was "impractical" to prevent people from meeting in the park. Nonetheless, a further Hyde Park meeting, planned for May 6, 1867, was banned by Walpole, who explained to Parliament the danger of allowing gatherings about issues "on which men's minds are easily excited."[40] The government was supported by the opposition leader, Gladstone, who declared that "the scum of this great city would take advantage of such an assemblage."[41] Despite such rhetoric, on the day the police were unable to uphold the ban: 15,000 people entered the park, ignoring the police, and Walpole resigned as Home Secretary the following day. In 1872 the Park Regulation Act was passed, allowing anyone to hold a meeting in Hyde Park without prior permission. A civic right had been asserted. (Speakers still gather in Hyde Park every Sunday.)

The concept of citizenship is intimately related to conditions of spatial accessibility, for civic behavior depends upon a series of rights of entry, ranging from the polling station to town squares to cyberspace where much contemporary interaction now occurs. In the absence of these rights of public access, democratic citizenship becomes a pious aspiration rather than a practicable commitment.

Universality

Public space is universal rather than particular. It is a realm of impersonal relations, in which the safe familiarity of mutual recognition gives way to the fleeting acknowledgments of passing strangers. In this sense, that which is public is broad and fragile: available to all and any, but lacking any firm right to attention. Unlike private and personal affairs, which appeal to self-interest and purposeful curiosity, public affairs are often regarded with indifference, as the remote workings of a self-generating and self-serving system. Linking the collective priorities of impersonal public space to the private passions of biographical existence is perhaps the most challenging task of mass societies.

But first societies must determine what is appropriately public and what is not. These are fluid categories. Once strictly privatized, intimate matters, such as sexual orientation and attachment, have become matters of public experience and debate. At the same time, spaces that were once regulated in the name of public vigilance, such as vote-casting and film-watching, are increasingly migrating to domestic privacy. Matters are made universal through claims that they relate to everyone and made non-public when such claims are rejected.

Publics, comprising strangers who might not ordinarily meet, can only form if spaces exist in which heterogeneous encounters can take place and be developed. Before anything resembling democracy can be said to exist, inclusive public spaces have to be established, for, as Hannah Arendt argued, "before men began to act, a definite space had to be secured and structure built where all subsequent actions could take place."[42] Public space is where ideas, issues, and dilemmas relevant to anyone and everyone can circulate over time. This conception of communication as a circulatory process – a series of interactions over time between claims and attention – is helpful in understanding the notion of universalistic public space. It is what Anderson had in mind when he wrote about the invention of the printing press and the spread of vernacular texts giving rise to the "imagined communities" of European nation states.[43] Similarly, one might argue that it was the *circulation* of early news-papers, with their reports of trading voyages, foreign adventures, and price fluctuations, that gave rise to a consciousness of the universal significance of global market relationships.

In the context of democratic political relationships, which depend for their health upon vibrant public spaces of interaction, universality is tested and played out within what has become known as the public sphere. According to Kant, ideas can only be effectively tested if they are exposed to public reason.[44] As spaces of socially cross-cutting intellectual exposure such as coffee-houses and salons emerged, the possibility of an inclusive public conversation was raised. Habermas, who has famously discussed the history and democratic functions of the public sphere, states that "The public sphere can best be described as a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e. opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions."[45] There has been a tendency to over-institutionalize Habermas's account

of the public sphere, confining it to "official" spaces, such as the press, television, or political parties. In contrast, Negt and Kluge counter the depiction of the public sphere as comprising "a few professionals," such as "politicians, editors, officials or federations" and argue that a truly public sphere "has to do with everybody" and "is only realized in the heads of people, as a dimension of their consciousness."[46] Unlike private affairs, which resist the interference of outsiders, public affairs are of universal relevance and circulate within spaces from which nobody can be justifiably excluded. The unprecedented public debate about the Iraq war is a good example of an issue which "has to do with everybody." Some politicians, military strategists, diplomats, or embedded journalists might claim to have special insights into the justice of this war, but the ethos of universality upon which the democratic public sphere is founded affords just as much legitimacy to returning soldiers, parents of combatants, peace campaigners, and interested citizens as it does to elites seeking to speak for the public. The health of the public sphere is tested by its capacity to provide room for all voices, regardless of their status, background, or mode of expression.

Visibility

But before public space can be accessible or deemed to be of universal relevance, it must be visible to all. As Thompson has explained, "What is public . . . is what is visible or observable, what is performed in front of spectators, what is open for all or many to see or hear or hear about."[47] Whereas it was once the case that social power was protected by seclusion and opacity, in democratic societies there is an expectation that power should be visible for all to witness and scrutinize.

   The case of Parliament, as the center of representative power in Britain, provides a useful illustration. During its long period as an institution that was dominated by a patrician elite, there existed no principle of accountability to the governed. For example, in 1571, Members of Parliament resisted the publication of verbatim report of the proceedings of Parliament and penalized reporters who attempted to publish such material, arguing that "every person of the Parliament ought to keep secret and not to disclose the secrets and things done and spoken in Parliament House to any other person, unless he be one of the same House, upon pain of being sequestered out of the House, or otherwise punished

as by order of the House shall be appointed."[48] It was not until 1878 that a Select Committee examined the question of allowing an official report of the proceedings of the House of Commons to be produced, and it was not until 1909 that the daily *Hansard* reports were finally declared to be official records, when the *Official Report* was legitimized as a parliamentary service, on the basis that the public, who since 1884 had obtained the right to vote, ought to be free to know what their elected representatives were doing in their name. As Parliament moved from secrecy to visibility, a press lobby was established (1884), radio microphones were allowed in (1978), and cameras were allowed to film the live proceedings of the House of Lords (1985) and then the House of Commons (1989), though in both cases the rules of filming were strictly regulated by Parliament itself. What one sees here is a parallel evolution of democratization and visibility: as Parliament's legitimacy came to depend upon being seen to speak for the public, technologies of public visibility became more important. Indeed, between the early 1930s and the late 1990s, a profound change of perspective in relation to the significance of political visibility had taken place. In 1932, the Speaker of the House of Commons told Parliament that the Prime Minister and others believed it was undesirable for the BBC's press gallery reporters to provide a daily account of the dealings of Parliament. Several decades later, when the BBC was considering program changes, the then Speaker of the House, Betty Boothroyd, hoped that nothing would happen to the one of its flagship programs, *Yesterday in Parliament*, since it performed an important function in bringing Parliament closer to the people. From dependence for its authority upon the maintenance of a dignified distance from the vulgar public, parliamentary power came to depend upon techniques designed to make it appear close and connected to those it claimed to represent.

Thompson[49] has very usefully shown how the nature of public visibility has changed as technologies of mediation have given rise to "a new kind of publicness which consists of . . . *the space of the visible* . . . in which mediated symbolic forms can be expressed and received by a plurality of non-present others." Mediated publicness is experienced through technologies and techniques designed to convey an impression of presence. Television is the most ubiquitous provider of such mediated experiences, but, as the word itself suggests, a trade-off is involved. Tele (distance) and vision (seeing) embodies both the promise of mediation – extending visual reach across vast spatial distances – and its inherent

compromise between the sensual experiences of direct involvement and the limitations of virtual witnessing. One of the authors recalls well living within walking distance of Wembley Stadium when the 1966 Soccer World Cup Final was played. Watching the momentous last minutes of the match on television, he could hear the gasps and roars of the live crowd as goals were scored and missed. In order to experience the naked reality of the occasion, the television sound had to be turned down so that the immediate (unmediated) vibrations from the stadium could be heard and felt directly. The same gasps and roars were audible from the television set, but these were somehow once removed from the originality that characterizes authentic experience. On occasions such as these, mediation can make spaces public, but cannot necessarily guarantee the quality of such encounters. A key aim of this book is to problematize the sense in which mediation devalues that which it makes available. Specifically, we are interested in ways that the mediated public is both reflected and constituted; represented and reconfigured.