



# CONTEMPORARY PUBLICS

SHIFTING BOUNDARIES IN NEW MEDIA,  
TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE

EDITED BY

**P. David Marshall**

**Glenn D'Cruz**

**Sharyn McDonald**

**Katja Lee**



# Contemporary Publics



P. David Marshall • Glenn D'Cruz • Sharyn McDonald • Katja Lee  
Editors

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Shifting Boundaries in New Media,  
Technology and Culture

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## Introduction: The Plurality of Publics

*P. David Marshall*

Every now and then, there is something infinitely calming in observing ants. As entomologists will explain, ants are remarkably socially connected. Each individual ant will move through its task with an efficiency and direction that is unshakeable. Yet, what one observes about the social behavior of ants is that as they pass each other, they communicate something. It either reinforces the tasks or it changes them. The alteration may appear to be insignificant—a slight change in path or a reconfiguration of their order of activities. As a non-scientific researcher of ants, I may be anthropomorphizing my reading of their forms of communication, and I may not see the other chemicals and agents that are producing these subtle shifts; nonetheless, what I can discern as a popular observer is that ants do not change their overall mission. Their connection of the individual to the collective seems universal, even when there is an errant message flowing along the ant line.

Metaphorically, ants' social activity crudely describes a kind of idealized public sphere. All are included. Debates (although in the ant-world, these debates only last milliseconds) lead to connected solutions. There is an intuitive sense that all are connected to the collective good in some way. Indeed, if there is an identity that can capture this sensitized

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connection to the meaning of actions, it would be the very notion of ants as citizens.

Whether we take the notion of the public and the public sphere from Walter Lippman in his *Public Opinion* or from Jürgen Habermas' original foray in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, most (if not all) iterations of "public" have contained this overriding communicative relationship of the individual to unity. Debates and discussions define the activity of the public sphere and, on the surface, represent some sort of disunity; but the sense that these debates comprehensively and categorically connect to all people, and that the discursive and communicative plays and counterplays are simply effective, just, and democratic ways of arriving at consensus and compromise, ultimately has put the concept of the public and public sphere in the realm of utopia. The public sphere is and was a mythic concept. As much as it is valued in consensus building, the public sphere is an "imagined community" (Anderson 1983, 15). The related concept of *public* similarly defined a way to characterize both opinion and belongingness into something coherently accepted as significant, valued, and self-evidently universally constituted and constructed. Using the word *public* has thus been a way to allow one voice to embody the entire body politic of citizenry. In contrast, other terms that describe the link between the social and the political generally have some negative connotation. From Matthew Arnold's late nineteenth-century polemic on "mass" culture to Gustav LeBon's efforts to understand the mental weakness of the crowd, the formulations of collective activities in the nineteenth and twentieth century imagined order challenged by the rabble and the mob. While the mass and the mob were characterized as irrational and seething with raw emotion, the utopian public and its expression in the public sphere were characterized as symbolizing rationality and reasoned argument. The public and the public sphere celebrated non-violence even if the debate was heated; they were terms that indexically pointed to democratic practices and the role of citizenry.

This book's intervention into the understanding of public and the public sphere similarly realizes the impossibility of achieving these utopian and unified concepts in the contemporary moment. It is the singularity of the concept of public which is challenged in the essays in this collection. Our title, *Contemporary Publics*, heralds the idea that the mythic quality of the comprehensive public sphere and public needs to be rethought in terms of parallel, overlapping, and competing publics. In addition to this

challenge to the universality and utopian quality of what the public and public sphere represents, what also unifies the various approaches taken here is a recognition of how publics are formed through discourse. They may not reproduce the unity of the ant colony, but publics imply a vibrant, contentious engagement of various groups to articulate views, positions, and postures audibly and visibly.

In this opening essay I want to position the intellectual and political significance of thinking through the plurality of publics in three stages. The first stage investigates the multiple uses of the term *public* as a nomination of different forms of visible cultural engagement. The second stage builds from this multiplicity of definitions to identify the location of the non-public—the private—in this plethora of publics. The final stage identifies the various disciplines and intellectual directions that have informed the essays in this book and how they have further helped situate the value of thinking and using the concept of publics.

### PUBLIC USES: DEPLOYING THE TERMS *PUBLIC* AND *PUBLICS*

Etymologically, *public* represents one of those words that has had a proliferating array of uses over the centuries. From the *Oxford English Dictionary*, there are seven variations of the term public as an adjective, and as a noun, another five. Contained in the concatenation are literally thousands of variations. With its Latin origins, public has been deployed in some aspect to reveal something related to the people as a whole *and* as something visible or at least “conspicuous” (Oxford English Dictionary) for almost two millennia. Moreover, with little variation, it appears in all the European Romance languages and beyond. Habermas, along with most of northern Europe, used *Öffentlichkeit* or some close variation to express this same adjectival or noun form.

As well as being a ubiquitous term, over time it has also become quite promiscuous in its associations. For centuries, it has been wedded to government as a way to express its representativeness of the people. In this way, public has always had a close affinity to forms of democratic government—hence the word *republic*. But as it has modified particular nouns, it has migrated somewhat. Terms such as *public housing* or *public works* have clear links with government-related initiatives and have developed in the twentieth century to indicate some form of *public welfare*. Some expressions using public are invocations for political actions of caring: *public*

*good*, *public spirit*, and *public benefit* are examples of this embedded notion of the state and its responsibility for its people.

But its use cannot be contained by these characterizations. A *public library* expresses something that simultaneously identifies its potential funding by the state but also its openness to a community for its benefit. Like a library, *public baths* or *public square* are expressions of an equally open territory, one where no individual can lay claim to its property; all can use it and borrow without taking away from its connection to a commonwealth.

As *public* becomes attached to these practices and activities, one can see its relationship to visibility. Over the past five centuries, a *public life* has very often been defined by its relationship to political office, where an individual, by choice or by what Rojek would describe as the “ascribed” role that members of royalty inhabit (2001, 17), works for others—what Habermas calls “representative publicness” (1989, 9–12). However, a *public life* is also related to those members of society that are seen and, therefore, has come to encompass our celebrity culture, where certain individuals are seen to have a visible presence to the rest of a culture. The rest of us move in and out of *public spaces* and thereby express acceptable (or unacceptable) public comportment which defines our rather limited public lives. The somewhat contested term *public intellectuals* has become a way to describe how certain individuals who are normally sealed monastically as academics from the everyday, invest in a public and visible presence via their ideas, possibly for public good. Often it is not their expertise that defines their activities as public intellectuals but rather that they are called upon to become part of political debate as an agent of the public. Even the role of the *publican*, which has come to mean the person who manages the *pub* or *public house*, describes an individual who provides space for the expression of the social self and possibly a collective identity as well. The pub is an inn where all are welcome, and even travellers passing through particular spaces find in the public house something that is beyond the private and foreign domain of their travels.

What becomes more complicated is when public is used in the parlance of commerce and trade. When a company decides to *go public*, it is a decision that is at least connected to the idea that public means visible. This visibility is closely related to when an individual, after months of media pressure to reveal their private (and apparently compelling) story, decides to be interviewed by the media and *go public*. The stock exchanges and the share market become ways that a company is reconfigured as accessible

to more investors and shareholders, and therefore subjected to this very particular formation of collective activity. *Publicly traded companies*, which have had an *initial public offering*, in their new status as *publicly listed* corporations, are subject to new levels of scrutiny in the *publication* of annual reports and quarterly profit and loss statements.

In a similar vein, the related words of *publication* and *publishing*, like their trade counterparts, address the formalization of text for its wider distribution, but also for its consumption by an audience. One of the largest conceptual debates in cultural theory since Matthew Arnold's original 1869 treatise involves making sense and relating these collectivities of mass, public, and audience (Arnold and Garnett 2009 (1869)). Where the audience has been related broadly to some form of mediated production, from theatre, newspapers, and film to radio, television, and magazines, the audience has also been an entity that has allowed the conceptualization of both public and public opinion to have some recurring and current reality.

From this survey of the way that the term has been deployed, it is clear that as an idea *public* has become attached to a wide variety of activities and practices. But interestingly, this plurality of practices and uses did not lead to pluralizing of the term for centuries. Publics, as opposed to public, emerged gradually in the twentieth century from institutions and industries most closely associated with *publicity*. Historically, publicity is the practice of making known a person or a product. In its deployment over the last two centuries it has been connected to the various entertainment industries as they attempted to attract attention around a particular film, for example, or personality. Publicity also migrated into reputation management for corporations. Over the twentieth century, the field of public relations emerged as an organizational management structure either directly connected to institutions or employed as an agency to service companies in crisis communication situations. The first uses of *publics* comes from the public relations field and industry. Edward Bernays, self-acclaimed father of public relations, began to see the twentieth-century social field as composed of more than one public and that targeting publics critical to the particular issues or concerns of corporations was essential to his job. Although Bernays used the plural term "publics" only in passing in his first book in 1923 (2015/1923, 142, 168), in 1947 he elaborated further on the idea by identifying "internal and external publics" in an article entitled "The Engineering of Consent." By 1952, Bernays directly used "publics" to describe the third component of his definition of public relations: "efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with

its publics and of publics with those of the institution” (Bernays quoted in Cutlip 1994, 187).

From these origins, the idea of publics is thus connected to expressing a diversity of opinions and the practices of directing or shaping opinion to particular ends. In public relations itself, public became a way of expressing an organized and coordinated way of thinking for a group or institution and thus any number of publics could exist in a given society. Perhaps because the concept of publics emerged from publicity and its connection to the entertainment industries, the term also became a way for media theorists to conceptualize plurality and difference in contemporary culture. Whereas the idea of audience and audiences defined the experiential relationship people had to cultural forms, public and publics became a way to think of that experience politically and strategically.

The deployment of the term *publics* shifted from the relatively conservative practices of public relations specialists in the mid-twentieth century to a term that began to describe quite different and distinct communities by the end of the century. Specifically, publics became a way to express new generations of political and cultural visibility in a culture and thereby relied definitionally on how the concept of public is fundamentally associated with attention. The emergence of new publics, or to use Michael Warner’s idea of “counterpublics” (2005), depended on a media economy that privileges difference, novelty and distinctiveness, which could be characterized as formations of publicity and were important methods of conveying news from the centres of power. In conjunction with communities, publics emerged as political entities related to visible cultural movements. In the American context, a recognizable black public emerged from the civil rights movement. Similarly, gay counterpublics established themselves as well as a feminist public from the 1970s onwards. Along with visibility, these publics offered their participants a sense of egalitarian citizenship within their spaces that rivaled the older unitary public sphere that described the nation state (see Emirbayer and Sheller 1999, 150).

These new publics also identified the blind spots of what Habermas attempted to describe as the public sphere. These new publics underline distinctively new speaking positions within a culture and work to legitimize formerly excluded forms of performance of the public self (Fraser 1992). Forms of protest, possibly seen as illegitimate, become both recognized and authentic in this shifted conceptualization of publics. Classed expressions, gendered ways of behaving or misbehaving, and racial and ethnic

differences in address and public posturing become ways of new-found legitimacy within publics and in a competing culture of publics and counter-publics. The contentious world of publics has become a performative space with varied and nuanced codes of communication within publics and between publics.

In the twenty-first century, publics have become further legitimized by the marketplace as different publics are configured into demographic targets for the fabrication and selling of goods and services. Choice and difference have become the catchwords of consumer culture through product differentiation that appeals to these visible publics, which simultaneously become recognizable and sometimes sizeable markets. As a new ethereal culture of connection and networking has emerged through digital culture, the idea of digital publics has been naturalized and layered onto the reading of contemporary culture as a plurality of publics. Embedded in the digital have been similar appeals to new freedoms, new forms of presenting the public self, and a connection to citizenry that once again transcends the nation state as previous emergent publics have done (see, for example, Roberts 2014; Gripsrud and Moe 2010). In the practices of social media, further extrapolations of publics have developed. In my own research, I have heralded the expansions of intersecting “micro-publics” (Marshall 2015). Other online researchers have coined pluralities such as “personal publics” (Schmidt 2014), “networked publics” (boyd 2010), and “meso-publics and macro-publics” (Bruns and Moe 2014) to describe the new movements of communication and the new patterns of publicity and self-exposure that are part of the Internet and mobile media experience.

### CHANGING BOUNDARIES: PRIVACY BECOMES A FORM OF PUBLIC

The term *publics* has become both an analytical tool to help describe contemporary culture’s new networks of visibility and a prescriptive nomination of a new politics. Of equal significance to these two dimensions of the era of the plurality of publics is its quite direct challenge to the boundaries of the public. Highly visible publics imply an expanded engagement with publicity. What is outside the bounds of the visible and beyond the purview of the attention economy becomes harder and harder to discern. Determining what is private and privacy means defines the era of contemporary publics that many of us now inhabit and navigate.

The media industries have been instrumental in both providing the material for the idea of a public and the development of multiple publics. For more than two centuries, they have expanded the dimensions of what is publicly visible and published. With the expansion of the visual technologies of recording and dissemination through photography, film, and video, there has been a related expansion of what has become acceptable to reveal both in fictional and non-fictional forms. So, in many ways the private has become public. Through our films and television narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we have been allowed to pass through windows and doors into the interior of lives, making visual what the novels and biographies of the nineteenth century described in text. Connected to this visual discourse of increasing revelation, it is also possible to position the expanding reach and play of pornography as another example of what is apparently private becoming public in some specific way (see Williams 2004).

An even further expansion of these discourses of revelation is the move to what would be considered “backstage” or “behind-the-scenes” in our popular culture. For most of the twentieth century, magazines principally provided the channel to reveal more private and potentially intimate details about our most celebrated individuals. Whether in the structured and manicured presentations of the picture magazines of the mid-twentieth century such as *Look* or *Life* or, increasingly, in the pages of the tabloid newspapers and magazines such as *People*, *Hello*, *Who Weekly*, or *Us*, by the late twentieth century, an entire industry produced and circulated private images of stars and celebrities specifically for public consumption. These invasive discourses and practices also describe and anticipate the development of what has come to be called “reality television.” Using the basic documentary film-making techniques of “fly-on-the-wall” camera and audio work, the audience is invited into the private spaces and conversations of constructed “families,” as in the tradition of *Survivor* or *Big Brother*, or directly into the everyday of famous families such as the now long-running *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (since 2007). Although by consent, the individuals portrayed “privately” in this televisual universe help form a new understanding of what should be public and accessible to public discourse. They collectively buttress the expanding publicness advanced through news reports and debates about the unusual Clinton-Lewinsky scandal of 1996 which, in its extensive intimate description of sexual acts by a sitting US president and a White House Intern, worked to transform the sheer dimensions of the public revelation of the private (Busby 2001).



In her book, *A Private Sphere* (2010), Papacharissi makes the claim that determining the domain of the public and the private is the essential work of democracy itself. This process is complicated, however, by the way that media has insinuated itself into the expression of both public and private through its past prevalent uses in the domestic sphere (we can think here of the way that television and radio have occupied the private hearth of the home over different time periods [see Spigel 2001]) and its current expansion of its uses publicly (in its new mobility) and privately (in the pervasive expansion of personalized devices of connection and communication). Papacharissi's work makes the significant point that the contemporary moment, with its extensive use of digital media, has produced the pathway to the public sphere through gateways of the private to an even greater extent than these past avenues. Drawing from Livingstone's efforts at understanding the public and the private in terms of media publics (Livingstone 2005), Papacharissi attempts to demarcate the different ways in which profit, participation, and governance move our sometimes personal alignments and interests into different "planes of socio-economic activity on which private and public domains overlap and separate" (2010, 36). Thus, our current social media activity represents a complicated *mélange* of public and private interest: while social media companies push us to reveal and share in online culture in a way that produces vibrant and visible public debates at times, this structure also enables the movement of quite personal information for aggregation and sale to potential advertisers. As individuals, we are simultaneously moving in the private dimension as consumers of social media, as commodities for re-sale, *and* as publicly engaged citizens.

The private—when not referring to the non-collective, self-interested drives of commercial culture—is getting harder and harder to discern in the contemporary moment. Our forms of communication are now only superficially personal in their subjection to surveillance and re-communication for sometimes other ends. Contained in our investigation of the plurality of publics is an effort to identify the conflicted notion of public—and private—and thereby map and chart a spectrum of public-like activities that are often making visible what used to be thought of as private and personal. Because of this blending and reconfiguring of the private and the publics, understanding contemporary publics is actually a project making sense of the new dimensions of contemporary cultural politics.

## CONTEMPORARY PUBLICS

The conceit of this book is its apparent unity. Contemporary publics are complex, immaterial entities that can attach and detach from territories, technologies, spaces, and practices. When the Persona, Celebrity, Publics Research Group, or PCP, originally embarked on hosting an international symposium on this theme, it recognized that the idea of publics may have many faces emerging from many disciplines. As this book moved from those original abstracts, to presentations, to submissions, and to thematic organization, we as editors were very aware that we had intersected and engaged with thinkers and scholars from quite diverse backgrounds. The heterogenous intellectual origins of our contributors resulted in valuable and varied interventions in understanding contemporary publics. For instance, this book contains several scholars who claim public relations as their home discipline and practice. Although public relations represents the field where the concept public was first pluralized for strategic purposes, it is clear from their engagement that our contributors have adopted a quite intriguingly critical counterpoint to the discipline's origins as the public voice of institutions.

Approaching the topic from a radically different direction, academic artists are well represented in this collection. Given how certain types of artistic practice challenge public spaces and territorialization quite directly, and that artistic practices represent discursive formations that are direct/open appeals to being visible, heard, and public, the range of artistic disciplines represented—from animation, visual arts, dance, drama, design, and film-making—define another collective home for the exploration of the multiplicity of publics.

Perhaps because the various sub-disciplines of media, communication, and literary studies have had a long intellectual history delineating private and public value, as well as transforming collectivities/publics via their work on audiences, they represent the largest group of contributors in the collection. Our contributors from these areas (and others) are also inflected in their approaches to publics by cultural studies. It is this tradition that provides some of the networks of theory that appear to make this collective work conversantly rich and hopefully cohere in interesting ways.

As a result of the disciplinary diversity, one of the strengths of this collection lies in its concerted efforts to make sense of publics. We are hoping the sections themselves will help organize and define future thinking about publics. The section introductions thus serve as the explanatory

intermediaries as each member of our editorial team took the lead in bringing the ideas together thematically.

Glenn D’Cruz has edited our first section, “Countering Neoliberal publics: Screen and Space,” which is composed of five chapters and an introductory essay entitled “The Beach Beneath The Street: Art and Counterpublics.” Drawing from Warner’s ideas of counterpublics, situationists’ concept of *détournement*, and the conflicting politics of spectacle and space, D’Cruz situates the place of artistic practice in the making and shaping of publics. Along with the chapters in the section, he is able to position the contradictory values of the screen in producing dominant publics as well as the deployment of the screen in temporarily shifting the meaning and politics of contested public spaces and postures.

There is no question that technology figures prominently in the shaping of our conceptions of publics. Sharyn McDonald, through her introductory chapter, “Media Technologies and Publics,” maps our second section entitled “Making and Shaping Publics: Discourse and Technology.” McDonald, in an exploratory study of how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) engage with new communication technologies to pursue their goals of social improvement, accurately situates technology’s utopian quality within its equal capacity to lead to techniques of social control. In her investigation of Facebook’s contested Internet.org philanthropic initiative to connect disenfranchised populations with the Internet, McDonald identifies the conflicting play of media and communication technologies in producing a new global public sphere that simultaneously draws people into the orbit of a private company’s pecuniary imperatives. The chapters in this section deal with the potential of technology to produce new and exciting publics, and also examine the capacity of technology to produce new invasive, surveilled, and limiting public worlds.

Our final section, “Commodifying Public Intimacies,” deals with the divides between the public and the private and the regular patterns of commodification that envelope our production of public figures and public presentations. In her introductory essay, “Making Cents of Contemporary Intimacies: The Private in the Public,” Katja Lee identifies and examines the increasing uses made of intimacy in producing and sustaining contemporary publics. For Lee (drawing from Lauren Berlant), intimate publics provide patterns of connection for people through the sense of feeling and emotion. As the chapters in this section explore further, this intimate public space has been commercialized for certain ends as it produces new

publics couched in self-improvement and, in some instances, a form of neoliberal self and agency.

*Contemporary Publics*, like the formation of publics themselves, is a collective enterprise. Publics imply a connection beyond ourselves, a perhaps fleeting bond around an idea that transcends the individual. Our current generation of publics, their very plurality of presence, identifies a transformed political culture where our attentions are sought and shifted, our loyalties are drawn and positioned, and our citizenry is momentarily solid but often fluid. The intellectual work in this book provides some of the basic tools and concepts to understand the flows of these publics as well as make sense of how publics expand and temporarily inhabit spaces of all-inclusiveness even as they articulate the dangers of that ethereal but powerful unity.

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PART I

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Countering Neoliberal Publics:  
Screen and Space