
Public Emergence, Public Eclipse:
Information and the Conception Public

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December 2006

What is the public?

Philosopher Alastair Hannay recently wrote: “To ask ‘what is the public?’ sounds as if we were asking for features of some abstract object, or trying to pin down the public on a chart of ‘kinds.’ The question sounds abstruse and philosophical” (Hannay 2005, p. 2). Yet, that very question has long been an occupying interest to journalists and social activists, political philosophers and politicians. Used as a modifier for terms like ‘space,’ ‘sphere,’ and ‘opinion,’ the idea of the public – or multiple publics – underlies many theories of participation, particularly democratic political participation.¹

Yet, like the concept of democracy itself; ‘public’ is a highly contested term.² If public(s) exist, how they do or do not emerge, how they encounter established political institutions in their ongoing process of organization, and their role and purpose in participatory politics is far from settled.

The purpose of this paper (a section of a larger forthcoming paper),³ is an attempt to understand the term ‘public’ from the perspective of three theorists. The three – John Dewey, Walter Lippmann, and Jürgen Habermas – are recognized as important contributors to the

¹ The list of those who connect public participation with democracy is long. Benjamin Barber (Barber 1984; Barber 1998), for example, advocates for a conception of “strong democracy” in which citizens participate in “deliberative, self-governing communities.” American social capital theorists, such as Robert Putnam (Putnam 2001), make an underlying assumption that civic or public participation is fundamentally a part of self-governance. A full listing or discussion of these various theorists is outside the scope of this project. And though I also make normative assumptions about the importance of the public in participatory politics, this particular project focuses on conceptions of public emergence (or the lack of public emergence) and the role that information plays in that emergence process.

² For example, see Julia Paley’s (2002) *Toward an anthropology of democracy*. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31:469 and Paley’s (2004) *Accountable Democracy: Citizens’ Impact on Public Decision Making in Postdictatorship Chile*. *American Ethnologist* 31 (4):497-513. For a discussion of contested concepts in political theory see Connolly, William E. 1983. *The terms of political discourse*. 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

³ This paper is intended to be part of a larger exploration of how people begin to identify themselves as political actors or publics and the role that information practices play in that emergence process. The larger paper will look at the literature included in the section provided here, but will also include some of the relevant literature in the area of distributed political information practices and neo-institutionalism. The full paper will attempt to explain some of this literature and analyze how it relates, intersects or diverges.

discussion of political publics, particularly in how publics emerge or fail to emerge. In this paper, I argue that though these theorists' understandings, definitions and critiques of publics vary, their conceptions are unified in two main ways. First, all see public emergence as an information intensive process. And, second, all see the lack of public emergence, what Dewey terms the "eclipse of the public" (Dewey 1927, p. 304), as, in part, a problem of information.

Dewey, Lippmann, and the discussion of the public

. . . democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman. It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication (p. 350).

So writes John Dewey in his 1927 essay, *The Public and Its Problems*. By the time of the book's publication, the social pragmatist was considered one of the most important American philosophers of his time – influencing the ideology of modern liberalism, education and social theory (Fott 1998; Westbrook 1991). Underlying much of Dewey's work was a belief and advocacy for democracy as a "way of life," not simply a form of government (Stuhr 1998). In works such as *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), Dewey urged maximum public participation in governing.

But by the 1920s, after the conclusion of World War I, Dewey found his conception of democracy under attack. Increasingly, a group of critics – referred to as "democratic realists" – questioned the very feasibility of democracy. Their critique of participatory democracy focused on two of its tenets: the capacity of all people for rational political decision-making and the practicality and even desirability of public participation in policy-making. Basing their critique,

in part, on a series of empirical voting studies,⁴ the democratic realists concluded that “voting was indiscriminate and unintelligent” (Carroll Woody as quoted in Westbrook 1991, p. 284)

The most widely-read and influential of the democratic realists was Walter Lippmann. Lippmann, a journalist, media critic, and philosopher argued that participatory democracy was untenable in a complex, industrialized world. First with the publication of *Public Opinion* (1922) and later *The Phantom Public* (1925), Lippmann provided a scathing critique of the potential of participatory democracy and the role citizens could play in both acquiring and understanding the information necessary to self-govern.

Based on empirical evidence about the effectiveness of political propaganda in shaping public opinion during World War I (Schudson 1978), Lippmann posited that the formation of the public through public opinion did not emerge from the public itself. Instead, publics and public opinion were shaped and even manufactured by political leaders. In essence, for Lippmann, a democratic public was a myth (Schugurensky 2004).

One of the central problems of participatory democracy, according to Lippmann, was that it assumed an “omnicompetent” citizen (Lippmann 1922). In reality, instead of total competence, people were often misled in their conceptions of the political environment. Like other democratic realists, Lippmann saw the problem of public formation and public opinion being based in two main issues. First, he argued that people were not rational in their decision-making. Distorted information, what he termed stereotypes, is inherent in human thinking. In *Public Opinion* he writes, “For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for

⁴ See Norman C. Meier’s 1924 presidential election study and Carroll D. Woody’s study of 1926 Chicago primary as described in Westbrook (1991).

us by our culture” (1922, p. 55). As such, people are more likely to believe and make decisions based on these stereotyped symbols, or “pictures in their heads,” than through thought and direct experience.

Second, there was a problem of access to and the complexity of public information. Lippmann maintained that limited knowledge was available to citizens, both individually and as a group (Fott 1998, p. 29). The modern political environment was too complex, often invisible, and only indirectly accessible. As a consequence, citizens had to rely on other sources for information. Those “other” information sources were most often the news media, which he claimed was not capable of the job. “The press . . . is like the beam of a searchlight that moves restlessly about, bringing one episode and then another out of darkness into vision. Men cannot do the work of the world by this light alone. They cannot govern society by episodes, incidents, and eruptions” (1922, p. 215).

The solution for Lippmann, like other democratic realists, was not the complete abandonment of democracy. Instead, the role of the public in decision and policy making should be severely limited. There was a need to introduce, “some form of expertness between the private citizen and the vast environment in which he is entangled” (1922, p. 238). This mediating layer between the public, which he termed outsiders, and the governing elite was to be composed of a group of “insiders” – technical experts, specialists and bureaucrats. Efforts should be made to “enlighten” insiders and at the same time limit the role of the outside public to issues of “procedure” but not of policy. He writes:

The broad principles on which the action of public opinion can be continuous are essentially principles of procedure. The outsider can ask experts to tell him whether the relevant facts were duly considered; he cannot in most cases decide for himself what is relevant or what is due consideration. The outsider can perhaps judge whether the groups interested in the decision were properly heard. . . He can watch the procedure when the news indicates that there is something to

watch. He can raise a question as to whether the procedure itself is right, if its normal results conflict with his ideal of a good life. But if he tries in every case to substitute himself for the procedure, to bring in Public Opinion like a providential uncle in the crisis of a play, he will confound his own confusion. (1922, p. 251)

Advocates of participatory politics, like Dewey, saw Lippmann's proposals as bleak. Writing that *Public Opinion* was "perhaps the most effective indictment of democracy as currently conceived ever penned," Dewey agreed with Lippmann's critique of democracy, but not his solution (Dewey 1922). In response, most of Dewey's work in the 1920s was an attempt to deal with the challenge brought on from democratic realists like Lippmann (Westbrook 1991). Through a series of lectures, culminating in the publication of *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey provided his most comprehensive response to the democratic realists as well as his most formal work of political philosophy.

As formal political theory, the essay explored the emergence and functions of the state, the public and government. Dewey defined the public and the state in quite specific ways. In keeping with his pragmatism, he contended that humans existed in association and interaction with one another. As such, human action inevitably had consequences on others. Dewey divided those consequences into two categories: consequences which affected the individuals directly engaged in the interaction; and consequences which indirectly affected individuals not immediately engaged in the association (1927, p. 243-244). This was the essential, and only, distinction between private and public.

In this distinction, Dewey rejects the concept that the private is equated with the individual and the public with the social.⁵ Nor does he conceptualize a single, unitary public. Instead, he

⁵ Instead of seeing the distinction between private and public as a distinction between individual and social, Dewey writes that "the line between private and public is to be drawn on the basis of the extent and scope of the consequences of acts which are so important as to need control, whether by inhibition or by promotion" (p. 245).

saw that there were multiple publics, emerging each time the indirect consequences of interactions were recognized and required management. He explains that the public consists of “all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions *to such an extent* that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for” (emphasis added, 1927, p. 245-246). In order to handle the effects of indirect association – mitigating the negative consequences and promoting the positive ones – publics would organize to form a ‘state’ and establish officials to serve their interests (1927, p. 244).

The point that is worth emphasis is that these indirect consequences must first be *recognized* and their effects must be *evaluated* in order for a public to emerge. It is precisely this recognition which is the central problem for Dewey. The key to modifying the state and effecting social and political change was that a public had to come forward and to organize. But public emergence required members to be aware that they constituted a public. And they needn’t only know that they had common interests, they had to judge what those interests were. As Westbrook points out, “Dewey’s theory pointed to the need for a public to organize itself not only to serve its interests but to define them” (1991, p. 306).

Dewey recognized that public emergence and organization were not easy tasks. As noted, it required members of the public to be able to perceive the consequences of other’s associations. It also required members to trace those consequences to their source. Finally, it required the selection and establishment of officials to represent the public’s interests, which often entailed opposition to already existing and entrenched state powers.

Dewey argued that the ability to perceive and then trace the effects of indirect associations had been further complicated by the introduction of a new industrial society. He wrote, “the machine age has so enormously expanded, multiplied, intensified and complicated the scope of

the indirect consequences, has formed such immense and consolidated unions in action, on an impersonal rather than a community basis, that the resultant public cannot identify and distinguish itself. And this discovery is obviously an antecedent condition of any effective organization on its part” (1927, p. 314). Though industrialism had called into existence a new public, that industrialism had so extended the area over which consequences of action had an effect that this new public had remained “largely inchoate and unorganized” (1927, p. 303).

The result was that the public was in eclipse. “At present, many consequences are felt rather than perceived; they are suffered, but they cannot be said to be known, for they are not, by those who experience them, referred to their origins. It goes, then, without saying that agencies are not established which canalize the streams of social action and thereby regulate them. Hence the publics are amorphous and unarticulated” (1927, p. 317).

What is significant is that Dewey did not talk of an eclipse of the public by claiming that there was no public – no group of people with common interests – or that the public was a myth or phantom. Instead, the eclipse of the public was a problem of information and communication. He maintained that there was both “too much public,” in the sense the public was too diffused to be able to organize, and that there were “too many publics” with too many concerns to hold itself together (1927, p. 320).

The fundamental political problem for Dewey, then, was to facilitate the self-identification of publics (Fott 1998, p. 31). Building on his past work, he saw the answer in a revitalization of local communities, in social inquiry and in communication – requiring both an improvement in the “conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion” as well as “freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and dissemination of their conclusions” (1927, p. 365). For Dewey, it

required no less than the Great Society of the 1920s become the Great Community (1927, p. 348).

The transformation to the Great Community demanded that publics be based in a physical place. It was only through the revitalization of local communities and face-to-face communication that members of the public could participate in discussions with others, and these dialogues were critical for public formation. Second, if a public was going to recognize and define its interests it would have to rely on effective and organized social inquiry (1927, p. 327). Finally, the public would have to communicate and disseminate the meanings of its discussions and inquiry as a way to organize action.

Agreeing with Lippmann's critique of the "omnicompetent" citizen, Dewey admitted that it was not necessary for all citizens to be involved in every aspect of social inquiry. His political theory saw a place for experts in governance, but what was required of the public was to be able to judge the information provided by those experts. So unlike Lippmann, Dewey stressed that the enlightenment of the public took precedence over the enlightenment experts: "Democracy demands a more thoroughgoing education than the education of officials, administrators and directors of industry" (p. 344).

For Dewey, once the relevant information was made public through the appropriate modes of communication (e.g. a free press), discussion and deliberation would help the public to determine the nature of their common interests. And once members of the public were able to engage in those discussions, participatory democracy could emerge. "There is no limit to the liberal expansion and confirmation of limited personal intellectual endowment which may proceed from the flow of social intelligence when that circulates by word of mouth from one to another in the communications of the local community. That and that only gives reality to public

opinion. We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of an immense intelligence. But that intelligence is dormant and its communications are broken, inarticulate and faint until it possesses the local community as its medium” (1927, p. 372).

Habermas and the public sphere

Though Dewey has been generally viewed as a champion of participatory democracy, he has been criticized for his lack of specificity in setting forth the role that citizens would play in democratic government. Further, the criteria he established for the transformation to the Great Community were demanding and he offered little guidance in how to actually implement them (Fott 1998; Hannay 2005; Schudson 1997; Stuhr 1998; Westbrook 1991). Despite these critiques, Dewey did provide an alternative to democratic realists and other critics of participatory politics – an alternative which has been expanded upon by successive political theorists.

One such successor was the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas.⁶ Best known for his work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1989), Habermas takes up Dewey’s normative conceptions of participatory democracy and focuses mainly on the role of deliberation – or rational argumentation and debate – in the formation of publics and the public sphere.

One of his earliest works,⁷ the focus of the book is Habermas’ historically-grounded and theoretical account of the emergence and ultimate breakdown of the bourgeois public sphere.

⁶ See Antonio, Robert J., and Douglas Kellner. 1992. Communication, Democratization, and Modernity: Critical Reflections on Habermas and Dewey. *Symbolic Interaction* 15 (3):277-298 and Kellner, Douglas. *Habermas, the Public Sphere, and Democracy: A Critical Intervention* [cited December 15, 2006]. Available from <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/habermas.htm> for an explicit link between Dewey and Habermas.

⁷ The book was first published in 1962 but was not translated to English until 1989.

Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere was a historically specific moment in the western world. Defined as something between civil society and the state, for Habermas the public sphere was a space free of coercion where private individuals could engage in “rational-critical” debates on issues of general concern. Importantly, as a basis for normative democratic theory, the public sphere was, in principle, open to all citizens and as such was a space where legitimate public opinions could be formed (Habermas 1996).

In *Structural Transformation*, Habermas links the emergence of the public sphere to the development and transformation of capitalism and the rise of bourgeois society. Specifically, he claims that the public sphere came out of capitalism’s ideal of separating what was the political sphere from the market. As a mediator between the two, a public sphere developed as a counterpart to the state. Bourgeois society uniquely fulfilled this counterpart role through the act of discourse – critiquing, interpreting and discussing political matters in private, but openly accessible settings (such as 18th century coffee houses and salons).

The rational-critical debate function of the public sphere crystallized into the formation of public opinion. Habermas’ conception of public opinion was quite different than Lippmann’s, however. Habermas distinguishes public opinion both from “mere opinion” or uncritical prejudices of single individuals in aggregate form, and also from a “reputation that emerges in the mirror of opinions” (1989, p. 90). Instead, Habermas argues that a public opinion can only be formed by a *single* public which engages in rational-critical debate. In this sense, Habermas’ conception of public and public opinion is also quite different from Dewey because Habermas conceptualizes a single public which “comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (Habermas as quoted in Schudson 1997).

But Like Dewey and Lippmann, Habermas explains that the bourgeois public sphere went through a type of eclipse. He accounts for the demise of the public sphere by arguing that as the public sphere became increasingly open to others (e.g. non-property owners) it became fragmented. Secondly, with the transformation of capitalism and the rise of the welfare state, society and the state became interlocked. As such, a unified and independent public sphere was no longer viable. Instead, the public moved from one of debate to one of consumption. As a consequence, it was no longer possible for a single public to rationally devise an independent, critical opinion about the state. And like Lippmann, Habermas saw this development as a crisis of participatory politics where opinions were manufactured and manipulated by corporate and state interests and then fed back to the public.

Habermas' Frankfurt School roots are evident in this critique. A student of Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas's *Structural Transformation* has vestiges of the mass culture critique.⁸ He criticizes new media such as television, radio, and even film as undermining the ability of audience members to engage in a discursive relationship. He claims that these new media deprive the audience the opportunity to "talk back" or disagree. Instead, the public receives already-mediated information, which they consume rather than critique. As a consequence, instead of developing public opinion through rational-critical debate, public opinion becomes something that is manipulated, manufactured, and spoon-fed to an uncritical and voiceless audience. In this critique, public opinion and the public sphere become a fiction. And, according to Habermas, these trends lead to both the anesthetizing of the public and the disintegration of a critical public opinion (Calhoun 1992; Scheuer 2004; Staats 2004).

⁸ See Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor W. Adorno. 1972. *The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception*. In *Dialectic of enlightenment*. New York: Continuum.

Like Dewey, Habermas' work has had important implications for democratic theory, particularly theories of participatory democracy. As a normative project, liberal democracies find their legitimation through the consent of an informed public. But *Structural Transformation* calls into question whether or not that legitimation is possible without a functioning public sphere. And also like Dewey, Habermas' normative conceptions have engendered significant criticism.

In many ways, Habermas falls victim to the same weaknesses of his Frankfurt School predecessors. He seems almost nostalgic about a time of a high-culture consuming public, revealing a level of elitism that is also evident in Lippmann's work. He has also been criticized for idealizing a public sphere where alternative voices were, by its very structure, absent (Mansbridge 1996; Paley 2004; Splichal 2006; Ikegami 2000; Ryfe 2005). Women, the working class, and ethnic minorities were silenced in the bourgeois public sphere. And, as Nancy Fraser argues, he completely fails to examine other non-liberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres and instead insists that alternative publics contributed to the demise of *the* public (Fraser 1997).

Public Emergence, Public Eclipse: Information and the Conception of Public

At this point we have discussed Dewey, Lippmann and Habermas' differing notions of the public and how those conceptions disagreed or built upon one another. It is now time to return to the beginning. In the introduction of the paper I argued that though these three theorists' understandings, definitions and critiques of publics vary, their conceptions are unified in two main ways: they all see public emergence as an information intensive process; and they all see the public's eclipse as, in part, a problem of information. Though that argument is clearer now, it is worth further explication.

As we have seen, the three theorists differ in the way they define the public. Dewey understands the public in terms of the consequences of other's associations. He maintains that there are multiple publics made up of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of other's interactions. In organizing themselves, publics form a state and establish officials (who might include their own members) to represent their concerns. So for Dewey, the public is part of the state. Lippmann, on the other hand, separates the public and the state – with the state, in part, manipulating the formation of the public, rather than it emerging from individuals. He argues, in essence, that the democratic public is a “phantom.” Finally, Habermas argues that there is a single public which is made up of private individuals. Through discussion and debate this group of individuals forms a unified public and public opinion. That public is separate from both the state as well as the market.

In our discussion it also becomes clear that each of the theorist's diverge in how they explain public emergence. Dewey argues that publics emerge when individuals who were previously separate come together and recognize, define, and judge their common concerns. The process of recognition is possible only through face-to-face communication and inquiry. Habermas echoes Dewey's conception that a public emerges when individuals come together to share and discuss a common interest, claiming that the public sphere exists as a space where individuals engage in “rational-critical” debate and determine what their common interests are. Lippmann is less optimistic, claiming that publics emerge through the manufacturing of consent and opinion. Political propaganda and mass advertising shape that opinion and also, therefore, shape the public.

Despite these differences in the definition and explanation of public emergence, each theorist, at least in his particular historical context, views the public in an eclipse or demise.

Dewey argues that the public cannot recognize itself, in part because it is too diffuse and has too many divergent and undefined concerns. Lippmann blames the problem of public formation in two main issues. First, he argues that people are not rational in their decision-making. Distorted information – stereotypes – is inherent in human thinking. Second, there is a problem of access to and the complexity of public information. The modern political environment is too complex, often invisible, and only indirectly accessible to citizens and thus, individuals have to rely on other, inadequate sources for information. Habermas, on the other hand, saw the demise of the public sphere being caused, in part, by the introduction of a consuming public and the replacement of a critical one. New media such as television, radio, and even film deprived the audience the opportunity to “talk back” or disagree. Instead, the public received already-mediated information, which they consumed rather than critiqued. As a consequence, instead of developing public opinion through rational-critical debate, public opinion became something that was manipulated or manufactured.

Each of these points is summarized in the table below:

	Dewey	Lippmann	Habermas
Definition of public	Multiple publics are made up of all those people who are affected by the indirect consequences of the associations of others to the extent that those consequences need to be regulated. Publics organize states to fulfill that regulation and therefore the public is part of the state.	The public and the state are separate entities. The public, as a group of people who share and know they share common interests and opinions, is a myth or phantom which is created or manipulated from above (in part by the state), rather than emerging from individuals.	There is a single public made up of private individuals who through discussion and debate form a unified public opinion. The public is separate from the state and the market.

<p>Public emergence</p>	<p>Publics emerge when individuals who were previously separate come together and recognize, define and judge their common concerns. The process of recognition is possible only through face-to-face communication and inquiry.</p>	<p>Publics emerge through the manufacturing of consent and opinion. Political propaganda and mass advertising shape that opinion and also shape the public.</p>	<p>Publics emerge through communication or the “rational-critical” debate of issues of common concern.</p>
<p>Public eclipse</p>	<p>The public is in eclipse because it cannot recognize itself, in part because it is too diffuse and because it has too many divergent and undefined concerns.</p>	<p>The problem of public formation and public opinion is based in two main issues. First, people are not rational in their decision-making. Distorted information – stereotypes – is inherent in human thinking. Second, there is a problem of access to and the complexity of public information. Lippmann maintained that limited knowledge was available to citizens, both individually and as a group. The modern political environment is too complex, often invisible, and only indirectly accessible. Therefore, individuals have to rely on other, inadequate sources for information.</p>	<p>The demise of the public sphere was caused, in part, by the introduction of a consuming public and the replacement of a critical one. New media such as television, radio, and even film deprived the audience the opportunity to “talk back” or disagree. Instead, the public received already-mediated information, which they consumed rather than critiqued. As a consequence, instead of developing public opinion through rational-critical debate, public opinion became something that was manipulated or manufactured.</p>

What becomes clear is that though none of the theorists defined public emergence and public eclipse as necessarily problems of information, our analysis reveals that it is. In both Dewey and Habermas’ theories, communication, deliberation, and inquiry are the basis for public formation. For Habermas it is rational-critical debate of issues and information of common concern. For Dewey it is the improvement of the “methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion” (1927, p. 365). In either case, public formation is an information

intensive process which requires individuals to have information on which to discuss issues of concern, to evaluate those common issues, and to then disseminate those interests to others.

What is also clear is that the problem of the public's eclipse is, in part, an information problem. Here Lippmann's analysis is the most succinct. A participatory public must have access to a range of information in order to make decisions. But the problem is that no citizen can be, in Lippmann's terms, "omnicompetent." As such, the issue emerges as to what information is needed for citizen decision-making, how to get access to that information, and how that information can be evaluated and distributed.

The theorists again diverge on how to "solve" the problem of the public. Dewey envisions a Great Community, Lippmann the introduction of a technocratic class, and Habermas the return of discursive or deliberative politics. Though their solutions may not be desirable or even viable in our own contemporary context, what is useful about these three theorists is the way they both defined the public's emergence and its eclipse. Is it possible to port their definitions of public emergence as well as their identification of the problems with the public's eclipse into the current historical context? The problems they identify may be similar to contemporary problems. If so, is it possible that new information practices are supporting (or possibly hindering) public emergence? Those questions must be left for further exploration. But for now, simply seeing public emergence and eclipse as issues of information – and therefore concerns for information science – is an important analytical start to understanding the role that information practices play in the emergence of new publics.

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