

## Participation, Representation and Media System: Habermasian Paths to the Past

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### Abstract

Drawing from Swedish press history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the present article argues for further historical investigation into three aspects of Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere. The first concerns actual media participation, the second the representative features of media institutions, and the third media systems. These routes of analysis can and should be combined, and historical specificity is key. When we focus on concrete situations and places, the neat grand-scale chronologies (Habermas' and others') fall short. There is no simple development from a "representative publicness" to a participatory public sphere, and back again. And the media have always been interconnected in a system-like way. However, historical specificity does not exclude contemporary developments. The present conclusion is that if we are to gain any true understanding of contemporary phenomena, a historical perspective is crucial, and aspects of Habermas' theory can serve as heuristic tools.

**Keywords:** Participatory media, representation, media system, public sphere, Jürgen Habermas, press history, eighteenth century, nineteenth century.

## Introduction

*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, published in German in 1962 and translated into Swedish in 1984 (*Borgerlig offentlighet*) and into English in 1989 (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*), has been strongly criticized. Three problems associated with Jürgen Habermas' theory of the public sphere are 1) that, by focusing on the (male) *bourgeois* public sphere, it downplayed other forms of public activity, and hence depicted the public sphere as a far too homogenous object; 2) that, by focusing on a small range of high-culture periodicals, it neglected other forms of printed material, and hence described public life in an idealized manner, as being free from commercialism and sensationalism; 3) that its depiction of the decline of the bourgeois public sphere is simplistic, because recipients of media products have never been passive consumers who are as easily manipulated by new media techniques as Habermas, clearly influenced by Horkheimer and Adorno, imagined (e.g., Calhoun 1992; Robbins 1993; Thompson 1995; Bergström, Ekström & Lundgren 2000; Roberts & Crossley 2004).

These are valid objections. Habermas' work has nevertheless remained central, and the present article suggests three empirical paths, originating from his theory, worth exploring in an attempt to deepen and extend our understanding of the past. The first concerns participatory features of historical media forms. The second considers the representative character of media institutions. And the third deals with media systems. While Swedish press history in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the period from which most of my examples derive, has its own unique features and chronology, the paths suggested can most likely be followed far beyond the borders of Sweden, in other media forms, and in others times.

## Participatory Media

According to Habermas, the public sphere was constituted by private persons who came together to discuss among themselves how civil society and the state should best be regulated. The periodical press did not constitute the public sphere. Individuals did. The public sphere was neither a medium nor an arena, neither newspapers and magazines nor salons and coffee houses. It consisted of communicating people.

This notion has been blurred in much of the historical research, and it has been common to view the newspaper press as perhaps not equivalent to the public sphere, but at least as its most important expression. In Swedish historiography, authoritative individuals, in the form of, e.g., self-confident liberal newspaper editors in the first half of the nineteenth century, have even been described as (more or less successful) interpreters or registers of the public sphere and their papers as (more or less accurate) mirrors or megaphones of public opinion (e.g., Nordmark 1989; Rosengren 1999). But how, more specifically, did the editors

manage to register public opinion? And where, more precisely, was this public opinion created (Habermas' whole point being that public opinion was crystallized *within* a critical discussion among individuals)? That is, if the editors did actually manage to register some *predominant* opinions (by opening their windows, by eavesdropping at coffee houses, or in some other way), how do we know that these opinions had been formed in a critical debate that was *in principle* open and unconstrained? Or, to put it differently: What is the actual relation between the texts in these newspapers and the individuals supposedly constituting the public sphere? Naturally, as long as that question remains unanswered, interesting things can be said about these newspapers and their editors; we should be careful, however, with any statements about their relation to a rational and critical Habermasian public sphere.

The periodical press was certainly, as Habermas argued, important to the public sphere: to start with, as an important source of information on which arguments and critiques could be based, and later on, as a medium through which individuals could express their views and opinions. But empirical anchorage is not the strength of *Structural Transformation*. Habermas was not particularly empirically generous with regard to how individuals actually expressed themselves via the periodicals.

I will only be slightly more generous in that respect and merely point out some remarkable features of Swedish press history (see Lundell 2002 for a comprehensive study). In the latter half of the eighteenth century, the ideal of a participatory press was established. Newspaper publishers started to consider it their duty to print letters to the paper, and readers began to identify a corresponding right to be published. Incorrectly, some individuals even believed that this was a legal right (Sylwan 1896: 108). It was commonly agreed that, in order to promote a better society, newspapers should *contain* a public discourse, not merely reflect one.

Three examples: In the 1760s, when one paper was beginning to show signs of decline, a subscriber appealed to his fellow citizens. "Whom shall I blame? Not the printer, for his task is to print, not to write. It must therefore be the learned and literary citizens of this city" (Quoted in Lundell 2002: 23). In a prospectus from 1793 for another paper, the ideal of the participatory press was articulated as follows:

One would see such a daily or weekly open the door, so to speak, to a constant conversation among the residents of the town, where everyone has the opportunity to enlighten, benefit from and amuse each other, and where the most prominent as well as the most common resident enjoys an equal right to raise his voice, for both the public and the private good. (Quoted in Mral 1998: 111.)

In the first issue of a third newspaper, launched in 1795, the paper's editor addressed his readers: "The beginning of a newspaper which reflects the values of our city and our community is hereby realized; it must depend, however, on the practitioners of Science, Literature and the Fine Arts to further my purpose!" (Quoted in Lundell 2002: 23). Naturally, this ideal was shaped by several factors

– cultural, economical and social – that cannot be elaborated on here. My point is that it was very frequently expressed. It is furthermore easy to show that it was put into practice; material submitted by subscribers comprised a substantial amount of newspaper content, ranging from hard facts about travel and comers to poetry and polemics. And it is even possible – based on signatures and subscription lists – to get a fairly good picture of the social status of the contributors (Lundell 2002).

In principle, the newspapers were explicitly open to everyone; in practice, however, high cultural and social barriers were erected around them, including of course gender qualifications. In the case of Sweden, this periodical press was borne primarily by the clergy and the nobility, i.e. the traditional elite of the old regime, demanding in the name of Enlightenment and anticipating (and later echoing) Immanuel Kant’s famous appeal (Kant 1784) that the true good citizen be actively involved in society. The view of the Enlightenment as a not too radical but politically moderate and elite phenomenon is fairly established today (e.g. Porter 2000; Knudsen 1986; Christensson 1996). Furthermore, an important parameter was the limitation of the medium itself, conditioned by its historically specific means of production and distribution. As few as three or four hundred copies could be considered successful circulation, often in towns with less than 10,000 inhabitants. The papers usually lacked competition on the local market and hence operated in relative solitude. And although newspapers had existed since the beginning of the seventeenth century, the papers referred to here were often understood as a new way of communicating, as a new medium. Their relatively conservative content and their socially and geographically limited scope, however, do not make the participatory features of this press less true, neither as an ideal nor as a practice.

So, was this the Habermasian public sphere? In the case of Sweden, the social structure of the actual public supporting this kind of press had little to do with a pushing bourgeoisie; its “decline” in the nineteenth century, on the other hand, can certainly be related to the rising middle class. And in any event, an analysis limited to newspapers is certainly not sufficient for making statements about a single, uniform public sphere. Habermas’ ideas still work as a heuristic framework for generating questions, and this kind of periodical press corresponds as well as anything to what I find to be most central in his theory, namely the participatory aspects. In a sense, it actually seems even more Habermasian than anything in *Structural Transformation*.

In the British context, the “humble” editor of the eighteenth century has been compared with the “authoritative public oracle” emerging in the next century, based on, e.g., the very first issue of the *London Daily Universal Register* (soon to be renamed the *Times*) in 1785, where one could read that a newspaper “ought to resemble an *Inn*, where the proprietor is *obliged* to give the use of his house to all travellers, who are ready to pay for it” (Liddle 1999: 5–6). In other words, this kind of media participation could be seen in London as well as in small provincial

towns in Sweden. Though hardly studied to date, the theme can most likely be found elsewhere as well.

And the observations *per se* are not new, at least not as far as Sweden is concerned. However, the participatory elements of the Enlightenment press have previously often been understood as something else. While everyone has agreed that its history stretches much farther back in time, *proper* newspapers, the story has usually gone, only came into existence in the nineteenth century. The preceding period has often literally been seen as *pre*-history and quite anachronistically defined in terms of its lack of features to come. Historians around 1900 sneered at the amateurish elements and poor quality of the eighteenth-century press. In 1927, a highly regarded history of Swedish literature informed the reader that the pages of *Dagligt Allehanda*, one of the most widely-circulated and long-lived Stockholm papers (founded in 1769), were filled by its own readers. “Thus,” the authors concluded, “*Dagligt Allehanda* was a very inferior newspaper” (Schück & Warburg 1927: 76). In a four-volume history of the Swedish press published at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the participatory qualities of the early nineteenth-century press are referred to in terms of editorial “cunning and tricks” (Torbacke 2000: 282).

Instead of being blinded by the rhetoric of novelty, changes in the media of our own digital age – blogs, podcasting, video sharing websites – should make us capable of seeing something quite different in history as well. We just have to start looking. Instead of speaking vaguely of a Habermasian public sphere that connotes openness, dialogue and civic engagement, we should try to study actual participation historically (cf. Ekström *et al.* 2010). And who knows where this could be found – in what times and places, in what media forms? This would truly deepen our understanding of past media relations, and it would challenge the widespread notion of the revolutionary nature of our time (e.g. Surowiecki 2004; Tapscott & Williams 2006; Keen 2007).

## **Representative Institutions and Individuals**

One answer to the question of why we became so blind, of how we managed to forget media participation in days gone by, is that modern media institutions have had no interest in letting us see or remember. The history of the newspaper press and its audiences has largely been constructed as part of the professional efforts of an emerging corps of journalists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This resulted in a narrative that ignores their older participatory precursors and emphasizes the non-participatory qualities of their own enterprise (Lundell 2010).

In the first half of the nineteenth century, a new type of editor began arguing for both a representative and leading role. This was motivated by the fact – as one very influential paper, *Argus*, put it in 1825 – that everyone, including the individuals who wrote letters to the papers, was driven by self-interest, even if it was

often “concealed even to the writers themselves.” The same paper wanted to abolish “the *extensive* and *uncontrolled* practice of printing letters to the paper” (Quoted in Lundell 2002: 125). The only individual actually capable of rising above self-interest was the independent editor, by virtue of his being a professional. The editor, and the editor only, could lead and educate public thinking *and* give the same public a voice. Thus, what happened was that an existing, participatory public was degraded to a passive audience that received the teachings of professional editors. The dramatic increases in the number of newspapers that found their way into the hands of the lower classes would not occur until half a century later, when the new roles were firmly established.

When it became apparent that this type of editor was fighting a winning battle, conservative representatives of the old Enlightenment ideal began insisting on the legal obligation of newspapers to make room for rebuttal. In 1849, the parliamentary ombudsman recommended that such a law be enacted, because it would not only curb abuse and defamation, he argued, but also strike at the core of the problem, *viz.* the lack of impartiality in the press and hence in the public debate (Theorell 1849). Liberals sometimes agreed that these ideas were seemly and just—while at the same time dismissing them as unrealizable. The modern infrastructure of communication was simply far too complex (Rydin 1859).

For the new editors, there were a number of discursive means (from silence to exaggeration) of attaining status and establishing the new ideals and practices in the public mind. For example, the word *correspondent* was recharged. In Swedish, it had primarily denoted a letter-writer (a layman), but in the 1830s, it quite rapidly came to mean news reporter (a professional), and soon it behoved every editor with self-respect to employ at least one or two of them. Quite a few new newspapers even added the word to their names. The more or less professional correspondent certainly existed. But in many cases, this was merely a case of giving an established practice a new name. In the public mind, however, the label stressed the difference between professional and layman, and hence strengthened the professional image of the paper (Lundell 2002: 235–236). As for the participatory element *per se*, there is no question that non-professionals were responsible for a considerable amount of newspaper content long into the nineteenth century, and much later (Johannesson 2001; cf. Griffen-Foley 2004).

On a general level, there was a rhetorical exaggeration of professionalism. For instance, in descriptive reports of newspaper offices, the huge buildings (baptized newspaper palaces) are bustling with people, the pace is frantic, and the rotary press adds to the industrial atmosphere. In reality, most of these late-nineteenth century papers had only a handful of employees, the offices were furnished with one or two desks, and the most important tools were a bottle of glue and a pair of scissors (Jarlbrink 2009).

It is not possible to draw a line between the conscious strategies and inherent logics of a profession gaining momentum. But around the year 1900 – when the

press, as far as Sweden is concerned, could be described as an institution and an industry, whose power and influence no one could seriously deny – organized and very conscious attempts were also made to promote the self-image (Lundell 2006). And this self-image was that of the professional, not of layman participation. The newspaper press now became occupied with far more than the mere production of papers. Several other media forms – from pins to statues, from stamps to movies, from posters to lavish history books – were enrolled (Hampton 2004; Jones 1996; Lundell 2008). These expressions should not be regarded as exceptions, or phenomena outside proper journalism. They should be considered obvious features of practising the profession, of attaining and maintaining the status of the institution. Besides these kinds of external, self-celebrating activities, more internal strategies developed, for example narrative techniques aimed at creating the *impression* of objectivity (Tuchman 1980), i.e. the impression of professionalism.

The success of a medium is always conditioned by blindness or inattention to its supporting protocols, i.e. the social and cultural norms and practices associated with the specific media technology (Gitelman 2006: 5–7). Today, the narrative of the professional press is part of a confirming tradition, “invented” in the nineteenth century. And this tradition is also maintained outside the press itself. Politicians, novelist, scholars and other intellectuals and artists have – for various economical, ideological and social reasons – joined in the chorus (Lundell 2008). On the other hand, the mass-media critical approach developed during the twentieth century, from (say) Karl Bücher and Walter Lippmann onwards, has generally been highly consistent with and confirmed the internal stories of professional media institutions. Bücher (1917: 257–258) described the press as developing from a news-based medium via an opinion-based one to being advertisement-based (a scheme that Habermas later adopted). In his own time, Bücher (1926: 31) saw newspapers as an industry that produced advertising space, which required at least some editorial material to sell. Lippmann (1922) viewed the press as a means for transmitting information from professionals to the mass public, and his main concern was with the standard and skills of those professionals, arguing for the importance of scholarly influence on the journalistic corps. These two narratives – the internal journalistic and the external (sometimes) critical – have been so predominant that the professional and basically non-participatory aspect of the press is seen as media specific, creating a blindness for any actual participatory elements.

According to Habermas, the public sphere was eventually “refeudalized”. In modern society, critical debate left room for theatrical practices. It has been argued, however, that direct comparisons between the kind of “representative publicness” that was typical in the Middle Ages and the mediated politics of today risk being superficial; the development of media has supplied new forms of political interaction (Thompson 1995: 75). On the other hand, this does not alter the

fact that there actually are representative elements in modern media institutions as well. Every institution, every power, is anxious about how it is viewed. This is true of the *New York Times* and BBC as well as of Routledge and Google. Any exercise of power actually *requires* a production of meaning that confirms and conveys the legitimacy of that power (e.g. Walzer 1967; Hunt 1986; Douglas 1987). This also applies to individuals. Every individual needs to present him-/herself, in the public particularly through a professional identity (e.g. Goffman 1956). Every individual – be he or she a small-town journalist, a famous novelist, an upcoming poet, an ageing actor, a wealthy publisher, a young blogger or a career-planning academic – needs to produce meaning in relation to his/her public function. We need not moralize on these conditions. Identifying self-images as such, and seeking to offer critical correctives, is therefore no less important.

## Media System

*Structural Transformation* can be described as a periodization of different media systems: the representative, the bourgeois and the refeudalized media system (Harvard & Lundell 2010). In Habermas' narrative, the bourgeois phase was dominated by one specific medium, *viz.* the periodical press; the preceding representative era was characterized by ceremonial practices; and the following refeudalized media system saw a wide range of new manipulative media techniques. In some important respects, this is consistent with later works on media systems. They have very often been occupied with establishing large-scale chronologies, and they have described the historical development as being characterized by ever-growing medial complexity and diversity. Furthermore, like Habermas' historiography, they are also often normative, pointing out the "best" media system, and they are as a rule limited to a rather narrow spectrum of media forms (e.g. Bastiansen 2008; Bastiansen & Dahl 2003; Turow 1992; Hallin & Mancini 2004; McChesney 1999).

Habermas' theory and description of the history of the public sphere could be enriched by other new perspectives used in recent historical media research. An approach that is more sensitive to history can draw from an expanding multidisciplinary field of research into the cultural history of media. Once again, changes in the media of our own time can open our eyes to neglected aspects of the past. To begin with, in recent decades, the very concept of media has been challenged in a new way, calling for a much more open definition than one that only includes the traditional mass media of the twentieth century (which has dominated if not theory construction in, at least the practice of media research) (Jülich, Lundell & Snickars 2008: 12–17). If a medium is defined as a technology for producing and transmitting messages, there is no reason why a wide range of historical artefacts, apparatuses and activities should not be included, from mechanical automats and zograscopes to exhibitions, museums and public festivals.

In line with the ideas of Raymond Williams, it could furthermore be argued that any given epoch has residual, dominant and emergent media (Williams 1977: 121–127). The relation between the past and present is always dynamic. And the relation between media forms at any given time, also in the past, can be analysed using concepts like convergence, intermediality and remediation (e.g. Bolter & Grusin 1999). All these relations can be said to constitute the media system of a given time and place. The hitherto predominant form of media historiography, which focuses on one medium at a time – book history, press history, film history etc., is becoming obsolete. And once again, these historiographies are partly the result of media institutions writing their own history. The dependence on and interplay with other media forms have hardly been in focus, because one aim has been to market a product, commercially and ideologically. One measure of the success of these internal historiographies is the institutionalization of some academic disciplines, for example media studies (centred on the press, radio and television – one at a time), film studies and comparative literature.

In *A Social History of the Media*, Asa Briggs and Peter Burke, in their critique of Elizabeth Eisenstein's work on *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979), stress the necessity of considering "the media as a whole, to view all the different media as interdependent, treating them as a package, a repertoire, a system, or what the French call a 'regime', whether authoritarian, democratic, bureaucratic or capitalist" (Briggs & Burke 2002: 22). And they continue:

To think in terms of a media system means emphasizing the division of labour between the different means of communication available in a given place and at a given time, without forgetting that old and new media can and do coexist and that different media may compete with or echo one another as well as complement one another. (Briggs & Burke 2002: 22–23.)

It is obvious that, in the past as well, content migrated from one medium to another, that changes in the form within one medium had effects on the content of other media, that new media changed the conditions for old media, that the economic base within one sector of the media system influenced the production within other sectors, that the terms of distribution of one medium acted on the consumption of other media.

This approach can partly be illustrated by two twin articles on the parliamentary reform in Sweden in 1865, written by Jonas Harvard and Madeleine Hurd, respectively (Harvard 2010; Hurd 2010). Harvard shows how a group of influential individuals carefully orchestrated a media campaign in order to create an opinion in favour of parliamentary reform. By activating newspaper editors and other influential citizens in more than one hundred places in the provinces, and by having these agents organize so-called reform meetings, a grass roots movement was established. Through the whole chain of media – from the letters of instruction, and the local meetings and the petitions, to the delegations calling on the King, the pamphlets, the parliamentary protocols and the increasingly frequent telegrams on these issues published in the papers – the impression of a uniform and nationwide

opinion was created. In Hurd's article, the very organizing function of the newspaper press is in focus. The relations between various medial expressions outside the press – like political meetings – and their equivalent genres within the press are analysed. There was a firmly established structure for how the ritual of a typical and successful political meeting should be carried out. The corresponding reports on the meeting in the papers incorporated the ritualized activities in a suitable text form, which at the same time arranged the activities into a uniform narrative on the meeting in question. Through this uniformity, the single report became only one part of a larger narrative, in which the press – by referring to all the activities outside itself – could claim to speak on behalf of the nation and its people.

To be sure, by focusing on a small range of high-culture periodicals, Habermas neglected other forms of printed material, but he did include – and this, I find, is another very important result of his study – the coffee houses, the literary salons, the political clubs and the parliament in a view of the media as a system (cf. Briggs & Burke 2002: 73). With a more generous media concept and with new analytical tools, we can deepen that understanding. Instead of adopting his scheme (which is based on not too solid empirical ground in England and France) and instead of looking at it from above, from the perspective of grand-scale chronologies, we should start from below, in specific places and situations. We should try to uncover concrete medial interchanges, connections and overlapping practices on the local level. Only then – and after a great deal of hard work – can overall patterns and casual relations be seriously discussed (cf. Harvard & Lundell 2010).

## **Conclusion**

The present article has argued for further historical investigation into three aspects of Habermas' theory of the public sphere. The first concerns actual media participation, the second the representative features of media institutions, and the third media systems. Naturally, these paths of investigation can, and should, be combined. The last example above – on the media system of the reform movement in Sweden in the 1860s – is also a clear case of both participation and representative strategies. Historical specificity is key. When we focus on concrete situations and places, the neat grand-scale chronologies fall short. There is no simple development from a "representative publicness" to a participatory public sphere and back again. The media have always been interconnected in a system-like way. Historical specificity does not exclude an interest in contemporary developments. On the contrary. Today, one discursive strategy for newspapers, printed or net-based, is obviously to create the impression of public participation, which on the other hand does not exclude the possibility that there actually is some real participation going on. If we are to gain any true and deep understanding of these contemporary phenomena, a historical perspective is necessary.

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