The field of political communication has always drawn upon and incorporated elements from different intellectual currents. In recent decades the concept of the public sphere has emerged as a focal point of theorizing, research, and reflection within a number of disciplines in the social sciences and humanities and in political communication. In fact, it could be argued that for political communication, the relevance of the public sphere as a particular concept and as a general perspective is particularly compelling, even if the notion of the public sphere brings with it a number of contested issues. The discussion here first looks at the basic elements of the concept of the public sphere as derived from the groundbreaking work of Jürgen Habermas. From there it suggests that the public sphere, as a concept to be used with political communication, can be seen as comprising three basic dimensions. The discussion then looks briefly at some of the issues and debates that have followed the evolution of this concept.

**The Public Sphere According to Habermas**

Increasingly, discussions about democracy and the media are framed within the concept of the public sphere. In schematic terms, a functioning public sphere is understood as a constellation of communicative spaces in society that permit the circulation of information, ideas, debates—ideally in an unfettered manner—and also the formation of political will, that is, public opinion. In the vision of the public sphere, these spaces, in which the mass media and now, more recently, the newer interactive media figure prominently, serve to permit the development and expression of political views among citizens. These spaces also facilitate communicative links between citizens and the power holders of society. While in the modern world the institutions of the media are the institutional core of the public sphere, we must recall that it is the face-to-face interaction, the ongoing talk among citizens, where the public sphere comes alive, so to speak, and where we find the actual bedrock of democracy.

While versions of the concept of the public sphere appear in the writings of a number of authors during the 20th century, such as Walter Lippmann, Hannah Arendt, and John Dewey, most people today associate the concept with Jürgen Habermas’s version that was first published in 1962. Though the full text was not translated into English until 1989, his concept had by the 1970s come to play an important role in the critical analysis of the media and democracy in the English-speaking world. Since the translation, both the use of the concept and critical interventions in relation to it have grown considerably. While Habermas has not attempted a full-scale reformulation of the public sphere, it is clear that his view of the concept is evolving as his work in other areas develops.

After an extensive historical overview, Habermas surmises that a public sphere began to emerge within the bourgeois classes of Western Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The institutional basis for this public sphere consisted of an array of milieu and media, such as clubs, salons, coffeehouses, newspapers, books, and pamphlets, all of which in various (though incomplete) ways manifested Enlightenment ideals of the human pursuit of knowledge and freedom. For Habermas, the key here was not only the institutional basis, but also the manner in which communication took place in this burgeoning public sphere. He saw that interaction in this social arena, however imperfectly, embodied the ideals of reason, that is, the Enlightenment goals of rational thinking, argument, and
In his notion of the public as a rational, dialogic process, Habermas’s account of communication and democracy bears similarities with that of John Dewey. We can note that Habermas’s work from the 1980s on communicative rationality further develops normative perspectives on how political communication should take place in order to enhance intersubjectivity and the democratic character of society.

Habermas sees the public sphere growing and deepening in the first few decades of the 19th century with the spread of mass literacy and the press, but then, gradually, the decay sets in. Journalism increasingly loses its claim to reason; public discourse degenerates into public relations. As the logic of commercialism increasingly shapes the operations of the media, the domain of rationality diminishes. Moving into the 20th century, Habermas observes with pessimism the trivialization of politics, not least in the electronic media, the industrialization of public opinion, and the transformation of publics from discursive to consuming collectivities. These and other ills serve to constrict society’s potential for democratic political communication.

Three Dimensions of the Public Sphere

The public sphere perspective on political communication, with its strong normative commitments and broad horizons, may seem removed from the empirical realities of political communication. While the strength of the perspective lies in its conceptual and theoretical dimensions, it also offers many entry points for empirical and critical analysis. To make the notion of the public sphere more accessible as an analytic tool for political communication research, it can be useful to conceptualize it as comprising three constitutive dimensions: the structural, the representational, and the interactional.

The **structural dimension** has to do with the formal institutional features of the public sphere. At bottom, the public sphere rests upon the idea of universality, the norm that it must be accessible to all citizens of society. If the media are a dominant feature of the public sphere, they must thus be technically, economically, culturally, and linguistically within reach of society’s members; any a priori exclusions of any segment of the population collides with democracy’s claim to universalism. Seen from this angle, the vision of a public sphere raises questions about media policy and economics, ownership and control, the role of market forces and regulation, issues of the privatization of information, procedures for licensing, rules for access, and so forth.

The **representational dimension** refers to the forms and contents of mass media output, as well as the attributes of “one-to-many” communication via the newer interactive media. Thus, the representational dimension includes all the traditional questions and criteria within political communication about media output—for example, fairness, accuracy, pluralism of views, sensationalism, infotainment, diversity of cultural expression. Yet, while the media are central to the public sphere, they also generate a semiotic milieu that far exceeds its boundaries. Most media output is not about political communication; it deals instead with entertainment, popular culture, sports, advertising, and so on. Thus, the mediated public sphere of political communication is competing for attention in a semiotic environment overwhelmingly oriented toward (ostensibly) nonpolitical matters.

The dimension of **interaction** reminds us that democracy resides, ultimately, with citizens who engage in talk with each other, whether face to face or via interactive technologies like the Internet and telephones. The public sphere as a process does not “end” with the publication of a newspaper or the transmission of a radio or TV program; these media phenomena are but one step in larger communication chains that include how the media output is received, made sense of, and used by
citizens in their interaction with each other. Moreover, civic interaction in the public sphere need not just be directly mobilized by the media; it can also rise through discussions that relate personal experience to societal horizons. Here it is useful to recall that Habermas, as well as other writers such as Dewey, argue that a "public" should be conceptualized as something other than just a media audience. A public, according to Habermas and Dewey, exists as discursive interactional processes; atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes, do not comprise a public. To point to the interaction among citizens is to take a step into the sociocultural contexts of everyday life. Interaction has its sites and spaces, its discursive practices, its contextual aspects; politics, in a sense, it emerges through talk. Thus, from a public sphere perspective, it can be argued that political communication extends deep into people's microworlds.

**Conceptual Issues and Debates**

Habermas's work on the public sphere had a major impact on thinking about media, publics, democracy, and the nature of political communication. Observers have noted that Habermas's historical account bears many of the markings of the original Frankfurt School of critical theory. There is also a decidedly nostalgic quality to the analysis, the sense that there once was an historical opening that then became closed off. Habermas certainly sees the limitations of this original bourgeois public sphere, not least in class terms; a counterpoint to Habermas's model even argued for a proletarian public sphere. Feminists have been quick to point out the gender limitations of the bourgeois public sphere—as well as in Habermas's own thinking. He has responded generously to his critics and made constructive use of their interventions.

There is ambiguity with the concept: it is not fully clear whether what Habermas describes is the empirical reality of an historical situation or whether he is fundamentally presenting a normative vision. Most readers conclude that it is both. He describes the structural mechanisms that erode the public sphere, yet at the same time he—and many of his readers—continue to be inspired by the vision of a robust public sphere serving a well-functioning democracy. Indeed, as the use of the concept spreads, the idea of the public sphere has tended to gravitate away from its Frankfurt School origins and to join mainstream discussions about media performance, journalistic quality, political communication, and the conditions of democracy. In practical terms, the normative horizons from the liberal or progressive traditions that promote “good journalism” or “information in the public interest” are not so different from ideals about the media inspired by the framework of the public sphere.

Another key theme of debate has centered on the tension between a unified, national public sphere versus a pluralistic or fragmented one. The argument that each nation state should strive for a large, encompassing public sphere is based in part on the criteria for governability—with too many forums and too many voices, democracy ends in an ineffective cacophony. This position also derives from concern that isolated islands of public discourse will become politically ineffective. This view of the public sphere—as providing a unified political culture—was used (albeit indirectly) in, for example, defining the mission of European public service broadcasting. Today, the importance of the public sphere concept is being reiterated in the context of the European Union; there is a need to achieve some such semblance of a transnational public sphere, as well as the profound difficulty in attaining anything other than a collection of national mediated spheres in which European Union matters are aired and discussed.

The arguments that see the public sphere in essentially plural terms base their claims in part on the

[https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/public_sphere](https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/public_sphere)
complex and heterogeneous sociocultural realities of late modern society, including its increasingly
globalized character. To even think of a unified communicative space for all citizens seems simply
sociologically out of touch with the real world. Habermas has moved in this direction in a more recent
reformulation of the concept. Further, it has also been argued that in a democracy, various groups,
movements, interests, and other collectivities need a semisheltered space to work out their own
positions, promote collective identity, and foster empowerment. Some argue for oppositional or
counter-public spheres. Obviously the heterogeneous quality of late modern life and its public cultures
raises problematic issues for democracy, and these become particularly compelling when refracted
through the prism of the public sphere.

One way to conceptualize the public sphere in the context of societal heterogeneity is to see it as
consisting of many communicative spaces structured in a tiered fashion. The major mass media of a
society can be seen as creating the dominant public sphere, while smaller media outlets, not least
those that exist on the Internet, can generate cluster of smaller spheres defined by interests, gender,
ethnicity, and so on. Smaller spheres “feed into” larger ones, ideally resulting in interfaces that allow
collective views to “travel” from the outer reaches toward the dominant center.

A further point of contestation has been the normative view of the kind of communication that should
take place in the public sphere. There is in the Habermasian tradition a strong leaning toward the
rational; communication is theorized in a rigorous manner that emphasizes formalized deliberation.
Among the common criticisms leveled against his approach is that he seemingly strives to reduce
political communication in a manner that excludes affective, rhetorical, symbolic, mythic, bodily,
humorou, and other dimensions. Furthermore, it could be argued that the criteria of traditional notions
of rational speech may exclude other, specific communicative registers prevalent among particular
groups, thereby undercutting their communicative legitimacy in the public sphere—a line of argument
that readily links up with the theme of a unified versus pluralistic public spheres.

Politics, the Public and the Private

Certainly one of the central quandaries of public sphere theory is that social and cultural evolution
continues to scramble the distinction between public and private. This is a development that is
abundantly visible in the late modern media milieu. The traditionalist stance is to define politics in a
narrow way, focusing on the formal political arena in the mainstream media. In the process it thereby
shuts its eyes, so to speak, to a lot of reality.

The concepts of public and private encompass an ensemble of notions that readily align themselves
into sets of polarities. The idea of “public” in traditions like the Habermasian is implacably associated
with reason, rationality, objectivity, argument, work, text, information, and knowledge. The private
resonates with the personal, with emotion, intimacy, subjectivity, aesthetics, style, image, and pleasure.
(There is a large literature on these themes as they pertain to the media.) In the media context, the
private is also closely related to consumption, entertainment, and popular culture.

At a fundamental level, what is at stake in the modern use of the public sphere perspective is the
question of where the political resides and how it is positioned against that which is deemed
nonpolitical. There has been a flood of discussion and debate around this issue. Depending on
circumstances, the seemingly private can often harbor the political, a point that has been forcefully
made not least by feminist political theorists like Lister and Meehan. Similarly, the potentially political
character of popular culture is often asserted, a view that has also entered into some corners of
political science. The possibilities for topics to become politicized are key elements of the open, democratic society. In the final instance, it can be said that politics has to do with decision making, but within the public sphere, the realm of the “politically relevant” is larger, always shifting—and can never be fully specified.

See also
Deliberation; Democracy Theories; Public Communication in Politics

Further Readings
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