on_education
Journal for Research and Debate

global public sphere or fragmentary, ever-diminishing publics?

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This article peruses the discourse concerning the European public sphere initiated by Habermas in the early 1960s and assessments of the arguments by a variety of commentators who have drawn attention to the globalisation of the public and its multiplicity. In this context I suggest that the notion of the public must be understood in relation to the concept of 'viral modernity' including viral and open media on the one hand, and technologies of post-truth on the other which systematically distort the messaging of the 'public' marring its future possibilities.

Keywords: global public media, global public sphere, Habermas, public sphere, viral modernity

Jürgen Habermas (1989) is well-known for his analysis of the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which became synonymous with the flourishing of democracy and liberal modernity. The book was first published in 1962 (1989 in English) and was Habermas's first major work. In feudal society "*publicness* (or *publicity*) *of representation* was not constituted as a social realm" (Habermas, 1989, p. 7), it was rather wedded to a status attribute. In the Renaissance, "the humanistically cultivated courtier replaced the Christian knight" (p. 9), representative publicness reduced the court and "'private' designated the exclusion from the sphere of the state apparatus" (p. 11) from the developing state between the 16th to 18th centuries. It was only with the growth of the bourgeoisie and the development of civil society that flourished on the basis of the early capitalist economy that conceptions of 'the good' and 'the public good' began to emerge: "Civil society came into existence as the corollary of a depersonalized state authority" (p. 19). Commodity markets, essentially private economic activity, had become relevant to the public in law and in policy, including taxes and duties. Crucially, there was an accompanying change in the growth and nature of the press where, in particular, "the scholars were to inform the public of useful truths" (p. 25). Habermas argues that the bourgeois public sphere was constituted when private individuals came together to debate the general rules governing commodity exchange and social labour: "The *publicum* developed into the public, the *subjectum* into the [reasoning] subject, the receiver of regulations from above into the ruling authorities' adversary" (p. 26).

In Habermas's hands democracy is theorized as an ideal speech community, after Wittgenstein's language-games, where inherent validity claims can be discursively redeemed and public discourse is deemed to be governed by the force of argumentation alone, that is, against all forms of coercion and force allowing public discourse ideally to be ruled by the better argument. This is a very persuasive philosophical notion because it represents an ideal rational public sphere, governed by pure public reason alone. It is also a discursive concept of the public that serves well as a rational model for public education based on the implicit ideals of public discourse including the ideal of a space where claims and counterclaims can be ethically resolved according to law and where

argument, evidence, and precedence counted in the courts and the newspapers. Public education historically is considered an essential institution of the public sphere. It was defined as a human right in the early declarations, partly as a result of Rousseau's influence. Everyone was deemed to possess the right to education, free and accessible to all, directed at "strengthening respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms", designed to "promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups", as well as "the maintenance of peace", as Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) puts it.*1* Public education constitutes one of the major institutions of democracy that theoretically protects and extends rights and freedoms to ever-expanding sets of rights extending to property holders, to men, women, children, indigenous peoples, animals, and the environment. Freedom of thought and expression are regarded as primary rights as "the free communication of ideas and of opinions" permits that "[a]ny citizen may therefore speak, write and publish freely, except what is tantamount to the abuse of this liberty in the cases determined by Law", as expressed in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789).

Certain propositions follow from Habermas's analysis: first, the notion of the public emerges historically in modern Europe which is associated with the growth of liberal jurisprudence and with constitutional rights developed by a range of philosophers including Locke, Rousseau, and Kant. Second, it is also associated with 'public intellectuals' whose role it is to protect freedom, as well as with notions of the 'public interest', the 'public good' (considered to be both non-excludable and non-rivalrous), and 'public opinion' – a 'weak' epistemological determination of public judgement. Third, the modern history of 'the public' is indissociably linked to the rise and complexity of public discourse, public education, the growth of science, and the proliferation of public media, all designed to educate citizens and to inform public debate. The meaning of 'the public' and what constitutes 'the public good' is an historical product. Public institutions and the laws governing them have also been subject to political capture. During the last fifty years, neoliberalism has been directed against 'big' governments wanting to downsize the public sector and privatize education. Arguments about the 'public-private' distinction and whether education should be regarded as a public good, as it was in the heyday of the welfare state, have been central to this policy debate.

Clearly, Habermas's conception was idealised, and his analysis is but a philosophical sketch of its evolution. The philosophical underpinnings of the ideal speech community strongly influenced by the latter Wittgenstein but also by ordinary language philosophy and especially speech act theory that emphasised the inherent social dimensions of language are meant to function as a regulative and critical ideal. The public sphere as the ideal speech community is the ground upon which the decision is made which individual's claims to truth could be tested, argued, and affirmed or rejected. The rules depend on every subject with speaking and acting competence to take part in public discourse, to make a claim, to question existing assertions, and to express their attitudes.

This idealised conception came under attack by those who pointed out that particular historical examples only existed through the systematic occlusion of others. Habermas (1983/1990) responded by jettisoning the ideal speech community to talk of 'discourse ethics' as a vehicle for the exploration of links between moral consciousness and communicative action. He thought that a new moral system could be derived from the rules of argumentation alone. His mature position led to the theory of communicative action where communicative rationality is seen as the rational potential built into everyday speech. As Bohman and Rehg (2014, n.p.) point out: "Habermas's theory of communicative action rests on the idea that social order ultimately depends on the capacity of actors to recognize the intersubjective validity of the different claims on which social cooperation

depends". Habermas's theory becomes the basis for his deliberative theory of democracy: "The challenge, then, is to show how an idealized model of practical discourse connects with real institutional contexts of decision-making" (Bohman & Rehg, 2014, n.p.). His discourse theory also has strong implications for international modes of deliberation, especially cosmopolitan political theory where the global political order is considered to be based on a democratic form of life and the ideology of human rights – a substantive conception of cosmopolitan democracy.

Habermas has brought us a long way and subsequently refined his own theses time and again. His efforts, as Calhoun (1992) points out, have helped us enormously to understand "the history, foundations and internal processes of public discourse" and "inform[ed] democratic theory […], self-reflection of literary and other cultural critics, […] new approaches in ethics and jurisprudence, and empirical studies in sociology, history and communications" (p. vii). The priority of education as the institution with a critical and transformative role in the provision of a critical literacy is often seen as necessary to create and protect the conditions and practices for intellectual freedom as the landscape of public media shifts. Education was constitutionally recognised in the early declarations as a fundamental right of all citizens.

Of all the work completed by feminists on the notion of the public sphere perhaps Nancy Fraser's (1990) 'Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy' was the most prominent. It was sympathetic to the tradition believing it to be 'indispensable' to critical social theory, and yet through its critique her hope is to extend the concept and develop it in ways that can theorize the limits of actually existing democracy that recognises the need for a post-bourgeois model of the public sphere after the failure of 'welfare state mass democracy'. Fraser contends that Habermas idealises the public sphere and fails "to examine other, nonliberal, non-bourgeois, competing public spheres" (p. 60–61). She investigates the historiography of counterpublics based on systematic exclusion and conflicts. In particular, she shows that the idealised model of bourgeois public sphere masked "a masculinist ideological notion that functioned to legitimate an emergent form of class rule" (p. 62).

Fraser asks whether under actual bourgeois masculinist ideology the public sphere functions as an "instrument of domination" or whether it can be altered and developed as a utopian ideal "to retain some emancipatory force" (p. 62). She concludes that it neither "undermines nor vindicates" the concept but does lead to the questioning of four main assumptions going to the heart of Habermas' conception. Societal equality is a necessary condition for political democracy; "the proliferation of a multiplicity of competing publics is not necessarily a step away from greater democracy"; that public discourse might also admit a discussion of private interests; and that a democratic public sphere does not require "a sharp separation between civil society and the state" (pp. 62–63). Fraser considers each of these in turn under the headings: "Open access, participatory parity, and social equality"; "Equality, diversity, and multiple publics"; "Public spheres, common concerns, and private interests", and "Strong publics, weak publics: On civil society and the state". Her argument against the four constitutive assumptions "undermines the bourgeois conception as a normative ideal" showing that the elimination of social inequality is a necessary requirement; that "a multiplicity of publics is preferable to a single public sphere"; that any conception of the public sphere would countenance "the inclusion of interests and issues that bourgeois masculinist ideology labels 'private' and treats as inadmissible"; "a defensible conception would allow both for strong publics and for weak publics" (p. 77). Her arguments are salutary and display ways of rethinking the notion of the public sphere.

In New Zealand (my home country), one of the first countries in the world to introduce a comprehensive welfare state, with compulsory, free and secular state education as one of its cornerstones, the welfare state worked to uphold male wage-earners as the head of the household, systematically favouring a white liberal masculine conception of education, while screening out the education for girls and Māori. The New Zealand welfare state model occluded and impaired interests of girls and women and Māori, both considered during the early postwar years as on the margins of a male labour market. Education purported to be based on the principle of universal equality but functioned to reproduce the existing dominance of white male institutions. Much of my research has been directed at responding to the crisis of the welfare state focused on the changes in political philosophy that occurred with the introduction of neoliberal policies after the oil shocks of the 1970s and the growing awareness of dependency culture. From constituting the social laboratory of the Western world in the 1930s in terms of social welfare provision, New Zealand became one of the prominent neoliberal experiments of the fully marketized society in the 1990s (Peters & Marshall, 1996; Peters, 2011). The privatisation of tertiary education and the deregulation of secondary education exemplified neoliberal responses to the so-called crisis of the welfare state. This crisis crudely drew up the lines of debate between the opposing ideologies and policy metaphors of individualism and community. On one side of the divide neoliberal values of market fundamentalism committed firmly to substituting the market and market mechanism for the state and on the other, social democracy, signaling the welfare state and the value of public participation in policy formulation and delivery. The neoliberal reforms beginning in the 1980s reduced the space for public discourse and the effective role of public education based on the argument that education was a private satisfaction rather than a public good (Peters, 2018). Beginning with the election of the Thatcher and Reagan governments in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the current era has been dominated by contemporary forms of neoliberal market fundamentalism, by globalisation as world economic integration and the ideology of 'free trade', and by an attack on 'big' government and social welfare.

I have argued that starting in the 1980s a distinctive strand of neoliberalism emerged as the dominant paradigm of public policy in the West. Based on the Chicago school citizens were redefined as individual consumers of newly competitive public services which commodified welfare rights. The public sector itself underwent considerable "downsizing" as governments pursued an agenda of commercialisation, corporatisation, and incremental privatisation of public services (Peters, 2012a, p. 135). The principles of 'new public management' that emulated private sector styles were delegated rather than genuinely devolved, while executive power became concentrated even more at the centre (Peters, 2012a, p. 135).

While New Zealand was the world's first country to introduce the right for women to vote in parliamentary elections in 1893, it took another 26 years to allow them to stand for parliament. Kate Sheppard led the suffrage campaign, and New Zealand has had several female prime ministers, including Jenny Shipley, Helen Clark, and Jacinda Ardern. Women in New Zealand still face gender-based violence, sexist policies, pay inequity, traditional ideas about gender roles, and barriers to participation in education and employment. While the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) under Article Three granted Māori "all the Rights and Privileges of British Subjects", in effect indigenous rights in New Zealand have been limited. The education system has been the contemporary expression of a "colonising" process which has encouraged Māori "to believe in a new order of things based on their participation in their own cultural oppression" (Smith, 1986, p. 3). The school system based on British models acted as an agent of assimilation functioning to reproduce *Pakeha* culture while systematically denigrating Māori culture (Walker, 1987). For over a century the

education system in New Zealand has favoured the development of Pakeha skills of reading and writing in the English language to the exclusion and detriment of Māori language and culture (Peters & Marshall, 1988). The institutions for public discourse were greatly limited for Māori, and the education system has failed generations of Māori children. It was not until 1987 that Māori became an official language. Public discourse is not 'public' if it forces everyone to adopt the language of the coloniser. It is often recounted that fluent native speakers were punished for speaking their mother tongue and for not speaking English.

James Tully (1995), the Canadian political philosopher, taking inspiration from Wittgenstein's language-game analysis, was one of the first to explore diversity in the context of the demand for constitutional recognition arguing that at the dawn of the 21st century we are entering an age of cultural diversity. Remarking on 'The Global Multiplicity of Public Spheres' and its possibilities for democratization, he writes: "One of the most spectacular events of our time is the emergence and proliferation of a multiplicity of public spheres and the correlative multiple uses or senses of the vocabulary of public spheres around the world" (Tully, 2012, p. 1). He observes the increasing complexity of global public spheres: "local, regional, national, transnational, global and local, official and un-official, publics and counter-publics, and Western and non-Western…institutional, networked and ad-hoc, face-to-face and mediated, secular, religious and mixed; and relatively powerful and powerless" (Tully, 1995, p. 2). They vary extremely in size, location, and in terms of public representation and performance. Some are old like various spiritual organisations, and some are historically unstable and rapidly changing like the huge growth of the rainbow coalition that represents the ecological movement. Using Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance', Tully indicates the way these publics overlap, and as 'negotiated practices' they elude a single set of essential characteristics.

More recently Fraser (2005) has again discussed the legitimacy and efficacy of public opinion on 'Transnationalizing the Public Sphere'. She argues that these two are essential elements to the concept of public discourse in democratic theory, yet at the same time they are not necessarily part of transnational public spheres especially when participants in these discursive arenas are not part of the same political community. Habermas's original concept embraced the main articles of faith of the Westphalian system: territoriality, citizens of a bounded political community, a national capitalist market economy legally constituted and regulated by a Westphalian state, modern media that constitute national press and national broadcasting, 'linguistic transparent' shared medium of public communication, and a public sphere that traces its origins to a national print-based culture that developed during the Enlightenment configuring a reading public and sensibility or subjectivity. Nancy Fraser also acknowledges her own "critique presupposed the national-territorial understanding of publicity" constituting the Westphalian model. Her argument sought to enhance the efficiency of public discourse within the Westphalian state, and it is clear that new developments of deliberative online forms of public communication, including "subaltern counterpublics", while originating in national media of the Westphalian state have turned into truly global constellations with increasingly other global platforms altogether outside the West (Fraser, 2005, n.p.). The burning question is whether social networks can sufficiently facilitate platforms for democratic debate or whether the internet fragments public communication to give way to viral and algorithmic distribution of anti-democratic sentiments at home and abroad, weakening traditional industrial media and channels for national media public discourse. Both, of course, are currently happening. Fraser (2005, n.p.) wants to provide the basis of critical theory in a post-Westphalian world where new transnational public powers are made accountable to the force and efficiency of "new democratic transnational circuits of public opinion".

I have argued for a view that crucially involves education and pedagogy both in its national and international contexts and that promotes critical media studies as a curriculum with the aim of examining the global media ecosystem and its representations, ideologies, and power relations that shape the possibilities for post national democratic networks. My approach is to adopt a broad historical epistemology in order to argue that the notion of the public must be understood in relation to the concept of 'viral modernity'. It should be characterized by both viral and open media, and technologies of post-truth that reveal the distortions of the 'public', and marred its future possibilities (Peters & Besley, 2020; Peters, 2022). The concept of 'viral modernity' is based upon the nature of viruses and the ancient and critical roles they play in evolution and culture. The aim is to understand their basic application to the evolution of information (and forms of bioinformation (Peters, 2012b) in the social world including the parallel relations and symmetries between epidemics and infodemics (conspiracies) on the one hand, and open global science and historically unprecedented sharing of scientific work on the other. 'New' genomic biology and information are the powerful forces that now drive cultural evolution. Their analysis is essential in understanding 'viral' technologies, codes and ecosystems of information and communication networks. It is important to understand the platformisation of emerging global media systems in relation to the possibilities of transnational public discourse which may enhance democracy or lead to fragmentary, ever-diminishing publics.

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Recommended Citation

Peters, M. A. (2022). Global public sphere or fragmentary, ever-diminishing publics? *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *5*(14). https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.14.6

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