

# Recension

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*Sonia Livingstone (ed.):*

**Audiences and Publics**

**When Cultural Engagement Matters for the Public Sphere**

*Bristol, UK, and Portland, OR: Intellect Books, 2005, 244 p.*

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What is the relationship between audiences and publics? As Sonia Livingstone implies in her introduction to this volume, there has been a tendency to regard them as opposites. She argues, however, that in the wake of the development of media technology publics are becoming increasingly mediated and audiences increasingly diffuse and diverse, no longer contained in the private sphere. It is this observation that, according to her, has prompted the writers of the volume to scrutinize what is taking place at the audience-public interface. As to this theme, however, the contributions to the volume make up a motley collection, because only a few of them are concerned properly with the audience-public relationship. In this review, I concentrate on them.

Of the two terms under scrutiny, the public is particularly ambiguous. In its most inclusive sense, it denotes a whole population; in its most narrow sense, again, a body of people discussing or tackling publicly some problem or issue. In this narrow sense, the public is often defined normatively: in order to qualify as a public people ought to discuss or act rationally and without passions, concentrate on politically significant issues and so on. The view of the public adopted in the volume corresponds more or less to this characterisation.

In her opening article, Sonia Livingstone contrasts two views of audiences and publics – one which opposes them and another which conflates them. For her, both are beset with problems. The view opposing audiences and publics is incapable of taking into account such new phenomena – exemplified by talk shows, internet chats, etc. – that resist traditional categorization “as matters of either audience or public” (p. 19). The view conflating audiences and publics does not make things better, because after all the activities of audi-

ences and publics are different. The solution suggested by Livingstone is to look at the new phenomena as an intermediate realm between audience and public – a realm of “civic culture” as she calls it. For her, this solution prevents the normative concept of the public sphere from encompassing all kinds of “public discourse and participation”, while recognizing the importance of the new ambiguous phenomena as “the heated conversation in a talk show” or “the incipient new social movements mobilizing online” (p. 32).

But why should one cling to a normative concept of the public sphere or the public? As to publics, what is decisive is the form of collective behaviour, in which people engage and which makes them a public in the first place. This also provides a criterion for distinguishing publics from audiences: while publics are actors, engaged in public debate and action, audiences are spectators, observing public debate and action or other things. In all its banality this observation informs us not to think of publics and audiences as fixed groupings but as something people compose when stepping into this or that mode of behaviour. These modes of behaviour are options between which people can fluidly move. As an audience they can draw on the media resources they put into use when acting as publics through the media itself or otherwise.

Defined in this way, the public may appear a catch-all concept. This does not do any harm, however, because one can make within it necessary distinctions. For example, publics fulfilling certain normative criteria may be distinguished from publics not fulfilling them. But is this extended concept of the public applicable to the new phenomena pointed out by Livingstone? Well, that depends. One should note that besides those modes of behaviour that give

rise to audiences and publics there are other modes that give rise to other collectives, such as communities or crowds. In order to get a more pertinent view of the new phenomena, therefore, one ought to pay due attention to the forms of collective behaviour in each different case. This is complicated by the fact that theoretical concepts like the public, the community and so on are ideal-typical, pure constructs while empirical collectives tend to be impure, shifting mixtures of characteristics indicating different theoretical constructs. All this shows that the new phenomena brought together under the concept of “civic culture” by Livingstone need sorely further analysis and specification.

When the defining characteristic of the public is the engagement in public debates and actions, an additional problem is what kind of utterances and acts qualify as contributions to public or civic activity. Dominique Mehl’s article provides certain points of view concerning this problem. In her analysis of television programmes, which invite ordinary people to recount or exhibit their personal life, she concludes that such an elevation of the private into the public sphere is transforming that sphere into one of (private) exhibition. In her view, this “has enormous consequences for the way the public debate is conducted” (p. 92). In the programmes, people do not debate using intellectual arguments but express feelings and disclose private, often unusual experiences without putting these experiences into wider contexts.

Mehl’s description of the manner people are interacting in such programmes sounds pertinent. On the other hand, does this manner really change the way the public debate is carried on? Insofar as the discussion moves on a personal level without transgressing the participants’ own life circles, it is not public discourse about some issue having a wider scope, but simply private conversation in public. Its mode of conduct has no inherent power to transform that of a proper public debate. What it can do, however, is to push the actual public debates to the margins of the public sphere. On the other hand, even if the discussion in programmes like those analysed by Mehl would predominantly move on a personal level, the participants may occasionally take up in their utterances more wide reaching points of view. Through such utterances they would contribute to some public discourse and join temporarily the public conducting it.

Yet if the discussion remains predominantly on a personal level, such occasional contributions to public discourses do not transform the discussing body of people itself into a public. But if people carrying

on a discussion publicly on television do not constitute a public, what do they compose? This can be answered only by analysing the mode of collective behaviour manifested by their interaction. As this interaction is, for Mehl, a compound of expressions of feelings, personal confessions and disclosures of private experiences and fortunes, the discussing bodies of people come near to what has been called an expressive crowd. One must keep in mind, however, that empirical collectives are theoretically impure and hard to locate unambiguously.

While the relationship between audiences and publics is quite problematic for Livingstone and Mehl, for Daniel Dayan it is more straightforward. In his article, he sees audiences as aggregates of individual spectators having no social bonds between them. A public, in contrast, is “a coherent entity whose nature is collective; an *ensemble*, characterised by shared sociability, shared identity and a sense of that identity” (p. 46). Publics are quite often constituted in response to some problem, which they attempt to solve. Regardless of the clear difference that Dayan makes between audiences and publics, he does not see them as fixed entities but as options between which people move. Members of an established public make up an audience when they pay attention to what the media tell about things important to them. On the other hand, there are many times when publics begin to sprout among the audiences when spectators react to grievances disclosed by the media.

What makes Dayan’s contribution particularly valuable is that he notices the existence of other kinds of collectives besides publics and compares publics with them. Yet this does not prevent him regarding publics as too coherent bodies of people – in fact, he draws them near to communities. Contrary to what he implies, people contributing to a public discourse or action do not necessarily share a homogenous identity. What, indeed, would a shared identity be, if people composing a public are in disagreement with each other – if, for example, the state of affairs that has aroused the debate is defined as a problem by some but as a non-problem by others and if those regarding it as a problem advocate very different solutions to it? This is the case more often than not. Neither are publics such stable formations as Dayan implies them to be, but their composition is continually shifting, because most people do not stay in them but come and go. If a public begins to stabilize, it loses its nature as a public and is transformed into a movement, a community or something else.

Kirsten Drotner analyses the relationship between audiences and publics from the point of view of the mobile media. Her main argument is that these new

media “challenge our received notions of what constitutes audiences and publics” (p. 201). She is, of course, right if she means by that, for example, that it is not the same thing to receive public messages from the radio or television than to read a private text message on one’s own mobile phone. The basic setting, however, has not changed: in both cases, you are at the receiving end of the communication chain. That you can reply and do this immediately in the latter case is no novelty either. The only novelty seems to be that you can receive messages and reply to them when you are moving in public places or elsewhere. This is a change, indeed, but hardly a revolutionary one.

As to publics, Drotner pays specific attention to the fact that mobile media “have eased the rapid mobilization of large-scale protests” (p. 200). A protest is, of course, a visible and momentous utterance in the public debate that the protested state of affairs has brought forth. Yet the easing of mobilization does not change the basic parameters of protesting. Drotner notes further that mobile media affect the mode of the (possible) public discussions conducted with their aid: it becomes very hard, if not impossible, to support one’s views with nuanced argumentation or to practise systematic deliberation. This means that mobile media are not – or at least not for the time being – very qualified for public discussions in the proper sense of the word. In what kind of conditions, then, would such a discussion be carried on through such awkward means? In the end, Drotner is driven to concede “that mobile media do not undermine or

abandon the formation of audiences and publics as we know them; but they serve to make these processes more complex” (p. 202). That may be quite true.

Because the rest of the volume’s articles do not concern properly the relationship between audiences and public, I skip them. What is worth of noting in this context, however, is the appendix of the volume. It contains a sketch of ways in which selected European languages manage the semantic field that is mastered in English with the terms “audience” and “public”. These languages are German, Danish, Greek, Slovenian and French. It is an astonishing thing to note that none of these languages contain an exact counterpart to the English binary division between audiences and publics. Moreover, even if all languages have words to capture the semantic field in question, the languages are still somewhat dissimilar with one another in this respect. The Finnish language, too, has been short of a binary division applicable to this semantic field, but recently there has been an attempt to make things better by inventing a specific term for “public”, which hitherto has been captured with the same word as “audience”. It remains to be seen whether or not this attempt is successful.

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