

## **Where is public space?**

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There is one concept that is both spatial, if only implicitly, and which seems to link together ‘the urban’ and ‘the media’ around a concern with politics. This is the concept of the public sphere. Accounts of the public sphere bear on democratic theory in a particular way: “Democratic theory focuses on accountability and responsiveness in the decision-making process; theories of the public sphere focus on the role of public communication in facilitating or hindering this process” (Ferree *et al* 2002, 289). The concept of public sphere has been important in both urban studies and human geography, and in media and communication studies and cultural studies, in reorienting the normative frameworks of research around issues of citizenship, democracy, and participation. It enables researchers to claim that the particular sorts of spaces they focus upon (urban spaces and scales; or communications networks and media spaces) are the paradigms of the public sphere.

Both these fields draw on their own, distinctive traditions of spatial theory (see Barnett 2004a). Urban theorists and human geographers, however, often ignore this, and admonish communication and media studies’ approach to theorising the public sphere a lack of attention to ‘real’, ‘material’ spaces (see Barnett 2004b). Urbanists tend to argue that the city is a privileged scene for modern public life: sometimes this argument is made with reference to arguments about urbanism as a space of encounter; more recently, rolling together the urban and the media, it is related to an argument about urban space becoming one huge screen-scape. Both arguments might have something in them, but neither is very convincing in making the case for the urban, on its own, being the privileged space in which the relationship between the public sphere and democracy is worked through in practice. There is no good reason to suppose that publicness, in these terms, inheres in any given spatial configuration (Barnett 2008). There is more than a hint of nostalgia in urbanists’ insistence that the urban is a privileged site of publicness, indicative of a hankering after a sense of the public as an embodied collective subject, and of a continuing difficulty when it comes to thinking about publicness in relation to absence, representation, and withdrawal. The self-consciously materialist insistence on grounding the public in urban spaces of co-presence stands in contrast to the implicit spatiality at work in Habermas’ (1989) original account of the public sphere, in which publics are formed through the circulation of communicative materials; an emphasis drawn out in his more recent insistence that the public sphere must be thought of in terms of ‘subjectless flows of communication’ (Habermas 1996). Habermas provides us with an image of the public sphere as a circulatory space of communication. We do not need to ‘ground’ this image in ‘real’ or ‘material’ spaces. Quite the contrary, this gesture detracts from the really important insight in Habermas’ work, which draws our attention to the degree to which a public sphere is all about the process of discoursing. But, in order to think about the spatialities of discoursing, we do need to suspend the presumption in Habermas’ original account that circulation is contained within circuits of face-to-face dialogue. It might be better thought of as a process of *scattering*, *dispersal*, and *dissemination*. We are likely to find much better understandings of the spatialities that matter, publicly and democratically, in the work of communication theorists or literary theorists. They help us to see that publics are not gathered or even assembled,

but are queer formations strung out in time (Warner 2002) and formed through processes of dissemination (Peters 1999). Or, to put it another way, the problem with metaphors like the public *sphere*, the public *realm*, public *domain*, or the public *sector* is not that these are spatial *metaphors*. It is that they are *spatial* metaphors.

The project of theorising ‘space’ and ‘spatiality’ has exhausted itself, always doomed as it seems to be to return to the same style of theorising by ontological assertion. Where does this leave us, in trying to think about the relationship between the urban and the media politically, with the help of the concept of the public sphere. Well, maybe we should just theorise more *ordinarily*, by listening to what concepts actually seem to mean in practice. If we take seriously the idea that the medium of publicness is discourse, then we should also take seriously the degree to which publicness is a process: it’s something people *do*, rather than a space they inhabit. I want to suggest that we subordinate the question of what sort of spaces are public spaces to the task of discerning the sorts of doings which are involved in public action. We might, for example, think of publicness as emerging through combinations of certain sorts of objects, subjects and mediums of action (Barnett 2008). Or we could get a little Wittgensteinian, and focus awhile on the differential grammar of public-talk: where *the public* can be a type of actor (the who of publicness); a temporal moment, a decision to *go public* (the when); a scene in which action takes place, as in *acting in public*; and an attribution given to some actions, as in *acting publicly*. It might be interesting to think in terms of acts of publicness, and then ask what sorts of spaces and times are enacted through these actions.

The advantage of this sort of approach to theorising publicness, in terms of thinking about the relationship between the urban and the media, is that it opens up various areas of investigation without overselling any single dimension as the singularly important essence of urban-media-politics interface. There are various spatialities that are enacted which throw into relief relationships between the urban, media, and politics. These might include the kind of spatiality implied by thinking in terms of backgrounds, infrastructures, and mediums of coordination. Another spatiality disclosed by thinking about the media as a space of politics is the space of domesticity. Modern communications constitute ‘private’ spaces as always already public, if not quite political, and herein lies an important reminder to urbanists not to suppose that the space of urban publicity is exemplified by those sociable spaces of the street, café, or mall at all.<sup>1</sup> Then there is the McLuhanite insight that new media don’t replace old media so much as embed themselves in them, and perhaps displace them into new locations. This draws into focus the extent to which the space-times of urban living are the parasitic conditions of possibility for new forms of communicative action, whether this is the automobilised time-spaces of talk-radio and pop music, the mass transit time-spaces of metropolitan newspapers, the domesticated time-spaces of the evening TV news, or the office and/or home-working time-spaces

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<sup>1</sup> The only reason that it could possibly still be interesting to spend time on the representational frames through which political issues are circulated is not, as is assumed by most extant cultural theory, because of some magical process of subject-formation pulled off by ‘the media’. The reason why it might still be interesting to spend time elaborating on the ways in which news discourse, for example, is anchored around certain sorts of topics of mundane urbanity (house prices, local travel information, local weather, local sport, sports news) and around certain sorts of figures (heroes and villains, personalities and talking-heads) is because it might help in understanding the distinctive phenomenologies of various media (after Paddy Scannell) or (after Stanley Cavell), their distinctive ontologies.

of internet media. Then there are the more obvious ways in which urban space functions as the dramaturgical stage for various forms of contemporary political mobilisation – the spatial site through which media attention is sustained and projected.

This is not meant to be an exhaustive list of the fields in which a relationship between the urban, media, and politics can be established by thinking in terms of the spatio-temporal enactment of publicity. It is just meant to illustrate that this relationship is best approached pragmatically, rather than supposing that one can come up with a singular understanding of the spatiality which can politically articulate the urban and the media.

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