

## [Sonia Livingstone](#)

# Introduction: audiences and publics : when cultural engagement matters for the public sphere

## Book section

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## Introduction

*Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, "Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?" And sometimes, "Do bats eat cats?" for, you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it.<sup>1</sup>*

Following Alice, this volume asks, when is an audience a public and when is a public an audience? Or, how does it come about and with what consequences that publics are mediated or that audiences participate as a public? The contributors to this volume have been intrigued to note how difficult it is to think about any dimension of social life - from the grand concerns of democracy and culture to the apparently mundane but equally consequential matters of ordinary beliefs, emotions and identity in everyday life - without reference to the notion of 'public'. Centuries of English-speakers have come to preface numerous concepts with the term 'public' - public participation, public sector, public opinion, public interest, even public convenience. The conceptual vocabulary of other languages is somewhat similar, although certainly not identical. If one reflects on the everyday uses of the term 'public', it is clear that despite the many dimensions of publicness, there are some crucial commonalities. 'Public' refers to a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest. It also implies a visible and open forum of some kind in which the population participates in order that such understandings, identities, values and interests are recognised or contested.

Our starting point is the contention that the understandings, values and identities of the public (or publics), together with the fora in which these are expressed, are increasingly mediated - technologically, materially, discursively. Moreover, the forms of mediation are themselves changing, with the public being mediated by ever more diversified, pervasive and subtle forms of mass and, recently, interactive communication. This ushers in not just a technological shift in communicative forms but also a social shift: the media are ever less sequestered to discrete domains (of leisure, of political news, etc.) but act to blur traditional boundaries between work and leisure, education and entertainment, domestic and civic, local and global.

We ask whether and how this mediation of publics matters by exploring the intersection between hitherto distinct fields - one concerning publics, the other concerning media audiences. These research questions have been stimulated by the empirical observation that publics are increasingly mediated, moving ever closer to audiences, while audiences are increasingly diffused and diverse, no

longer contained within the private sphere. As befits a volume in this series, emerging as it has done from the European Science Foundation's *Changing Media, Changing Europe* Programme, these changes are analysed by the contributors to this volume in relation to historically and culturally-specific shifts in turn-of-the-century Europe.

These changes include, first, the transformation of the long-standing alignment between public, audience and nation, disturbed by transnational flows of money, people, technology, information and culture. Within the European context, publics and audiences are conceptualised in relation to the mass-market diffusion of imported - typically American - media contents, these influencing policy initiatives to strengthen the European market. Central in cultural terms is the legacy of public service broadcasting (and its contemporary dilemmas), together with the traditional 'fourth estate' role of the press (and the variety of factors threatening this) - both theorised in relation to the public sphere. Meanwhile these debates occur in a context of technological and market innovation, the development of interactive or narrowcast rather than mass audience media technologies potentially undercutting or reorganising the collectivity inherent in conceptions of both audience and public. One must also note the broader shift from a focus on the individual nation towards an increasingly inclusive conception of a unified Europe, including the notion of the European or transnational public sphere.

Many of these changes are insightfully theorised in the conceptual terms of late modernity - individualisation, privatisation, commercialisation, globalisation. These then represent the themes that variously guide the chapters in this volume. The contributors have met on a series of occasions over the last five years to discuss the relations between audiences and publics.<sup>2</sup> The intention has not been to generate an agreed position so much as to engage in conceptual clarification in order to construct a framework which makes sense of a diversity of empirical phenomena - both those we ourselves are researching and others increasingly to be found in the literature. These empirical phenomena appear to be ambiguous, hybrid, confusing even, and often contested. Rather than treating them as messy objects to be tidied away into distinct categories (public, audience, mass, crowd, consumer, citizen, etc.), we chose to focus our meetings on bringing them to the fore, making them central rather than peripheral to our account of wider trends in the mediation of social relations and cultures.

As we hope is evident in the dialogue threaded through this volume, the contributors have sought to develop these conceptual debates by asking some *Alice in Wonderland* questions that move beyond asking whether public and audience are distinct or identical. These questions concern the boundaries or relations among concepts. They also concern the nature of the social phenomena referred to by these concepts - and their relation to others much debated in media and communications - the public sphere, civil culture, civil society, the personal and the

political. Since, unlike Alice, we think it matters which way around the questions are put, we have asked ourselves the following:

*When is an audience acting so as to participate in, or to constitute, a public?* This is to ask about the audience as a collectivity rather than an aggregate of individuals, and about an engagement with media texts that includes but goes beyond the moment of reception. For example, when a public service broadcaster addresses the nation, how does audience membership mediate public opinion and with what consequence? If teens discuss sexuality in chat-rooms, do they thereby create a public forum? If the talk show audience becomes so engaged with the issue that some of them write to their local politician, does this effect a shift from audience to public? Indeed, can the media bring new publics into being?

*When does it matter that a public is also an audience?* Given that the knowledge, interests and activities of publics are increasingly mediated, does their status as an audience alter their activities as a public? When and why do certain publics come to rely on the media to sustain their common understanding, interaction style and purpose? For example, if a pre-existing group moves its face-to-face discussions into an online forum, does this alter the nature of the discussion? At what point in the media coverage of a politician's speech is the occasion reduced to one of publicity? Will forming a minority radio station help a pre-existing immigrant group to mobilise?

We can ask these *Alice in Wonderland* questions also in the negative.

*When is an audience not a public?* An audience may not be a public because the media or the elites deny this possibility via strategies of gate-keeping or exclusion, whether for political or commercial reasons. Or, the media might attempt but fail to transform an audience into a public, as in various e-democracy initiatives. Or, audiences may not wish to become publics, satisfied to engage with the media purely for reasons of identity, pleasure, knowledge, lifestyle.

*When is a public not an audience?* As a complex range of media becomes ever more thoroughly embedded in all aspects of daily life, it is arguable that there are no unmediated moments or spaces or social relations, this forcing us to refer to the media in any discussion of the definition and activities of publics. But one might still wonder why some publics rely less on the media than others. Or, why face-to-face communication plays a greater or lesser role in different publics?

In the first chapter, I explore the relations between audiences and publics, noting that in some intellectual traditions these terms are mutually opposed, that some instead focus on phenomena situated on the borderline between audience and public, while in yet other traditions, audiences are subsumed within a broader conception of 'the public' or 'publics'. Following an analysis of the key words 'audience' and 'public' as these have been used within the field of media and

communications, this chapter argues for a recognition of the ways in which the activities of publics rest upon, indeed are sustained and resourced by, the activities of people in private. Hence the activities of publics cannot be divorced, analytically or empirically, from those of private individuals. And since these activities - which include thinking, feeling, talking, interacting, acting - occur in a thoroughly-mediated environment, they also cannot be divorced from the activities of people as audiences. The chapter concludes by reviewing recent research concerned to examine whether and when the media are used by audiences, conceived as 'citizen-viewers', to bridge the increasingly permeable boundary between the private domain and the civic or, arguably, the public sphere.

The semantic space of 'audiences' and 'publics' is widened in Daniel Dayan's chapter to include spectators, crowds, communities, activists, militants and witnesses, all terms which address, as he puts it, 'the focussing of collective attention'. He proposes that some publics are there for anyone to see. Their key features are visibility, dramaturgy and performance for they belong in a theatrical model of the public sphere. These are the 'publics' most often contrasted with audiences, for audiences he argues require professional mediation in order to become visible even to themselves and so to stake a claim to being a public. He further distinguishes 'meaning-making audiences', catalyzed into existence as an imagined community (a kind of public) by and through the process of viewing, from 'consumer audiences', for whom the collective fiction that characterises them has been imagined for them by others and which, therefore, draws no commitment from them though they may take pleasure in it. All, however, are collective formations that rely on processes of imagination for their very existence. Hence in different ways, the media are crucial to today's publics (and audiences) in inviting, shaping and managing the focusing of collective attention and, hence, the construction of the collective fictions through which publics come into being, perform and, eventually, die.

The chapters that follow bring into focus some of the ambiguous empirical phenomena situated variously on the borderline between audiences and publics, thereby opening up the particular and yet everyday ways in which publics are mediated and audiences become - or do not become - engaged in ways that matter in the public sphere. Dominique Mehl takes as her subject the widely discussed and apparently paradoxical situation in which people's most intimate, even taboo thoughts and feelings are publicised to the nation in the talk show studio, creating, as she puts it, a subjectivised, individualised 'public sphere of exhibition'. This new 'public/private space' is populated not by experts but by the figure of the witness; it is no longer centred on the process of deliberation so much as on that of display; the outcome is less the conclusion of an argument than an experiment in lifestyles. And yet, these programmes attract a particularly active audience - or, as she terms it (see the multi-lingual account of these keywords in the appendix to this volume), a particularly active public. The chapter concludes by seeking validation for the activities of this audience-as-public by broadening traditional conceptions of

citizenship so as to recognise the ways in which public discussion is routinely but crucially sustained by private experience.

If the talk show is traditionally denigrated as emblematic of the improper publicisation of private life (or, conversely, the privatisation of the public sphere), the news is traditionally valued as a primary, even the only, form through which the media address audiences as citizens rather than as consumers or private individuals. Daniel Dayan argued in his chapter that publics are defined in relation to an identifiable object of collective attention - an issue, a programme of action, a constituency. Mirca Madianou takes as her starting point that normative project which is the ultimate object of television news, namely the nation-state. Through detailed ethnographic work with audiences in Greece, she uncovers diverse ways in which members of both majority and minority groups (Greek, Greek Cypriot, Turkish-speaking) are positioned, and position themselves, in response to the public address of national and international news. She argues that engagement as a citizen includes emotional as well as cognitive participation in the mediation of public affairs and that, for some people, the media's invitation to participate instead results in a 'switching off' - an audience ceasing to be part of a public. This is explicable in part at least by a mismatch between the imagined citizen inscribed in the textual address and the actual, contextualised, ethnically-diverse citizens of the news audience.

Some audiences actively participate from the comfort of their living rooms, others display their domestic conflicts in the glare of the television studio, and yet others express their relation to the public sphere by switching off from its dominant media. However, a much longer tradition links audiences to publics through participation in live events as managed institutionally by theatres, concert halls, political meetings and so forth. The next two chapters draw on the tradition of research developed for mass-mediated audiences to re-examine these live, co-present audiences.

Ulrike Meinhof asks about the social and cultural competences required to perform in public, drawing on ethnographic work to inquire into the process whereby a public is initiated within the particular context of a distinctive yet also ambiguous phenomenon, namely the live performance of 'roots' or 'world' music in a Western cultural setting. Having followed a Malagasy artist and politician - itself a highly meaningful combination given our present project - across a range of European and African performance contexts, she reveals a series of steps by which an audience is reconfigured as a public. This is achieved through 'strategies of involvement', a carefully sequenced set of linguistic, emotional and performative moves by which the artist manages the 'collective attention' of the audience, inviting them not 'just' to participate as an audience but also initiating them in the steps required to transform themselves into a public.

A music festival such as that discussed by Ulrike Meinhof reveals the workings of popular culture and popular audiences, linking these to opportunities for the popular expression and mobilisation of civic concerns. Roberta Pearson and Máire Messenger Davies further unsettle the easy opposition between audiences (or masses) and publics (or citizens) by switching the focus to a high culture setting, that of the theatre. As they observe in their empirical work, the same people at one time participate in the often-denigrated audience for popular television shows such as *Star Trek* and, at another other time, participate in the often-admired audience for plays by literary figures such as J.B. Priestley. Indeed, both audiences and actors - one such actor providing an empirical focus for their research - routinely cross discursive boundaries of taste and value as they move in and out of different audiences in public and private settings. This has implications for a further arena in which relations between audiences and publics are debated, that of the policy and funding for public events. Roberta Pearson and Máire Messenger Davies draw on the concept of cultural citizenship to theorise cultural participation in relation to questions of access, rights, even heritage.

The last two chapters in this volume move away from the very public spaces of live events and turn to those most private of spaces - the child's bedroom, and the personalised space of mobile media - to examine how these too raise issues of public participation and the public sphere. In Chapter 7, my starting point is the persistent valorisation of the public over the private in many polar opposites. Yet empirical research with children and young people persistently reveals the value they place on the private - as secret, as beyond surveillance, as personalised, even a pleasure in branded and commercialised entertainment. In offering, then, a 'defence of privacy', I distinguish three underlying dimensions along which public/private matters are often discussed and, indeed, confused, in academic and policy circles as well as in ordinary discourse - public sector/commercial, connected/withdrawn, visible/hidden. Empirically, it is evident that these produce tensions in the everyday lives of children and their families as they come to terms with the new media in their homes and bedrooms. I suggest that each represents a Habermasian interpenetration of once-distinct social spheres, each with different pressures and challenges, raising crucial questions of interest or profit, of participation or retreat, and of governance and accountability or of invasions of privacy. It is concluded that the media, especially interactive, personalised media, contribute towards the blurring or renegotiation of several versions of the 'public'/'private' boundary which should be kept distinct if we are to recognise their various implications for agency, sociality and responsibility.

Kirsten Drotner pursues the challenge of understanding new forms of media in her chapter, for these are increasingly mobile media, media that create an individual and private experience within and across public spaces. Unlike the Walkman or Discman, however, the mobile phone not only separates but it also connects people, simultaneously withdrawing them from their immediate physical location in order to draw them into another set of connections, potentially just as 'public' as that

from which they have absented themselves. In reviewing the emerging empirical analyses of mobile phone use, she argues that as the spatial and temporal boundaries of sociality become increasingly permeable, communicative connectivity is becoming more important than that previous theme so stressed by ethnographic researchers of static media (television, personal computer) - communicative context. Some have argued that the notion of audience is inappropriate here - after all, there is no broadcaster as yet (though the nature of mobile communication is, of course, set to changes further) - but Kirsten Drotner argues, on the contrary, that mobile communicators are indeed audiences, if more flexible, adaptable, and performative than ever before. Are they, she then asks, also 'portable publics', or are the new opportunities for civic or democratic participation exaggerated? Ending with a challenge to media researchers to get mobile also, following their objects - audiences, publics, communities, activists - wherever they go, she reminds us that while new technologies pose some old and familiar questions for the field, they also prompt a fascinating agenda for further research.

Finally, we end by reflecting on a persistent and fascinating theme that has threaded through our work in preparing this volume, that of language and its relation to concepts. Having begun with the realisation that the relation between audiences and publics as we initially conceived it is in significant ways peculiar to the English language, we then asked ourselves not only about the terms for 'audiences' and 'publics' in other languages, but also about how these terms variously fit within a wider semantic field in each language (encompassing masses, crowds, communities, viewers, etc.). Importantly, this then led us to consider whether and how the English (or American) conceptions of audiences, media and publics have been translated, exported even, thereby influencing the academic discourse through which the mediation of publics is conceptualised in other languages and in intellectual traditions. Since this project threatened to take over our discussions entirely, requiring of us considerable linguistic and historical skills, we have restricted our ambitions here to an accounting for key terms and usages in several languages. Our aim is to alert the reader of media and communications research, especially those who read only in English, to the issue of translation, for this is by no means a mere practicality but rather a matter of some theoretical consequence.

Rather than presuming a consensual framework, the authors in the present volume have found it productive to position their work at the intersection of debates about audiences and debates about publics. Each is deeply concerned with questions of citizenship, power and the public, variously seeking out contemporary ramifications of such questions in the ambiguous and shifting ground of mediated culture, pursuing themes of identity, hybridity, cultural citizenship, borderlands and the everyday. Each develops a complementary dimension of the problem and some but not all of the contributors pursue the proposal that the civic mediates between public and private, or public and audience. In preparing this volume, we have found that the tension between these complex debates allows us to pursue a



series of research questions about the (plural) relations among publics and audiences that are pertinent to contemporary discussions of the changing media environment.

### Notes

1. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, by Lewis Carroll, first published in 1865 (various publishers since then). Quotation from Chapter 1, 'Down the Rabbit-Hole'.
2. The contributors would like to express their considerable gratitude to the European Science Foundation, through the auspices of its *Changing Media, Changing Europe* Programme, for making such meetings – and hence this volume – possible.