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**The elasticity of the public sphere: Expansion, contraction and 'other' media**

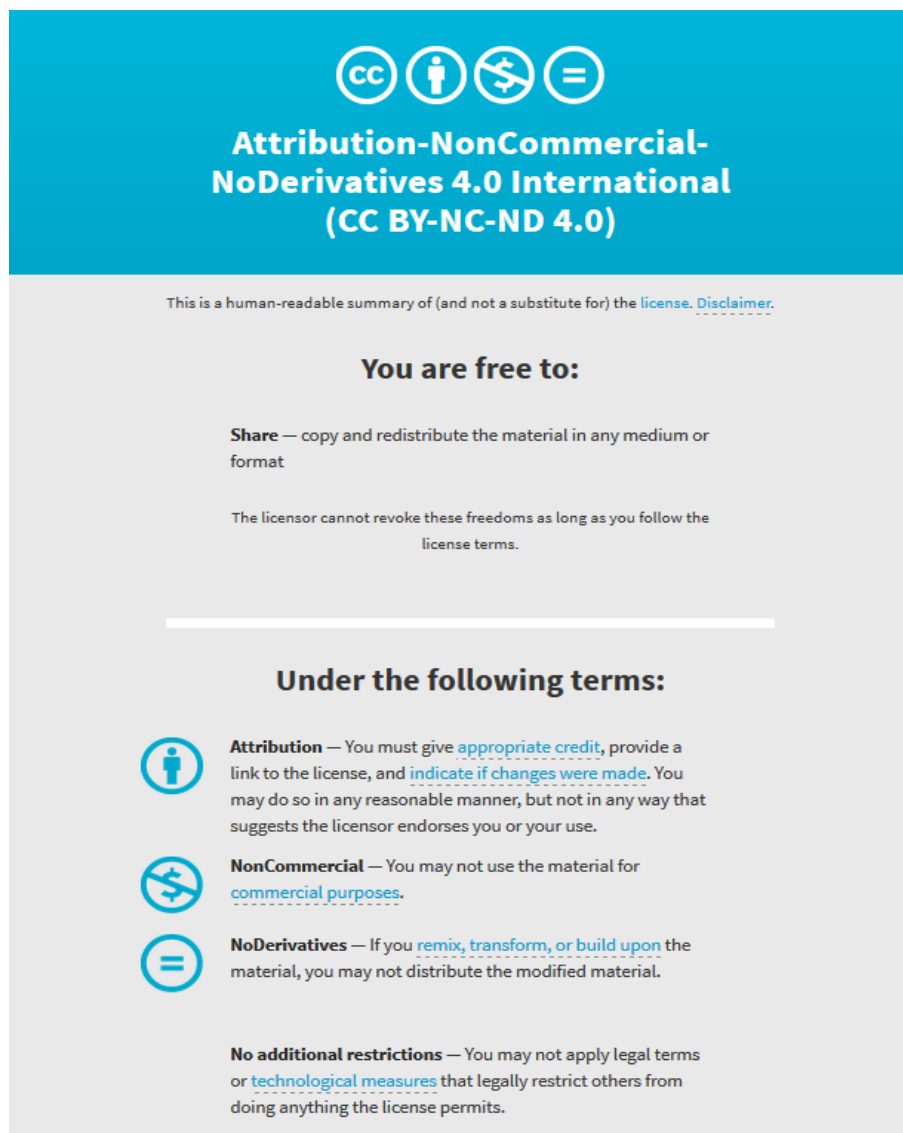
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# The elasticity of the public sphere: Expansion, contraction and 'other' media



*John Budarick*

## **Introduction**

This chapter traces the shifting conceptual contours and parameters of the public sphere as they relate to ethnic minority, transnational and diasporic media. Each of these forms of media challenges the equation of public with nation, and nation with state, and problematises the housing of effective public policy within a bordered nation-state. Drawing on historical, political and theoretical critiques of the bourgeois public sphere ideal, several authors have taken minority media as being central to an understanding of multiple publics competing for political legitimacy and influence in increasingly diverse societies (Fraser 1990; Eley 1990; Calhoun 1992). Transnational media have been implicated in a similar process, wherein the location of the public sphere has been stretched to incorporate transnational public spheres, and even a global public sphere. Here, transnational and diasporic media are thought to be the engines upon which the expression of transnational publicness can occur. In many ways,

then, this chapter engages with the question: 'What media provide what kind of public spheres?' (Butsch 2007, p. 3).

The public sphere as a critical theoretical model has undergone many changes since Habermas's original conception. Debates have raged over the idea's historical validity, its ability to incorporate differing sectors of complex modern societies into its discursive space, and its ability to capture globalising tendencies through which national borders are seemingly becoming more porous. What tends to remain central to discussions of the public sphere, however, is the centrality of questions over the communicative landscapes and structures within which deliberative debate can be said to take place. This chapter focuses on two developments in understandings of the public sphere, and the communicative landscapes so central to rational debate. The first concerns the fragmentation of the public sphere into smaller sphericules or spheres, coalescing with ideas of subnational publics and identity politics (Fraser 1990; Gitlin 1998; Cunningham 2001). The second concerns what Fraser calls the transnationalisation of the public sphere — that is, the way that, through increasingly prominent movements of people, goods and media across borders, the ideas of society, nation and community have been wrenched clear of their nation-state home (Cammaerts & van Audenhove 2005; Fraser 2014).

The aim of this chapter is to examine these reconceptualisations and to think about the place of ethnic, transnational and diasporic media in each. I seek to bring the public sphere into critical dialogue with different forms of non-'national' media. How well does the fracturing and contracting of the public sphere account for ethnic media, and are the communicative practices of minority ethnic groups best thought about through a model of multiple publics? What is the role of transnational and diasporic media in debates over the transnational public sphere, and can such a public space even be said to exist? It is hoped that by addressing such questions the chapter can contribute to an understanding of the role of a dynamic and changing media environment in the formation of publics and the facilitation of deliberative debate (Habermas 1989).

In the discussion to follow, I will argue two main points. First, in relation to the fracturing of the public sphere into counterpublics, subaltern publics and public sphericules, I will argue that debate has focused primarily on ethnic minority media for their role in self-representation and the provision of alternative discourses. This leaves unanswered the question of the relation between different publics and the ability of ethnic media to affect the practices and language of the dominant public sphere. Second, in regards to the transnationalisation of the public sphere, I will suggest that diasporic and transnational media, from satellite television to the internet, are taken as providing much of the framework upon which transnational publics can form and maintain themselves. However, the unifying potential of transnational media is often

prioritised to the neglect of divisions and exclusions that reflect earlier critiques of the original bourgeois public sphere.

### **The contraction of the public sphere: Spheres, sphericules and subaltern publics**

#### *Rethinking the public sphere*

It was not long after the English translation of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* that critiques of the public sphere model began to emerge in English academic writing (Habermas 1989). Many of these critiques were concerned with the nature of the 'public' itself; the realities of power over, and access to, the spaces of public deliberation; the specific forms of communication and debate prioritised by Habermas; and the very possibility of broad social consensus in societies experiencing increasing claims to cultural autonomy and political self-determination by different groups (Butsch 2007). One of the most notable critiques came from Nancy Fraser (1990, pp. 62-3), who took issue with Habermas's liberal bourgeois conception of *the* public sphere as a singular metaphorical space. Such an understanding, she argued, rests upon four assumptions:

1. that it is possible to ignore inequalities in a public sphere, and thus that inequality is 'not a necessary condition for political democracy'
2. that a single public sphere holds more democratic potential than a multiplicity of public spheres
3. that the public sphere debate should exclude private interests and issues
4. that the public sphere requires a distinction between civil society and the state.

Drawing on historical critiques, such as that of Geoff Eley (1990), Fraser (1990) argued that the male-dominated public sphere was constituted upon a particular mode of cultural behaviour and communication which privileged masculine norms of interaction and marginalised others based on gender, class and ethnicity. As such, *the* bourgeois public sphere came dangerously close to being a tool of gender- and class-based hegemony — a function of control that gives the illusion of consensus and inclusion but instead is based on the naturalisation of specific and contingent forms of social organisation and interaction. Eley (1990) argued that the liberal bourgeois model of the public sphere not only idealised a specific, gendered mode of social organisation and expression, but also ignored other forms of potential emancipation, rendering particular political and social movements as marginal to the bourgeois project.

The idea of a single public sphere also prioritised, in Habermas's original work, consensus and rationality over contestation and conflict. Fraser (1990) suggested that

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ignoring power inequalities fails to account for the diverse and sometimes conflicting social movements and groups in complex modern societies. A more useful approach would feature conflict and power as constitutional ingredients, and would thus legitimise social action that could be said to be antithetical to the rational, collective debate of the original public sphere — contest, disagreement and emotion (Butsch 2007). Such a reimagining also extends to the public/private dichotomy. In the original bourgeois public sphere, the very definition of what count as 'private' interests simply reaffirms the already established, white-male-dominated hierarchy of issues of social importance. The publication of issues which are deemed to be private, but which have important public consequences, would challenge such hierarchies and diversify and expand public discussion (Fraser 1990).

According to Eley (1990), it is misleading to talk of the fracturing of the public sphere as occurring in the late nineteenth century, as it was in fact never a unified and all-encompassing space for social debate. The public sphere was

the structured setting where cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics takes place, rather than ... the spontaneous and class-specific achievement of the bourgeoisie in some sufficient sense. (p. 11)

Habermas himself has acknowledged these critiques, and has re-evaluated the historical role of non-bourgeoisie cultures and movements, and the contemporary role of political mobilisation and its potential interjection of mass media cultures (Habermas 1992 in Downey & Fenton 2003). Recognition of multiple publics has thus been widespread since 1989, and these competing publics have been given various names: public sphericules, counterpublics, Indigenous public spheres. Fraser (1990) labelled them *subaltern counterpublics* to better articulate the contestation at the heart of public debate in unequal and diverse societies. The idea of subaltern counterpublics holds that marginalised groups in society have for a long time constructed their own, relatively independent publics within which they are able to speak their own language and, through deliberation, construct their own terms and articulate their own desires and needs. Fraser (1990, p. 71) gave the example of feminist publics which, through their own networks of education, public speeches and organisations, successfully argued for the inclusion of issues such as domestic violence as an important *public*, rather than *private*, issue to be debated in the wider public arena. Such an example demonstrates the potential of counterpublics to contribute to inclusive democratic decision making and to fundamentally affect public opinion.

Neither Eley nor Fraser discounts the existence of a wider, overarching public sphere in relation to which counterpublics operate and organise themselves. Fraser's (1990) example of a feminist public sphere, for example, would make little sense unless contextualised by a dominant, masculine public space and discourse organised through the exclusion of a variety of alternative modes of interaction and publicity.

Importantly, it is this overarching public that a subaltern feminist public sphere 'spoke' to, influenced and changed (Fraser 1990). In order to appreciate such processes, however, one must abandon the idea of a single public sphere, instead acknowledging the historical existence of publics outside of the dominant mainstream.

### *Ethnic media and multiple public spheres*

The public expression and organisation so central to the public sphere has naturally resulted in the conceptualisation of competing publics being tied to an increasingly fragmented media environment. Notions of counterpublics and public sphericules have found a home in areas of media studies which focus on minority, ethnic, Indigenous and alternative media (Butsch 2007; Cunningham 2001; Hartley & McKee 2000; Husband 1998, 2005; Sreberny 2005; Couldry & Dreher 2007). Behind such reconceptualisations lies an acknowledgement of the growth of grassroots, community and ethnic media; the exclusory nature of the early public service media charged with articulating the nation; and the rise of social movements around the world that challenge equations of 'society' with nation-state (Deuze 2006; Murdock 1992; Hallin 2008).

At a discursive and expressive level, then, minority media are seen to articulate identities and movements that cannot appropriately be cast as part of a single, all-encompassing public (Cammaerts & van Audenhove 2005). These media provide a platform through which counterpublics can form and develop and disseminate alternative discourses (Browne 2005; Cunningham 2001; Hartley & McKee 2000). Those traditionally marginalised from the dominant public sphere, and indeed its representative media system, can use these media to control the particular cultural tone of their discussions and interactions, rather than trying to be heard in a dominant public sphere that, by its very nature, requires them to adopt the language and values of the dominant public. Thus, as Cunningham (2001, p. 133) suggests in arguing for diasporic popular media as facilitating public sphericules, '[t]here are now several claims for such public sphericules. One can speak of a feminist public sphere and international public sphericules constituted around environmental or human rights issues'.

Attitudes to such fracturing vary. Authors such as Todd Gitlin (1998) seem more pessimistic, suggesting that the effectiveness of a fractured public sphere rests on assumptions of equality and the subsumption of deep social fractures that preclude collective deliberation. For others, public sphericules and subaltern publics hold the potential for a more balanced society — one based not on unattainable consensus, but rather on the recognition of contestation and inequality in a political and social environment defined by a diversity of interests and voices (Fraser 1990).

### *Satellite publics or public interaction*

At the broader political level of the public sphere, in terms of its idealisation as a model for liberal democratic politics, there is still a need for consideration of how competing publics form part of a political consensus that allows for the effective functioning of day-to-day life in complex societies. How do these discursively distinct publics encounter each other, and the dominant modes of political action in Western societies? In other words, beyond the realities of multiple representative spaces, the question 'of the relation among them' remains (Butsch 2007, p. 5). Once again, this is a question that Habermas himself has considered, and it has been the focus of significant work in media studies (Downey & Fenton 2003; Husband 1998, 2005; Dahlgren 2000). However, to a large degree a focus on discourse and representation has meant that the role of media in discussions of public spheres is yet to expand sufficiently to a consideration of how and where these processes turn into political action, and in what ways public spheres become more than a series of 'independent and parallel' publics (Husband 1998, p. 143). While Habermas was concerned with the potential of mass media as facilitators of the opening-up of the public sphere to marginalised publics, particularly during times of crisis when the dominant public sphere was vulnerable to counterdiscourses, others have looked to alternative media.

In thinking about this through ethnic media, one can take some of Fraser's (1990) contributions as a useful starting point. She suggested that it is indeed the public nature of counterpublics that guards against separatism, or the political ineffectualness at issue here: 'After all, to interact discursively as a member of a public — subaltern or otherwise — is to disseminate one's discourse into ever widening arenas' (p. 67). Fraser holds out hope for cross-cultural communication amongst publics structured within an egalitarian, multicultural society. The existence of multiple publics in multicultural societies need not 'preclude the possibility of an additional, more comprehensive arena in which members of different, more limited publics talk across lines of cultural diversity' (p. 69). Her example of the feminist public sphere makes clear the potential for counterdiscourses to seep through to the wider society, reflecting the reality of complex social systems in which different publics and the individuals within them overlap and intermingle. Issues of concern to minorities previously neglected in mainstream media have been thrust into public and even political debates in Australia, Europe and North America through the actions of minority publics and the media at their disposal (Hartley & McKee 2000).

However, beyond the discursive range of possibilities, others have looked at the structural conditions necessary to ensure sustained cross-public dialogue and the political efficacy of minority public spheres (Husband 1998, 2005). If ethnic media are able to publicise formerly neglected issues, questions still remain as to the degree to which minority publics can turn from 'weak publics' to 'strong publics' (Fraser 1990, p. 75).

Are ethnic media able to provide the conduit through which minority publics can directly influence wider public opinion formation and the resultant policy decisions on a consistent basis? What are the structural conditions necessary for such a process to take place in a sustained way, and for changes in public discussions to be met with changes in public policy?

These questions have been addressed by Charles Husband (1998, 2005), through an attempt to recognise the realities of the power of dominant ethnic majorities whilst sufficiently acknowledging inequality and diversity amongst publics. Husband's notion of the multi-ethnic public sphere seeks to recapture a commonly shared public space in order to avoid the political ineffectualness that multiple public spheres can bring. A series of separate public spheres, it is argued, will do little to promote inclusive democracy (Husband 1998, 2005; Couldry & Dreher 2007). The publication of alternative and subaltern ideas is one thing, but there must be mechanisms in place to ensure that those ideas are heard, understood and acknowledged. The basis of publicness, in and of itself, is no guarantee that counterdiscourses will have a sustained affect on majority public opinion and policy.

Husband thus bases the multi-ethnic public sphere on two premises that go to the heart of citizenship and communication: *differentiated citizenship* and *the right to be understood*. The principle of differentiated citizenship acts as a safeguard against more 'formulaic' interpretations of multiculturalism and universal citizenship, wherein the limits of diversity are set by dominant groups who define what it is to be acceptably different (Husband 1998, p. 140). It is a counter to the safe and superficial multiculturalism lamented by Zygmunt Bauman (2011), where diversity masks inequality through a series of cultural expressions that have little recourse to actual political action. Differentiated citizenship is therefore based at the level of social structure, and involves institutional, financial and legal assurances for the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, including support for ethnic and religious practices and the presence of minority groups within the 'central institutions of the larger state' (Husband 1998, p. 14). Importantly, the market is unable to guarantee support for these rights and protections, which instead require the intervention of the state in the form of 'provision for media regulation and funding to address the specific needs of minority ethnic groups' (p. 141).

The right to be understood is directly related to the need for the discursive expression of subaltern publics to be heard, recognised and acknowledged. It reflects aspects of an ideal speech situation and emphasises the commitment to 'seek comprehension of the other' and to recognise the legitimacy and value of the voices of other communities (Husband 1998, p. 139). The importance of this notion is articulated by Dreher (2010, p. 98), who has argued for the importance of 'questions of "listening" as well as "speaking"' when it comes to mediated interactions between minority and



majority public spheres. This right to be understood can be seen as a safeguard against a monological media system that discourages debate and dialogue and systematically silences or misrepresents minority voices (Husband 1998; Jakubowicz et al. 1994).

At the systemic level, then, the multi-ethnic public sphere as an ideal goes some way to highlighting the limits of the current role of ethnic minority media in conceptualisations of multiple public spheres. Without some form of institutionalised avenues for cross-cultural dialogue, the role of ethnic media is unlikely to expand beyond the articulation of discursive subaltern publics, contributing to an image of cultural diversity with little political substance, sans some select public issues that gain prominence amongst the majority public sphere. As Husband has suggested,

[c]onsequently a balanced multi-ethnic public sphere must also possess well-developed media systems which are capable of *sustaining* ethnically diverse agendas and which *promote dialogue across ethnic boundaries*. The multi-ethnic public sphere must articulate the differing interests of national minorities and minority ethnic groups ... (1998, p. 143, emphases added)

In Australia, both the community and, by extension, ethnic minority broadcasting sectors have had to fiercely defend their small slice of funding in an increasingly market-oriented media system. Although state intervention is antithetical to the original public sphere, it is necessitated by the rise of multinational media corporations with a monopoly on the media environment (Fraser 1990). At the same time, the limits of a publicly funded system can be seen in the historical analysis of Graham Murdock (1992), who points to the largely paternalistic and exclusory nature of the early BBC's broadcasting charter under Lord Reith. Such critiques have been echoed in analyses of Australia's multicultural broadcaster, SBS (Roose & Akbarzadeh 2013). Thus, as Graham Murdock (1992, p. 18) suggested almost a quarter of a century ago,

[t]he crucial choice is not, as so many commentators suppose, between state licensing and control on one side and minimally regulated market mechanisms on the other. It is between policies designed to reinvigorate public communications systems which are relatively independent of both the state and the market, and policies which aim to marginalise or eradicate them.

The role of ethnic media in contributing to cross-public dialogue and political efficacy for marginalised public spheres is also limited by institutionalised communicative norms and standards in several Western countries. The dominant public discourse around communicative ethics, for example, has as its basis individual rights to speech and expression, with scant attention paid to the obligation to listen and comprehend (Husband 1998). The Western ideal of professionalism, particularly when it comes to journalism (Waisbord 2013), also limits the extent to which ethnic minority media are able to cross into the mainstream without abandoning their representative status vis-à-vis the minority community (Husband 2005; Sreberny 2005). Journalistic ideals of objectivity and impartiality are often applied pejoratively

to ethnic minority journalists, who are expected to abandon their community aims if they desire acceptance into mainstream media institutions. As Husband (2005, p. 468) suggests, '[t]he moral concerns of identity politics with cultural viability and survival do not sit comfortably with the economic logic of media production and distribution'.

While these issues do not necessarily reduce the power of ethnic media in giving voice to minority ethnic public spheres, they certainly raise questions as to how to best think about the relationship between subaltern and dominant publics. As Couldry and Dreher (2007) suggest, it is perhaps more fruitful to approach the media of ethnic minorities as bridging systems, neither forming separate counterpublics nor being subsumed into the dominant public spheres. Their analysis of the Forum for Australia's Islamic Relations [FAIR] in Sydney suggests that this organisation sits outside of the mainstream public sphere, and yet is not completely separate from it, engaging as it does in a series of attempts to provide 'deliberation and activism that seeks to reform the mainstream public sphere, but from a position at present outside it' (p. 82).

Such an approach has several advantages. It captures the practices undertaken by ethnic media producers in order to reach beyond their own communities and have an impact on wider social discourses — practices that are present amongst media producers in Australia (Budarick & Han 2015). It also acknowledges the inevitable rigidity of any approach that neatly divides complex social actors into separate publics, and it recognises the potentially fluid nature of both marginal and dominant public spheres. Perhaps most importantly, this approach draws more attention to the nature of bridging. How is it that certain ethnic minority organisations are able to more or less effectively perform this function? What are the structural conditions necessary for such a role to be played in a sustainable manner? Answering these questions would go a long way to both clarifying and deepening our understanding of the relationship between ethnic media, public spheres and public opinion.

### **A transnational public sphere**

The shifting contours of the public sphere have also expanded beyond the nation-state to incorporate transnational and even global public spheres. It is again useful to draw on Fraser (2014) as a starting point. Writing in the context of a recent explosion of literature on transnational communities, diasporas and media, Fraser points to the emergence of writing suggesting that the public sphere, once bound to the nation-state, has been expanded to account for transnational communities and movements. There is a rich history of work upon which such a changing view of the public sphere is able to draw. Studies of diasporas and transnationalism have challenged the equation of community and society with the Westphalian nation-state, demonstrating instead the existence of transnational communities held together over time and space by a series of processes, beliefs and organisations (Vertovec 2009).

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Depending on which literature one reads, these processes and structures include the formation and maintenance of a shared history, destiny and collective identity by dispersed groups, supported by primordial claims to belonging, as when a transnational group sustains a collective identity through an adherence to a lost homeland they hope to one day reclaim (Safran 1991). They include transnational social and political movements and organisations that centralise dispersed communities, giving some of them more or less stable political formations and representative bodies to whom to turn for the reification of a recognised political identity. Then there is the role played by physical travel and interaction, with the material exchange of people, products and money across borders reaffirming a specific, transnational cultural identity (Vertovec 2009).

Underpinning much of this, however, are transnational communications networks — satellite television, digital communications technologies, telecommunications — which have the ability to transcend time and space and overcome the specificities of dispersed people living in different sociopolitical spaces. For example, in Steven Vertovec's (2009) detailed review of transnationalism, media and communications networks are a constant presence. In discussions of 'What's new?' about current trends in transnationalisation, modern media technologies — from satellite to Skype — offer a point of distinction from older forms of transnationalism, increasing the speed, intensity and sustainability of transnational processes. Such is the power of disembedded and re-embedded symbols and narratives, and the synchronicity afforded by media that can connect geographically dispersed migrants into a transnationally connected community. When discussing transnationalism as a site of political engagement, a definition that brings it directly into line with discussions of the public sphere, Vertovec (p. 9) has suggested that 'such a transnational framework — a global public space or forum — has been actualized largely through technology'.

Media and communication are also central to recent definitions of diasporas, themselves considered by some to be 'the exemplary communities of the transnational moment' (Tololyan 1991, p. 5). Floya Anthias (1998) has helpfully engaged with the changing understandings of diasporas, including their constitutive elements. She outlines a shift away from *descriptive typological* approaches that sought to define diaspora based on a set of criteria, most famously provided by William Safran in 1991, and based heavily on the classical Greek definition of diaspora as (forced) dispersal from the homeland with a longing and commitment to one day return. The homeland itself was central to such definitions, and the diasporic group was often seen as a unified ethnic community with primordial ties to a collectively recognisable home (Anthias 1998). Critics argued that such rigid definitions were unable to appreciate the diversity within and between diasporas, and solidified what were in fact changing, hybrid and imagined communities into monolithic ethnic groups.

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Understandings of diaspora as a *social condition* focus less on testable definitions based on origin and the nature of dispersal, and instead focus on diaspora as being formulated and sustained through a transnational imagination that encompasses multiple transnational linkages, identities and communicative practices. The approach captures the changing understandings of diaspora that emerged largely from work in cultural studies and the influence of postmodern social theory. Identity was detached from ethnicity, and the homeland was no longer seen as a stable point of collective nostalgia, but rather as something imagined differently by different diasporic agents (Budarick 2014). What emerged was an 'understanding of diaspora that makes central culture — its formation, transformation, multiplicity, and complexity — rather than place' (Field & Kapadia 2011, p. xiii). Werbner (2002, p. 2) thus defined diasporas as 'deterritorialised imagined communities which conceive of themselves ... as sharing a collective past and common destiny ... existing beyond the nation state with its fixed boundaries'. Diaspora thus shifted from a categorical descriptor applied to certain populations, to a fluid, multifarious way of being, formed through imagination, connection and identity.

Like transnationalism, ideas of connectivity and communication are central to understandings of diaspora as a social condition. Cross-border media facilitate the transnational imagined community of diaspora (Karim 2003). These media overcome the tyranny of time and distance and construct an overarching 'space' in which diasporas can imagine themselves as part of an evolving and changing community. Transnational community is facilitated, then, through a mediated process of 'suppressing or neutralising internal differences, of establishing the context in which common experiences can be developed and past experiences can be interpreted in similar ways' (Sofos 1996 in Tsagarousianou 2004, p. 60).

Understanding the role of media in discussions of transnationalism and diaspora is an important foundation for identifying some of the pressing questions in considerations of a transnational public sphere, particularly as those questions relate to media. As the above discussion attests to, transnational communities are thought to be built, to a large degree, on the framework of transnational communications networks. However, the question remains as to what extent transnational media — satellite television, digital communication, telecommunications and the physical trade in older analogue forms — can be considered to be sustaining a transnational community or public. Furthermore, at what moments can people be said to belong to such a public, or to feel themselves as part of a transnational public?

### *The formation of publics*

As with the formation of so-called transnational communities, the formation of a transnational public requires sustained political debate across borders and a common

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consensus over issues of public importance across different sociopolitical landscapes (Vertovec 2009; Cammaerts & van Audenhove 2005). In other words, people must share some idea as to what the political and social events that affect them are, despite living in potentially diverse social and political environments. And they must share an open and accessible forum through which to debate such issues using a shared language and non-exclusive cultural modes of interaction (Crack 2008; Fraser 2014).

In regards to the first issue, there is ample evidence to suggest that transnational media, in their old and new forms, struggle to provide a framework through which experiences of commonly held concerns and issues can be sustained. Rather, these media are part of a process in which watching satellite television or accessing digital technology facilitate and challenge allegiances, identities and belongings that are fluid and malleable (Budarick 2013). In some cases, this malleability leads to the exacerbation of differences in political, social and cultural experiences. Aksoy and Robins (2000, 2003; Robins & Aksoy 2001, 2004), for instance, question the assumption that transnational and diasporic media provide a sense of synchronicity to dispersed groups. In a study of Turks in Europe, they find that the use of transnational media can result in reminders of difference based on the local context of reception (2000). They describe the problem as one of a continuing fixity on the imagined community, even in its transnational forms:

The analysis of transnational media remains grounded in the conventional idea of community bonding and the sharing of a common culture. For, in the end, in spite of all the evocations of the possibilities inherent in global flows and mobilities, there seems to be a basic inability to move on from the core ideas and concepts of the national imagination. In the discussion of transnational futures, the fundamental reference point continues to be the stubborn and insistent idea of 'imagined community'. (Robins & Aksoy 2004, p. 183)

Transnational media do not necessarily provide a resource for a transnational public of interest, one in which there is at least a basic level of acceptance that members are each affected by similar social and political issues. Further, they are seldom used in isolation, free from the pulls of localised media directing the attention of even the most transnational social agent to their local environment and to issues not shared with others in the supposedly transnational public (Budarick 2013). Migrants, as the archetypal dispersed citizens, are particularly diverse in their media consumption habits (Gillespie 2007). Much of this diversity stems from a lack of trust in any one source of information. It also comes from a need to be informed about a variety of geographical, political and cultural areas, and an epistiphilic desire for information built from the insecurity of movement and exile (Naficy 1993; Budarick 2013). What it means, however, is that the use of transnational media is always contextualised by more local, embedded forms, which potentially call on different incarnations of public and community.

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However, transnational public spheres are increasingly being seen in terms of specific global issues, those that cannot be said to be attributable to, or resolvable by, a single nation-state (Cammaerts & van Audenhove 2005; Loader 2014). Cammaerts and van Audenhove (2005) describe these public spheres as being linked to changes in forms of citizenship, from *communities of birth* to *communities of interest*. Thus there are seemingly more and more instances of shared issues of interest and debate across borders, from global environmentalism to trade, foreign policy and free market capitalism. Even if the transnational media of diaspora and migration are unable to facilitate a transnational agenda of pressing social and political issues, isolated from and prioritised ahead of localised concerns, the prevalence of identity politics, organic social movements and alternative discursive communities ensures the formation of publics around global issues (Cammaerts & van Audenhove 2005).

But what of the mechanism for cross-border debate? If the issues can be said to exist individually of media, in terms of coming from concerned 'global citizens' rather than through media discourses, what forms of transnational media can truly support public deliberation transnationally? Digital media networks, including the internet and social media, are often held up as the archetypes of such media (Loader 2014). Aligned as they are with global social movements, from the Occupy movement to the anonymous and so-called Arab Spring, social media are giving rise to a new form of community of interest in which geographical dispersion is no impediment to collective debate and action.

As work on the relationship of digital media to transnational public spheres attests, however, class-, gender- and ethnicity-based exclusions from a public are still a reality. In her work on the relationship between transnational public spheres and media networks, Crack (2008, p. 70) cautioned against conflating the technological ability of digital media, and the utopian discourses that surround it, with the ability to support cross-border public spheres in all their complexity:

A transnational public sphere rests on the ability of interlocutors to communicate across state borders with ease. It could be said that this requirement has already been met in terms of material capability. ICT [Information and Communications Technology] has eradicated temporal and spatial barriers to distanced communication. However, the prerequisites of public debate are more demanding than this.

These prerequisites include issues familiar to all who have critically engaged with the public sphere at the nation-state level: inclusiveness, accessibility and freedom from government and market interference. Just as they have been shown to be problematic ideals in Habermas's original theory, so, too, are they yet to be demonstrated as anything else at the transnational scale. This is recognised by Loader (2014), who suggested that the same weaknesses in the original bourgeois public sphere are in all likelihood replicated in digital publics based on social media and internet communication. As

well as issues of gender and race, class is still a determining factor when thinking about the nature of a transnational public facilitated by digital networks (Loader 2014).

Such ambivalence to the potential of the internet was expressed by Habermas in the late 1990s, with a nod to contemporary debates around the democratic substance of many digitally formed social movements, as well as the potential fragmentation of social and political positions into ideological bubbles:

The publics produced by the Internet remain closed off from one another like global villages. For the present it remains unclear whether an expanding public consciousness, though centered in the lifeworld, nevertheless has the ability to span systematically differentiated contexts, or whether the systemic processes, having become independent, have long since severed their ties with all contexts produced by political communication. (Habermas 1998 in Downey & Fenton 2003, p. 189)

As Papacharissi has suggested (2015, p. 8), 'the internet pluralizes but does not inherently democratize spheres of social, cultural, political, or economic activity'. The individualisation of much online content and the blurring of public and private through online expression problematise any neat connection between transnational digital networks and global public spheres (Papacharissi 2009). What is needed is a commitment to the recognition of the realities of the use and production of transnational media (as well as their content), which take place in specific locales, influenced but not over-determined by transnational and global factors. Transnational media — whether diasporic and exilic satellite television, issue-based global chat rooms online, or products from mainstream commercial media corporations — are produced with some combination of ideological, financial and political aims (some less than democratic), and with a more or less broadly defined audience in mind. As well as potentially transcending difference to the point of sustaining shared public debate across borders, these media are involved in the creation of networked and symbolic borders, wherein inclusion and belonging are based upon exclusion and division (Morley 2000; Shields 2014).

In both articulating issues of common public concern amongst dispersed communities, and providing the framework for debate across borders, transnational media are limited. Acknowledging and understanding these limitations is an important aspect of discussions of the public sphere. In order to avoid traversing old ground, discussions of transnational or global public spheres need to take seriously the empirical realities of transnational media and not be seduced by the technological capabilities of transborder technologies.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have critically analysed the role of ethnic, transnational and diasporic media in conceptualisations of multiple and transnational public spheres. I have

demonstrated that these different forms of media are important to the changing parameters of the public sphere. Each allows for new forms of social interaction, provides new platforms for political debate and facilitates a framework for the emergence of new types of communities and publics. However, important limitations on the role of media in sub- and transnational public spheres have been raised. While ethnic media are undoubtedly a central part of the emergence and sustenance of subaltern and counterpublics, their ability to foster dialogue between different publics is less clear. While the public nature of discourse would seem to contribute to cross-public dialogue, without underlying structural and ethical conditions there is no guarantee that counterpublics will not simply be relegated to marginal voices with little political effect (Fraser 1990; Husband 1998).

Evidence for the emergence of a transnational public sphere can be seen in the growth of communities of interest around issues that are truly transnational, if not global, in their causes and impacts. While transnational media in no way guarantee that such issues are articulated and interpreted in a way that provides for deliberation across borders, the prevalence of global social movements 'from below', and their use of social and digital networks, would seem to reduce the reliance on media. However, as empirical studies demonstrate, even such open communicative environments as the World Wide Web come with their own problems of access and use, favouring an already privileged white, Western, urban elite whose central place online is perhaps foreshadowed by the dominance of their fathers and grandfathers in the physical political spaces on the global stage (Loader 2014; Cammaerts & van Audenhove 2005).

As the work of several authors explicitly and implicitly points out, the public sphere can be thought of as a 'horizon for the organization of social experience', and counter- or subaltern publics can never be completely separate from this overarching framework (Downey & Fenton 2003, p. 194). In this chapter I have attempted to contribute to an understanding of how 'non-mainstream' media may contribute to the interactions between public spheres in modern societies. The structures and systems that support or preclude more effective interpublic dialogue and debate are worthy of close academic attention.

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