THE GLOBAL PUBLIC SPHERE
Public Communication in the Age of Reflective Interdependence

Ingrid Volkmer
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Contents

Acknowledgements vi
Illustrations vii

Introduction 1
1 Public Territories and the Imagining of Political Community 11
2 Post-Territoriality in Spheres of ‘Public Assemblages’ 53
3 From ‘Reflexive’ Modernity to ‘Reflective’ Globalization: The Public Space of ‘Inbetween-Ness’ 91
4 Public Interdependence, Interlocutors and the ‘Matrix’ of Influence 129
5 From the Public Sphere to Public ‘Horizons’ 163

Notes 192
References 195
Index 215
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Illustrations

Figures

2.1 World cable network in the 1880s 80
2.2 World map of Reuters news agency network (1865–1914) 83
3.1 Trendmap global 94
3.2 Satellite footprint 117

Graphics

4.1 Process-oriented ‘flows’: intensification, acceleration, dialogical connectedness 143
4.2 Matrix of influence as flow chart 145
4.3 Al Jazeera web 147
4.4 Dialogical interlocutor: dimensions 149

Tables

3.1 Top 20 cities on Facebook, 2012 96
5.1 Degree of feeling secure by country 186
5.2 Degree of world citizenship 187
5.3 Trust in institutions overview 188
It is often argued that we live in a time of unprecedented connectivity. Statistics show that not only has one-third of the world’s population access to the web but – and this is a change from about a decade ago – the majority of users are now located in Asia, followed by Europe, Latin America, North America and Africa. In addition, visual geographical mapping tools show that no longer are these networked structures reaching mainly urban centres of all world regions but stretch across rural areas and even remote territories – from sub-Saharan Africa to the South Pacific Islands and Central Asia. It is an unprecedented landscape of digital connections and a new architecture of globalized communication, which we are only beginning to understand. Almost two decades ago, Manuel Castells published the trilogy of the *Network Society* (1996), which suggested a novel approach to an inclusive model of networked social, political and economic relations across societies. Today’s advanced globalized communication sphere is no longer characterized by these macro-structures of networks, connecting nodes across all continents, which was a fascinating imagination about ten years ago, but nodes are situated within a universe of subjective, personal networked structures linking individuals across world regions. These are dense and authentic networks which are continuously monitored, navigated and configured on commuter trains, on streets and even in university lecture halls. These subjective networks are no longer simply ‘social’, connecting mainly communities of friends, but have become platforms for subjectively ‘lived’ public spaces.

This new communicative sphere is no longer mainly ‘digital’, or even – to use a term which now sounds outdated – a sphere of...
cyber’ communication, existing as a distinct sphere from ‘mass media’. These distinctions no longer work. Converging media spaces are embedded in content threads, which often resurface on social media platforms available almost anywhere in the world. Media organizations are searching for new ways to ‘connect’ directly to their users – wherever they live. Content is shifted across platforms and – through cookie codes and pixel tags – increasingly framed along users’ interests and according to geographical locations. Newspaper sites are becoming multi-media platforms; for example the Guardian in London has launched such a platform, Guardian Witness, encouraging readers across the world to upload information as well as images and to collaborate closely with Guardian journalists to identify and unfold stories. The once clear contours of the term media are fading and new concepts are being suggested to identify nuances of these emerging, densely entangled dimensions. Concepts such as ‘media manifold’ (Couldry, 2012), ‘polymedia’ (Madianou and Miller, 2012) and ‘spreadable media’ (Jenkins et al., 2013) begin to ‘map’ the multiple communicative layers of today’s media forms within a world where the user, the ‘audience’ has become the communicative actor: reproducing, delivering, accelerating and magnifying ‘content’ within the chosen logics of subjective networks across a globalized scope. For the purpose of our discussion I suggest the term micro-networks as a metaphor for the merging of content on individualized platforms within the sphere of a subjectively created communicative universe, incorporating multiple communicative terrains. In this sphere ‘bits’ and ‘pieces’ of available media forms are ‘assembled’ and ‘arranged’ – from traditional media (e.g. television and newspaper) to communicative sites of local community engagement; from social media (iTunes channels and ‘apps’, Skype and YouTube), in addition to streaming content of national outlets (from the BBC to Nigerian television) – from mobile communication to networks of direct-to-home satellite platforms.

However, the term micro-networks also allows us to identify the ‘connectedness’ of the communicative actor across an assembled communicative sphere and helps to address the new trans-border-ness of these communicative flows. Whereas decades ago, trans-border communication was understood as being either ‘international’ (i.e. is, connecting nations), ‘trans-national’, (reaching sections of several nations simultaneously) or ‘spatial’ (a secluded sphere of digital flow), today’s globalized communications across advanced micro-networks of subjective platforms are no longer ‘trans-border’ but rather discursively
interrelated. In this sense, the communicative sphere within a globalized scope is no longer an extension but is situated in interrelated subjective micro-networks. In other words, the global and the national and even the local are no longer distinct spheres but merge in particular in contexts of communicative spheres across diverse sites of subjective micro-networks. When students are asked in classes to identify their news sources, they might pick similar media forms; however, each of them names a completely different hierarchy of sources, which relates no longer to the news agenda of a national sphere but is deeply embedded in their own public ‘horizons’; these are seamlessly situated within a globalized sphere of interdependence: densely and often linked ‘live’ to peers and communities anywhere in the world but also to authentic and trusted sources, which may or may not be located on servers in other world regions. These spheres are no longer situated within international or transnational communication but within new sets of communicative interdependence that not only transform the dimension of communication and challenge our understanding of ‘media’ and civic identity, but also deeply transform the understanding and practice of engagement in ‘the public sphere’.

It could be argued that spheres of interdependence within a globalized scope are not new. For example, debates in media and communication which occurred at the time when satellite communication emerged as a new form of transnationalization in the early 1990s, identified spheres of reciprocity of globalized communication processes and shifted the paradigmatic foci to a new sense of interdependence across globalized thematic ecologies. CNN (Cable News Network)’s ‘breaking news’ influenced the daily news agenda of national broadcasters in various world regions. It was also the time when the interdependence of media ‘flows’ across continents was critically assessed, in addition to an emerging powerful strata of political economy and globalized imbalances, for example along the ‘digital divide’, to the concreteness of identity politics and – specifically – political activism. However, there are differences between these layers of interdependence. Today, interdependence is intensified, ‘dense’ and, most importantly, is no longer governed by the national or even transnational media agenda but layers of interdependence are carefully selected from a subjective universe of options, governed by deliberatively chosen ‘loyalties’ and ‘alliances’. In this sense, the sphere of globalized interdependence is no longer ‘out there’ but very concrete ‘right here’ in the way content trajectories are chosen, intersect and relate within the
site of a subjective networked ‘universe’, synchronized across devices and always available.

Micro-networks might incorporate Greenpeace news, NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) reports on climate change as well as monitoring sites of transnational pollution, in addition to resources of local community groups. What we see on television is ‘filtered’ and ‘re-ordered’ through the lens of networks of trust, for example ‘live’ social networks which enable ‘communicative action’. The reference frame for public engagement is no longer within one country, but subjectively assembled across a globalized scope of those who are ‘concerned’. When looking for conceptual frames that could help to further assess this emerging sphere of subjective networked locations within a globalized scope, Manuel Castells’ term of ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells, 1996, 2009) comes to mind. It is a term which signifies a ‘post-convergence’ age as it no longer highlights the merging spheres of content of ‘mass’ and ‘digital’ media – which was a key issue a few years ago – but rather the outcome of such a convergence: the sphere of ‘individualization’ of communicative practices vis à vis networked platforms. Saskia Sassen is another author who is relevant here, however, addressing a different angle of this emerging sphere. She has recently pointed out that we are facing the deconstruction of the traditional ‘unitary’ bodies of societal knowledge, specifically through the phenomenon of de- and re-contextualization of ‘bits’ and ‘pieces’ across digital networks (Sassen, 2012: 74).

Leaving these recent attempts to map in more general terms transformative parameters of the networked communication space to one side, globalization debates are also relevant here for identifying signposts of the emerging communicative landscape within a globalized scope. Globalization debates have over the last decades – especially since the early 1990s – addressed the methodology of interdependence and critically assessed the fine-lined ‘logics’ of these entanglements across national and local institutional, economical, political and cultural structures and within specific dimensions of globalization ranging from neoliberalism, to global governance as cosmopolitan multilateralism (Held, 2005) to global civil society (see Kaldor, 2003). Recently, interdependence has also addressed a completely new perspective through lenses that have been invisible for too long. This is due to the new densely globalized formations of communication that are no longer merely the domain of the Western narrative of globalized interdependence but include the diverse perspectives of the approaches of Asia, South America and Africa. Authors from South America and Africa in particular suggest to shift the one-dimensional globalization
narrative towards new paradigms of ‘inclusiveness’, i.e. of regional specific world perceptions and a conception of cosmopolitanism that specifically takes into account the new realities of digital networked communication practices in so-called ‘developing’ regions (see Reguilo, 2009; Ndlela, 2009; Oreget, 2010).

Leaving these larger globalized narratives to one side, it seems that methodologies for the assessment of concrete forms of communicative interdependence begin to emerge in specific areas of media and communication research. For example, approaches of ‘conflict’ communication – specifically of national political conflicts and crises – are increasingly moving away from transnational angles and, instead, address a broader globalized thematic terrain (Cottle, 2009; Pantti et al., 2012). Another example is journalism studies, a field which began in the 1990s to draw attention to globalized news ‘flows’, and which focuses traditionally on a professional practice negotiating between national organizational structures and transnational audiences and now begins to define conceptual frameworks of globalized journalism (Hanitzsch and Mellado, 2011; Weaver and Willnat, 2012). Social media research is a third example of a more profound shift towards identifying interrelated transnational communicative forms, for example in contexts of ‘viral’ publics as a new sphere of public accelerators of political crisis across specific interrelated spheres.

Considering these developments, it is surprising that conceptual frameworks of transnational public spheres are somewhat on the periphery. Despite these transformations of communicative structures within larger frameworks of interdependence, public sphere conceptions even in a transnational context are mainly articulated vis-à-vis modern nation-states and – in this framework – often understand the public sphere as the sphere between civil society and the state. Jürgen Habermas’ groundbreaking work on the transformation of the public sphere still serves today – I suppose to his own surprise – fifty years after it was first published in Germany as a core framework for the debate of public discourse in the twenty-first century. Habermas’ work provided us with a philosophical understanding of public discourse within the larger paradigm of critical theory but his understanding of public culture needs to be recontextualized. It spoke specifically to the changing societal conditions of a divided Germany in the time of the Cold War – a time when Germany was slowly recovering from an age of fascism. However, the reality of public life is different today. Today’s geopolitical order has shifted and the nation-state as such is being incorporated into larger regional and globalized governance structures (from the EU to the