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Publics and the Public Sphere

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Summary

Mass communication is a constitutive part of social life and experience across the world today, affecting how people work, practice religion, engage in politics, understand others, and so on. Indeed, in many world contexts, social actors interact with mass media on a daily basis. In doing so, they not only consume or produce media artifacts but also participate in publics. A public is a particular kind of social form that coalesces as discourse circulates among, and thereby creates, audiences of mutual attention. Through participants' ongoing orientation to and engagement with circulation of texts and images, publics produce social arenas that link disparate persons into collectivities of shared interests, issues, and convictions. Some publics are large, general, and sustained, such as those centered on national news. Other publics focus on particular topics, such as those related to religious communities, political ideologies, marked social identities, professional worlds, or even hobby and fan cultures. Others still are relatively small scale, such as those formed among the diffuse groupings of friends and acquaintances connected on social media platforms. As venues constituted by the circulation of discourse, publics have wide-ranging social and political consequences. The interests and identities that they privilege and presuppose shape broader processes of social belonging, exclusion, and contestation. Publics ground claims to

political authority through assertions of the public interest. Publics also mediate contemporary consumer capitalism, as when advertising targets particular networks of public circulation. In short, publics lie at the center of contemporary social formations and political economies.

The anthropology of publics and the public sphere examines how practices and structures of mass communication mediate and generate wider forms of social and political organization.

How do publics normalize some identities while marginalizing others? Under what conditions can publics emerge as political actors? How do dominant public spheres shape political cultures? In taking on these questions, anthropologists attend to the regimes of publicity; that is, constellations of participation norms, social imaginaries, media infrastructures, language ideologies, and metadiscourses that organize publics. This analytic perspective illuminates both how normative publicity is reproduced and challenged and to what effect. In addition, in focusing on discursive circulation, scholarship on publics has pushed anthropologists to develop research methodologies that go beyond face-to-face, participant observation as a tool of data collection. The anthropology of publics and the public sphere has thus emerged as a theoretically generative and methodologically innovative field that endeavors to illuminate mass communication and its implications for social life. In doing so, it has generated novel theoretical understandings of mass media, power and affect, consumption and capitalism, identity, belonging and exclusion, and the bases and limits of democratic representation.

Keywords

publics, the public sphere, media, circulation, identity, democracy, consumption, power, affect, mass communication

Introduction

Mass communication is a constitutive part of social life and experience across the world today. The circulation of texts and images among and across large, unbound audiences fuels economic systems, animates political participation, and can organize sentiments of social belonging and exclusion. Numerous professions and industries now specialize in mass communication, and few contemporary organizations could survive without it. Practices and institutions of mass communication are baked into social arrangements that span home life, politics, activism, and even central banks' management of national economies. The challenge of conceptualizing and studying mass communication thus lies at the center of contemporary anthropology.

Within this milieu, the anthropology of publics and the public sphere has emerged as a theoretically generative and methodologically innovative field that endeavors to illuminate mass communication and its implications for social life.¹ The field of study first took shape in the 1990s as anthropologists and kindred scholars began to consider how the mass circulation of discourse not only depended on historically variable practices, presuppositions, and institutions but also had wide-ranging consequences for how social actors imagined communities, engaged in political practice, participated in consumer society, and struggled over the norms and limits of public life. Organizing this inquiry was the concept of “a public.”

Literature scholar Michael [Warner \(2002\)](#), 90) described publics as “the social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse,” while anthropologist Susan [Gal \(2006\)](#), 173) explained that, “publics are created through the circulation of discourses as people hear, see or read a message and then engage it in some way,” creating a “mutual awareness” among participants. Publics thus rely on different media forms or combinations of them: for

example, newspapers, radio broadcasts, films, television programs, memes, Tweets, TikToks, and so on. Significantly, however, publics presuppose some shared interest or outlook that mediates how persons relate to and participate in the production, consumption, and evaluation of discourse and media. A national news public presupposes a shared interest defined by national belonging and facilitates reports and discussions on matters assumed to have national significance: the economy, politics, sports leagues, and entertainment. In contrast, a public that coalesces around K-Pop fandom presupposes that participants share a different set of interests and outlooks circumscribed by their enthusiasm for and knowledge about Korean pop music and performers.

Such social spaces created by the reflexive circulation of discourse are arenas in which identities are articulated and represented—the “we” that a public addresses; but they are also arenas of contestation, as when participants marshal rival or alternative conceptions of a common “we.” Publics are thus dynamic social spaces. Emergent publics can limn new horizons of belonging and identification, what [Warner \(2002, 114f\)](#) calls their worldmaking capacity. At the same time, participation norms, as well as media technologies’ differing affordances, inevitably restrict who and how one can interact within a public ([Graan 2022a](#)). Furthermore, publics are multiple: they intersect, codepend, leak, or come into conflict (e.g., [Hill 1995](#)). To wit, the business models that underwrite many popular media broadcasts, from network television to Facebook and Spotify, ensures that publics coexist with advertisements that refigure shared interests (whether national belonging or music fandom) toward commercial ends (cf. [Williams 1974](#)). At times too, publics can manifest in forms of social action, organizing mass political participation or authorizing political interventions.

Importantly, the forms of collectivity and sociality that publics manifest emerge through practices and institutions of communication. Membership in a public is always open-ended, as is the circulation of discourse within and across publics ([Warner 2002](#)). As a social form,

publics link people in collectivities that do not rely on copresence, face-to-face interaction, or personal acquaintance.² Because of this, publics present a challenge to anthropological research methods that privilege face-to-face participant observation as a tool of data collection. Yet, this is also why the anthropology of publics and the public sphere constitutes a cutting edge of contemporary anthropology that has developed innovative methods and theories to understand the omnipresence, significance, and consequence of mass communication in social life.

This article endeavors an overview of the central themes in the anthropology of publics and the public sphere and delineates how this multifaceted area of study contributes to allied scholarship in media anthropology, political anthropology, linguistic anthropology, and the anthropology of capitalism. The anthropology of publics and the public sphere presents unique and transformative approaches to understand and study mass media processes, identity formation, belonging and exclusion, collective action, political authority, and popular culture. I first present a short history of the scholarship on publics and the public sphere that has informed current discussions in anthropology. I then review contemporary anthropological approaches to the study of publicity. Drawing on this literature, I highlight how publics always reflect and manifest a “regime of publicity,” that is, a particular constellation of imaginaries, infrastructures, participation norms, language ideologies, and metadiscourses that shapes the character and politics of a public. Subsequently, I explore how the anthropology of publics intersects with and contributes to work in media anthropology and political anthropology and to theoretical excursus on affect and power and conclude with an examination of ethnographic innovations that have accompanied anthropological research on publics and the public sphere.

Publics and the Public Sphere: A History

Publics and the Problem of Mass Democracy

A first wave of scholarly interest in publics and the public sphere took shape in the early 20th century as scholars reckoned with the growing impact of mass communication on democratic practice. Social contract theory, and the constitutional republics inspired by it, had posited “the people” or “the public” as the legitimate source of authority within a polity.

Nevertheless, the social transformations wrought by industrialization, urbanization, and the onset of “mass society” reinvigorated long-standing, elite critiques of popular decision making (cf. [Graeber 2007](#)). In particular, new technologies and the use of mass communication fanned elite fears about the susceptibility of mass publics to political manipulation and propaganda, especially with the rise of European fascism during the 1920s and 1930s.

Famously, writing in 1925, Walter Lippman claimed in *The Phantom Public* (1993) that the concept of “the public” as the legitimate source for political decision making was but a fiction. In mass societies, he argued, it was impossible for ordinary citizens to be informed on all necessary matters of government, much less to deliberate on them. In practice, he continued, the ideal of public deliberation had long been replaced by a public sphere populated by superficial discussion and manipulative, emotional appeal. Rather than pretending that this “phantom” public sphere still lived as a vibrant institution of democracy, Lippmann reasoned, it was best to abandon its “unattainable” ideal and instead delegate democratic governance to a technocratic trust. In a response to Lippmann, philosopher [John Dewey \(1991\)](#) agreed with *The Phantom Public*’s diagnosis of the problems of mass democracy but disagreed on the solution, arguing that it was indeed possible to reinvigorate grassroots democracy through education and participation in local government and associations.

This first wave of writing on publics thus counterposed a political understanding of “the public” as the people to whom a state is responsible with a practical understanding of mass communication and its ability to address and influence its “publics.” This tension between publics as a political agent and publics as an effect of communication is also one that reappears across scholarly writings on publics and the public sphere. For both Lippmann and Dewey, the observation that publics could be created and swayed through mass communication compromised democratic understandings of the people and the public sphere as institutions of rational decision making. In this way, their work dovetailed with other late 19th- and early 20th-century writings, from [Le Bon \(2001\)](#) on crowds to Freud (2004) on mass psychology, that alleged popular susceptibility to irreason as a weaknesses of mass democracy. An undercurrent of all of these works is that publicity, as in acts of mass communication, constitutes a potential source of social and political energy (cf. [Mazzarella 2017](#)) that can ignite public behavior and even betray the public good. If Lippman proposed top-down technocracy and Dewey bottom-up democratization as solutions to this problem, it should not be surprising that this time period also witnessed growing regimes of media regulation and censorship (cf. [Mazzarella 2013](#)).

Habermas and His Critics

Jürgen Habermas’s (1989) historical study, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and the reactions that it provoked, constitute a second wave in the scholarship on publics and the public sphere. The book itself, which was first published in German in 1962 and translated into English in 1989, became famous for its detailed analysis of the development of “the bourgeois public sphere” in the cities of Western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries. As print culture advanced, bourgeois elites formed literary salons in which to circulate and discuss new writings. This social institution of the salon emerged as a forum for

shared deliberation as participants entertained the arguments, opinions, and conceits of literary works, from pamphlets and broadsheets to novels. For Habermas, these salons, and the political culture that they spawned, epitomized the vibrant, rationally oriented discussion required by democratic politics. Ultimately, then, Habermas presented “the bourgeois public sphere” as a model to which polities should aspire. In this way, the book captured the ideal of liberal publicity, that is, of a public sphere organized by the rational, disinterested discussion of political matters, and indeed portrays it as a normative model for publicity writ large.³

On another level, however, Habermas’s book was influential for its sociologically rich, thick description of the nascent bourgeois public sphere. For instance, the book detailed how the category of publicity emerged through mutual contrast with a corresponding category of privacy. Each were mediated by differing forms of communication (the pamphlet versus the personal letter), associated with different social spaces (the domestic spaces of the home versus the salon), and presupposed a differing kind of social subject (a rational everyperson versus an emotionally complex, private self).⁴ In its creative, relational analysis of communicative genres, social spaces, political practices, and concepts of the subject, Habermas’s book proved inspirational among political philosophers, social historians, literary theorists, and cultural anthropologists alike. Indeed, it is one of its lasting legacies in the anthropology of publics and the public sphere.

Finally, in its second half, *The Structural Transformation* examines what Habermas dubbed “the refeudalization of the public sphere.” Echoing Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1972) critique of the culture industry, Habermas argued that the commercialization of print, and later radio and televisual media, undermined the deliberative potential of the rational public sphere. In some sense, Habermas replayed Lippmann’s argument on the unattainable ideal of deliberative, democratic public as narrative of paradise lost. Tellingly, Habermas’s later writing on communicative action constituted an effort to establish the philosophical grounds

for communicative practices that could underwrite sustainable, democratic disagreement and decision making (Habermas 1984).

Despite its wide-ranging influence, *The Structural Transformation* nevertheless inspired substantial critiques that challenged Habermas's celebration of the liberal public sphere by analyzing its constitutive exclusions. In their critical approach, such works opened up a third wave of scholarship on publics and publicity. In *The Public Sphere and Experience*, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972) argued for the specificity and vitality of proletarian practices and institutions of publicity, thereby charging Habermas with a romantic classism. Joan Landes's (1988) historical study of Revolution-era France highlighted the gendered exclusions that grounded the "bourgeois public sphere." Landes analyzed how emergent conception of public and private in 18th-century France ultimately served to relegate women to domestic, "private" spheres in the post-Revolutionary era. Political philosopher Nancy Fraser (1990, 1997) similarly indicted the normative exclusions on which the bourgeois public sphere had been predicated, noting the disjuncture between the claims of publicity to represent "the public" at large and norms of participation that privileged elite, White, Christian men above all others.⁵ A 1994 special issue of *Public Culture* on "the Black Public Sphere" detailed how White supremacy organized dominant publics and how Black public spheres carved out alternatives to and critiques of dominant norms (see, e.g., Austin 1994; Baker 1994; Dawson 1994; Appadurai et al 1994).

Across these interventions, critics of Habermas revealed the normative and exclusionary presuppositions evident within the liberal model of the public sphere and its claims to rationality. In turn, they also highlighted the multiplicity of publics. Although participants might frame a dominant public as "the public sphere," that is, as representative of the body politic, various "subaltern publics" (Fraser 1990) or "counterpublics" (Warner 2002) exist that are organized differently than, and sometimes in opposition to, the dominant bourgeois

public spheres that Habermas had privileged (see also [Squires 2002](#); [Urla 1995](#)). The first wave of scholarship on publics and the public sphere had questioned whether mass communication and mass society undermined the democratic potential of the public sphere. Critics of Habermas shifted this question, pointing to the structural exclusions (e.g., based on class, gender, race, and sexuality) that foreclosed the possibility of a “representative” liberal public sphere. The problem was not the risk of outside manipulation; it lay in the very foundations of liberal publicity itself and its monopoly claims on reason (see [Yeh 2018](#), 19–20).

Linguistic Anthropology and the Anthropology of Publics

In anthropology, the first sustained scholarship on the public sphere began to appear in the 1990s. In particular, a group of linguistic anthropologists drew on Habermas and his critics, as well as on Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1991), to study and theorize how the mass circulation of discourse was integral to the contemporary production of subjectivity, identity, and political authority. In doing so, these scholars expanded a long-established anthropological and sociolinguistic interest in the social and political dynamics of communication (e.g., [Goffman 1981](#); [Gumperz and Hymes 1986](#); [Sapir 1985](#)). Debra Spitulnik Vidali published a pioneering essay on the “Anthropology of Mass Media” ([Spitulnik 1993](#)), which placed publicity and linguistic anthropology at the center of her study. Her subsequent essay, “The Social Circulation of Media Discourse and the Mediation of Communities” ([Spitulnik 1996](#)), modeled the ethnographic investigation of publicity and national identity as she traced the circulation and uptake of “public words” among a Zambian radio public. Benjamin Lee ([1992](#), [1993](#), [1995](#), [1998](#)) wrote a series of essays on the concept of publics that examined how textual circulation shaped political cultures, both in early US history and in Maoist China (see also [Lee and LiPuma 2002](#)). [Susan Gal and Kathryn](#)

[Woolard (1995)] edited a groundbreaking special issue of the journal *Pragmatics* on “Language and Publics” that foregrounded how language practices (e.g., particular speech genres or registers) and language ideologies (e.g., on the “voice from nowhere”) mediate the claims to authority that infuse public spheres.⁶ Extending her important contributions to feminist anthropology, [Gal (2002)] also examined the semiotics of the very division between “public” and “private.”

One key contribution of this linguistic anthropological work on publicity was the conception of discursive circulation that it developed. Habermas had foregrounded how the bourgeois public sphere was organized by the circulation and discussion of texts. The 1990s also witnessed an explosion of interest in the movements and “flows”—of media, ideas, technologies, and people—that propelled globalization (see [Appadurai 1996]). Already armed with sophisticated understandings of communication, linguistic anthropologists added new rigor and empirical grounding to the study of how discourse (i.e., structured communicative segments) could “circulate.” Drawing on Bakhtinian conceptions of discourse and dialogism ([Bakhtin 1981]), they decomposed circulation into a contingent process of decontextualization, entextualization, and recontextualization (see [Bauman and Briggs 1990]; [Silverstein and Urban 1996], see also [Gal 1989, 2003]). In order for discourse to move from one interactional context to another, it must first be decontextualized—that is, disconnected from contextually specific, or indexical, meanings and moorings. In this transformation, stretches of discourse are entextualized—that is, made into “text” fragments that are available for reproduction in new discursive and interactional contexts. Yet, in being recontextualized—that is, emplaced within a new array of indexical meanings and moorings—entextualized text fragments convey new social meanings and effects.

In so theorizing discursive circulation, linguistic anthropologists highlighted the social work and political consequences of how discourse is reproduced, and thus seems to move,

across contexts and encounters (see also [Agha 2005](#); [Gal 2018](#); [Wortham and Reyes 2015](#)).

From this perspective, the circulation of text within publics is never a neutral affair but a power-laden and generative process in which identities, worldviews, and claims to authority are variously asserted and challenged. Linguistic anthropological approaches thus emphasized the politics of publicity—that is, the political struggles mediated by and enacted through discursive circulation within and across publics.

Warner on Publics and Counterpublics

The 1990s and early 2000s also saw a series of publications by literature scholar Michael Warner that galvanized new interest in publics and the public sphere. Warner's first book, *Letters of the Republic* ([1990](#)), was a historical study that examined the speech genres and forms of self-presentation that defined the early American public sphere. His 1992 essay, "The Mass Subject and the Mass Public," developed this earlier analysis to theorize the normativities of the contemporary American public sphere and their social and political consequences (Warner 1992). Warner argued that the participation norms that organized the "mainstream" public in the United States were anchored in a conception of an everyman that, despite claims to universality, privileged White, male, Christian, and heterosexual subjectivities. In consequence, when individuals participated in the US public sphere, whether as producers or consumers, they were required to orient to its normative bases. Such orientations, Warner argued, entailed practices of self-abstraction, as individuals aligned to the supposed unmarked norms of American publicity, and practices of self-particularization, as individuals reckoned with those aspects of their identity that did not align with the public's underlying norms. Warner then used this dynamic of self-abstraction and self-particularization to illuminate the alternative ways that particularized and embodied identities become publicly palpable, for example, through fashion and graffiti or in public fascinations

with celebrity culture and mass disaster. Importantly too, Warner linked the public sphere's exclusionary claims to universality to the rise of identity politics in the United States, a topic that he also explored in *Fear of a Queer Planet* and *The Trouble with Normal* (Warner 1993, 1999).

However, it was Warner's titular essay in the collection *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002) that transformed how many understand, research, and analyze publics and publicity. Here, in conversation with, if not citing, work in linguistic anthropology, Warner introduced his definition of a public as a social form constituted by reflexive orientation to the circulation of discourse. For Warner, the mass mediations of publicity imbued publics with several unique features: for example, they are premised on a "world of strangers," but in uniting participants around matters of shared interest they have the capacity for "poetic worldmaking" and political expression. Warner also acknowledged that not all publics were created equal. In contrast to publics that claim or assert general representativity as "the public sphere," Warner advanced the term "counterpublics" to describe publics organized around norms of participation (e.g., preferred speech genres, histories of topic selection) that place them in tension with mainstream publicity, for example, as expressively queer, raced, or gendered. Through this discussion of the politics and possibilities of publics and counterpublics, Warner broke with previous works on publicity that often focused on the historical analysis of some public sphere. The essay amounted to a manifesto on how to conceptualize and understand publics as a general, capacious social form.

Warner's formulation of publics and counterpublics proved widely influential and furthered interest in publicity as an object of critical and anthropological inquiry. The 2000s and 2010s thus saw an explosion of research and reflection on practices of publicity. Often combining linguistic anthropological approaches with Warner's works, this research included work on publicity and the politics of circulation (e.g., Agha 2011, Briggs 2003, 2005; Cody

[2009]; [Gal 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006]; [Jackson 2013]); publicity and the politics of public emotion ([Berlant 1997, 1999]; [Fennell 2012]; [Vidali 2010]); national and minority publics (e.g., [Graber 2020]; [Humphreys 2019]; [McIvor 2020]; [Muir 2021]; [Paz 2018]; [Yeh 2018]); and explorations of publics organized beyond the liberal paradigm ([Bate 2009, 2021]; [Bishara 2013]; [Hartikainen 2018]; [Hirschkind 2006]; [Humphreys 2019]; [McIvor 2020]; [Roudakova 2017]; [Wedeen 2008]; [Yurchak 2005]).

Notably, during this same period, anthropologist William [Mazzarella (2003a, 2003b, 2013, 2017)] carved out a unique, Frankfurt School–inspired approach to mass publicity. In contrast to scholars interested in variously deliberative public spheres, Mazzarella focused on the “commodity images,” that is, artifacts such as advertisements and entertainment media, that circulate within publics (cf. [Arvidsson and Caliandro 2016]). On one level, producers, such as marketing professionals, design these commodity images in order to trigger affective responses among target consumers. But on another level, producers work to harness consumers’ affective responses in ways that can add value to the commodity image. After all, this service is what marketing and media professionals sell to their clients. Across his work, Mazzarella examined publicity through these dynamics of affective excitation and affective management, whether in the world of advertising ([2003a]), the state regulation of cinema ([2013]), or as a more general dialectic of social life ([2017]).

Contemporary Approaches to Publics and the Public

Sphere

Over the last several decades, the anthropology of publics, publicity, and the public sphere has emerged as a vital and innovative field of anthropological inquiry. In conceptualizing

publics as a social form predicated on discursive circulation, work on publicity has expanded the way that anthropologists think about and theorize identity, politics, mass media, normativity, belonging, and exclusion. Of course, research on publics and publicity varies according to topical focus and theoretical aim. Nevertheless, one way to appreciate the breadth of the current scholarship is to examine how anthropologists study the regularities and trajectories of discursive circulation, that is, “the social organization of interdiscursivity” (Gal 2018: 5), that any given public manifests.⁷ In this section, I review how anthropologists have conceptualized and studied the social imaginaries, material infrastructures, participation norms, language ideologies, and metapragmatic discourses that characterize particular publics. Such features combine to form regimes of publicity that mediate how people can and cannot participate in any given public. In studying these features of publics, anthropologists therefore investigate how the forms of discursive circulation animated within publics variously reflect or obscure, and reproduce or contest, the social hierarchies and differences otherwise evident among participants.

Social Imaginaries

Anthropologists of publicity, by necessity, are concerned with how text and images circulate within a society. One innovation of work on publicity has been to elaborate how particular social imaginaries (Lee and LiPuma 2002; Taylor 2002) mediate the forms of discursive circulation that constitute a public. For example, a social imaginary of the nation grounds a national news public just as a social imaginary of Christian marginalization within secularist society grounds an evangelical Christian activist public (McIvor 2020). Such social imaginaries mediate the forms of “mutual watching or listening” that result in a “self-aware public” (Gal 2006, 174): individuals, however complexly, envision themselves within or in relation to the imaginary, which anchors how they participate in the public. Reciprocally, as

Michael [Warner \(2002\)](#) noted, public address targets no one in particular, but it does prefigure an ideal audience (e.g., the nation, other evangelical Christians). Publics are thus shaped by the kinds of public address that they privilege, which inevitably presuppose a particular imaginary of circulation, that is, an assumption about to whom one's public words will circulate (see [Briggs 2005](#); [Manning 2010](#); [Manning and Uplisashvili 2007](#); see also [Lempert 2011](#) on addressivity; cf. [Bakhtin 1986](#)).

In presupposing imaginaries of circulation, publics can (re)produce or intensify social differences. As Francis [Cody \(2009, 287\)](#) argued, the social imaginaries that undergird publics can coalesce into “regimes of circulation,” or “cultivated habits of animating artifactually mediated texts” that enable “the movement of discourse along predictable social trajectories.” In Cody's case, the differing class and gender presuppositions of some Indian newspapers map onto class and gender differentiated regimes of circulation that serve to reinforce such social divisions (cf. [Rajagopal 2001](#); [Udupa 2015](#)). In envisioning an ideal audience, the social imaginaries that publics privilege can also discourage other subjects' participation. For example, [Samy Alim and Generva Smitherman \(2012\)](#) demonstrated how “mainstream” American publicity is bound by a normative Whiteness that depends on and traffics in negative stereotypes of African Americans (see also [Hill 1998, 2008](#); [Shankar 2020](#); [Smalls 2021](#)). These stereotypes not only reinforce “double consciousness” ([Du Bois 1994](#)) but create barriers for African Americans' participation in the normatively White, “mainstream” American public sphere. Charles [Briggs \(2003\)](#) made a parallel point in his analysis of a cholera prevention campaign undertaken in Venezuela. The media produced for the campaign presupposed a middle-class, White addressee, as evident in the inclusion of negative depictions of poor and Indigenous Venezuelans. As [Briggs \(2003\)](#), 303) argued, “to interpellate oneself as in need of cholera health education was to accept an image of oneself

as premodern, dirty, ignorant, superstitious, impoverished, and a threat to the health of the body politic.” In consequence, the campaign failed to engage poor and Indigenous citizens.

Media Infrastructures

Media infrastructure is another important factor that organizes participation and helps to define the character of publics. Any given public depends on a range of technosocial infrastructures: from those central to production (e.g., printing presses, movie cameras, and studios) to those required for distribution and consumption (e.g., salons, movie theaters, home television sets), to the central stages of publicity, such as a parliament building or public square (Cody 2011; Latour 2005), and to broader social institutions that affect participation in publics. As James et al. (2020) point out, institutionalized segregation has constituted an infrastructure of publicity that affects both “mainstream” White publics and Black counterpublics. Across this range, infrastructures shape and are shaped by how users understand and interact with media (see Cody 2011; Larkin 2008).

On one level, differentially positioned social actors can have quite different access to media technologies and infrastructures required to participate in a public. In early European print cultures, unequal access to printing presses, literacy education, salons, and text artifacts themselves functioned to regulate participation in nascent public spheres. In the present, economic and cultural capital, which affects patterns of media access and ownership, continues to influence who and how one can participate in publics, especially as a producer of discourse and media. In consequence, corporations, the state, and the wealthy almost always have an advantage. Popular pressure can mount to expand access and underground or alternative publics can influence the mainstream, but access to infrastructure and technology inevitably constitutes a filter on the viewpoints that circulate within publics (see Graan 2022a). When new media infrastructures, such as 'zines or the internet, emerge and offer

expanded access, such as through self-publishing, they are often celebrated for their democratic potential. Nevertheless, state and corporate interests, and their attendant legal regimes, can be quick to bring new media forums under their control or oversight.

On another level, media infrastructures and technologies present distinct affordances that predicate different possibilities for publicity. Famously, [Walter Benjamin \(1968\)](#) argued that mass reproducibility enabled possibilities of representing human experience that secularized art, facilitating cultures of mass society (cf. [McLuhan 1994](#)). More recently, the affordances of digital media have garnered both attention and scrutiny. For example, as [Dominic Boyer \(2013\)](#) demonstrates, the speed at which digital media can be published and circulated has transformed both the production and consumption of news reports. With news websites that can be updated on demand and with sharing of news stories on social media platforms, the temporal rituals of “reading the morning paper” (cf. [Anderson 1991](#)) or “watching the evening news” are obsolescing. Social media too has transformed how people communicate, consume media, and understand and enact publicity (see [Gershon 2010, 2014](#)). The different affordances of particular media technologies and infrastructures can thus affect the practices and dynamics that characterize a public.

Music writers [Nate Sloan and Charlie Harding \(2021\)](#) presented an interesting example of this in their account of how TikTok, the internationally popular social media platform, has influenced the compositional norms of pop music. From the 1960s onward, American commercial radio—a media infrastructure—incentivized songs with a verse-chorus-verse structure and with song length limited to approximately three minutes. This formula was seen to produce catchy songs and the song length minimized the risk of listeners losing interest and changing the dial. The fifteen-second limit that TikTok places on videos, by contrast, incentivized songs that quickly introduce the “hooks” that had been traditionally saved for choruses. Given the centrality of TikTok to contemporary music distribution, Sloan and

Harding argued, pop songs increasingly begin with a succession of hooks and eschew the verse-chorus-verse progression of old. The music-listening publics organized through TikTok's media infrastructure are thus altering the very structure of pop music.

Such developments, however, are never the sole consequence of media technologies or infrastructures. Rather, as [Ilana Gershon \(2010\)](#) illustrates, media technologies are always subjected to various "idioms of practice" that are not reducible to the technologies. Similarly, the ways that media technologies and infrastructures are socialized within particular contexts often produces social forms and experiences that could not be anticipated by the technologies alone (see [Kulick and Wilson 2002](#); [Larkin 2008](#)).

Participation Norms

Publics can share common media infrastructures and technologies but nevertheless display distinct participation norms on who, and how one, can contribute to a public. These norms include prescribed and proscribed topics, ways of speaking, forms of address, speech genres, authority claims, and so on. For instance, in her analysis of publicity in Tijuana, Rihan [Yeh \(2018\)](#) shows how participation norms distinguished the city's *clase media* (middle class) public from that of the working-class public of the *pueblo* (the people): while the former addressed a "we" that was assumed to be middle class, the latter formatted discourse as hearsay, as something that is simply known or that "they say." [Sahana Udupa's \(2015\)](#) study of news journalism in Bangalore in the 2000s and 2010s similarly identifies diverging norms of publicity. Udupa shows how the *Times of India's* entry into the Bangalorean market upended journalistic practice. Whereas established newspapers were seen to faithfully cover state politics, what commentators described as "statement journalism," the *TOI's* Bangalore edition linked its reporting and marketing departments, privileging stories on scandals, celebrities, and wealthy neighborhoods designed to attract youth and the city's growing

nouveau riche. As Udupa shows, the *TOI*'s new norms for producing news had ripple effects across the industry that transformed Bangalore's news media landscape and articulated new sorts of social and political division.

More broadly, anthropologists and allied scholars have also examined how dominant participation norms mediate political culture and cultural production. For example, Alexei [Yurchak \(2005\)](#) described how a register of Marxist-Leninist political language came to structure the Late Soviet public sphere. The result was a "hegemony of form" whereby the imperative to deploy the Marxist-Leninist formulae came to outweigh the content of what was being said. As Yurchak elaborated, these participation norms conditioned unique forms of parody when participants would over-perform the register to ridicule the emptiness of the political officialdom that it represented. To take another example, [Alice Marwick's \(2015\)](#) analysis of "micro-celebrity" on Instagram detailed how "influencers" are expected to abide by the participation norms that predominate on the platform. For example, "posting several times in a row is disfavored" and users should avoid "untimely posting" by sharing photos soon after they are taken ([Marwick 2015](#), 142–143). Individuals' ability to abide by these norms can be consequential for how or whether their contributions circulate within Instagram publics.

Language Ideologies

The participation norms that organize any given public often reflect particular language ideologies that inform and regiment idioms of practice ([Gal and Woolard 1995](#)). The concept of language ideologies ([Kroskrity 2000](#); [Schiefflin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998](#); cf. [Silverstein 1979](#)) describes how historically specific ideas, attitudes, and embodied emotional stances about language, language structure, and language function mediate linguistic practice. For example, it was a particular language ideology that imputed greater "truth" and

“authenticity” to the styles of plain speaking preferred within liberal public spheres (Bauman and Briggs 2003). Rosa and Flores (2017) examined how racist and colonial language ideologies that denigrate the speech of racialized subjects continue to penalize racialized subjects’ participation in many public spheres. These “raciolinguistic ideologies” reproduce the position of a “white listening subject” who claims the authority to evaluate and judge the language practices of minoritized others, ultimately reproducing forms of racialized inequality and exclusion (cf. Alim and Smitherman 2012). To counter such raciolinguistic ideologies, Rosa and Flores (2017, 17) proposed a “raciolinguistic perspective” that “refocuses our theory of social change away from the modification of the linguistic behaviors of racialized populations toward a dismantling of the white supremacy that permeates mainstream institutions as a product of colonialism.” Alim and Smitherman (2012) similarly critiqued “White linguistic hegemony” in the United States and advocated for pedagogical approaches based not on the normative Whiteness of “standard English” (see Bonfiglio 2002) but on the recognition and celebration of speech variation and styleshifting.

Metadiscourses

Participation norms also emerge through and authorize metadiscourses, that is, talk about the meaning, function, or propriety of language practices, by which publics are policed and regimented (Graan 2016a, 2021). For instance, in the contemporary United States, there are ongoing metadiscursive debates about what kinds of language should be permitted to circulate in publics, whether attempts to “cancel” public figures caught engaging in racist, misogynist, homophobic, or transphobic behavior or assertions of “free speech” (see Candea et al. 2021) against “political correctness” (see also Graan 2022a). Similarly, Angela Reyes (2021) shows how metadiscourses on elites’ supposedly fake, mixed, and excessive speech

appear in many postcolonial societies. As [Reyes \(2021\)](#), 11) argues, such metadiscursive evaluations both denigrate and praise postcolonial elites “for their supposed approximation to imperial modes of being and speaking,” thereby reproducing the categories of colonial status hierarchies. Such evaluations can also assert or question the status of elites as participants in postcolonial public spheres. Metadiscourses on (in)appropriate language constitute a powerful means by which to regulate who, and how one, can participate in a public.

Regimes of Publicity

To conceptualize publics as social organizations of interdiscursivity is thus to appreciate the regimes of publicity—the constellation of social imaginaries, media infrastructures, participation norms, language ideologies, and metadiscourses—that mediate who can (and cannot) participate in, and what kinds of discourse can (or cannot) circulate in, a public. As the concept “regime of publicity” implies, a public’s imaginaries, infrastructures, norms, ideologies, and metadiscourses are all interconnected and combine to regiment and characterize publicity in that instance. Attention to regimes of publicity reveals the sociopolitical forces and cultural presuppositions that undergird publics as well as those that animate struggles and contestations over publicity itself. Publics are an inherently dynamic social form. The regimes of publicity that organize them are continually subject to change, and shifting imaginaries, infrastructures, participation norms, language ideologies, and metadiscourses can indelibly alter the character of a public. In analyzing a public’s regimes of publicity, and also how it is contested, one can thus gain insight to the social orders, the social conflicts, identities, values, and political sensibilities that a public reflects and projects.

Media Anthropology and the Anthropology of Publics

Although a relative new field, media anthropology now stands as a pillar of contemporary anthropological research. On the one hand, anthropologists increasingly draw on popular media (e.g., films, books, memes, images, advertisements) as evidence in their analysis. On the other hand, anthropologists increasingly study media processes as social and cultural phenomena. Classically, ethnographies of media would focus either on media production (Bishara 2013; Boyer 2005, 2013; Davila 2012; Dornfeld 1998; Gürsel 2016; Hannerz 2004; Mazarella 2003a; Schiller 2018; Shankar 2015; Stankiewicz 2018) or on media reception (Abu-Lughod 2005; Ang 1982; Kulick and Wilson 2002; Mankekar 1999; Radway 1991; Rofel 2007). This emphasis on production and reception paralleled Stuart Hall's (1980) seminal essay that theorized media in terms of processes of encoding and decoding. This production/reception dichotomy also appeared in several early volumes on media anthropology (e.g., Askew and Wilk 2002; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, and Larkin 2002; Peterson 2004).

The anthropology of publicity similarly centers on media, whether text, images, sound, or video. But as a complement to work on media production and reception, anthropological work on publics foregrounds media circulation as a socially generative process that warrants its own theorization and analysis. Anthropological works on publics have elucidated how media circulation contributes to community formation (Lee 1995; Spitulnik 1996), enacts forms of social difference and exclusion (Briggs 2003; Hill 2008; Smalls 2021; Yeh 2018), and mediates political expression (Bate 2021; Jackson 2013; Lempert and Silverstein 2012). Insofar as “circulation” has emerged as a popular concept-metaphor (Moore 2004) within anthropology, anthropological work on publics thus provides a useful and analytically and empirically grounded way to conceptualize and study circulation as a social process.

Work on publics and publicity has also led the way in conceptualizing specialized media artifacts, such as brands and the forms of brand management that they require. In general,

scholars emphasize that brands are an interactive media form: the value of a brand, and the associations that ultimately adhere to it, depend on consumer engagement (Lury 2004; Arvidsson 2006; Coombe 1998; Foster 2007). Hence, branding and advertising are, as William Mazzarella (2003b, 35) elaborated, “a matter of what one might call ‘affect management,’ the ongoing attempt to harness a volatile, often explosive, oscillation between affect-intensive images and their discursive elaboration.” Through branding, firms circulate “brand fractions” (Nakassis 2012a), such as logos, taglines, print and video advertisements, distinctive design, and packaging within and across public spheres. These brand fractions are created to excite and resonate with consumers. But branding also operates through publicly circulated brand narratives that seek to (re)appropriate consumers’ affective reactions.

Fundamentally, then, branding, like marketing and advertising more generally, takes place through practices of publicity. As I have argued elsewhere (Graan 2016a), brand management consists of efforts to advance authorized representations of the brand within some public while also preventing the circulation of unauthorized and damaging representations of the brand. Like other forms of strategic communication, that is, intentional and concerted efforts to advance value-producing representations of some target entity (e.g., a business, a product, a place, a politician, oneself) within and across publics (Graan 2022a; see also Hallahan et al. 2007), branding is thus a practice focused on the regulation of public spheres in pursuit of value, advantage, and profit. Indeed, practices of branding, public relations, and marketing now permeate public spheres, organizing capitalist practice (Dávila 2012; Foster 2007; Gershon 2016; Lury 2004; Mazzarella 2003a; Nakassis 2012b; Shankar 2015) and political strategy (Fattal 2018; Graan 2013, 2016a; Lempert and Silverstein 2012; McLagan 2002; Ralph 2015; Stein 2012). The rise of strategic communication attests to the ways in which publics and publicity have themselves been reorganized according to logics of

capital accumulation (cf. [Udupa 2015](#)). It also constitutes an ethnographic fact with which anthropologists must increasingly reckon.

Political Anthropology and the Anthropology of Publics

Since the first theories of the public sphere appeared in the early 20th century, the concept has been connected to discussions of sovereignty and democracy. Within contemporary anthropology, sovereignty exists as an “essentially contested concept” ([Gallie 1955](#)), in that it has been subjected to diverse currents of theorization. While many anthropologists draw on [Agamben’s \(1998\)](#) conception of sovereignty in relation to the “state of exception,” others treat sovereignty as historically variable sets of practices and performances (e.g., [Bryant and Reeves 2021](#); [Howland and White 2009](#)) through which changing models of the world order are articulated. Such historical approaches to the sovereignty concept also often highlight the colonial past ([Anghie 2004](#)) and colonial legacies ([Bonilla 2015](#); [Simpson 2014](#)) of sovereignty politics today.

Within the literature on sovereignty, scholarship on publicity has been especially important to theories of popular sovereignty. Since Rousseau, philosophers have posited “the people” as the legitimate source for sovereign power. Yet, such views raise fundamental questions about (1) how a “people” is constituted as such and (2) how a “people” can express its political will.

In regard to the first question, writing on publics has been integral to contemporary theories of identity that examine the role of mass mediation in the creation of collective identities. Famously, Benedict Anderson’s ([1991](#)) *Imagined Communities* theorized nationalism as, in part, an outcome of the circulation of texts (e.g., newspapers and novels) that presupposed a protonational reader who shared experiences, interests, geographies,

knowledge, and language practices with authors. For Anderson, then, national identity is an effect of a particular kind of public: the people becomes a “people” via a social organization of interdiscursivity that presupposes and animates the nation as political category that conditions public participation.

Linguistic anthropologists, in particular, have examined how forms of public address can interpellate, or discursively position, persons as national subjects. Benjamin [Lee \(1995\)](#) analyzed the preamble to the US Constitution, arguing that the “we” of the opening phrase, “We, the people,” created a transportable figure of American national identity. [Errington \(1995\)](#) and [Keane \(2003\)](#) similarly examined how Indonesian, a standardized form of Malay, was promoted as a national language following Indonesia’s independence. In an otherwise polyglot context, the medium of Indonesian served as a vehicle to perform and participate in national belonging. Through such everyday practices, the national public itself is (re)produced as a discursive achievement. As Rihan [Yeh](#) explained,

Only through their perpetual evocation, embedded in the give and take of interaction and the risks of recognition it implies, do publics become taken-for-granted social realities, presupposable referents within which individuals may routinely locate themselves. Only through it do they become not just imaginable but inhabitable. (Yeh 2018, 6)

Publics are thus a crucial vehicle through which collective identities are produced, normalized, and enacted.

As a space of politics and political identity constituted through the circulation of discourse, publics thus anchor expressions and sentiments of peoplehood. Yet, one should not discount the normative forces that organize publicity. The political imaginaries afforded by publicity are inevitably constituted by exclusions of alternative expressions of a political identity and of identity characteristics that might be included among participants in a public

but that are not represented by it (see [Badiou 2005](#)). Furthermore, as Partha [Chatterjee \(1993\)](#) argued, colonial subjects' expressions of collective identity must be articulated against the bourgeois, colonialist public spheres from which they are excluded (see also [Cody 2011](#)). In consequence, colonial public spheres must confront the “rule of colonial difference” and break with bourgeois nationalism, establishing a conception of nation based on shared kinship ([Chatterjee 1993](#)), an alternative set of expressive practices ([Barber 2007](#)), or a transnational anticolonial public that exceeds protonational logics ([James et al. 2020](#); see also [Hunter and James 2020](#)).

Every public, then, houses its own politics of representation. In some historical eras and political contexts, dominant publics are figured as representative of the will of the people and as an expression of the vox populi. Yet, as [Cody](#) argued, the political subject of publicity often appears as a slippery one:

the very capacity of publics to know themselves and act in the world is premised, not on the instrumental use of communication to represent that which is already there, but rather on recursive processes of mass-mediation and self-abstraction. The political subject of publicity is deeply entangled in the very technological, linguistic, and conceptual means of its own self-production. (2011, 47)

Rosalind Morris made a complementary point, arguing that,

Neither majoritarianism nor direct action can ever answer the question “Who is ‘the people’?” because “the people” is never that which can be present . . . The social is always larger than what can ever be present. This excess is not merely to be measured in quantitative terms, however; it is also a function of the communicative dimension itself. (2013, 97)

Publicity itself is thus incapable of deciding how a “people” can express its political will.

Not surprisingly, then, a variety of technologies have developed, which claim to concretize and represent the political subject of publicity, including elections, political parties, rallies, listening tours, petitions, photographs (see [Gürsel 2017](#)), and, of course, polling. Each of these technologies, however, manifests a politics of representation. For example, [Bourdieu \(1979\)](#) criticizes polling’s assumption that public opinion is but the aggregate of preformed individual opinions, which thereby occludes the collective processes by which politics takes shape (see also [Cody 2011](#), 44). Indeed, Alejandro [Paz \(2016\)](#) analyzed one example of this collective process in his study of “public opinion” on immigrant children in Israel. As he showed, successful performances of a “public opinion” against child deportation depended on the successful “voicing” of child immigrants in the Israeli news media and the uptake of the resulting messages by a sympathetic Israeli public.

Furthermore, because publics are so regularly construed as representative or reflective of the popular will, they often affect and are affected by dynamics of state power. Publics and counterpublics can generate political claims and forms of political practice that challenge, or even threaten, state legitimacy. For example, [Bonilla and Rosa \(2015\)](#) analyze how activists protesting Michael Brown’s 2014 murder by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, used Twitter to establish a public that challenged the authority of the police and demanded accountability. However, precisely because of this capacity, state institutions often seek to regulate publicity, that is, to regiment what can (and cannot) circulate in publics (see [Graan 2022a](#)). In such cases, as Francis [Cody \(2011, 45\)](#) expressed it, “Politics . . . takes the form of a cultural regulation of publicity, and sovereignty is asserted in the very capacity to regulate the limits of public display.” Thus, while publics are productively understood as a space constituted by the reflexive circulation of discourse, they can also be analyzed as spaces in which state power is both asserted and challenged.

In yet other cases, rival claims to represent the collectivity that publics presuppose appear within and across publics, producing and exacerbating political cleavage and polarization (see [Graan 2021](#) on “representation struggles”). Arvind [Rajagopal \(2001\)](#) analyzed such struggles in his study of the “split public” that emerged in India with the rise of Hindu nationalism. If bourgeois news outlets had long claimed to represent the interests of the Indian public, Hindu nationalist politicians and publications challenged that claim in asserting their own populist (if sectarian) legitimacy. Early 21st-century discourses on media bubbles arguably mark a similar splitting of a mainstream public that was once assumed to be (relatively) unified. James [Slotta \(2019\)](#) shows how such laterally organized “bubbles” and “siloes” are (re)produced by discourses and practices that mark alter-publics as other, for example, as irrational and in need of decipherment (see also [Graan 2021](#)). Indeed, some scholars have suggested that the fragmented character of late liberal publics, often enabled by new media technologies, undermines the unmarked and authoritative “voice from nowhere” that undergirded modernist, national publics and their claims to public representation ([Heyd and Schneider 2019](#); [Hirschkind, de Abreu, and Caduff 2017](#)).

Publicity and Affect

Attention to the politics of publicity also foregrounds the play and power of affect within publics. William Mazzarella, in particular, emphasized the affective dimension of publicity. For Mazzarella ([2003a](#), [2013](#), [2017](#)), mass media forms, whether advertisements, films, or political rhetoric, constitute a complex kind of ethnographic object. Their value depends on media producers’ ability to excite and harness affective resonance within targeted audiences. But such resonances can easily exceed and subvert producers’ interests. Mass media forms are thus risky and motivate both commercial and governmental efforts at “affect

management,” that is, efforts to regulate public spheres. In his later work, [Mazzarella \(2017\)](#) developed this analysis of mass media forms into a theory of the “mana of mass publicity,” which posits the dialectical movement between public excitation and its instrumental containment as a general social and political dynamic within contemporary societies.

One factor in the circulation of public discourse is thus its “resonance” with broader affective lifeworlds ([Lepselter 2016](#)). The affective charge of a media artifact (e.g., a commodity image, a song, or a film) or a public discourse (e.g., a conspiracy theory, a discourse on wellness or on crime) depends on (but is not reducible to) its dialogism with a broader history of discursively mediated public emotion. [Catherine Fennell \(2012\)](#) examined how the developers of the Public Housing Museum in Chicago sought to interpellate a “sympathetic public” through media and discourse that would resonate with long-standing public discourses on bourgeois responsibility to help those in need. Importantly, Lauren Berlant studied how public forms mediated emotional attachments and vice versa (e.g., Berlant [1997](#), [1999](#), [2011](#)). Indeed, as Berlant (2016) argued, even claims to “rational deliberation” within liberal public spheres rest on and deliver their own affective charge, that is, such claims stake out one affective position—that of inhabiting “rationality”—within a broader field of public emotion.

Scholars who are attentive to the affective dimension of publicity have also questioned the conceptual division between publics and crowds. Beginning with [Le Bon \(2001\)](#), a generation of scholars theorized the crowd as a locus of mass irreason, where emotion and group mentality could be channeled into destructive violence (see [Freud 2004](#); cf. [Canetti 1984](#)). Indeed, fear of “irrational,” mass behavior spurred writers like Lippman and Dewey to consider the limits of a democratic public sphere. For much of the 20th century, then, irrational crowds, often classed, raced, and gendered, were assumed as an antithesis to rational publics. Contrary to the rational public/irrational crowd dichotomy, some

anthropologists have pointed out similarities between the two social forms. Stanley [Tambiah \(1996\)](#) illustrated how forms of discursive circulation and publicity mediate crowd formation. [Mazzarella \(2010\)](#) argued that the mimetic logic of crowds exists in dialectical tension with social institutionalization, including, one might suppose, in publics. Francis [Cody \(2015\)](#) developed an ethnographic perspective on crowds in India, showing their importance as a long-standing modality of performing “peoplehood” and popular sovereignty (see also [Chowdhury 2019](#)). In taking crowds seriously, Cody problematizes the liberal assumptions that underwrite classic public sphere theory, from Habermas to Warner.

Reconceptualizing Power

Perhaps no other concern is more significant in contemporary anthropology than the analysis and critique of power. As Sherry [Ortner \(2016\)](#) has argued, “dark anthropology,” that is, the investigation of the inequality, domination, and suffering wrought by (post)colonialism and neoliberalism, set the tone for the discipline in the 21st century. If “society” or “culture” once constituted the conceptual center of anthropology, arguably “power” now serves that function. This sea change in anthropological focus corresponds with the critique of an older anthropology that depoliticized and dehistoricized the (often marginalized) people that it studied (see [Rosaldo 1989](#)). The turn to power thus grounded a reflexive anthropology that sought to reveal and critique, rather than to perpetuate, the operations of domination.

Beyond all others, Michel Foucault provided a theoretical basis for the anthropological critique of power, in his work on discipline and capillary power (1986); on governmentality and biopolitics (1991, 2008); and on care, sexuality, and ethics (1990, 1997). Other theorists and approaches also remain influential and essential in anthropology, especially Marx ([Ortner 2016](#)), but in many ways, Foucauldian understandings of power and society have

become the discipline's default. For example, the metaphorical language of "management," made popular by Foucault's writings on governmentality (1991; see also Miller and Rose 2009), is used to describe and conceptualize power in contemporary anthropological writing, even without explicit citation of Foucault (Graan 2022b).

Against this backdrop, the anthropology of publics and publicity suggests ways to conceptualize power that extend but also go beyond Foucauldian approaches. First, some work on publics examines how publicity itself can function as a tool of social management and governmentality. In *The Economy of Words*, Douglas Holmes (2014) documented how central banks rely on public communication in their efforts to steer national economies. In sharing their forecasts of the economic future, central bankers expect and compel economic agents (e.g., businesses, banks, investors, consumers) to modify their behavior to steady growth and combat inflation. In essence, central bankers' public pronouncements are live experiments in "the conduct of conduct" (Foucault 1991), in this case, in managing economic behavior.

Yet, as I argued in my study of American and European diplomats' public commentary on political reform in Macedonia (Graan 2016b), in many ways, the varieties of governance that are enacted through the public sphere differ from classic models of governmentality. Governmentality studies (e.g., Miller and Rose 2009) conceptualize power in terms of particular political rationalities and the political technologies through which they are implemented. In consequence, the analysis of power typically focuses on temporally and spatially delimited *projects* and *programs* of governance (Graan 2016b). Diplomats' public commentary in Macedonia did function as a form of political intervention, I contended, but it was not structured as a prefashioned plan of global governance. Rather, the commentary was extemporaneous, multivocal, dialogic, serial, and ongoing, that is, it was organized by the discursive space of the Macedonian public sphere. In effect, diplomats' public commentary

expressed quite a different logic of intervention compared to most analyses of governmentality (see also Gilbert 2020). This suggests that analyses of power must expand to account for the unique forms of politics that emerge through public spheres.

Second, attention to the normativity of public spheres can also inform scholarship on power and identity. Judith [Butler \(1993\)](#) famously theorized how speech acts channel social norms to interpellate gendered subjects. Beyond the pronouncements of authority figures, media across public culture can similarly interpellate subjects in gendered, raced, and otherwise marked ways. For example, in her work on the normative Whiteness of the American public sphere, Jane Hill ([1993](#), [1995](#), [1998](#), [2008](#)) illustrated how everyday language and media tropes reproduce negative stereotypes about Spanish speakers and, by extension, Latinos (cf. [Alim and Smitherman 2012](#); [Smalls 2021](#)). Miyako [Inoue \(2003, 2006\)](#) showed how male academics invented a normative model of “Japanese women’s speech” amid a fin-de-siecle moral panic on female behavior. Inoue argued, however, that this construct never existed as an organically spoken variant of Japanese: it was a projection of how male scholars imagined Japanese women should talk. Nevertheless, this model was taken up in literature, radio, television, and film, as a “properly feminine” voice. Insofar as “women’s language” proved authoritative in Japanese publics, it thereby exerted a normative force, interpellating gendered speakers in relation to its model (cf. [Rosa and Flores 2017](#)).

This scholarship on identity, power, and publics highlights how the discursive organization of publics stands in a dialectical relationship with the social organization of its participants, effecting a social organization of interdiscursivity ([Gal 2018](#)). In effect, publics constitute an arena of political action, in which “saying things”—and changing how things are said or evaluated—effects social life more broadly. In contrast to many other anthropological theories of power and political economy, such scholarship sees power as

something that is entrenched but still responsive and (re)moldable through social practice (see [Bakhtin 1981](#) on centrifugal and centripetal forces).

How Does One Study the Public Sphere

Ethnographically?

This article began with the observation that, beginning in the 1990s, anthropology increasingly concerned itself with forms of mass media and public culture. I have shown the novelty and vitality of the anthropology of publics and the public sphere and its relevance for the anthropological study of media, circulation, community formation, nationalism, identity, power, and so on. One lingering question, however, is a methodological one: how does one undertake an ethnography of a public, of a social organization of interdiscursivity?

There are myriad answers to this question, and most of the anthropological works cited here provide an answer to the question. In parallel to media anthropology, some studies focus on the institutions and professionals (e.g., journalists, marketing executives, central bankers) who produce media for public circulation ([Bishara 2013](#); [Fattal 2018](#); [Holmes 2014](#); [Mazzarella 2003a](#)). [Bishara \(2013\)](#), for example, examined differences between how “international” journalists report on Palestine and how Palestinian journalists (who often also work as fixers for the foreign journalists) do so. Through participant observation, Bishara shadowed Palestinian journalists as they did their work, showing how they navigated Israeli constraints on their movement, how they collaborated with international peers, and how they wrote news reports differently for different imagined audiences. Through this research, Bishara brought into relief the regimes of publicity that differentiated the work and possibilities of Palestinian compared to international journalists. International journalists practiced historically specific standards of “neutrality” and “objectivity,” whereas Palestinian

journalists engaged in advocacy journalism, seeing their reporting as necessary to publicizing the brutality of the Israeli occupation that so circumscribed their professional and personal lives. In comparing these differently structured publics, Bishara does not elevate the former, with its professed “objectivity,” as superior to the latter. Rather, she uses the case of Palestinian journalists under occupation to show how some participation norms and language ideologies are untenable in contexts of extreme militarization and structural violence. Through an ethnography of journalists, Bishara not only analyzes distinct regimes of publicity, she also relativizes and critiques liberal assumptions (e.g., on objectivity) that otherwise claim universality.

Scholars have also studied media consumption to understand how texts circulate in publics. Francis [Cody \(2009\)](#) detailed how tea shops in Tamil Nadu served as forums for collective news consumption and discussion among working-class men. Shop owners would hang the pages of the day’s newspaper on clotheslines, so that those interested could read the latest news or even read aloud to others present. Cody then contrasts this working-class practice of news consumption with the middle-class norm of reading the paper alone, in the privacy of one’s own home. From this ethnography of news consumption, Cody elaborated how differing working-class and middle-class news consumption practices reflect distinct “regimes of circulation.” Working-class and middle-class consumers not only preferred different newspapers, but the papers themselves were constructed to correspond to their target audiences’ reading practices. For instance, the working-class papers were printed to enable sharing, they were designed to be taken apart and hung on lines. Like Bishara, then, Cody brought differing publics into ethnographic relief by investigating one set of practices that organize and are organized by such publics.

Finally, other studies of publicity center on circulation itself. The focus here is not on the producers or consumers of media within a public, but on how texts do (or do not move)

within publics. For example, Greg Urban's (2001) book *Metaculture* enquired into the ideologies (e.g., of novelty) and enabling genres (e.g., film reviews) that catalyze particular kinds of circulation in American popular culture. His concern is not on a particular professional or social class, but on the genres that structure the circulation of discourse and other media in publics. Charles [Briggs's \(2003\)](#) study of public health announcements in Venezuela analyzed their production, circulation, and consumption, showing the interrelationships among imaginaries of circulation, text production, and (the lack of) uptake. [Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa's \(2015\)](#) article "#Ferguson" engaged in what might be called platform ethnography. The authors study how affordances of Twitter (e.g., shareability, tagging, liking), combined with its relatively democratized infrastructural requirements (i.e., a camera-equipped smartphone and an internet connection), enabled a Black activist public to organize to protest racist police violence and Michael Brown's murder.

It is worth noting that such studies of circulation often break with some established ethnographic conventions. In a discipline in which face-to-face participant observation is still considered the gold standard of research, efforts to map how texts circulate or how platforms structure publics might appear slight on ethnography. Nevertheless, new ethnographic objects often require new methodological approaches. George [Marcus's \(1995\)](#) widely influential essay on multisited ethnography argued that contemporary anthropological problems cannot be easily located in one research location. Hence, it is necessary to *follow* ethnographic objects, to trace how ideas, texts, people, media, and arguments circulate across contexts.

Marcus's formulation of multisited ethnography thus foreshadowed ethnographic research on circulation within and across publics. The goal is to study how ethnographic objects move. For most anthropologists, this task still requires, and certainly benefits from, located participant observation, but face-to-face ethnography is often unable to answer all of the questions relevant to media circulation and public spheres. In consequence,

anthropologists of publicity, like anthropologists more generally, combine methodologies and analytic techniques, for example, by employing discourse and media analysis to examine interdiscursivities and circulations that exceed face-to-face interactions (see [Wortham and Reyes 2015](#)). The anthropology of publicity is thus one vanguard in the field of anthropological methods that seeks to blend interpretative methods in its pursuit of anthropological insight.

Conclusion

Ethnographic and theoretical engagement with public culture is now a necessary part of anthropological research. This article has sought to demonstrate how the anthropology of publics and the public sphere contributes to this task. Anthropological approaches to publics and the public sphere can serve to guide ethnographic research by foregrounding the regimes of publicity, those combinations of social practices, norms, ideologies, and infrastructures that mediate how discourse and other media circulate. In bringing new sorts of ethnographic objects into relief, the anthropology of publics and the public sphere illustrates how methods such as media and discourse analysis can expand and deepen ethnographic research.

At the same time, anthropological theories of the public sphere not only draw on and relate to developed interests in identity, affect, and power but also make unique contributions to these literatures. Long-established norms of anthropological research have privileged co-located and delimited social groups as field sites. In consequence, anthropologists have built their theoretical understandings of the social world through the analysis of group relationships and power dynamics. The anthropology of publics and the public sphere, however, develops a different approach to the social, one that recognizes how mass communication mediates social forms that are irreducible to spatially co-located

communities, institutions, practices, and organizations. This turn to theorizing discursive circulation affords scholars of publicity new perspectives on classic social problems, from those of representation and power to those of identity and social belonging. A vital field of theory and inquiry, the anthropology of publics and publicity is poised to contribute to future understandings of media, politics, and society in the contemporary world.

Further Reading

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Related Articles

Ethnographic Explorations of Intellectual Property; Inequality; Language and Culture in Workplace Ethnography; Language as Social Action; Social Media Relationships

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Notes

¹ *A note on terminology:* Throughout the essay, I use the term “publics” to refer to a particular kind of social form created by the reflexive circulation of discourse (following [Warner 2002](#)). “Publicity” refers to the general phenomenon of participation in publics. For example, one can discuss various “practices of publicity” or the “politics of publicity.” This usage is distinct from the commonplace understanding of publicity as a kind of marketing or advertising, as when an actor “does publicity” for a new film. The term, “the public sphere” refers to a public that claims hegemony over a national community, in distinction to publics that are defined as “special interest” in contrast.

² Importantly, publics do vary according to scale. Mass media publics typically presuppose, and often achieve, large-scale audiences. In contrast, small-scale or alternative media often target more narrowly defined constituencies that limit their circulatory expanse. Social media networks afford users so-called micropublics composed of “friends” and “followers.” Social media micropublics, however, often blur distinctions between users’ private and professional lives (see [Gershon 2014](#)), rendering them an especially interesting (and awkward) frontier of publicity. These differences between mass media, small media, and social media publics map onto differences in scale, ownership, and producer/receiver relations (see also [Hirschkind, de Abreu, and Caduff 2017](#)). I thank one of the article’s anonymous reviewers for emphasizing this point.

³ The model of the “liberal public sphere” continues to serve as a normative political model in many world contexts. Rihan [Yeh’s \(2018\)](#) ethnography of publicity in Tijuana offers one example of this, showing how interlocutors invoked norms of liberal publicity in order to figure middle-class

propriety as opposed to the communicative practices of the working-class “pueblo.” As another example, in the United States, mainstream responses to the candidacy and presidency of Donald Trump often also reproduced a model of the liberal public sphere. In rejecting the regular lies and fabrications of Trump and his supporters, critics instead called for “fact-based” journalism rooted in disinterested reporting and rational procedures of truth verification.

⁴ For more on the distinction between public and private, see [Gal 2002](#).

⁵ See also Craig Calhoun’s (1992) edited volume *Habermas and the Public Sphere*.

⁶ This issue was later republished as an edited volume ([Gal and Woolard 2001](#)) and was recently reissued by Routledge.

⁷ The concept of interdiscursivity stems from Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) writing on the dialogic character of language. Bakhtin notes that one’s words are always already suffused with the words of others, such that linguistic meaning depends on past utterances and can be transformed by subsequent ones. Interdiscursivity emerges across contexts when some stretch of discourse, whether spoken or written, somehow indexes and thereby reworks an earlier stretch of discourse (see [Agha 2005](#); [Bauman and Briggs 1992](#); [Gal 2018](#)). My argument here is that the mutual orientations and participation norms that mediate publics result in particular interdiscursive regularities (e.g., ways of speaking, ways of addressing audiences) that presuppose and entail particular societal arrangements. Publics thus amount to, following Susan [Gal \(2018\)](#), a “social organization of interdiscursivity.”