



## The global public sphere: public communication in the age of reflective interdependence

Peter Dahlgren

**To cite this article:** Peter Dahlgren (2015) The global public sphere: public communication in the age of reflective interdependence, *Information, Communication & Society*, 18:12, 1423-1425, DOI: [10.1080/1369118X.2015.1020824](https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1020824)

**To link to this article:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1020824>



Published online: 24 Mar 2015.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 685



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

## BOOK REVIEW

**The global public sphere: public communication in the age of reflective interdependence**, by Ingrid Volkmer, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014, 225 pp., £17.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-7456-3958-1

In just a few years after the English translation in 1989 of Habermas' classic book on the public sphere, discussions on that theme were beginning to intersect with those of globalization. At first it was perspectives such as 'pan-European public space' and 'global civil society' that rose to prominence, given up to about the mid-1990s, the ever-growing cross-border flows of communication were still dominated by structures of mass media and by conceptualizations about the nation state, two key elements in Habermas' historical analysis. The notion of a 'global public sphere', while an attractive motif, seemed sociologically remote at the time. Circumstances have of course evolved, and two decades later, nation states are sharing the global arena with many other actors, and the media landscape has undergone dramatic developments. The idea of a global public sphere has gained considerable significance, even if this involves modifying some basic conceptual features of the original model and normative ideal. (As with the original conception, many would with this new global format lean towards using the concept in the plural form, but the clumsier form of exposition – rather than any strong theoretical point – tends to favour the singular form.)

Ingrid Volkmer is well versed in Habermas' work, public sphere theory, the processes of globalization, and the contemporary character of media, rendering this volume a most welcome contribution. She does not simply try to 'update' our understanding of the public sphere, but engages in broad theoretical synthesis as well as breaks new ground in order to come to grips with a set of very altered contingencies. Indeed, I would suggest that she in fact charts the new, contemporary 'structural transformation' of the public sphere and gives it a decidedly late modern conceptual profile. Her theoretical framework is informed by a large body of literature, which she mobilizes and dialogues with as the book unfolds. Not surprisingly, the prose is theory-heavy, but her writing is for the most part clear and accessible, if a bit challenging in spots. The book is definitely worth the effort.

She has several points of departure. First, while noting that the familiar, technical macro-networks of communication – with their active audience-users – constitute a premise for contemporary global communication, she emphasizes the multi-level character of these media and their communicative modes. She underscores that the character of globalized communication today is not defined by these media structures in themselves, but rather in the actual way that individuals and organizations communicate across diverse platforms, from all manner of mainstream media to all kinds of social media. Second, it is in the communication – and editing, mixing, filtering, and modifying – of *content* that we find the new global sphere. Third, that sphere is shaped by individualized nodes, 'situated within a universe of subjective, personal networked structures linking individuals across world regions' (p. 1). There is thus a significant emphasis on subjective dynamics here, not only in terms of communicative processes, but in the very character of 'lived' public spaces. Volkmer uses the concept of 'micro-networks' to capture the interdependent connections between actors across these thus 'assembled' communicative spaces.

We have thereby left behind the defining framework of nation states, and moved to a regime where the local blends readily with the global and all stops in between, based on the identities, loyalties, and allegiances of the actors, operating across the full range of media technologies and platforms; this global public sphere operates across supra- and sub-national societal contexts. Volkmer makes the further point that we have also moved beyond the Western-dominated version of globalization: there is an emerging, *de facto* 'inclusiveness' whereby the dense communication patterns in the world today encompass other regions, with their particular perceptions and practices. Indeed, she opens the book by pointing out that the majority of web users are now found in Asia.

Volkmer acknowledges her intellectual debt to Habermas, while offering a compelling analytic vision of a global public sphere in a new historical epoch. Yet, she also insists that this vision must be filled in empirically, with more knowledge about public cultures, their histories, and transformations, beyond the Western context. Also, we need to further explore the ramifications of these altered public horizons and their global geographies, particularly in regard to publics as such, as publics increasingly move beyond the nation state into global arenas. For example, she points to the question of what happens to the legitimizing role of publics in this context, when they become thus disembedded from the nation and community and dispersed across many discursive sites. This leads her to the necessity of a key dynamic that she calls *reflective interdependence*, whereby prevailing paradigms of, for example, globalization, citizenship, and civic engagement must be – and are – constantly being redefined.

The book is composed of five chapters. The opening one is the scene-setter, situating us conceptually in the (long ongoing) processes whereby public culture has been seeping out beyond the frame of the state. While this has amassed some democratic gains, Volkmer also discusses the crises of legitimation, sovereignty, and power that follow in the wake of this 'post-territoriality'. In Chapter 2, aided by historical and contemporary examples, Volkmer focuses on the trans-border communication flows within a model that highlights what she calls *densities of public space*, or 'public assemblages'. This refers to the mechanisms of how subjectively based micro-networks become linked to each other and how they move beyond the state, while facilitating the deliberation needed for democratic life. Chapter 3 pursues the theme of how deliberative discourse is becoming increasingly disembedded, as it seeps out into global contexts. The chapter typologizes key 'fields' (not the Bourdieu concept; 'mode' might have been a better term) of deliberation among transnational publics and explores how a variety of 'disjunctures' impact on such discourse. Volkmer looks at examples of the deliberative possibilities of what she calls 'reflective inbetween-ness', that is, continual self-confrontation as subjects encounter situations of public interconnectness in globalized settings where deliberation can take place.

In Chapter 4, she launches the idea of 'matrix of influence', which shifts our analytic gaze away from seeing media as forms of organization and instead underscores how different media forms become embedded within and used in diverse contexts of public space. Using three case studies of transnational news organizations, she shows how ostensibly monologic mass media output can become, via a variety of process-oriented flows, radically refracted as public interconnectness and dialogue. The final chapter pulls together the theoretic trajectories and moves towards the idea of 'public horizons', understood as an achievement of public interconnectness. Volkmer mobilizes Kant and Hegel to develop a view of publicness and discursive consciousness that is coherent with the contours of the contemporary global public sphere. If the chapter may be seen by some readers as theoretically somewhat lofty, it should be kept in mind that the aim of this work is to ground a new conceptual framework, one that will be useful as an analytic tool, rather than serving up confirmed empirical findings.

This is an ambitious book, and in my view largely succeeds on its own terms in offering the contours of public sphere dynamics in the globalized age. I would have liked to have seen a

discussion connecting the large themes of the global public sphere more explicitly to the micro-settings and problematics of engagement in everyday life, and the empowerment of citizens. There is a certain analytic grey area in regard to perspectives on power and agency; how are we to understand ever-present power relations, their impact on the contingencies of deliberation, and where do we find the major threats to democratic development? While Volkmer analyses with clarity how historical circumstances are changing, it would also be useful to have a better idea of what actors, especially citizens, can actually do within these new contexts, that is, how they impact on the potential for political engagement and efficacy. However, we already have been offered quite a lot to think about – and with – in this book, and perhaps these further concerns will be addressed in future publications. As it is, Ingrid Volkmer has written a book that will benefit all students of globalization and/or the public sphere who read it.

Peter Dahlgren

*Media & Communication Studies (MKV), Lund University Lund, SE 221 00, Sweden*

Email: [peter.dahlgren@soc.lu.se](mailto:peter.dahlgren@soc.lu.se)

© 2015, Peter Dahlgren

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1020824>

#### Notes on contributor

**Peter Dahlgren** is Professor Emeritus at the Department of Communication and Media, Lund University, Sweden. His work focuses on media and democracy, from the perspective of late modern social and cultural theory. Along with various journal articles and book chapters, his recent publications include *The Political Web* (Palgrave, 2013), *Media and Political Engagement* (Cambridge University Press, 2009) and the co-edited volume *Young People, ICTs and Democracy* (Nordicom, 2010), as well as the collection *Young Citizens and New Media* (Routledge, 2007). [email: [peter.dahlgren@soc.lu.se](mailto:peter.dahlgren@soc.lu.se)]