The Relational Public

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Abstract

This article sets out three ways of conceiving publics: (1) an organic conception, the public as the body politic; (2) an individualized conception, the public as an aggregate of individuals, grouped by social categories; and (3) a relational conception, in which publics are defined as open-ended networks of actors linked through flows of communication, shared stories, and civic or other collective concerns. These conceptions have emerged not only through theoretical reflection but also as the result of historical and institutional developments. Building on work from Tarde and Habermas down to recent theorists, I seek to advance the relational conception, suggest its implications for research, and highlight its connection to contemporary developments in both theory and society.

Keywords

public, relational sociology, public sphere, virality, social networks

On the morning of January 13, 1898, according to his son's later recollection, the sociologist Gabriel Tarde reacted with astonishment as he read the headline "J'accuse" on the front page of the Paris newspaper *L'Aurore* over an open letter to France's president from the novelist Émile Zola (van Ginneken 1992:219). The letter charged that the government had falsified evidence and framed a Jewish officer on the army's general staff, Alfred Dreyfus.

Over the next two years, as the Dreyfus affair played out, Tarde published a pair of essays that mark the beginning of sociological discussion of the public as a distinct social phenomenon.[1] The journalist, Tarde ([1899] 1969:312) pointed out, initiates a social process: "Every morning the papers give their publics the conversations for the day. One can be almost certain at any moment of the subject of a conversation between men talking at a club, in a smoking room, in a lobby." Physical proximity, however, had ceased to be necessary for social influence. Contrary to the view popularized by his contemporary Gustave Le Bon that theirs was an era of crowds, Tarde argued that it was "the era of the public or of publics, and that is a very different thing." People were now linked together not just by reading but by the knowledge that others were at the same moment reading the same things. In a public, Tarde ([1898] 1969:278, 281) wrote, the "bond" among people "lies in their simultaneous conviction or passion and in their awareness of sharing at the same time an idea or a wish with a great number of other men. It suffices for a man to know this, even without seeing these others, to be influenced by them *en masse*."

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In short, Tarde argued that the public had to be understood as a distinctive structure of social relations and consciousness. In his example, the newspaper linked together its readers in a "simultaneous conviction or passion" and mutual awareness. In addition, newspapers set off in-person interactions, "the conversations of the day," at certain predictable places, "at a club, in a smoking room, in a lobby."

Today, analysts often use the term "networked public" or "networked public sphere" to describe the kind of horizontally connected public that has emerged with digital communication and social media, as distinct from the more centralized "mass public" created earlier by the mass media (Benkler 2006; boyd 2010). But horizontal connections were present all along, even in the mass public, although they are now more traceable and measurable. All publics are networks; they are just networks with different structures, sitting on different institutional and technological platforms. What makes them publics is that they are open-ended networks of actors linked through flows of communication, shared stories, and civic or other collective concerns.

This way of understanding publics—a "relational" conception this article will spell out in more detail—has an extensive history since Tarde, although many who have developed it have had little, if any, acquaintance with Tarde's work. The relational conception is best understood when contrasted with two other conceptions that come down to us from a long lineage. The first and oldest is the conception of the public as the body politic, the organic foundation of a state. This is the public invoked by leaders claiming a mandate: the people as a corporate body, or at least the legitimate members of the political community as the dominant party conceives it. The second conception views the public chiefly as an aggregate of individuals, grouped by social categories. This is the pollster's public, discovered by asking a sample of individuals one by one for their private opinions, then summing them up as public opinion.

Both of these conceptions, the organic and the individualized, have their place in the political imagination. It is not my intention here to argue that either one is "incorrect." But both are missing the intervening social and cultural processes that make publics what they are. From a relational standpoint, the public depends not only on what individuals think but on how they associate and are linked with one another and develop mutual awareness and recognition. Depending on social conditions, a public may be broad or narrow, strong or weak, unified or fragmented. Instead of there being a single all-inclusive whole, there may be many publics, and rather than being ongoing fixtures of society, publics may wax or wane over time or appear suddenly in the vortex of politics or cultural excitement and just as abruptly vanish.

In English, the noun "public" came into widespread use in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to designate the readership of books and periodicals, the audiences of plays and spectacles, and the body of people whose voices carried weight in politics. How was this public to be understood? Above all, how was it to be understood in relation to the political community? Although we can distinguish analytically among conceptions of the public, the different meanings have bled into one another in practice. The term "public" carries over connotations of legitimacy from its linguistic and historic roots; far from being a neutral analytic category, "the public" has also been, and remains, a critical and aspirational idea. Unlike other terms for a collection of people (e.g., a "population"), the noun "public" bears normative freight. To speak of a public is plainly to dignify the people so grouped together. A public sits in judgment and acts like a tribunal: "the court of public opinion." Hence the fear, hope, and disappointment it often inspires. A public, as a long line of theorists have defined it, ideally consists of reasoning participants (in the political sphere, citizens) who recognize obligations beyond self-interest and are capable of rational discussion about the

common good. Some sociologists may wish to dispose of this seemingly unscientific concern. But this ideal vision of the public remains a crucial standpoint for criticism and reflection, especially in an era like our own, when the public is being rewired and transformed and the chief alternative ideal to the public and the public good is the rationality of the market.

This article sets out the three general conceptions of the public, along with many variations, as they have historically developed, often in opposition to what have been seen as degraded collectivities (the mob, the crowd, the mass). In developing a relational view, I focus on three dimensions of the social relations of the public: how felt connections emerge, how communication flows and actors are linked, and how power relations develop and affect civic and collective concerns.

THE PUBLIC AS THE BODY POLITIC

No institution has been more important in the public's development than the state, and no form of the public has been more important than the public of citizens. As states vary, so do ruling ideas of membership, recognition, and rights. A public does not simply exist as an inevitable feature of any human society. In a feudal society, where rule rests on ties of personal loyalty, there is no public to speak of, or at least none that can find a voice. Neither is there a public under a totalitarian regime, where the state suppresses civil society and public discussion. For a public of citizens to develop, there must be enough of a state to create a political community but not so much as to suffocate it.

The distinction between public and private has ancient origins, although the conceptions of who and what belongs on each side of the boundary between them has changed. The Greeks distinguished the *polis*, or body politic, from the *oikos*, or private household: the *polis* was reserved for free, adult men with ancestral ties to the community, while women, slaves, and foreigners were outside its boundaries. Rome had a more cosmopolitan definition of citizenship, but in the Roman republic, the public realm was also socially exclusive. It is from Latin that we get the English word "public" and its cognates in other languages; the notion of a public realm derives from the Latin phrase *res publica.* The meaning of *res publica* was contested among the Romans and changed over time (Hodgson 2017), but perhaps the most famous definition comes from Cicero:

> *Res publica*, then, is the concern (*res*) of a people (*populi*). A people, further, is not just any gathering of humans that has come together in any way at all; but it is a gathering of a multitude formed into a partnership by a common agreement on law (*iuris consensu*) and a sharing of benefits (*utilitatis communione*). (Asmis 2004:575)

As Asmis (2004:579) explains, *res publica* refers to the concerns a people hold in common, "everything that has to do with the political community as a whole. . . . Formulated as *res populi*, it designates something that belongs to the people, whether as a sphere of activity or as a possession." Classical republicanism revered public-spiritedness, devotion to the *res publica.*

Civic republican thought in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe (e.g., in the work of Machiavelli and Harrington) revived Roman ideals celebrating public-spiritedness. Civic virtue required a vigilant devotion to the public good; the citizen-soldier embodied that vigilance, tending his land in peace but willing to defend his country in war. Freedom, in this view, meant security against domination and required active engagement and an abiding suspicion of arbitrary power. But in civic republican thought, the public was also socially restricted. It consisted of property-owning men whose wealth was presumed to give them a

stake in the social order and the capacity to resist corruption (van Gelderen and Skinner 2002).

Although the term "public" has an all-inclusive meaning to the modern ear, social distinctions—by gender, class, and moral deservingness—have typically been implicit in the dominant conception of the public. Some groups have been presumed to fulfill the ideal of the public more fully than others, and some not at all. The history of the public is partly a history of these changing social boundaries and hierarchies.

The forms of exclusion have varied. Slaves, as Patterson (1982) shows, were denied social existence entirely. Women, even in dominant social strata, were consigned to the private sphere of the family (Elshtain 1981). New tensions over women's role developed in the eighteenth century, as elite women became a growing part of the reading and theatrical publics. But women were still not granted political rights, and much of the language of politics retained the understanding of the public as a sphere demanding manly virtues. During the era of the French Revolution, writers often condemned the court and aristocracy as effeminate; the revolutionaries elevated an ideal of "fraternity" that excluded women from politics. "Public virtue," Hunt (1991:126) writes, "required virility, which required in turn the violent rejection of aristocratic degeneracy and any intrusion of the feminine into the public."

Besides the feminine, domestic sphere, the other antithesis of the public in the literature and political thought of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the "mob"—short for the Latin *mobile vulgus*, or fickle populace. In contrast to the rational public of men of rank and wealth, the mob comprised individuals lacking a stake in society, dependent on others, governed by their appetites, and therefore unable to make sacrifices for the good of all. By the late nineteenth century, writers fearful of disorder and revolution (Le Bon was a central figure) focused their attention on the "crowd" and devised a new "crowd psychology." They understood the crowd not just as a gathering of people but as a group that was suggestible, irrational, and uncontrollable. The threat of the mob and the crowd helped justify antidemocratic politics and the restricted, elite conception of the public (Barrows 1981; Le Bon [1895] 1960; van Ginneken 1992).

These socially exclusive understandings did not disappear, but liberal, democratic, and nationalist tendencies in political thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought the organic conception of the public into closer alignment with nations as a whole. The liberal element emphasized openness and accessibility in communication. The democratic element called for breaking down the hierarchies and exclusions that restricted the boundaries of the public in the republican tradition. The nationalist element equated the public with the national public.

The public-private distinction in modern societies has had two dimensions. Along one dimension, public corresponds to open, private to closed. Making something public generally means making it open and accessible. Along a second dimension, public corresponds to the whole of society, private to a part. Public in this sense sometimes refers to the state, as when we speak of "public officials" or a "public agency," although public may also refer to the *res publica*, not the state itself but the sphere of collective concerns and interests. Liberal reforms such as freedom of speech and the press have been especially concerned with the dimension of openness and accessibility. Classical liberalism is sometimes represented as being exclusively concerned with private and individual interests, but this is not accurate. Liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century were concerned not only with making a person's life and property more securely private but also with making government and politics more thoroughly public. Reforms such as the publication of laws and the opening up of legislative assemblies went along with a free press. Public in the sense of open would serve the interests of public in the sense of the whole. Free and open public discussion, conceived

as a test of reason, was at the foundation of liberal hope for human advancement. In "What Is Enlightenment?" Kant ([1784] 1990:85) defined "the public use of one's reason" as the use a person makes of reason "before the reading public." This public use, he insisted, "must always be free, and it alone can bring enlightenment," whereas "the private use of reason may often be very narrowly restricted without particularly hindering the progress of enlightenment."

Except in its most radical forms, however, classical liberalism maintained the old hierarchies and exclusions that denied equal rights to men without property, women, and racial minorities. It took organized movements from below and more democratic ideas to enlarge and diversify the public. But in the process, it may have become more difficult to continue to think of the public in the singular—as having a clear, homogeneous identity—and more in keeping with the new world of politics to think of it as a composite of individuals, organized into groups or grouped by categories.

THE INDIVIDUALIZED PUBLIC

As both a political philosophy and an analytic method, individualism conflicts with an organic conception of the public, just as it does with any holistic conception of society. At the extreme, the radical libertarian sees nothing but mystification in the idea of the public. "There is no such entity as 'the public,' since the public is merely a number of individuals," writes Ayn Rand (1964:88) in *The Virtues of Selfishness*, denying there is any such thing as the "public interest." The more common tendency, methodological individualism, regards concepts of collective phenomena as having no explanatory value unless they can be reduced to facts about individuals (Lukes 1973:110–22). In this view, the public remains a legitimate category but is intelligible only as an aggregate of individuals or the sum of individual action.

The individualized conception of the public is also closely related to the impulse to treat the public as a market. In some contexts, a market is tantamount to a public. Expanded markets for reading and theatrical performance in modern societies have created wider reading and theatrical publics. Markets and publics coincide whenever a public is formed as a result of a purchased product or service or whenever consumers' attention is purchased by advertisers. It is in this sense that markets make publics—that is, publics of consumers, as distinct from the public of citizens. But it is a short step, albeit a fraught one, to conceiving of the public of citizens as just another public of consumers, that is, as a "political market" in which individual citizens or voters express their preferences the way consumers do when they "vote" for different products. This is not just a common conflation in much contemporary political thought. The historical development of public opinion research brought the analysis of consumers and voters together under the same individualistic conceptual and methodological framework.

Public opinion is now identified with one method of measuring it—the opinion poll. But before surveys instructed us to think of public opinion as an aggregation of individual attitudes, political theorists and leaders had other ways of conceptualizing it. When the term "public opinion" first came into widespread use in the late eighteenth century, it was often used interchangeably with "public mind," "public spirit," or even "prejudice" and referred to what today might be called "values" or "ideology." When used in this sense, public opinion stood for ingrained and customary belief. But others, notably the physiocrats in France, came to think of public opinion as opinion that was clarified through public discussion and was therefore more rational and trustworthy as a foundation of government (Sheehan 2002). This was the political counterpart to the Kantian belief in public reason as the basis of

enlightenment. When Madison ([1788] 2009: 257) wrote in *The Federalist* No. 49 that "all governments rest on opinion," he was using "opinion" in the first sense as ingrained custom: "The most rational government will not find it a superfluous advantage to have the prejudices of the community on its side." But in other writing, Madison clearly favored the notion of public opinion as opinion clarified and enlightened through public debate. Later, when he was involved in the political struggles of the early republic, Madison wrote about public opinion as a malleable force, one that political leaders could modify and mobilize and that institutions, such as a national postal system, could help shape. But "public opinion" still referred to a diffuse concept of the public "mind" or "spirit," shared beliefs about central moral and political tenets (Gibson 2005; Madison 1791; Sheehan 2004).

The understanding of public opinion as resting on shared beliefs persisted among many writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a forgotten work of political science, *Public Opinion and Popular Government*, A. Lawrence Lowell (1913), president of Harvard, argued there could be no public opinion where there was no community of principle. If a shipwrecked sailor landed on an island with two cannibals, no public opinion existed among the three. To be "really public," an opinion had to be freely acknowledged by the minority as legitimate. A society's "accepted moral code" exemplified public opinion. As Lowell (1913:5, 15) conceived it, public opinion depended on the existence of a public that was not just a collection of individuals but a moral community.

Another largely forgotten work of early-twentieth-century political science illustrates a second perspective on public opinion predating the rise of opinion polls. In *The Process of Government*, Arthur Bentley ([1908] 1967:236)—at one time a revered figure as a founder of pluralism—argued, "There is no use attempting to handle public opinion except in terms of the groups that hold it and that it represents." Public opinion, as Bentley had it, was organized opinion. His logic partly reflected the circumstances of the times. Before opinion polls, the effective proxies for the public outside of government were civil and political associations, newspapers, and other periodicals. Between elections, who else spoke for the public if not the organized forces in civil society? But this conception was always vulnerable to the criticism that publicly expressed opinion did not correspond to the private beliefs of individuals, particularly those who went unrepresented by organized groups.

A much-discussed exchange in the decade before the emergence of opinion polls illustrates the uncertainty and even gloom among U.S. intellectuals about the nature of public opinion. Skeptical about the knowledge and attention to public affairs of the supposedly "omnicompetent" citizen, Walter Lippmann questioned whether in practice public opinion had the weight commonly attributed to it. In *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann (1925) argued it was a delusion to believe the people as a whole continuously directed the government in a democracy; the public was "merely those persons who are interested in an affair," and their role was limited to supporting or opposing the leaders of governing institutions. This public was "brought into action" only in a crisis, when those institutions were unable to resolve questions: "Where the facts are most obscure, where the precedents are lacking, where novelty and confusion pervade everything, the public in all its unfitness is compelled to make its most important decisions. The hardest problems are those which institutions cannot handle. They are the public's problems" (Lippmann 1925:69, 77, 131).

Responding to Lippmann in *The Public and Its Problems*, John Dewey ([1927] 1954) sought to bring back an organic conception of the public. He insisted there was a public—a body of persons with common interests—but also "too much public, a public too diffused and scattered" and "too many publics" given the complexity of social action. In Dewey's ([1927] 1954:137, 146) diagnosis, "the prime difficulty . . . is that of discovering the means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and

express its interests." Still conceiving of face-to-face relations in local communities as the foundation of the public, Dewey had no practical ideas to offer about the means by which the public could "recognize itself."[2]

Some of Dewey's contemporaries, however, did develop a practical means of determining public opinion. In the mid-1930s, a new intellectual technology—the sample survey—transformed the understanding of public opinion by individualizing and quantifying it. By polling individual citizens, the survey created a powerful analogy with elections. The use of new statistical techniques added scientific authority. The combined legitimating power of democracy and science overwhelmed whatever arguments critics then and since have sought to use against public opinion polls.

Reading the public through numbers was not an innovation of the 1930s. The new technology had antecedents in straw polls and market research. Straw polls of voters' intentions date back to elections in the early 1800s, when newspapers often reported on polls taken at events such as county fairs. By the early 1900s, the biggest straw polls were being conducted through the mail by popular magazines, which invited readers to send in cards marking off their preferences. Embedded in journalism, however, the straw polls developed in isolation from the social sciences and the discipline of statistics. In contrast, market research emerged at the turn of the twentieth century through efforts that brought together researchers in industry and the universities. The primary impetus for studies of consumer attitudes came from companies with brand-name products, advertising agencies, and magazines and newspapers that sought to demonstrate the value of advertising in their pages (Igo 2007). Although the methods early researchers used were generally intuitive, by the 1920s they were paying more attention to sampling theory developed by statisticians. As Igo (2007:113) notes, all three of the public opinion researchers who gained fame in the 1930s—George Gallup, Elmo Roper, and Archibald Crossley—began their careers doing market research and transferred techniques "from the buying to the voting public." The 1936 election was a turning point. The magazine conducting the biggest straw poll, *Literary Digest*, predicted the Republican Alfred Landon would win. By projecting victory for Franklin D. Roosevelt, the pollsters won a historic victory for themselves, forever changing the understanding of public opinion and the everyday experience of democracy.

The pollsters presented their analysis of the public as statistically more accurate and more genuinely democratic than the claims of interest groups and parties to represent the public. Polling, according to Gallup, gave a voice to the inarticulate and unorganized and did so on the basis of scientific evidence (Gallup and Rae 1940). Just as consumer research would tell companies what the public wanted from the market, opinion polls would tell politicians what the public wanted from government. In fact, the pollster's public suffered from some of the same limitations as earlier conceptions of the public. The surveys tended to oversample men and elite occupations and to undersample, and sometimes entirely omit, racial minorities. Because pollsters' business was mainly market research, their public was often biased in favor of consumers who had the money to buy the products that corporate clients wanted to promote (Igo 2007).

Even to the extent these limitations were later overcome or at least minimized, the pollster's public was an incomplete rendering. Their surveys did not reflect the social organization of the public. To be sure, pollsters used individual characteristics such as income, age, and gender to aggregate the data into different social categories. But categories—people in different age or income brackets, for example—do not necessarily coincide with the ways people group themselves and are linked with one another. By failing to register the networks of ties among people, the individualized public missed a critical aspect of the public that Tarde's more relational vision had captured.

THE RELATIONAL PUBLIC: FROM TARDE TO HABERMAS

Although this article is not primarily about Tarde, his work is a useful point of departure for thinking about the relational tradition of thought about the public—and, more specifically, how felt connections emerge and affect forms of mutual awareness and recognition, how actors are linked and communication diffuses, and how power relations develop and affect civic and collective concerns. Communication was at the heart of Tarde's sociology. "Consciousness," he wrote,

> is the premise of sociology, just as motion is the premise of mechanics. The elementary mechanical fact is the communication or the modification of a motion determined by the action of one molecule or of one mass upon another. . . . Similarly, the elementary social fact is the communication or the modification of a state of consciousness by the action of one conscious being upon another. (Tarde 2016:66)

As we have seen, Tarde's argument about the public was about intersubjectivity. Journalists linked people together in two ways: first, by awakening connections among their readers, who were simultaneously learning about the same stories, and second, by triggering in-person interaction, "the conversations of the day." These two types of social relations are central to the relational conception of the public.

The first type of relation—mutual awareness and recognition—may seem so attenuated as not to constitute a social tie at all; indeed, ties among members of a public may seem even weaker than "weak ties." But if we think of social ties as being narratively constructed through shared stories (Tilly 2002; White 2008), felt connections in a public may matter a great deal. Just as conventional weak ties may be strong in their effects, so may ties in a public, and for similar reasons: both link socially distant actors, potentially strengthening cohesion across otherwise separate groups and fostering the creation of new identities and groups (Centola and Macy 2007; Granovetter 1973). Bonds created through the press, Tarde ([1899] 1969:306) speculated, were the source of "the new and more prominent sentiment of nationality." When Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006:35) claimed nearly a century later that print media contributed to the rise of nationalism, he seems to have had no inkling he was repeating Tarde's argument. Every reader of a morning paper, Anderson wrote, "is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicated simultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others"—exactly Tarde's point about mutual awareness. With the phrase "imagined community," however, Anderson provided a memorable name for it, so he gets the citations for the idea.

These felt connections do not always arise among the public spontaneously; authors and artists often have in mind implicit or imagined audiences from whom they seek to elicit a common response. Journalists are not innocent of such intentions. "A news story is both news and a story," Schudson (2003:177) points out, adding that some news stories are more "story-like" than others. Evoking a kind of collective self-recognition among readers, listeners, or viewers is one way journalism and other forms of popular storytelling do not merely address publics but help create them. A public should not be understood as automatically equivalent to a community; it only has the potential to become one. Members of a public have a degree of collective self-awareness because they are conscious that what they have experienced, others may have experienced too, if only at a physical remove, through the media. The stories they share may become the basis of an accounting of their connections. From that limited basis, they may be able to deepen their ties and develop a stronger sense of identity as a community, perhaps even, like the Dreyfusards, forming a political movement to be reckoned with in their own right.[3]

The second type of relation highlighted by Tarde ([1899] 1969:308, 312) stems from the flow of the written word into speech and involves direct interaction: "One pen . . . suffices to set off a million tongues. . . . The press unifies and invigorates conversations." Indeed, Tarde declared, "This similarity of simultaneous conversations in an ever more vast geographic domain is one of the most important characteristics of our time." These follow-on conversations were crucial: "If no one conversed, the newspapers . . . would exercise no profound influence on any minds. They would be like a string vibrating without a sounding board" (p. 307). Journalists understood this: The nineteenth-century U.S. editor Charles Dana is supposed to have defined news as "anything that will make people talk" (quoted in Park 1923:285). As with the term "imagined community," it was only later that the follow-on oral process described by Tarde received a distinctive analytic name. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1944) called it the "two-step flow."[4] Today, with long chains of retweeting, liking, commenting, and other ways of sharing, the term "cascade" may seem more apt. But "cascade" misses the crucial intervening role that Lazarsfeld and his collaborators attributed to "personal influence." In their view, local "opinion leaders," the people who most closely followed the news, served as community filters of messages from the mass media, thereby limiting media effects (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955; Lazarsfeld et al. 1944).

Tarde, in contrast, saw the conversations triggered by the press as extending the press's reach. The newspaper itself was "a public letter, a public conversation" and had "thus finished the age-old work that conversation began, that correspondence extended, but that always remained in a state of a sparse and scattered outline—the fusion of personal opinions into local opinions, and this into national and *world* opinion, the grandiose unification of the public mind." Tarde was not disturbed by what he recognized was "an enormous power, one that can only increase." (Tarde [1899] 1969:318) Later theorists, particularly after the development of cinema and radio broadcasting, would become more worried about the power of mass communication. Developing his ideas in contrast to Le Bon's crowd psychology at an earlier point in the age of the press, however, Tarde saw the public as more rational than the crowd and hence a more benign social form. Publics, he held, were "less extremist than crowds, less despotic and dogmatic too," although he conceded that "their despotism or dogmatism is far more tenacious and chronic than that of crowds" because crowds were ephemeral (Tarde [1898] 1969:289).

Until a recent revival of Tarde's sociology (Candea 2016; Latour 2002), the standard narrative about Tarde was that he "lost" his debate with Durkheim and soon thereafter faded from prominence, partly for want of any students or followers. (Tarde actually did debate Durkheim in person at the École des Hautes Études in 1903 and died the following year.) But through the work of Robert E. Park ([1904] 1972), a former journalist whose dissertation concerned the public, Tarde's ideas about publics did not fade away. Park (1940:677) also wrote about the crucial importance of conversation in the transformation of news into discussion. Park's chapter on "collective behavior" in sociology's most influential early-twentieth-century textbook (Park and Burgess 1921:869) credited Tarde for the distinction between crowds and publics: "The public supposes a higher stage of development than the crowd. . . . In the public, interaction takes the form of discussion. . . . Issues are raised and parties form." In contrast, the textbook continued, "The crowd does not discuss and hence it does not reflect. . . . When the crowd acts it becomes a mob."

This understanding of the public as a higher social form became the conventional assumption of twentieth-century U.S. sociology, even as the contrasting term changed from "crowd" to "mass" in the midcentury theory of mass society. In this view, while a public fostered active, democratic discussion, a mass was an undifferentiated population of passive subjects. Like the mob and the crowd before it, the mass was a dangerous and degraded collectivity.

But whereas the earlier forms were dangerous because they were prone to contagious hysteria, the mass was dangerous because it was atomized and inert in the face of manipulation by propaganda and advertising—a lonely crowd, not a violent one. (The term "audience" carries some of the same connotations of passivity but without being as dangerous.) Mills (1956:303–304) drew the distinction between a "mass" and a "public" on the basis of several criteria; for example, in a mass, "far fewer people express opinions than receive them" and the prevailing communications "are so organized that it is difficult or impossible for the individual to answer back immediately or with any effect." Tarde had seen the public as the historic successor to the crowd. Now Mills wrote that "the transformation of public into mass" was "one of the major trends of modern societies." Mass society, he claimed, turns publics into "mere *media markets*," subjecting people to one-way communication (Mills 1956:301, 304). This would become a major sociological narrative about the public in the postwar era.

The midcentury theory of "mass society" came in various flavors—aristocratic, Catholic, existentialist, left-wing (Bell [1960] 1988). The general idea was that modernity had broken up traditional communities and faiths and left people rudderless, alienated, and therefore susceptible to manipulation through mass media and the appeal of charismatic leaders like Hitler and Mussolini. As mass production in industry turned out standardized goods, so the mass media produced uniform, lowest-common-denominator entertainment. To be part of a mass was to lose one's individuality. The conservative, aristocratic version of mass society theory saw a decline in the quality of culture as a result of loss of authoritative guidance by educated gentlemen (Ortega y Gasset 1932). Other versions of the theory bemoaned the submergence of individual identity in the mass and alleged tendencies toward conformity and "other-directedness" (Riesman 1961). Horkheimer and Adorno ([1944] 1972:94, 95–96) made much the same argument about cultural homogeneity and degradation, claiming the "culture industry" was "infecting everything with sameness": The radio exposed listeners "in authoritarian fashion to the same programs put out by different stations. No mechanism of reply has been developed."

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, written originally as a *Habilitationschrift* in the 1950s, Habermas ([1962] 1989:249–50) adopted this midcentury understanding of "publics" in contrast to "masses," citing Mills's formulation of the distinction in his conclusion. Habermas's theoretical novelty lay in fusing Marx's understanding of historical change with Kant's vision of public reason, although much of his contemporary analysis drew on the 1950s literature about politics and consumer culture. But while bearing the stamp of that earlier decade, the publication of the 1989 English translation marked a major shift. Both historical and theoretical studies of communication in the social sciences became organized around Habermas's work and, in particular, around the spatial metaphor of the "public sphere" coined in the English translation, where it was used (most of the time) for the German term *Öffentlichkeit*, otherwise translated as "the public," "publicity," or "publicness" (Habermas [1962] 1989:xv).

Habermas ([1962] 1989) told a story of decline. Capitalism had given rise to the "bourgeois" or "liberal" public sphere, "the sphere of private people come together as a public" (p. 27), making public use of their reason in classic Kantian fashion. The "model case" was England, the country where capitalism was furthest advanced at the turn of the eighteenth century. Ignoring the corruption and political manipulation of the English press in the 1690s and early 1700s,[5] Habermas held that this was the moment when the public sphere first began functioning in the realm of politics (pp. 57–66). But the once-benign effects of capitalism had turned bad. In the twentieth century, Habermas saw "unmistakable" tendencies "pointing to the collapse of the public sphere." The public and private had become "mutually

infiltrated"; a "culture-debating" public had degenerated into a "culture-consuming" public (pp. 149, 159). The mass media had become a "platform for advertising," and "the world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only" (pp. 171, 181). Mass culture was merely adapted "to the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of consumer strata with relatively little education," instead of guiding "an enlarged public toward the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance" (p. 165).

In discussing the early development of the public sphere, Habermas referred to particular social locations and social relations—in London coffeehouses, Paris salons, German literary societies. But like other mass-society theorists, once Habermas turned to the twentieth century, he saw only passive audiences, not people who talked with one another and were capable of exercising judgment. Radio, film, and television, Habermas ([1962] 1989:170–71) wrote, are "more penetrating" than print: "They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under 'tutelage,' which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree." The relations of intersubjectivity and conversation emphasized earlier by Tarde and others had disappeared; communication was one-way, top-down, dictated by the media, political parties, and other organizations to an apparently atomized society.

Power over communication had become more centralized in the mid-twentieth century, but this historical account had severe problems. Confusing the Kantian ideal with eighteenth-century institutional realities, Habermas ([1962] 1989:185) ignored the power of patrons and the use of bribery, intimidation, and other means to influence the press; manipulation and corruption supposedly arose entirely from the market: "The history of the big daily papers in the second half of the nineteenth century proves that the press itself became manipulable to the extent that it became commercialized." But the press had long been subject to manipulation, and the development of markets for books and advertising in the press enabled writers, journalists, and publishers to gain a significant degree of autonomy from patrons, parties, and governments. The market as a source of critical autonomy and competing viewpoints, the actual basis of an independent, liberal public sphere, was impossible to comprehend in Habermas's framework. Moreover, because of his exclusive focus on the bourgeois public sphere and his conception of it as a single discursive space, Habermas also omitted any reference to what Fraser (1992:123) calls "subaltern counterpublics," that is, "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups . . . formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (see also Emirbayer and Sheller 1998).

Habermas's picture of the public of his own time as atomized and inert was also overdrawn, an exaggerated theorization of the relatively depoliticized 1950s, a moment when many intellectuals were preoccupied with consumerism and what they saw, in frustration, as a collapse of critical debate. Not only would this critique already seem dated by the mid-1960s, when protest movements erupted in many capitalist democracies; the postwar decades were also the period when membership in churches, unions, and other chapter-based associations in the United States was at a peak, as was local civic engagement, according to a variety of measures (Putnam 2001; Skocpol 2003).

In addition, even in the mid-twentieth century, the conception of the public as passive subjects of the media ignored the active role that ordinary people play in giving their own meaning to the products of the culture industries. That active, interpretative role of readers, listeners, and viewers has been the subject of a long line of research going by various names (reception theory, reader-response theory, the text-reader model, "uses and gratifications" research), emphasizing—to use Stuart Hall's (1980) terms—that the way people "decode" the media is not necessarily the same as the way its producers "encode" it. Empirical studies

of the audience for television and other popular media repeatedly show that instead of simply accepting the "dominant" reading, people devise their own (Fiske 1987). At sports games, rock concerts, and other entertainment events, fans participate through their own displays and inventions. Rather than being a matter of just passive reception, fan culture is itself a form of cultural production, the reinterpretation of cultural commodities from the standpoint of fans' experience (Jenkins 1992). This is an interactional process involving everyday talk, much as Tarde argued earlier about journalism. "Fan talk," Fiske (1992:38) points out, generates and circulates meaning through communities of fans: "Indeed, much of the pleasure of fandom lies in the fan talk that it produces." Whether stories and other cultural objects turn out to have "resonance" in a public emerges from this kind of interactional process (McDonnell, Bail, and Tavory 2017). Moreover, the culture produced by fans (e.g., fans of science fiction and popular romance) often has wider social and political implications, even if it does not meet the standards for rational debate of a critical theorist who, like the genteel critics of another day, wanted to see the public guided "toward the appreciation of a culture undamaged in its substance."

Still, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas [1962] 1989) is an example of the positive uses of nostalgia. The public sphere Habermas believed he found in the eighteenth century could serve as a basis for a renewed democratic hope—and this hope, he suggested, lay in creating democratic social relations in the formation of public opinion (Habermas [1962] 1989:209–10). In later work, Habermas (2006) laid out two criteria for deliberative democracy in "media society": an independent self-regulating media system and effective feedback from an "inclusive civil society" that empowers citizens to respond to public discourse. Habermas's contribution lies not so much in these specific criteria as in the general view that what makes opinion public and legitimate is a free and democratic social process that critically evaluates it. Unaired and undebated opinions do not meet that test, the test of deliberative democracy.

Much of the work building on Habermas has ignored his original claim that modern developments in the media and political economy created only a sham public sphere, not a genuine one. His systems-theoretic preoccupations have also not been a productive direction. But there is a relational side of his thinking, as comes out clearly when he writes, "A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body. . . . Citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion" (Habermas 1974:49). Or when he observes, "Deliberation is a demanding form of communication, though it grows out of inconspicuous daily routines of asking for and giving reasons" (Habermas 2006:413). In this emphasis on everyday communicative interaction, there is a direct line of development in the conception of a relational public from Tarde to Habermas. Yet the primary idea many social scientists and theorists took from Habermas was a spatial metaphor, the "public sphere." And while this has been the basis of valuable work, it is also the source of some confusion.

DURABLE CONCEPTS, CHANGING STRUCTURES

One difficulty with thinking about the public as a sphere or a space is that it tends to conflate two things: *the social relations of the public* and *social relations in public.* The social relations of the public include much that is not public behavior and occurs in *different spaces*: the relations of people who consume media in private—reading, listening, or watching without anyone else observing them—as well as individual conversations and private meetings about public issues. To take full measure of the social relations of the public, in other words, requires going beyond open communication in the media or in public assemblies and

including one-to-one exchanges (Tarde's "conversations of the day") and, at an intermediate level, what might be called "one-to-some" exchanges insofar as they relate to civic or collective concerns.

Social relations in public, on the other hand, include encounters such as the nonverbal interactions of mere passers-by in the street that do not belong to the public, at least not in the sense of a public oriented to a larger civic or collective realm. The two sets of relations pose different questions for sociological theory, although they overlap insofar as the social relations of the public do involve behavior in public. Visibility may have both distorting and clarifying effects. On the one hand, it may lead to a preoccupation with display and the management of appearances (Adut 2018), and it may threaten to expose individuals in subordinate positions to retribution by the more powerful, producing dissimulation and concealment in what Scott (1990) calls a society's "public transcripts," as distinct from its hidden or artfully disguised ones. On the other hand, visibility—or in today's preferred phrase, transparency—is critical for testing claims, whether in court, scientific inquiry, or the democratic political arena. Liberal democracies do not simply demand that everything always be open; to balance competing considerations, they have a variety of rules (e.g., trials are open, but juries meet in secret). Both physical and virtual spaces for public discussion, from legislative chambers to online forums, also vary in their "architectures" in ways that may be more or less conducive to democratic participation and the inclusion of dissident voices (Forestal 2017).

The public-private distinction in modern societies, as noted earlier, has two dimensions—open versus closed and the whole of society versus a part. To conceive of the public as only a sphere of visibility is to drop the second dimension, the orientation to civic or other collective concerns, the *res publica.* Adut (2018:ix–x) writes that "the public sphere is simply any space where we are visible. . . . It is simply a space of appearances." Consequently, from this standpoint, "A public is not a body of active citizens talking or deliberating about the common good. It is a rather more prosaic, pedestrian entity: an audience, a collection of silent spectators faced with the same spectacle." But conceiving of publics as audiences of silent spectators ignores all the communication and connections within them. This is the exact antithesis of a relational conception: It is a public lacking any connections or interaction among its members and without any orientation to a civic realm.

A relational conception of the public needs to retain that orienting dimension to distinguish publics from other social forms (e.g., scientific disciplines, which demand open publication but are oriented toward other values). The civic dimension is the thread that links the principal conceptions of the public, ancient and modern. This is why, at the outset, in defining publics as networks, I defined them as networks of a certain kind—open-ended networks of actors (i.e., without a closed or fixed membership) linked together through flows of communication, shared stories, and civic or other collective concerns. This is not to say these concerns are always morally justified, nor that they are a matter of consensus. They are more often matters of conflict—"contentious conversation" in Tilly's (2002) phrase.

In a similarly relational conception, Emirbayer and Sheller (1998:738) write, "Publics are not simply 'spaces' or 'worlds' where politics is discussed, as the popular 'public sphere' idea suggests, but rather, interstitial networks of individuals and groups acting as citizens." Publics, as this formulation suggests, cut across more "bounded" and "stable" social formations; this is the bridging function that gives publics emergent possibilities in the creation of new social movements and imagined communities. "Interstitial" describes some publics in the process of emergence (Mische 2008) but not all publics, particularly not the large and well-established publics of nation-states. To define publics as existing only in the interstices—as transition spaces between network domains (Mische and White 1998)—is to

understate the direct relation between institutions and publics implied by the very use of the term "citizens."[6]

Although publics are not institutions—they do not have the stability or boundedness of institutions—the social relations of a public do not arise in an institutional vacuum. Those relations depend on constitutive choices about institutions and technologies, many of them made at critical moments of political upheaval, constitutional change, and technological innovation (Starr 2004). But this foundation—the historically built and rebuilt platforms on which publics develop—can also be understood, in significant part, from a relational stand-point, involving dynamically evolving relations at several levels: communications networks and infrastructures, cultural production networks, and networks among symbolic objects.

Communication networks—from roads and postal networks, railroads, and telecom networks down to networks of computers, sensors, and data systems today—have costs, limitations, and affordances that, depending on the choices made about them, affect the geographic extent and social inclusiveness of publics. In a common historical pattern, networks that start out as competing systems often create problems of interoperability: "Infrastructures typically form only when these various [competing] systems merge, in a process of consolidation characterized by gateways that allow dissimilar systems to be linked into networks" (Edwards et al. 2007:i). The transition from competing systems to infrastructures makes possible more universal connectivity; hence there is a broader public, but also more centralized surveillance and control, in either the state or private hands, unless barred by law or policy.

Cultural production networks connect authors and other content creators to publics, which then connect back again to the creators in the form of imagined audiences or expected markets. In sociology, the production-of-culture tradition analyzes the connections in these networks, with a strong organizational emphasis (Peterson and Anand 2004). Among historians, Darnton's (1982) model of "communication circuits," drawn from studies of early-modern book publishing, has played a parallel role. Darnton's circuits run from authors through various intermediaries (printers, shippers, booksellers) to readers, who complete the circuit by influencing "the author both before and after the act of composition." This is a fully relational conception: "Authors are readers themselves. By reading and associating with other readers and writers, they form notions of genre and style and a general sense of the literary enterprise, which affects their texts, whether they are composing Shakespearean sonnets or directions for assembling radio kits" (Darnton 1982:67).

Finally, at the symbolic level, texts, images, videos, and other content are linked via allusions, citations, hyperlinks, and other means. The co-occurrence of words, symbols, or temporal sequences in narratives can also be the basis for imputing connections and capturing "the foundational insight that meaning emerges from relations among cultural elements rather than inhering in the elements themselves" (DiMaggio 2014:294). Additionally, by virtue of being cited and shared by particular sets of readers, viewers, and other consumers, network ties at the level of content link publics together and create specific paths of diffusion.

In the past, the mapping and analysis of these networks and patterns of diffusion were necessarily limited, whereas today, with the increased traceability of communications and social connections, the data exist to do the mapping at scale. Publics may previously have seemed ill defined; now we are better able to measure and visualize them. Two studies illustrate the analytic payoff from this research, which brings out the relational structure of the public.

In a study of 1 billion viral events involving news stories, videos, and other content on Twitter, Goel and colleagues (2015:180) challenge the conventional understanding of

virality in online media. "Going viral," they point out, is "generally understood" to mean a "piece of online media content" has "attained its popularity through some process of person-to-person contagion, analogous to the spread of a biological virus." To test that understanding, they use a measure of "structural virality" that interpolates between two polar extremes: content spreading through a "single, large broadcast" and content diffusing "through multiple generations with any one individual directly responsible for only a fraction of the total adoption." "Broadcasts" here may come from media organizations or individual influencers with large numbers of followers. Although the study finds a great deal of structural diversity in diffusion, "popularity is largely driven by the size of the largest broadcast" rather than by one-to-one viral spread.

A second study, Benkler, Faris, and Roberts (2018), maps the contemporary U.S. "media ecosystem" and its distinct publics with three types of data: links among content items (40 million political stories from 40,000 online sources between 2015 and 2018); the sharing or "liking" of those items on social media; and case studies of news events, including the flow of stories from one source to another. Contrary to the idea that there are two symmetrical "echo chambers" on the right and left, the study finds two patterns: an insular network on the far Right, dominated by Fox and Breitbart, and a larger, interconnected network stretching from the center Right (e.g., the *Wall Street Journal*) through the center to the Left. News stories that proved false traveled quickly within the far Right without being corrected, whereas "mainstream" news organizations continued to observe journalistic norms, more often interdicted false stories before disseminating them, and corrected errors when they made them.

As these two studies illustrate, what were once two separate subjects, "mass communications" and "social networks," have now converged in the analysis of contemporary media. But this is only because the connections at the broadcast and person-to-person levels have become traceable and quantifiable together, not because these connections have appeared for the first time.[7]

The advent of social media has made the active, relational public more conspicuous, indeed, undeniable and self-evident. During the 1980s and 1990s, studies of television audiences and fan communities claimed their members were not simply "consumers" of media but were instead appropriating and "poaching" texts from the culture industry and producing a distinct popular culture (Fiske 1987; Jenkins 1992). Still, many sociologists took little or no notice of these phenomena and continued to offer a political economy of the media and a production-of-culture perspective that took a hegemonic culture industry as given. Now, in a world of YouTube, TikTok, Facebook, and Instagram, it is impossible to ignore the participatory role of the public and the blurring of distinctions between the producers and consumers of culture.

The relational structure and participatory role of the public are also evident in offline forms of collective action that are now interwoven with online and traditional media. New digital tools have been a boon to previously constrained or submerged social movements, reducing their organizing costs and altering the structure of advocacy (Karpf 2012), even making possible "organizing without organizations" (Shirky 2009) through hashtags and Facebook pages. Social media helps people connect with likeminded others outside of their immediate localities, a crucial step in developing wider mutual awareness and recognition. After taking shape through online networks, collective action often erupts in public in dramatic forms—marches, demonstrations, clashes with police—that are broadcast by mass and social media. The enhanced ability of movements to scale up rapidly without having built an organizational infrastructure may, however, prove a source of vulnerability as they may lack the decision-making capacity to change tactics, settle internal disputes, or negotiate with adversaries (Tufekci 2017).

Social movements challenging established elites have a dual nature (Fraser 1992:124). On the one hand, they represent counterpublics with their own networks, shared stories, and collective concerns, perhaps developing, especially in their embryonic stages, independently of wider publics. On the other hand, as they grow, social movements enter into the "public at large" in search of influence, staging protests to attract wider media coverage, change public opinion, and make their stories and concerns part of a reshaped common culture. Blocked by hostile institutions, for example, black intellectuals and civil rights activists in the United States long formed a counterpublic before they became a force in the national public in the mid-twentieth century. To achieve that impact, the civil rights movement depended critically on the national media to cover protests. As Martin Luther King Jr. put it (Torres 2003:27), the movement needed to "arouse the conscience of the nation through radio, TV, newspapers"—and because it did, the stories of struggles like the Montgomery bus boycott and the beatings of demonstrators in Selma became part of a national narrative. In Selma, one of King's deputies, Andrew Young, later recalled, "Sherriff [Jim] Clark had been beating black heads in the back of the jail for years," but with the demonstrations, he would have to do it "in front of CBS, NBC, and ABC television cameras" (Torres 2003:30). Today, marchers and onlookers carry their own cameras, while police often wear body cameras, and social media platforms provide alternative channels for distributing the images in what has become a "hybrid media system" (Chadwick 2017). But the fundamental tasks involved in turning the stories and concerns of a counterpublic into shared public understandings remain the same.

This is not the place for a full analysis of the historical changes in the structure of the public over the past half century. But some key developments may at least be sketched briefly because of their significance for the relational understanding of publics—focusing again on how felt connections emerge and affect forms of mutual awareness and recognition, how actors are linked and communication diffuses, and how power relations develop and affect the struggle over civic and collective concerns.

The mid-twentieth-century mass media system was highly constrained. Just as "society" typically meant a national society, so "the public" typically meant a national public, in line with tacit assumptions of "methodological nationalism." Communication power was concentrated in a small number of large organizations and their top executives, editors, producers, and other gatekeepers who controlled the channels to the mass public. By the late twentieth century, however, a variety of developments, both technological and political, began relaxing many of the old constraints, exciting hopes for a more horizontally connected, open, diverse, and therefore more equal and democratic society. The realities have turned out to be more complicated.

The identification of the public with national publics has been weakened in two ways. As a result of technological advances (e.g., telecom satellites and smartphones) and neoliberal policies (e.g., falling trade barriers), communications infrastructures and cultural production networks have become increasingly transnational, although as the rise of populist nationalism indicates, this did not mean the world entered a "postnational" era. While publics extended across national borders, they were also fracturing within them. The breakup of the national public began in the late twentieth century with the rising number of radio and television channels and neoliberal policies of privatization and deregulation, which created opportunities and incentives for market segmentation ("narrowcasting"). The large-scale adoption of the Internet heightened tendencies toward both transnational extension and subnational fragmentation. Under these conditions, it became more difficult to maintain what was, in effect, already a fiction—that each country had one great, national public.

These developments also affected the microfoundations of the public in ways that both realized and defied optimistic expectations. The Internet and personal computers put communication and computational power in the hands of unprecedented numbers of people, enabling them to create and distribute content of their own, a critical factor in contemporary social movements. Those same affordances, however, also enabled massive flows of online disinformation (Bennett and Livingston 2020). At the same time, the multiplication of content options allowed individuals to self-sort into different publics, simultaneously producing depoliticization and polarization: Many people with low levels of political interest opted out of political news (e.g., abandoning old habits of buying the local paper or watching the evening news), while those with higher levels of political interest self-sorted into ideologically differentiated news sources and devoted more time to them than before (Prior 2007). Both the rise in news "dropouts" and the turn toward more partisan sources undercut traditional news organizations and the normative restraints they had long imposed on reporting. As online sites (e.g., Craigslist) and platforms (particularly Google and Facebook) captured the bulk of online advertising revenue, resources for professional journalism dwindled, and the barriers to entry into broadcasting (in the general sense of the term) fell with the rise of YouTube, Facebook, and other social media. Instead of being limited to a small number of large media organizations, broadcasters now include a volatile set of politicians, celebrities, gamers, and other influencers who typically do not follow professional norms of editorial accountability, such as corroborating secondhand information. One result has been the rise of powerful forms of "participatory propaganda," involving both large broadcasters and legions of lesser influencers and their followers and friends.

In yet another reversal of earlier expectations, new structures of concentrated wealth and power have arisen. The early Internet encouraged a belief that online networks are inherently decentralized; instead, platform monopolies have recentralized control (e.g., through algorithms that determine the visibility of content in Google's search, Facebook's news feed, and Twitter's trending topics). As the 2000s began, Wikipedia offered a model of nonmarket peer production that some expected to proliferate (Benkler 2006); by the 2010s, it stood nearly alone as one of the few large-scale sites not co-opted by big business, while the companies running platforms appropriated "the rhetoric of a new public sphere" to defend their corporate interests (van Dijck 2013:16). Moreover, unlike traditional mass media, which had relatively little individual-level data on their audiences, Google, Facebook, and other platforms sweep up data about users' preferences, physical location, social relationships, and even emotions in a system Zuboff (2019) calls "surveillance capitalism." The flow of personal information from users to platforms reverses the historical relationship between media and the public, enabling platforms not only to microtarget advertising but also to modify states of mind and behavior. In two experiments in which Facebook varied elements in its news feed for millions of users, its researchers demonstrated "massive-scale emotional contagion" in one case (Kramer, Guillory, and Hancock 2014) and a large-scale effect on voter turnout in the other (Bond et al. 2012)—examples of what Tufekci (2014) calls "engineering the public."

These developments were not technologically determined; under other historical and political circumstances, alternatives were possible. Different policies, for example, could have provided financial support for independent professional journalism, regulated online platforms, and provided stronger privacy protection. At the time when constitutive choices about online media were made, however, government regulation, antitrust enforcement, and the financing of public media were in retreat, and what prevailed instead were neoliberal policies that left the design of communications to the market, on the theory that by

succeeding commercially, media and technology enterprises were satisfying not only the needs of consumers but also the only obligations for which they could be held responsible.

The chief counterpoint to this normative conception of the market is the tradition that upholds a normative conception of the public—the vision of citizens of a republic as free and reasoning participants in their own government, with consequent needs for trustworthy information. Derived from civic republicanism, democratized and liberalized—shorn, in particular, of its original class and misogynist assumptions—this tradition continues to be the basis of critical standards for evaluating the media and related institutions that shape communication and everyday knowledge. Democratic government is unsustainable if those institutions promote irrationality, silence, privatism, and pervasive distrust. But insofar as they advance rational discussion, promote active engagement, uphold truth-seeking norms, and elevate the public's concerns above self-interest, they create an environment in which democracy is at least a working possibility. A relational understanding of the public—an understanding that illuminates how people are connected, how they develop mutual awareness and recognition, and how power relations affect the definition of collective concerns—can deepen that tradition. In the world we confront today, that deepened vision of an active, rational public is more necessary than ever.

CONCLUSION

I had three goals for this article. First, I sought to clarify three ways of conceiving publics—the organic, the individualized, and the relational conceptions. Second, I tried to show how these ideas emerged historically. And third, building on previous work from Tarde and Habermas to recent theorists, I aimed to advance the relational conception of publics, defined as open-ended networks of actors linked through flows of communication, shared stories, and civic or other collective concerns.

The organic and individualized conceptions have legitimate uses. Conceiving the public as the body politic has been central to thinking about political legitimacy; the *res publica* is not just at the linguistic but at the conceptual root of the public. The notion that members of the public are tied together through common civic concerns remains a necessary element in distinguishing publics from other social forms. It is also a critical resource in upholding the public good as an ideal against partial or marketized understandings of the political community. The individualized conception of the public has its legitimate applications too. For example, breaking down members of the public by age, sex, ethnicity, and other individual characteristics provides information relevant to understanding demographic shifts in attitudes and electoral support. But both the organic and the individualized conceptions leave out the social relations of the public, the dynamically evolving web of connections and collective understandings that make publics what they are.

The organic and individualized conceptions of the public do not belong, however, only to political and social theory; they have been institutionalized in ways that make them seem intuitively convincing. The organic conception has been institutionalized in both ancient and modern systems of government. Republics that claim to derive their power from a single people contain the idea of a unified public, which seems all the more "natural" where the political community is socially restricted and homogeneous. The civic republican tradition emerged from that world. But as the old political exclusions eroded, the idea of a homogeneous public became more difficult to sustain. The public could be disaggregated in two ways. It could become a phenomenon of newspapers, parties, and interest groups, as it indeed seemed to be when those were the only effective proxies for the public between elections. Public opinion under those conditions was publicly expressed and organized opinion.

The public could also be represented in a more compelling way, however, as an aggregate of individuals, grouped by social categories, as it has appeared to be since public opinion polls effectively individualized the public, drawing on two potent sources of legitimacy, science and democracy.

The emergence of the relational conception of the public also needs to be seen at these two levels of intellectual and institutional development. Of the classical figures who may be counted among the founders of relational sociology (see Vandenberghe 2018), Tarde was the first to conceptualize the public as a distinct social phenomenon. Codified in early-twentieth-century textbook sociology, Tarde's conception of the public as a higher social form—originally in contrast with the "crowd," later with the "mass"—became part of the discipline's conventional wisdom, even when Tarde's name was largely forgotten and Habermas became the focal point of theoretical work about the public. For all its limits as a historical account, Habermas's work highlights the problem of creating a free, rational, and democratic process for the formation of public opinion. But the metaphor of the "public sphere" in the English translation of his work has its limitations, as when it is conceived as a space merely of appearances or visibility and the crucial civic dimension drops out.

At an institutional level, changes in communications and technology have given the relational conception of the public its own intuitive appeal. In the age of the World Wide Web, the idea that the public is part of the web of social relations is much more straightforward than it was earlier, when it was virtually impossible to trace, much less quantify, who conversed with whom or who read, listened to, or watched different media. As research on online publics makes clear, broadcast and person-to-person viral communication are points on a spectrum of interactions that belong in the same conceptual framework, not as two separate subjects, social network analysis and mass communications. Although contemporary analysts have announced the arrival of a "networked public," publics were networked all along—indeed, from a sociological perspective, publics are best conceived as networks. They are networks, however, of a particular kind, ones in which actors are connected through flows of communication, shared stories, and civic or other collective concerns.

A relational conception of the public raises different questions and suggests a different agenda for research than the alternatives do. Instead of thinking about the public either holistically or in individualized terms, a relational analysis calls attention to the social structures of communication. In thinking about contemporary restructuring, it calls us to examine how different platforms enable people to assemble and reassemble themselves and how the platforms' algorithms and rule making shape the flows of messages and the kinds of publics that emerge. It focuses attention on patterns of structural virality and on who has or acquires the ability to broadcast, their relative power, and their connections to networks that promote or inhibit viral diffusion of their messages. A relational analysis of the public calls attention to hybrid groups that exist both online and offline and to the counterpublics and publics in the process of emergence. It asks us to examine not only the networks through which communication flows (which would be only a "thin" relational analysis) but also the shared stories and collective concerns that emerge from that process and either reinforce or transform identities, movements, and systems of power.

The relational analysis of publics, incorporating person-to-person, group, and broadcast communications, can provide a more complete view of publics, and it can advance the relational project in sociology. Like other social structures, publics have never been fixed things; they have always been realized through everyday interaction and depended on evolving institutions and technologies. A sociological account of publics, like other structures of social relations and consciousness, must be built up from the ground of social relations as well as from the institutional and technological contexts in which those relations unfold.

This is the work that long-separate fields—social network analysis, media and cultural studies, science and technology studies, the history and sociology of communications, and social movement analysis—can all join in, with a relational theoretical framework that brings them into conversation with each other.

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NOTES

1. The two essays were "Le public et la foule" ("The Public and the Crowd"), *Revue de Paris*, July 15 and August 1, 1898, and "L'opinion et la conversation" ("Opinion and Conversation"), *Revue de Paris*, August 15 and September 1, 1899. Both were republished in *L'opinion et la foule* (Tarde 1901) and appear in translation in *On Communication and Social Influence* (Tarde [1898] 1969, [1899] 1969).
2. In other respects, Dewey was a relational thinker, indeed, a foundational one (see Emirbayer 1997), who believed in the use of "intelligence," by which he meant scientific reasoning, in social problem solving (see, e.g., Dewey 1935). But the public in *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey [1927] 1954:122–23) is an entity abstracted from social relations, as in such statements as "the public is so bewildered that it cannot find itself." See Forestal (2017) for an attempt to give Dewey's democratic ideals specific relevance to social media today.
3. In suggesting a public should not be equated with a community but only has the potential to become one, I am making an analogous distinction to the one Weber (1968:927) makes about classes: "'classes' are not communities, they merely represent possible, and frequent, bases for social action." This is similar to the Marxian distinction between a "class-in-itself" and a "class-for-itself." Analogously, we could distinguish between a "public-in-itself" and a "public-for-itself," the latter being a public organized into a self-conscious community.
4. According to Katz (2018), Lazarsfeld did not know at the time of the 1940 study that Tarde, in his work on conversation, had anticipated the two-step flow. But by the time of the 1954 sequel *Voting*, Lazarsfeld and his coauthors acknowledged the relevance of Tarde's work (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954:300). In his 90s, Katz (2018) still remembered an embarrassment more than 60 years earlier when he could not come up with the name "Tarde": "During the oral exam on my doctoral thesis—later to become Part 1 of *Personal Influence*—Robert Merton asked me to name the scholar who debated Durkheim on the nature of sociology. It was the one question to which I had no answer."
5. For his account of the English press, Habermas relied on early-twentieth-century sources, such as Hanson (1936); subsequent historical research has upended this work, showing how extensively the government manipulated the press. See particularly Downie (1979) and chapters 7 and 8 in Harris (1987).
6. Mische (2008) acknowledges this conception of publics is "unusual," and indeed it is. Mische and White (1998) include Goffman's "floating bubbles around ego" as one of their examples of "publics," but those "floating bubbles" have nothing to do with "publicness" in the sense of being openly visible or of relating to civic or other collective concerns, or as connected to the formation of public opinion. Mische and White's conception of publics is relational, but it includes a different set of relations from the "publics" that have been the focus of most historical and theoretical analysis. This is not to deny, however, that publics are often central to the emergence of more bounded and stable forms, such as movements, parties, and nations, and in that respect may be "transition spaces," as Mische's (2008) work on "partisan publics" in Brazil shows.
7. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) highlighted the connection between mass communication and social networks ("sociometry," as it was then called). But they understood interpersonal relations in a relatively narrow way, that is, chiefly in terms of the "primary group" as a source of conformity limiting media effects.

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