Book Reviews

The Global Public Sphere: Public Communication in the Age of Reflective Interdependence

Ingrid Volkmer

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As one of those exquisitely complicated interdisciplinary concepts, globalization embraces a deep range of theoretical perspectives, empirical phenomena, and normative expectations. Instinctively cosmopolitan, academic analysts—whether globalization optimist or skeptic—find it easy to see a global public sphere as a progressive step in the right direction. Meanwhile, however, political developments in Europe and the United States suggest that nationalism is on the rise and "citizens of the world" out of fashion. So what's the future of the global village? In *The Global Public Sphere*, Ingrid Volkmer tackles this daunting question from a communication standpoint with a theoretical unpacking and empirical illustrations. German by origin, Australian by employment (a professor of media and communication, University of Melbourne), and globalist by intellectual interest, Volkmer embodies the reconfigured transnational identity that is her subject here.

A thorough review includes the relevant figures in globalization studies, but this is difficult material, and the density of concepts can make the central argument tough to follow. The test, however, lies in whether this book provides a compelling theoretical framework and suggests how it may lead to fruitful empirical research. I found it successful—albeit challenging—with the former and perhaps less so with the latter. She does point us generally in the right direction, taking a less media-centric view beyond just global news—although journalism certainly plays an important part in creating these spaces of "public communication." In that respect, this represents a major theoretical advance from her earlier work on CNN, *News in the Global Sphere* (Volkmer, 1999).

Here, she synthesizes core insights from Castells' network society, Roland Robertson's subjectivity dimension of how we experience the "world as a single place," and the well-known spatial model of Habermas to propose a public sphere characterized by "reflective interdependence." The European-rooted emphasis of Habermas on the ideal speech situation poses an unrealistic standard when taken globally, with equal civic actors, agreed upon normative values, rational consensus seeking, and institutional civic structures corresponding to deliberative spaces. Even with its limitations, however, the public sphere—as indicated by her title—still seems to be the best starting point for the task at hand. Habermas deals only indirectly with a *global* public sphere in considering formal international bodies. Volkmer argues instead

that these international structures themselves are deeply embedded in national spaces, through globalized NGOs and other transnational relationships—a position I have taken with respect to international environmental NGOs in China (Reese, 2015). Nation states become the *site* of globalization rather than a defining boundary.

Thus, Volkmer's use of the global public sphere does not imply a unitary space that stands apart, but a multi-layered and interactive configuration of cross-border connections based on fragmentation and reconstitutions, forming spheres within spheres. Most importantly, this perspective continues the move away from methodological nationalism. The national container is so familiar and intuitive that even trans-, sub-, and supranational phenomena are defined with respect to the nation state and related global governance structures predicated on it (e.g., EU, UN). As a result, I share Volkmer's concern that the essential qualities of the global public sphere have been undertheorized and underinvestigated—especially in communication research. As a fundamental premise, the public self has become disembedded, with constructions of self-identity transcending local settings, decoupling deliberation from decision-making. We need to be clear that "networked publics," whether Occupy activists on Facebook or Arab Spring bloggers and tweeters, are not free-floating in cyberspace, but rooted in places "vertically" and dynamically connected horizontally. But what new deliberative spaces emerge?

Volkmer's global public sphere relies heavily on the quality of reflexive consciousness, an awareness, abetted by mediated platforms, of one's position in the world—with citizenship constantly being renegotiated through multiple intersecting belongings. Each person compiles a subjectively unique "lifeworld" of informational and civic elements. Social structures may look the same as they did, but the lifeworld of the actors inhabiting them has changed, reflexively aware of their unique place in the world and manifesting that awareness by coming together in new spaces of public deliberation. Like Appadurai's more familiar notion of "scapes" (mediascapes, ethnoscapes, etc.), Volkmer invokes the idea of "public horizons" to suggest the way we stretch our "civic selves" across national contexts.

"Networks of centrality," based on media monitoring, are posed as dialectical opposite to the "centrality of networks," rooted in social media and digital platforms and providing points of civic engagement. Like so many parts of the new communication ecosystem, this distinction is not so easy to make, although I take the point that the structure of media elements—whether *The Guardian* or WikiLeaks—and the information provided is not the same as the way citizens engage with it. In combination, these "spatial networked spheres" describe not just zones of information but of trust, verification, and concern. The deployments here of concepts such as horizons, spaces, reflexivity (seemingly interchangeable with relativistic), mediasphere, and dialogical interlocutor are difficult to pin down—but what is lacking in precision is gained in an imaginative grasping for something important.

This is particularly true with Volkmer's adaptation of the *assemblage* concept, following related recent theorizing in media sociology and international relations—primarily after Saskia Sassen (2006)—to describe a "dynamic spatial configuration." This term underscores the importance of properly mapping these configurations beyond the traditional scalar hierarchies (e.g., local to global) to include institutional, state, and civil society actors combining with traditional, social media, and other digital platforms that constitute a coordinated space within and across national contexts. These "thickening" layers of networked cross-border communication are easy to overlook with a more conventional lens.

In addition to providing an historical review of shifting global roles of new agencies and other media, Volkmer reports findings from her own projects—from the actual organizational structure of international newsgathering to the shifting lifeworlds of global citizens. For example, among youth interviewed in several countries half consider themselves citizens of the world, and they share similar communication practices, including involvement with transnational media. Interest in conventional politics may be low, but respondents share concerns with broader global issues. Satellite news channels have attracted much research attention, Volkmer included, to the extent that they visibly embody a sort of global sphere, with a single, synchronized message reaching a far-flung audience. Here, she includes interviews with news executives at BBC, Al Jazeera, and Deutsche Welle, to explore in a more nuanced way how they see their strategic missions re-embedded in global contexts.

Ultimately, we are challenged to describe the logics characterizing the networks and assemblages that constitute the new global public sphere, and what they portend for healthy civic life—whether local or global. We're still a long way from that goal, but Volkmer's work continues to keep it before us.

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