

Chapter Four

Technology and the Public Sphere

Abstract

This chapter explores the public sphere and assesses the impact that the introduction of digital technologies has had on its operation. The chapter opens by providing a definition and description of the composition of the public sphere, highlighting that whilst women consistently make up more than half of public sector employees in the UK (Miller, 2009), the number of women holding senior roles in public facing occupations remains low. The discussion then moves on to consider the wider role of women in the public sphere and the challenges commonly faced. The potential consequences of the increased interaction with the public that has arisen as a result of the centrality of social media and other online communication mechanisms to the contemporary operation of the public sphere (Mellado & Hermida, 2021; Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021) is also considered. In a wide-ranging discussion, this chapter also presents evidence on emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) and safety work (Vera-Gray, 2017).

Keywords: Public sphere; sexual harassment; safety work; emotional labour; Habermas; Hochschild

Introduction

The growth and application of technologies to complete tasks that were traditionally undertaken away from the public gaze has significantly altered the operation of the public sphere. The potential consequences of increased interaction with the public that has arisen as a result of changes made to the contemporary operation of the public sphere (Mellado & Hermida, 2021; Terren & Borge-Bravo, 2021) are

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central to this chapter. In a wide-ranging discussion, this chapter also presents evidence on emotional labour (Hochschild, 2012) and safety work (Vera-Gray, 2017), which are highlighted as key theories in exploring the experiences of women in public facing occupations managing episodes of online abuse.

Assessing the Public Sphere

Women consistently make up more than half of public sector employees in the UK (Miller, 2009), a statistic that is reflected across many OECD countries (OECD, 2015). However, whilst the inclusion of women in all levels of public service is crucial for ‘the achievement of both transparent and accountable government and administration and sustainable development in all areas of life’ (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2016, p. 1), the number of women holding senior roles in public facing occupations remains low. Less than half of senior civil servants (Cabinet Office, 2023) and 40 per cent of Members of Parliament are women (Cracknell & Baker, 2024), whilst making up 29 per cent of the members of the House of Lords (Buchanan, 2024). In academia, only 30 per cent of Vice Chancellors are women, whilst only 20 per cent of social media CEOs and 21 per cent of national newspaper editors are female (Kaur, 2020). In policing, 19 women currently hold the position of Chief Constable in England and Wales (Hymas, 2023). Work by Silvestri and Tong (2020) highlights the relative absence of women in leadership roles within policing across Europe, one of many studies to confirm the presence of perennial barriers blocking women’s advancement to senior levels in public sphere occupations (e.g. Al-Rawi et al., 2021; Sobande, 2020; Veletsianos et al., 2018; Walby & Joshua, 2021). Analysis of statistical data reveals that the number of women in positions of power in the public sphere remains in flux. For example, membership of the House of Commons elected in July 2024 has the highest level of female representation in history (Cracknell & Baker, 2024). However, despite this increase in parliamentary representation, the level of female leadership at the top of universities has declined over the same period (Brooks, 2019). Across all sectors being investigated in this research, the representation of non-white women is even poorer (Tariq & Syed, 2018).

Theorising the Public Sphere

A key benefit proposed for the widespread adoption of digital technologies is the opportunity it provides to bring opinion formers and members of the public together, in ways not previously possible (Heiss et al., 2019; Lee et al., 2020). It has been argued that the expansion of technology extends traditional notions of the public sphere and strengthens the concept that there is a space between society and the state where the public can organise and opinion be formed (Barker & Jane, 2016).

Public sphere theories can be traced back to the 18th century when the concept of a platform for debate with opinion formers was initially proffered (Habermas et al., 1964). More recent definitions centre around the notion of an online public sphere that ‘facilitates discussion that promotes a democratic exchange of ideas

and opinions' (Papacharissi, 2002, p. 11). The huge changes in communication brought about by the assimilation of social networking sites into everyday life provide the means for members of the public to interact both easily and directly with individuals in public sphere occupations, including academics, journalists, police officers and politicians. At the same time, the widespread adoption of the use of social media platforms facilitates greater political debate, offering the potential for a new form of policy making that transcends traditional boundaries (McLaughlin, 2004; Papacharissi, 2009). Taken together, this represents an opportunity to reshape the public sphere, making it more responsive to grassroots concerns (Dey, 2019). Bohman (2004) identifies the role of mutual obligation as being at the heart of these new political relationships. He suggests that the benefits of citizenship emanating from online participation can only be secured when such engagement occurs within an institutionalised public sphere backed by state institutions. However, it is arguable whether the widespread implementation of such a model is possible given the dominance of the large privately financed corporate institutions responsible for the operation of social media platforms. Just as in discussions around freedom of speech mechanisms within computer-mediated communication, there is a perennial concern that the increasing reliance on technology to facilitate debate in the public sphere has led to an inequitable dominance by technology companies (Castells, 2009; Habermas, 2004).

More recent analysis of the presence and function of the public sphere has highlighted a concern that the commercialisation of the mass media and the overtly capitalist motives of social media corporations has led to the commodification of the public sphere (Gane & Beer, 2008), concentrating its ownership amongst a wealthy few (Salter, 2017). Taken together, all argue that there is 'nothing truly public about the public sphere' (Rheingold, 2000b, p. 379).

Initially, there were hopes that the widespread use of social media platforms would blur the separation that exists between the public and their public sphere representatives and that this would herald the creation of a more open and responsive society (Harel et al., 2020). In reality, this has not occurred. Instead, concern has grown that the advent of social networking sites has increased the polarisation of public opinion (Guo et al., 2020; Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020; Newman, 2018) and contributed to a wider lack of trust in public institutions, most notably in the political realm, but present throughout the public sphere (Dubois et al., 2020). The increased immutability of public opinion is highlighted in the work of Sunstein (2009a) on group polarisation. For whilst, Sunstein's (2009a) treatise fails to consider in any detail the role of social networking sites, which with the benefit of hindsight seems a glaring omission; it does underline the preponderance of people to adopt more extreme viewpoints or actions when gathered with others (Sunstein, 2009a). Sunstein (2009a) uses this hypothesis to explain multiple social and political changes that have occurred throughout history, including the rise of fascism in the 1930s, the growth of student radicalism in the 1960s and the global collapse of the financial markets in 2008 (Sunstein, 2009a). Furthermore, Sunstein (2009a) proposes that social segregation, where individuals actively seek out others who share their opinions, both encourages and exacerbates group polarisation. Such a proposition has clear parallels with the activities of the users

of online platforms. Sunstein (2009a) speculates that online social networks bring with them the risk of creating ‘polarisation machines’ (Sunstein, 2009a, p. 25), with people’s opinions not only reaffirmed by involvement with others sharing similar views but potentially made more extreme. Sunstein’s (2009b, p. 12) further work on the creation of ‘echo chambers’ first introduced in Chapter Two identifies the tendency of people to organise themselves into self-selecting groups sharing the same opinions. However, there are concerns that scholarship in this area frequently fails to appreciate the nuances that exist between different online platforms (Kligler-Vilenchik et al., 2020), and indeed, in the way that different political candidates choose to conduct their presence on social networks, as these factors may affect the way opinion leaders influence voters (Guo et al., 2020). An alternative to the echo chamber hypothesis is offered by Taylor-Smith and Smith (2019), whose study of the social formations made on Facebook, instead suggests that defining such groupings as ‘boundary objects’ (Taylor-Smith & Smith, 2019, p. 1866) better describes the coming together of people with a wide range of views for non-polarised discussions within an online community space.

Feminist Critiques of the Public Sphere

Feminist critiques of the public sphere assert that claims of equality of opportunity cannot be viewed as valid until there is an end to the pervasive discrimination endemic across the public sphere (Carver & Chambers, 2011). Other work in this area has sought to highlight the role of feminists in expanding the public sphere to include women more fully, as evidenced by the Suffragists of the first wave feminist movement, and the campaigns against sexual harassment led by second wave feminists in the 1970s (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020).

Just as the internet was hailed as offering the opportunity ‘for the sharing of multiple views and public opinions’ (Harel et al., 2020, p. 2), it was similarly posited that the growth in online platforms would provide a mechanism to advance women’s equality, with the internet ‘hailed as a place where offline prejudices and abuse could be negated and destroyed’ (Poland, 2016, p. 159). As this volume has already highlighted, the reality is rather less egalitarian, with research confirming the online perpetuation of traditional (offline) gendered differences in political engagement. Men remain more politically active online than women, a difference resulting from an enduring gendered inequality in economic, educational and technical resources (Ahmed & Madrid-Morales, 2021) that the internet has failed to overcome. Whilst it is true that social networking sites have offered feminist and other campaigning groups an effective platform upon which to operate (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Micalizzi, 2021; Weathers et al., 2016), this has come at a substantial cost, in the shape of online abuse. When considering the impact of online abuse on women’s involvement in the public sphere, there is evidence that the barrage of abuse is causing women to withdraw entirely from the public arena (Lewis et al., 2017; Watson, 2019; Yelin & Clancy, 2021), thus precipitating the opposite of what was intended. Furthermore, there is also the potential for online abuse to affect women’s very equity and citizenship (Jane, 2017a), as the online abuse received by women in

the public sphere causes them to eschew a career in public facing occupations altogether (e.g. Thomas et al., 2021).

When evaluating the impact of the growth in social networking sites on women working in the public sphere, there is a multiplicity of issues to consider. The changes in working style and access, facilitated by the removal of barriers traditionally present between the public and those employed in public facing occupations, have led to other pressures on women holding such roles. These issues are considered using the lenses provided by the two key theories of emotional labour and safety work.

Emotional Labour

The theory of emotional labour first emerged in the 1970s, in relation to analysis of women's experiences of employment, particularly in the service industries (Hochschild, 2012). However, there are several key messages that can be taken from the concept and applied to the use of social networking sites, particularly in relation to the use of online platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, which have become an integral part of communication with the public (Williams et al., 2019).

The theory of emotional labour describes the process that occurs when the 'trained management of feeling' becomes an intrinsic part of an individual's employment, with 'women...more likely to be presented with the task of mastering anger and aggression in the service of "being nice"' (Hochschild, 2012, p. 24). Whilst Hochschild's original study, published in 1983, investigated the feelings and experiences of women working in the airline industry, the theory provides an important insight into the multiplicity of emotional support tasks that are currently demanded of women in the course of their employment (Fessler, 2018), and the 'emotion regulation that occurs within work contexts' (Zammuner & Galli, 2005, p. 251). Research exploring the link between emotional labour and social media has highlighted how the use of Twitter 'means that boundaries become blurred, and discussions can cross between the professional and the personal with no clear distinction between the two' (Bridgen, 2011, p. 3), with the line between 'work' and 'non-work' are increasingly indistinct (Smith Maguire, 2008).

Research by Wajcman et al. (2008), which details how women often use technology to break down barriers between work and family life, makes a similar link with emotional labour. This study suggests that whilst women are largely successful in maintaining the multiple necessary boundaries between the roles of caregiver and employee, the presence of technology, such as mobile phones, means that employees are always 'on duty' and that the separation between work and leisure time is increasingly amorphous. The huge changes in work patterns, originally necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Akande et al., 2020; Kong et al., 2022), now seem to be firmly entrenched (Vyas, 2022). Amongst the many alterations to routines post-Covid is the shift to 'working from home', which was originally the consequence of numerous enforced lockdowns, but which now has become the norm for employees in both public and private sector organisations across the globe (Vyas, 2022; Williamson, 2022). The growth in hybrid working has seen an increasing reliance on online tools, hastening the process by which the

internet becomes further ingrained in daily life (Wessels, 2010), with the delineation between online and corporeal activity rapidly disintegrating (Harris & Vitis, 2020). This emphasises the view that ‘you don’t do things on the internet – you just do things’ (Patel, 2014, p. 1) and that the completion of tasks using technology cannot logically be separated from other activities.

It is worth remembering that the growth in computer-mediated communication precipitated a change in how people worked, even before the rapid restructuring of working patterns necessitated by Covid-19. The phenomenon of ‘peer production’ provides a useful illustration of this change (Mandiberg, 2012). Peer production is the term used to describe the co-creation of technical innovation, journalistic content and political activism online (Kreiss et al., 2011). The system has been applauded for operating outside traditional power relationships (O’Neil, 2014), providing some credence to the libertarian ideals that advocate that the internet should continue to be organised outside of traditional rules or regulation (Wessels, 2010).

However, work by Kreiss et al. (2011) has shown that the changed occupational patterns associated with the growth in peer production has negatively blurred the boundaries between work and home that traditional bureaucracies create for employees, adding to the emotional labour demands within these occupations and methods of workplace organisation.

Furthermore, it is not just within the shift to online working that emotional labour is a factor. When women in public facing occupations become the target of online abuse, this further exacerbates the weight of emotional labour that must be managed (Lewis et al., 2017). In their study of women academics, Veletsianos et al. (2018) showed how female scholars often face an expectation from university management that they actively engage in the online space. However, in common with employees in other public facing occupations (Todd, 2017), this frequently leaves them open to abuse:

I said something about women in science (I am a chemist). I got a barrage of abuse targeting both me and my daughter (not my sons, whose photos are also on my feed – they were never mentioned) – it was mostly variations of ‘fuck off back to the kitchen’. It went on for months and every time it started up again men would encourage others to join in (Lewis et al., 2017, p. 1471).

The need to not just navigate online abuse but to actively manage online vitriol and threats necessitates a new form of emotional labour, where energy must frequently be invested, during a typical working day, to protect, respond or ignore (often multiple) instances of abuse (Kerr & Lee, 2021; Veletsianos et al., 2018). Indeed, the very act of ‘coping’ with online abuse and harassment requires recipients to manage their emotions in order to lessen its potential to cause harm (Lewis et al., 2017):

It’s something I experience quite often, and just for being a feminist. On an almost daily basis I have to deal with messages

from men, many of which contain pictures or content that's sexual and unwanted. It upsets me greatly, but I've gotten used to it and I can't afford to let it upset me (Lewis et al., 2017, p. 1474).

Safety Work

The different strategies that women in the public sphere engage in, in order to successfully navigate a way through the online abuse they receive, is a manifestation of a range of measures that women employ to protect themselves in the public space. Coming under the term 'safety work' (Vera-Gray, 2017), this description details the activities that women employ on a daily basis to protect themselves from the risk of sexual harassment, sexual assault or rape. Such measures enacted in the offline world may include avoiding public transport after dark, taking a different route home from work, or wearing sunglasses or headphones to avoid attracting attention (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020), all taken in a bid to evade the persistent threat of habitual gendered violence (Stanko, 1990). Whilst some have claimed that such strategies serve only to increase women's fear of crime (e.g. Ferraro, 1996), it has been argued that rather than presenting a futile overreaction, such safety work actively protects women from victimisation (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Kelly (2013) defines the online space as one conducive to abuse, citing a lack of regulation, the reduced status of women online and a large pool of potential targets, echoing the finding that as activity on social networking sites has grown, so too has the incidence of online abuse (Jane, 2017a). The expansion of abuse from the corporeal public sphere into the online space has provided a new location for abuse (Iudici & Girolimetto, 2020), which is causing women to employ similar safety work measures to protect themselves. What is striking here is just how visible the parallels are with the explanations provided for the gender-based violence of the 1970s and 1980s, discussed in Chapter Three. For the historical battles that second wave feminists fought to win recognition of the malign treatment of women some 50 years ago echo resoundingly with experiences of the treatment and reporting of online abuse in the present day. At the same time, there are also corresponding similarities between women's experiences of sexual harassment in public spaces during the same period and the sexual harassment that women now encounter online (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020).

By adopting the definition of sexual harassment as a 'spatial expression of patriarchy' (Valentine, 1989, p. 309), it is possible to view the online space as a hostile environment that women are overwhelmingly likely to find 'cold and threatening' (Christopherson, 2007, p. 3052). This is deliberate, as it is the explicit intention of those who engage in acts of online abuse to actively reinforce women's exclusion from the public sphere (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). Furthermore, Vera-Gray (2017) suggests that for those researching the issue of online abuse, including women academics and journalists, the emotional labour invested in such investigations is doubled, as 'not only is there work to be done in managing the research subject (and our own position in relation to it), but we have to conduct both work to manage our responses to our own experiences and histories

of men's violence, as well as safety work, that is the work of managing one's own safety in relation to men's practices' (Vera-Gray, 2017, p. 73).

Conclusion

This chapter provides a contemporary description of the public sphere, and the role that women play within it; which will be used to underpin the empirical chapters that follow. It highlights how, whilst consistently making up more than half of public sector employees in the UK (Miller, 2009), the number of women holding senior roles in public facing occupations remains below parity, with consequences for women who undertake these roles. The coalescence of theories of the public sphere and gender-based violence seeks to actively reinforce women's exclusion from the public realm (Vera-Gray & Kelly, 2020). This chapter is the last of the three theoretical chapters in this monograph. Moving forwards, the different interdisciplinary lenses provided by this analysis of the combined corpora of computer-mediated communication, gender-based violence and the public sphere will be applied to the empirical evidence provided by women working across the public sphere occupations of academia, journalism, policing and politics.