

Social Media and the Public Sphere

An Interview with John B. Thompson

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Dr. John Brookshire Thompson, who is of North American origin but currently works at the University of Cambridge, is a sociologist interested in understanding the role of the mass media in the development of modern society and culture. His theoretical expositions – especially those concentrated in his book *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media* (Polity Press, 1995) – are a constant reference in the productions of European scholars who theorizing around the concept of mediatization. In the present interview, the first reflections on transformations in the public sphere were developed by Thompson in the mid-1990s, are revisited under the light of a media ecosystem different in part.



MARÍA CECILIA REVIGLIO & NATALIA RAIMONDO ANSELMINO: What role do social media play in the configuration of the contemporary public sphere? For example, do they allow for the possibility of thinking about new ways of interaction or would the categories *mediated interaction* and *mediated quasi-interaction* that you proposed in the 1990s still be enough?

JOHN THOMPSON: There is no doubt that the massive expansion of social media that followed the development of Web 2.0 in the early 2000s has altered the information environment of contemporary societies and reconfigured the ways in which we communicate and interact with others. When I wrote *The Media and Modernity* in the early 1990s, the networks and platforms that we now associate with social media – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other – did not exist. Hence, social media did not figure in the theory of media that I

developed in that book. But I made it clear in *The Media and Modernity* that the distinction I drew between three basic types of interaction – what I called *face-to-face interaction*, *mediated interaction* and *mediated quasi-interaction* – was not intended to be a fixed typology that would suffice for all future scenarios, and I suggested that the continued development of new communication technologies could well give rise to new forms of interaction which differed in important ways from mediated interaction and mediated quasi-interaction; for example, by allowing for mediated interaction that was many-to-many in character.

In my recent work, I have begun to elaborate this idea that was alluded to in *The Media and Modernity*. I've added a fourth type of interaction to my original typology; what I call *mediated online interaction*. What I want to capture with this concept is the new forms of action and interaction that have been brought into being by the computer-mediated communication that takes place in online environments. Like other forms of mediated interaction, this new type involves the stretching of social relations across space and time and a certain narrowing of the range of symbolic cues. But it differs from the other two types of mediated interaction in two key respects: unlike mediated quasi-interaction (the interaction that takes place though so-called mass media like television), it is dialogical in character; and unlike mediated interaction (for example, telephone conversations), it is oriented towards a multiplicity of distant others; it is many-to-many rather than one-to-one.

Social media sites are the perfect example of this kind of mediated online interaction: on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media platforms, individuals create or continue social relationships with distant others, some of whom they know from contexts of face-to-face interaction but many of whom they know only through the social media site. The character of the relationships they form and the nature of the interactions they have are shaped by the properties of the communication medium or platform they are using; in other words, these social media sites facilitate a distinctive form of social interaction online. Hence, while this is a significant elaboration of the typology outlined in *The Media and Modernity*, it is entirely consistent with the theory of the media developed in that book, since the basic idea of this theory is that if you want to understand communication media and their impact, then you have to analyse them in relation to the kinds of action and interaction that they make possible and help to create.

M.C.R & N.R.A.: In your works on the subject that concerns us, you explain two types of visibility with which to think about the modern public sphere: *the visibility of co-presence* and *mediated visibility*. Do you think the functioning of social media on the Internet would allow for a new type of visibility or would it redefine the previous ones?

J.T.: I would still draw a distinction between two basic forms of visibility. The point of this distinction is to highlight the fundamental difference between the kind of visibility that arises in contexts of face-to-face interaction, on the one hand, and the kind of visibility that arises in contexts of mediated interaction, on the other. In face-to-face interaction, visibility is tied to the spatial and temporal properties of the interaction situation and is reciprocal in character: each participant in the interaction is visible to everyone else – it is the situated visibility of co-presence where each is visible to all. But with the development of communication media, visibility is freed from the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now. In the new forms of interaction created by the use of communication media, the visibility of individuals, actions and events is severed from the sharing of a common locale: one no longer has to be present in the same spatial-temporal context in order to see the other individual or individuals with whom one is interacting or to witness an action or event. Just as interaction is stretched out in space and time, so too is the field of vision. This is what I mean by *mediated visibility*: its spatial and temporal properties are fundamentally different from those of the *visibility of co-presence*.

But the mediated field of vision, stretched out in space and time, is shaped in various ways by the communication medium and by the nature of the mediated interaction facilitated by it. In the case of mediated quasi-interaction, visibility is no longer reciprocal in character. The medium changes what I call the *directionality of vision*: TV viewers can see the distant others who appear on their screens but the distant others cannot see them. In the case of online mediated interaction, the directionality of vision is different again because many participants in the interaction may have means at their disposal to make individuals, actions and events visible to distant others. The simplest and most effective of these means is the camera in their smartphones: this gives every individual who has a smartphone the ability to photograph or video an individual, action or event and make it visible to distant others via social media. This is not the same as the reciprocity of vision that is characteristic of face-to-face interaction because it is not a matter of each participant in the interaction being visible to all others. But the visibility characteristic of mediated online interaction has a

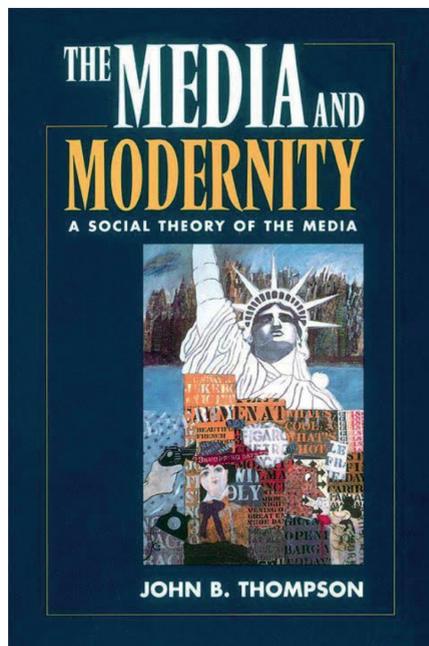


Image of the book *The Media and Modernity* published in the United States by Stanford University Press. Originating publisher Polity Press (1995).

different kind of directionality from the visibility of mediated quasi-interaction simply because many actors in the network can now use the means at their disposal –for example, their smartphones– to make individuals, actions and events visible to a plurality of distant others. Uni-directionality has been replaced by multi-directionality.

So my way of conceptualizing the impact of social media on the changing nature of visibility is not to introduce a new form of visibility: I always understood mediated visibility to be a form with many variations. As I said in my essay on “The New Visibility”, the development of communication media brought into being new forms of visibility –in the plural– whose properties varied from one communication medium to another but which, taken together, differed in fundamental ways from the situated visibility of co-presence. The rise of social media enriches the nature of mediated visibility by enabling multiple participants in mediated online interaction to make individuals, actions and events visible to others, thus creating a form of mediated visibility that is multi-directional in character.

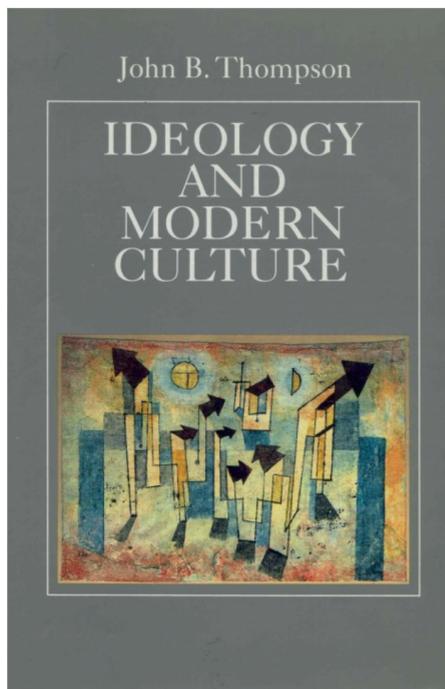
M.C.R & N.R.A.: In your article “The Theory of the Public Sphere”, you note that, alongside the development of communication media, the publicness phenomenon has been de-spatialized and has become non-dialogical. However, in the dialogical interactions that can be generated in social media today (as, for instance, in the exchanges between a candidate and the citizens that comprise his electorate via platforms such as Facebook or Twitter), wouldn’t a re-spatialization of the publicness be taking place?

J.T.: My article on “The Theory of the Public Sphere” was written in the early 1990s, before the rise of social media; in that article I was referring to the kind of mediated publicness brought into being by television and other so-called mass media. With the rise of social media, mediated publicness has not been “re-spatialized” –the kind of mediated publicness associated with social media is still stretched out in space and time and severed from the sharing of a common locale–. But it does have certain dialogical properties that distinguish it from the kind of mediated publicness associated with television and other “mass media”. Mediated quasi-interaction is predominantly one-way: television viewers sitting at home are primarily the recipients of symbolic forms whose producers do not require, and generally do not receive, a direct and immediate response from viewers. This is why I describe it as “quasi”-interaction. Mediated online interaction via social media does not share this monological character. It is fundamentally dialogical in character in the sense that multiple participants can actively contribute to the interaction, and hence the kind of mediated publicness associated with social media is more accurately described as de-spatialized and dialogical.

However, we must also recognize that the kinds of dialogue involved in social media are complex and highly structured. Donald Trump may communicate via Twitter to 50 million followers, who may find his frequent tweets channeled into their Twitter page, but you can be sure that Trump is not attending to the communications of his followers with the same degree of interest (and he is unlikely to be attending at all). Here, the significance of social media like Twitter has less to do with their dialogical properties –genuine though they are– than with the fact that these platforms provide political leaders with expansive new channels of communication that bypass the traditional media organizations. Social media platforms disrupt the power of the established media organizations –and of the legions of media professionals who are playing by the rules of the traditional media game– to set the political agenda and shape what is communicated to whom and how. By choosing to communicate via Twitter, Trump is making a calculated decision to prioritize mediated online interaction over mediated quasi-interaction as his preferred mode of interacting with citizens and with his political base. This serves his political goals: it is not so much a way of “exchanging” communication “with” the electorate but rather a way of communicating “to” the electorate without going through the established media channels, which he accuses of bias and of peddling fake news, and a way of saying what he wants to say without the framing and commentary of traditional media gatekeepers.

M.C.R&N.R.A.: *What would be the political consequences if, nowadays, not only the public but also the private and the intimate would become visible acts? How can the differences among these three domains still be recognizable?*

J.T.: One of the central concerns of my work on the media since the early 1990s has been to show that the development of communication media has blurred the boundaries between public and private life. Once you see, as I have tried to show, that both the public sphere and the private sphere have been reconstituted as spheres of information and symbolic content that are largely detached from physical locales and increasingly interwoven with evolving technologies of communication and information flow, then you understand



Ideology and Modern Culture. Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication (Polity Press, 1990).

why the boundaries between public and private life are blurred, unstable and constantly shifting: this has become an intensely contested space where individuals struggle to exercise control over information and symbolic content that they regard as their own while others avail themselves of a constantly evolving array of new means – technological, legal and political– to gain access to that information, use it for their own ends and, on occasion, make it available and visible to others, that is, public. The shifting boundaries between public and private life become a new battleground in modern societies where individuals and organizations wage a new kind of information war, a terrain where established relations of power can be disrupted, lives damaged and reputations sometimes destroyed.

In my work on political scandal, I showed that one of the consequences of this blurring of the boundaries between public and private life has been the rise and growing prevalence of scandal. The phenomena that we now recognize as scandals – Watergate, Clinton-Lewinsky, the expenses scandal involving Members of Parliament in the UK, the corruption scandal that has engulfed Brazil since 2014 and other– have not always existed: scandals are a modern phenomenon that came into being with the development of communication media, in the 19th and 20th centuries. The modern phenomenon of scandal is, fundamentally, a mediated phenomenon: it involves the disclosure through the media of some action or activity that was previously hidden from view, that involved the transgression of certain values and norms and that, on being disclosed, elicits public expressions of disapproval and outrage. Activities that were carried out in private are suddenly made visible in the public domain, and the disclosure and condemnation of these activities in the media serves in part to constitute the event as a scandal. Mediated visibility is not a retrospective commentary on a scandalous event: rather, it is partly constitutive of the event as a scandal.

The growing prevalence of scandal in contemporary politics is just one of the many consequences of the blurring of the boundaries between public and private life. Equally important is the growing capacity of states and other organizations to use digital technologies to gather information about individuals and use it for their own ends. In the wake of Edward Snowden's disclosures, we now know that key security organizations of the state – the National Security Agency in the US and GCHQ in the UK– have been involved in clandestine data-gathering activities on an industrial scale that involved the harvesting of phone and email records of millions of individuals in the US and elsewhere. Moreover, the fact that search engines like Google and social media companies like Facebook and Twitter have built their organizations on the systematic harvesting of the personal data of millions of users and the use of this data to generate advertising revenue has raised new and pressing concerns about privacy and the extent to which individuals

can control it. These are issues of the greatest importance and they need to be at the center of our attempt to understand the consequences of the digital revolution on social and political life.

While the development of communication media and, more recently, the digital revolution have blurred the boundaries between public and private life, this does not mean that the distinction no longer has any value or meaning for us today – there are some people who believe this but that is not my view. Indeed, it is precisely because we continue to value this distinction, and precisely because we continue to value the idea that some aspects of our lives are and should remain private, beyond the prying of states and other organizations, that the kind of surveillance disclosed by Snowden and the harvesting of personal data by Google and social media companies is a source of such concern for us today.

M.C.R & N.R.A.: In your book *The Media and Modernity*, you state that “it is primarily those who exercise power, rather than those over whom power is exercised, who are subjected to a certain kind of visibility”. Considering the present debates about the way that companies as well as governments manage what is called “big data”, do you still maintain that assertion?

J.T.: In *The Media and Modernity* I wanted, among other things, to challenge the view that the relation between power and visibility in modern societies should be conceptualized only or primarily in terms of the ways in which many people become visible to a few who are able to see without being seen, as in the model of the Panopticon used so effectively by Foucault. I wanted to show that, parallel to the development of mechanisms of surveillance, there is a very different configuration of power and visibility that inverts the model of the Panopticon: the development of communication media creates a whole new array of mechanisms by which many people can gather information about a few and, at the same time, a few can appear before many; here, the powerful are those who are seen, not those who see but remain invisible. This is not something that Foucault took into account. Like so many thinkers interested in the transformations shaping modern societies, the development of communication media did not feature in Foucault’s account. And yet this development is, in my view, of great importance.

However, I didn’t claim that this is the *only* way that power and visibility intersect in modern societies. The sentence you quote was intended to highlight a configuration that Foucault ignores; it was not intended to be an alternative formulation that claimed some kind of comprehensiveness. I always recognized that surveillance was an important feature of modern societies; Foucault was right about that. And the revelations of Snowden, together with the routine harvesting of personal data by the large tech companies, bring home with brutal clarity just how important this feature has become.

M.C.R&N.R.A.: Considering your books on this subject are over twenty years old, and taking into account all the changes that have happened to the media system, which do you consider are the unavoidable theoretical categories needed to think phenomena such as the ones treated in this volume?

J.T.: I stand by the central arguments developed in *The Media and Modernity*, *Political Scandal* and other works which I wrote in the 1990s and early 2000s, though I recognize that the digital revolution has transformed the information and communication environment of our societies and has had, and will continue to have, profound social and political consequences. I continue to believe that communication media are best analysed, not in terms of their intrinsic properties in the manner of, say, Innis and McLuhan, but rather in relation to the forms of action and interaction that the use of communication media brings into being. This social or 'interactional' theory of the media lends itself readily to the analysis of the new forms of action and interaction associated with social media and other kinds of what I've called mediated online interaction, and I gave a brief indication above of how I elaborate this new category.

I also indicated how we need to develop the notion of mediated visibility to take account of the way that mediated online interaction changes the directionality of vision; a consideration that has far-reaching consequences, as is evident when you reflect on the fact that individuals can now easily record what they see and hear on their smartphones, in the way that Ramsey Orta recorded the manhandling of Eric Garner by the NYPD on Staten Island one afternoon in July 2014, capturing the events on his cell phone and enabling millions of others, widely dispersed in time and space, to see and hear Garner being forced to the ground and utter "I can't breathe" eleven times before he passed out and subsequently died.

More generally, I think the theoretical priority now is to broaden the frame of reference and reflect systematically on the nature and consequences of the digital revolution that is transforming so many aspects of our social and political lives. Of course, the digital revolution is transforming our media systems. In my empirical research on the publishing industry, which has preoccupied me for the last couple of decades, I've analysed this transformation in detail and shown that it is much more complicated than it might at first seem. But the consequences of the digital revolution go far beyond its impact on traditional media systems: it is reshaping the information and communication environment of our societies and giving rise to powerful new players who are able to avail themselves of new forms of power based on their proprietary accumulation of data and their control of pivotal platforms and networks. We need to re-examine our ways of thinking about power, and the kinds of resources on which power is based, in order to make sense of the emerging structures and forces that are shaping our world today and that will continue to shape it in the years to come.

M.C.R&N.R.A.: Considering all the criticism the notion of *public sphere* has received, do you or do you not think it still is a rich category for contemporary social studies? If yes, how would you define it nowadays?

J.T.: I do think the *public sphere* remains a vital concept for social and political analysis – despite the many criticisms, Habermas’s pioneering account of the structural transformation of the public sphere remains, in my view, one of the great works of modern social theory. But to make Habermas’s concept work effectively for us today, we need to distinguish between two different senses of “the public” which emerged in early modern Europe. One sense has to do with the relation between the domain of institutionalized political power which was increasingly vested in the hands of a sovereign state, on the one hand, and the domains of economic activity and personal life which fell outside of direct political control, on the other.

From the mid-16th century on, “public” came increasingly to mean activity related to the state, while “private” referred to those activities or spheres of life that were separated from it. This was the institutional development with which Habermas was primarily concerned, and it was in this context that he identified and analysed the emergence of what he called *the bourgeois public sphere*, which he understood as a space of critical debate that emerged in between the public and private realms, supported by the coffee house culture of early modern Europe and the proliferation of periodicals that stimulated debate.

There is, however, a second sense of “the public” that did not feature in Habermas’s account. This is the sense that has to do with visibility. According to this second sense, “public” means “open” or “available”. What is public, in this sense, is what is visible or observable, what is performed in front of spectators, what is open for all or many to see or hear or hear about; what is private, by contrast, is what is hidden from view, what is said or done in privacy or secrecy or among a small circle of people. In this sense, the public–private dichotomy has to do with publicness vs. privacy, or with visibility vs. invisibility.

My work on the transformation of visibility is rooted in this second sense of “the public”; that is, in an understanding of the public as the visible. The rise of mediated visibility, in which visibility is detached from the sharing of a common locale, is at the same time the rise of mediated publicness: a new kind of public sphere in which individuals, actions and events can be seen and heard by others who do not share the same spatial-temporal context. In my view, this notion of mediated publicness/visibility is vital for understanding both the impact of communication media and the changing nature of power in modern societies.

While my way of understanding the transformation of the public sphere is quite different from Habermas’s (and, indeed, it gives me a vantage point from which to criticize his account of the supposed deleterious impact of electronic media), I do nonetheless think that his original conception of the bourgeois

public sphere retains some value today as a normative ideal, a critical yardstick for thinking about the institutional structure of the information and communication industries. In *The Media and Modernity* I put forward what I called “the principle of regulated pluralism” as a way of thinking normatively about the organization of the media industries, one that owes something to Habermas’s original conception of the bourgeois public sphere as a space “in between” the state and the market.

And I would say that today, as we begin to understand how the new spaces of communication and information flow constituted by social media are being surreptitiously shaped and controlled by a potent combination of commercial and political interests, the idea that the sphere of public communication in democratic societies is too important to be left to the commercial logic of corporations and the machinations of political actors is as relevant and important as ever.

IDENTIFICACIÓN DEL ENTREVISTADO

John B. Thompson is Professor of Sociology at the University of Cambridge and Fellow of Jesus College, Cambridge, England. His publications include *Ideology and Modern Culture* (1990), *The Media and Modernity* (1995), *Political Scandal* (2000), *Books in the Digital Age* (2005) and *Merchants of Culture* (2010). He is currently completing a new book on the digital revolution in the publishing industry. His books have been translated into more than a dozen languages and he was awarded the European Amalfi Prize for Sociology and the Social Sciences in 2001 for *Political Scandal*.