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The Public **As Projection**

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Abstract

Current theoretical approaches conceptualise 'the public' domain as a sphere, field or system, and theorists disagree about the range of meanings of the term *public*. While acknowledging that diversity of meanings, this paper seeks to avoid the limitations imposed by figures such as sphere, field or system by invoking the sociological theory developed by Niklas Luhmann. Particular emphasis is placed on later developments in which Luhmann employs theoretical terms such as medium, form and observation to conceptualise *the public*. Building on Luhmann's work, *the public* is conceived here as (connection) *medium* and *projection.* The paper draws on a range of diverse phenomena to illustrate the wider scope of this conception and its potential application, including public interactions, the transformation of texts as publications, audience formation, the role of media communication and the concept of traffic. In so doing, the paper contributes to the development of system theory as well as to a wide-ranging theory of *the public*.

Introduction: Configurations of *the public*

At first sight, *the public* is a strange concept. While scholars and scientists do not always agree about what conceptual structures 'the public' engenders or the functions it serves —it seems more or less clear what it means to use public transport, to be a member of 'the public' or to be in public spotlight. In short, despite a lack of consensus in the social sciences or arts and humanities in this regard, there seems to be general agreement in everyday life about what is meant by *the public*. In fact, this disparity between scientific and everyday accounts of 'the public' may help to refine a broad shared understanding: that one enters 'the public' realm on leaving the private sphere, and that the others see it in a similar way. To illuminate this issue in a novel way, the present paper adopts Luhmann's (1996) distinction between system and environment. Granted certain difficulties in applying the premises and concepts of sociological system theory to explore the idea of *the public*, the account advanced here suggests this is possible.

A closer look at the historical evidence clearly shows that the semantic and conceptual scope of the term *public* has shifted repeatedly and often enough to elude exact definition. Nevertheless, it is possible to detect a general frame that has its roots in the Latin *publicus*, which has two meanings: 'belonging to the people or to the state', and 'general, evident, obvious' (see Kluge 1999, pp. 598, 653, translation by the author). In antiquity, the term referred to everything that happened 'outside' on the street, in contrast to the *privatus* or what happened inside the house (Hölscher 1979, p. 420). This distinction was shaped by an overarching legal meaning, reflecting the role of possession and non-possession of property. Within the Catholic church, the emergence of legislation based on Roman conceptions of property, inheritance and contract law impoverished the original meaning of the Latin *publicus*, and that loss of precision afflicted the term until the sixteenth century (see Hohendahl 2016).

With the increasing functional differentiation of society from the seventeenth century onwards, especially with the emergence of politics as an autonomous social sphere, the meaning of the term *public* shifted from 'apparent' or 'familiar' to 'governmental' or 'state-run'. Politics was no longer defined in contrast to the household but in its relation to the economy, with important consequences for the distinction between public/private and res publica/res privata. These distinctions can be understood as the opposition between a generalized commonality (formerly 'the public') and a specific particular (formerly the private),[1] where the general or common being is thought of as a whole, which should express a physical unity and is represented by the state (for more detail on this period, see Hölscher 1979).

The concept gained further importance in the late Middle Ages, representing the people as a whole—that is, the general public or all that is generally accessible, the latter referring to places where people could meet and discuss (Baldwin 2000). The term *public sphere* has its origins in these 'circles' and appeared initially only in the language of the educated classes (Koselleck 2000). Among other ideas, the French Revolution created the concept of *publicity*, which informed German liberalism in the battle for freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and has merged the idea the public sphere with that of media communication (newspapers, printing press). The demand for a public sphere of general intellectual exchange emerged in this context and is therefore charged with a political and moral significance (Peter

[1] The distinction between public and secret or clandestine actions extended across all strata of earlier hierarchical societies and referred to all possible actions rather than its more limited political significance today (see Tortarolo 2012).

1995). This has endured, for example, in the works of Jürgen Habermas (1989), who refers to the public sphere in the context of political deliberation.

In the course of the 18th century, the economically independent bourgeoisie developed a need for social demarcation and political emancipation (Farge 2013). Driven by mercantile policies, this became a matter of social critique, and in the salons and coffeehouses, a new space emerged for the exchange of ideas and shared concerns. Following the invention of the printing press, the more local sphere of the coffee houses became a bourgeois public sphere that shaped reasoned general opinion. This expansion encompassed the political functions of state and society, extending to parliamentary negotiations and court proceedings. Initially seen to represent the interests of private individuals, the public sphere became the locus of democratic self-regulation (Baker 1990). More recently, the mass media, sometimes dubbed the fourth estate, is seen to have assumed the role of the public sphere (see Curran 1991). This role has expanded to a global scale with the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s (Fraser 2014). Social media became the new salons and coffee houses as an alternative platform to the official channels of the state (see Poster 1997, Gimmler 2001, Fuchs 2014).

Despite such a wide ranging history in the meaning of the word *public*, the notion of 'the public' has in an academic context taken on the form of an encapsulated space such as a sphere, field or even system (Bentele and Nothhaft 2010, Gao 2012, Kellner 2014, Rensmann 2014, Farah 2016). 'The public' is here configured as being distinct from other forms of social meaning-making. Furthermore, the public is associated with moral and political connotations, where the view that 'the public' takes is discussed in terms of a counter-governmental structure, as dissenting public opinion. These considerations rely more or less on an implicit understanding of 'the public' as something that is wide-ranging or for all people and thus position 'the public' within a context of more encompassing social structures, like the political system.

The present paper addresses the limitations of these tropes: (1) In this the paper it will be demonstrated that the notion of *the public* as a sphere, field or system is problematic in the sense that such a construction is unable to identify a specific form meaning-making that would differentiate *the public* as a sphere, field or system from others. Furthermore, concerns will be raised that the notion of such an encapsulated space objectifies 'the public' as something that exists out there, as something one could point at or address. However, this paper is not just about criticising existing approaches, but outlines that in order to understand the phenomenon of *the public*, it needs to be clarified how an observer comes to observe publicly or regard 'something' as public. In other words, it needs to clarify the meaning-making of *'the public'*. (2) Additionally, it will make an alternative suggestion that is able to capture the meaning of *the public* beyond political or moral notions. This will require to develop a conception that can incorporate the diversity of the above-mentioned meanings of the word *public*. As a consequence, a theoretical framework needs to be proposed that uses quite abstract terms, however, will be illustrated through a range of examples, from face-to-face interaction, to publishing, internet and traffic. (3) Based on these theoretical elaborations, the question will be raised why modern society has developed a need for *the public* as 'something' that is orthogonal to the more systematic structures of society. The suggestion will be made to consider *the public* as connection medium of modern society.

The Public as System, Field or Sphere

Set against the background of system-theoretical premises, the historical outline above makes it clear that the idea of *the public* is a contingent form that can take diverse forms. Above all,

it will be argued that *the public* is a social projection, but not a system, field or sphere in its own right (see also Baecker 1996). There is no operation or essential carrier that can create and reproduce *the public*; not everything that becomes public is so intended. On the other hand, very little that happens becomes public although it was intended to be publicised. In addition, many communicative contexts that claim public support or approval are too extensive and intertwined to be understood as a public system (see also Rospocher 2012). To that extent, *the public* constitutes a distinction rather than a system, field or sphere. For example, it is meaningful to distinguish between *public* and *private* or between *public* and *secret*, but not as a special type of operation that would differentiate *the public* from other spheres, systems or fields. Communications can be characterised as public or private (or secret), but crucially, this does not mean that all subsequent communications employ the same distinction in the same way. For example, designating some item of information as top secret, requiring discretion and silence, does not determine if subsequent acts treat the secret, private or intimate as such. In the same way, certain publications are often understood as published (or public), which are however only read or understood within a small or private circle. In other words, different meanings may be offered publicly, but there is no requirement that such a meaning is picked up or that it determines subsequent meanings. For instance, a 'public denunciation' or 'public apology', does not does it determine subsequent meanings of the same type, nor require anyone to take notice of them. In the course of discussion, meanings can be accepted or rejected, and yet precisely what remains impossible to discuss is whether and to what extent meanings characterised as public or private will remain so in subsequent communications. The fact that something is happening or communicated in public is only of importance for the social systems that register these meanings and deem them significant. The public or private nature of communication is either an aspect of *how* something is communicated or a consequence of invoking the distinction between public and private as a metacommunication about this very distinction.

As such, one could only speak of a sphere, field or system of the public by encompassing everything that is public and all public communication, linking all events that distinguish public from non-public. Despite the rise of the network society, such a conception seems implausible, at least for now (see Reese & Shoemaker 2016). The idea of everything that is public or that bears such a meaning, from global news in a national newspaper to private advertisements or marriage announcements in the regional press, from advertising in the print media to radio, television and internet promotions, from flyers on the street to chats online, from graffiti on buildings to words on clothing, from tattoos to the behaviour of everyone 'in the public eye'—in short, everything that claims 'public' status or treats *the public* as a system or sphere—would overstretch the notion of an autopoietic system as theorised in this paper.

Yet, even if we cannot assume that *the public* is a sphere, field or system, the usages of the term *public* highlight that *the public* is conceived as a 'something' as if *the public* exists in its own right. However, such an ontological approach or objectified approach is at odds with the diverse social 'existence' of *the public*. On the one hand, one cannot deny the everyday use of the meaning of *the public*, but on the other hand, it would go too far as to claim that the exists as a things 'in themselves'. In the following, it will be argued to consider *the public* as projection, so that it is seen as projecting matters as if they were inherently and undisputedly 'public matters'.

The Public As Medium and Projection

The projection of the meaning *public* as a particular view of matters is above all a social projection. Projection is conceptualised here as the projection of a meaningful surface, which does not co-project the projection within itself (see Fuchs 1999). The projection is always a projection of a 'something' (the projected) and every attempt to look behind the projected, even when looking at the projector itself, only lead to the projection of something. This notion of *the public* as projection will guide in the following why *the public* has this meaning of a 'something' and something that seems to 'exist; and yet it cannot be grasped or pointed at. Furthermore, this notion will be used to understand the meaning-making of *the public*, what it means when the projection of *the public* is employed.

These preliminary considerations indicate that *the public* cannot be seen as a sphere, field or system. But what then? How are we to understand *the public* differently, if not as a system? As a first attempt to answer this question, consider the distinction between medium and form (see chapter 2.1 in Luhmann 2012). In systems theory, a medium is defined in terms of the difference between elements that are loosely coupled (the medial substrate) and those that are strictly coupled (forms).[2] Only forms can be observed, and a medium can only be inferred from the micro-diversity of those forms (see Fuchs 2007). Inference of a medium is an abstraction, involving subtraction and refraction from unequal characteristics or conditions of the individual and singular—that is, from individual forms of communication. Each view of a specific form derives from a concrete projection, and the view that 'sights' (observes) a medium is the view (from a distance)—an abstract projection.

In that context, *the public* can be adequately conceptualised as both a projection and a medium of communication (see Luhmann 2000a). On the one hand, every communication appears publicly only if it describes itself as 'public' and is subsequently understood as such, or if it is seen by an observer as a public communication. *The public* can take the form of public communication, but it cannot represent the medium of *the public*. On the other hand, communication represents this medium only for an observer who abstracts from its concrete referents and then opens up the medium by discovering it. In this sense, *the public* does not exist other than for an observer who observes it, distinguishing it from the medium of privacy or intimacy and assigning to it the meaning 'public'. On that basis, this paper advances the view that *the public* constitute a medium (of communication) that arises solely from the abstraction of an observer. This bears the specific meaning of communication but does not incorporate the concrete features of things and applies the distinction between public and non-public to any such forms. As such, *the public* and observation of *the public* is the projection of an observer, and that projection is abstract. *The public* has no existence beyond observation of *the public* but exists only as a projection or as the projection of an observer.[3] The idea that every form (medium) that designates the meaning *public* or *publicity* is the abstracting projection of an observer will enable us to understand what is means when an observer employs this distinction, how this distinction structure the meaning-making of this observer.

In conceptualising *the public* as an abstract projection, as a medium and as a projection of an observing observer, the above account implies that the observer draws on the distinction between public and non-public. For instance, a 'public' park is designated as public if its public is an abstract projection of an everyman and not that of specific individuals (the Gonaitei Garden at the Imperial Palace in Kyoto was only open to the emperor). It is also

2 Luhmann has noted the observer-dependent nature of this distinction (see Luhmann 2012).
3 Similarly, Luhmann (2010) uses this term to refer to the projection of public opinion as the 'opinion of individuals'.

assumed that *the public* is itself an observation that takes the form of an abstract projection. For instance, the conception as public sphere presumes that 'the public' is itself such an abstract observer.

This contradiction, which was mentioned above as the tension between 'something' (as if 'the public' is inherently and undisputedly 'public matters'), but not sphere, field or system, can, however, be easily resolved, as this case deals with an observer who is observing an observer—that is, a case of second-order observation. While the first-order observer stands for the social appearance of *the public* as a form of abstract observer (Adut 2018), the second-order observer is one through whom the micro-diverse forms of *the public* are registered [recognized?]as a medium of observation.4 However, because this second-order observer only appears as an abstract projection of the many forms of *the public*, it is said to be a projection or, more precisely, the projection of a projection. This distinction between types of observer and levels of projection must now be applied to the notion of *the public* by considering first how *the public* appears as an observer.

The Public and Social Interactions

It was noted above that *the public* is conceptualised as what is common or widely accessible, and this   has caused it to be considered exclusively at a more macro-sociological level, i.e., political system (or 'establishment') versus public opinion (or 'the people'). However, in the following it will be argued that the distinction between different observer levels can help us to see that *the public* as projection appears not only in such macro-contexts.

In the case of social interactions, defined as co-presence or the presence of others that shape the interaction (see Goffman 1959), the different forms of observation can be clearly distinguished. For instance, *the public* can be understood as an address relevant to participation in interactions. This does not simply refer to a place or a space, as if one could act 'in' public, but involves a kind of projected authority, as in the *public* audience of a concert, play or panel discussion, or a stream of passing pedestrians. Although usually very limited in its impact, this is one necessary form of *the public*, defining the requirements for calling for help, turn-taking or listening with interest and applauding (see Borch 2012). This is not about a specific communicative address or specific persons but refers to a commonality that can become an address only by remaining common rather than becoming entirely personal.5 In this context, *the public* initially takes the form of an abstract address, as a performance takes place before a number of people—hundreds, thousands or perhaps only a few—but rarely before a single spectator.

Under conditions of interactive co-presence, the scope for directing communication to the abstract address of *the public* is likely to be very limited, as the abstraction of actors' personal characteristics can only be maintained for a short time or in specific professional or artificial contexts.6 At the level of society, communication seems increasingly to distance itself from local interactions (see Luhmann 1996). Although the possibilities are limited in interactive contexts, abstract address can be maintained with the aid of more institutionalised structures,

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4 Regarding the term *micro-diversity*, see Luhmann (1997) and Morgner (2019) for a more detailed application. In micro-diverse situations, every order is a project, and every self-organization is a projection.

5 Public festivals are characterized by abstract forms (protocols, speeches, etc.), but private festivals are not. This concerns the presence of certain addresses (see Delanty et al. 2011). Likewise, the expression of feelings in public (from tears to joyful greetings) has changed (Althoff 2019), with feelings of love typically restricted to highly personal social relations.

6 Although this paper focuses more on the sociological consequences of this abstract address, there is extensive research on this issue, especially in social psychology (see Ross & Nisbett 2011; Staub 2013).

as in street artist performances, public rehearsals and concerts, court hearings, parliamentary debates, group worship or virtual lectures to students. These forms of communication are possible only through the presence of an (abstract) *public* that shapes responsive and signalling behaviours. These forms also include preparation, presentation and maintenance of one's physical appearance with regard to what this may represent 'in the eyes of others'. It is reasonable to assume that these forms of interaction, although regulated by ceremonies, protocols, etiquette or choreography, become more distinctive as the social address of the 'audience' or 'public' becomes more abstract.[7] For an observer who observes this, the appearance of the crowd and the display of attention, as well as collective reactions of applause or approval, project the abstract address [to the *public* sphere]in the form of an audience.

However, *the public* is not only a projection that appears in interactions. It already takes on the form of an abstract address, where a generalised presence matters, which strongly includes (and does not exclude) the specific bodies of people. The forms of publicity referred to in the above examples require the allegiance and support of larger systemic structures like religion, art, politics or education. In addition, *the public* can also appear in absent or non-present mode. For instance, the audience may be reduced to whispers or silence; the person who turned up at the opera in casual clothes may have cast doubt on the accepted dress code; the lovers' argument may be injected with a higher level of passion when performed for an absent (but present) audience, perhaps conveying to each of the lovers how important their presence is to the other.[8] In short, the social reality of *the public* can take a number of forms. In the expression 'Don't talk so loudly. People can hear us', that reality indirectly influences the topic of conversation or how things are said. Here, *the public* does not appear as an address of direct impact but as the projection of a more or less abstract observer who cannot be said to be either present or absent. This phenomenon of 'present absence' cannot be ignored, easily or at all, even when it appears only implicitly.

These considerations can be summarised as follows: every *public* is the projection of an (abstract) observer. This is not to say anything about the ontological status of *the public*; one view is that *the public* does not exist, but only if one assumes that 'existence' means that one can go out and point at the object, 'public'. In that sense, there is no public.[9] However, *the public* does exist when observed by an observer—or better, if it is projected by an observer as an observer. As a projection, once established, it has cognitive and social consequences.

The Public and *Public*ation (text and image)

The public appears not only under conditions of physical co-presence—that is, not just as an anonymous crowd, gathering or audience—but also when no one is present or there is no form of reciprocal co-presence. In all of these cases, the projection of *the public* cannot be based on the presence of an audience or a crowd, but the projection of this abstract address nevertheless succeeds (see Ong 1982; Goody 1986). The development of modern mass media, from printing press to Internet, means that this projection now occurs more frequently,

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[7] From a historical perspective, the transition from 'the public' of the Middle Ages to the modern age is central. For instance, according to Abbé Gabriel-Francois Coyer (1779, quoted in Ozouf 1996, 94), 'When one walks through London, public spirit shows itself at every step'.

[8] The presentation of love in the view of an audience has generated some interesting research. For example, Illouz (1997) showed that the projection of intimate communication includes the projection of an abstract other.

[9] In 'Public opinion does not exist', Pierre Bourdieu (1979) reaches a similar conclusion, although in the context of another theory.

to the point of becoming normalised. For present purposes, it is important to note that the extensive production and distribution of textual and visual products, from scientific publications to YouTube clips, has almost inevitably created the projection right across society of a perspective that is now called 'public'.

In the present context, it is less important that some pictures or texts are seen or read privately or in secret. What matters is that the invention and implementation of modern media technologies has shifted the perspective so that, for instance, texts are seen as texts, and the same can be said about images. This becomes clear when one considers the changing etymologies of the words *disclosure* and *revelation* (see Hölscher 1979, Goodman 1992); crucially, our understanding of what constitutes a text has undergone a change: from the revelation of a divine word and (secret) knowledge at the hand of an author—an authority (*auctoritas*)—to publication of the (private) opinions and knowledge of an independent author. In the contemporary world, the text no longer appears as revelation (that is, as Holy Scripture) or as inspiration but as *public*ation (Warner 2009; Swaim 2009). As these changes are well documented, the present study focuses on the cognitive and social implications. This is important because this paper is not about texts and images but *the public* of an observer and therefore every public sign.

As already noted, the addressees of communication can take on a generalised form, even in the micro-order of an interaction. The interaction remains dependent on the fact that these addresses are a consequence of co-presence and the local situation. The addressees of communication appear at this level as particular addresses because of the temporally restricted nature of situations and the physical presence of participants. The generalisation of these particular addresses is restricted by the limits of probability—what is reasonable, and what is possible—and it is evident that only those present (in other words, not all of humankind) are intended addresses. This limitation is already established by the seemingly natural limits of interaction, such as who can be reached and restrictions of time or memory. In addition, as gaze and posture are inevitably selective, one must focus on an imaginary point or stare at the sky to signal that one is not addressing anyone personally. However, this marks a zone of transition to the improbable, as it is more likely that someone will feel addressed and will therefore answer. Although not asked, they may simply interrupt, applaud or heckle in between, confirming how unlikely it is to abstract from social addresses of communication at the level of interaction and particular persons.10

This abstraction is much easier in the case of texts or images. One might think that an image such as a poster or a text such as a book could speak to a potential viewer or reader who is not present. More importantly, however, that text or image is not addressed to a specific person. Apart from private correspondence or personal photographs, every text or image creates an abstract address, and this abstraction can occur on both sides, as in the abstraction of the author or reader/viewer. On the reader's side, for instance, the abstraction results from the duplication of texts and books, which seldom appear as a single copy and are handed over personally to a single reader. The 'reader' might be mentioned and addressed in the text, apparently as a particular projection. In principle, however, a text once printed and reproduced is accessible to everyone, regardless of which reader or group is mentioned in the text. This form of free access appears socially (in or on the text) as an abstraction of an

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10 One might consider the effort involved in disciplining those present to become an audience, where no one in particular stands out, and all remain more or less in one state or silent, as in a museum or an opera house (see Bazin 1967; Weber 1997). As Goffman (1959) noted, the flexibility and consequent irrelevance of the particular individuals who come and go, as on the street, is another such possibility.

address, as Everyman, specifically because the address of the communication in or of the publication is no longer observed, or only as an abstraction (of a 'reader'). In any case, the projection of an address is only successful if the text is generated as if formulated by someone to everyone and thus configured as social reality. In this context, a 'public' is constituted in the form of a readership or viewership as a projection of an abstract address that is only established with or through the publication, and to which a text seems directed (La Vopa 1992). Nobody is addressed personally, which does not mean that the publication is addressed to nobody, but rather to every reader.

The abstraction of the address of the 'recipient'[11] of a text or image can vary and may also vary in strength. This abstraction is made possible by the conditioned co-production of at least two social addressees, including that of the 'authors'. It is hardly surprising, then, that the author of a text or image appears as 'anonymous' or as a name (and only in rare cases like paintings); in all but a few contexts, more detailed information about the author is unlikely to be available (Foucault 1969). However, this indicates only that the abstraction of the social address on the 'producer' side of a text is quite flexible. Such abstractions probably lead to super-generalisations and projections of an abstract address or in other words as projections of *the public* in the form of another observer. Here, *the public* is configured as a collective singular for the countless authors, publicists, journalists, blog-writers and twitterers, who constantly speak out.

The Public as Sphere

To the extent that the abstraction of the address can be judged, it is at least clear that the withdrawal of the personal and particular reaches highly complex forms in the domain usually referred to as 'the public sphere' and sometimes as the 'system of media communication' (from journalism to entertainment, print to online) (Bentele & Nothhaft 2010; Kellner 2014; Rensmann 2014). In this area especially, the notion of the personal is becoming increasingly thin. It is reduced to the name of a publicist, a social media acronym or an online feed, abstract abbreviations like hashtags or combinations of letters are commonplace. In extreme cases, a contribution's author is not mentioned at all, and the social address takes the form of a newspaper, YouTube video or hashtag. This strange non-appearance and absence of person-like address is in effect the negative expression of a strong abstraction—a form of anonymity entailing little or no personal information. The same could be said for the 'recipient or user address'. Even in social media, this address rarely appears or appears only in imaginary form, addressing the readers of a YouTube comment section by saying 'if *you* want more of that, just click on that like button' Similarly, when a newscaster greets the audience as 'dear viewers', this abstraction of the 'recipient's' social address is only the secondary, conditioned, co-produced side of the abstraction that causes the address of the 'producer' to disappear.

In light of these considerations, the issue of the 'public' as a sphere or system resurfaces. As noted above, it is difficult to conceptualise the diverse meanings of the word *public* as a sphere or system. Examples from mass media and social media make it clear that such assumptions contradict the view that these should be understood as a system of the public. In other words, if every form of *the public* occurs only as a projection of an observer, and if forms like journalism or entertainment constitute a special realm whose forms are disposed to

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11 The concepts of production and reception remain linked to classic models of interaction and should be relativised by differentiating between operation and observation (see Luhmann 2000b).

produce that projection, then *the public* cannot simultaneously be understood as a system or sphere. However, this problem is resolved by understanding the configuration of the system as a projection of an observer. The system of media communication appears to one observer as an articulation of publicity; to another, it appears as a system that fulfils a wide range of functions, and to both of these observers it appears as another observer observing observer.

The Public as Traffic

If it is plausible to propose that *the public* is the projection of an observer with an abstract address, and if *the public* reaches its most abstract form in the system of media communication, a question inevitably arises as to the nature of this abstraction. In other words, in what form does *the public* appear with the greatest precision in the projection and abstraction of the address? The answer is simple but fundamental: the most abstract form of *the public* is *traffic*. Road and street traffic, local and long-distance traffic, Internet traffic— all are forms of *the public*. The hustle and bustle of activity on the streets, sidewalks and squares, the traffic lights, signs and signals, the online platforms and their busy comment sections, the message streams on social media—traffic seems a highly diffuse phenomenon, yet it always leads to the projection of an observer. It can produce various projections, but these usually take the form of *the public*.

This does not follow solely from the fact that 'public transport' or 'the World Wide Web' are sometimes referred to as traffic. However exact each individual projection, any projections related to road or Internet traffic are necessarily precise because without the most precise projections by regulators and planners, this traffic would be impossible, and their precision sharpens with increasing knowledge and improved techniques of calculation and simulation. When driving, no one needs to turn the steering wheel to see what happens, as this can be imagined with sufficient precision. In public traffic this restrains the way one can participates, because it is only possible by mastering the rules with precision. Likewise, in the case of the internet one may think one's posting remains unread or unseen, but often one will soon discover otherwise. In these situations, participants appear mutually for each other; they project the other's internal intentions and perceptions and are forced to coordinate these projections carefully with their behaviour. In turn, public transport planning involves a projection based on the appearance of large numbers of people on the streets, and precise traffic management depends on the most accurate figures possible (Goffman 1959). Above all, the road traffic regulations must be clear and unambiguous, as any inaccuracy may have catastrophic consequences.

Finally, just as the definition of road signs and signals (through abstraction and generalization) is extremely precise, Internet traffic needs buttons and URLs to click on and keywords to be searched. However, as a projection of *the public*, Internet traffic has different consequences. Algorithms and digital codes cause *the public* to appear as an abstraction from itself, with greater freedom to project a generalised image in the form of an avatar, automated online assistant or IP address. To that extent, netiquette or acceptable online behaviour depends on different rules, allowing much freer access to this form of public transport. The associated risk of the private or secret becoming public can create an unpleasant sense of being watched or out of control.

Traffic represents the most abstract form of *the public* not only because of the need for precise projections but because the abstraction of the address also peaks in this context. In the case of road traffic, such abstractions arise quite quickly on the participants' side. At a certain speed, other drivers are no longer perceived as individuals or even as people; driver and

vehicle merge into a homogeneous mass of a certain shape and colour. This depersonalisation is most apparent in speeding offences or in aggressive language about traffic or other drivers. Similarly, Internet traffic dissolves the person into a highly abstract form: a digital address that includes both the actual user and the 'recipient'. From a social perspective, this makes it much easier to harass others or to complain, as deviant public behaviour is cloaked in anonymity.

In road traffic, behaviour appears as a speed vector, and its social character is reduced to the vector change in mutual reactions. From a social point of view, then, the most important requirement is to demonstrate or display any change in speed or direction of travel. These changes are typically signalled by one road user to others by a flashing indicator or brake light. Similarly, Internet behaviour is governed by bandwidth or QoS (quality of service), which manages traffic direction and priority while myriad Internet protocols (ISO/OSI, ASN) relay datagrams. Again, there are direct signalling behaviours and strategies like PPC (pay-per-click) or reviews and metareviews on consumer sites. Most importantly perhaps, the online form of address is highly abstract, reduced to a numerical label (IP address). Comparing these micro-diverse cases, standardised projections that use technically induced signals appear abstract in the highest sense.

Both the signals of moving vehicles and the flow of digital information are directed to abstract addresses now approaching the highest level of abstraction, in which the address of communication behaviour hardly appears, as in 'dear user'. Nevertheless, as the address must somehow appear if the behaviour is to be considered social, the projection of the address must be supplemented by perceptual experience and imagination. In the case of road traffic, the address is presented at least as someone else registering light and sounds. Since language-based road signs are unreliable and imprecise, the projection of the address must use lights or horn signals. Online, the IP address is typically supplemented by images of avatars that signal the presence of a 'real' person (although it may often be a bot). As these signs, at the level of perceptual experience and imagination serve every conceivable address, the projection of the address appears in its most abstract form, that is, as a perceptible or imaginable other.

Concluding Remarks: *The Public* As A Connection Medium

The present paper raised three issue concerning the concept of 'the public' as a sphere, field of system, which included the problematic notion of 'the public' as something and its oncological reifications, but also in restricting the meaning of political to societal macro-structures like the political system and thereby considering 'the public' on in terms of morality. While this paper acknowledged the underlying concerns, like the notion of 'something', a different approach was presented that used the theoretical notion of the projection in combination with terms like form/medium, observer or abstraction as to explain the meaning-making of *the public* and how this meaning-making words under very different constellations from interactions to traffic. In the final part of this paper, it will be asked why modern society has developed as need for the meaning of *the public* that seems, on the one hand, encompassing, where under current conditions, no communication can avoid orienting itself to this distinction between public and non-public that it is fundamental to contemporary society (see Mills 1959; Firth 1973; Slater 1998; Bailey 2000). On the other, *the public* has not taken on the form of an encapsulated space, being a designated object, but its meaning sits orthogonal to systematic structure of society. In his later work, Niklas Luhmann (2013) proposed that in reaction to increasing differentiation between the levels of society, like between interactions, organisations and functional systems, so-called connection media, like

morals, but perhaps also trust and emotion have developed as a consequence (see Morgner 2018). This paper set out to suggest that *the public* can be conceptualised as medium and projection, where *public* is the abstraction of the individual, the personal and private, but likewise, still incorporates the views that other social addresses are involved. As such, society provides the notion of the personal and the intimate with a medium of an abstract other with a projection of other individuals, but without needing to know them intimately. The commonly, the connection with other people takes on a symbolic form beyond one's immediate experience. In this sense *the public* can act as constraints that limit the societal meaning-making to what is considered to be individual, but paradoxically can have an amplifying quality capable of amassing a particular point of view. Yet, society provides itself with a meaning-making that is also not too restrictive that allows for a great deal of diversity. Theoreticians of the public sphere have expressed the hope that such a conception could to higher forms of rationality, to a more enlightened deliberation. However, the perspective advanced in this paper point in a different direction, one where *the public* does not signify access to a higher form of self-control or lead to higher form of social transparency. On the contrary, it suggests the unpredictability of a notion of *the pubic* which derives its power from its opaqueness.

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