

The public sphere and Habermas: Reflections on the current state of theory in public library research

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Abstract

Purpose

This article addresses a recent debate in this journal between Buschman and Widdersheim and Koizumi on public libraries and public sphere theory in library and information science (LIS). The article moves beyond the debate as the debate has been too focused on the theories of Jürgen Habermas. In order to really understand the democratic mission of public libraries and how it is related to the public sphere, the author argues that LIS scholars need to look beyond Habermas' theories of the public sphere.

Design/methodology/approach

This is a theoretical article that discusses different theories of the public sphere, and how they have been and can be applied in library and information science.

Findings

The author finds that a main disagreement between Buschman and Widdersheim and Koizumi is whether one can use the concept of a public sphere without doing it in a “traditional” habermasian way. The answers put forward in this article, is that we can and should look beyond Habermas' work when seeking to understand the role of public libraries as public spheres.

Originality

The article puts forward theories that are not commonly used in LIS, and advocates for broadening the theoretical scope of LIS scholars studying the relations between public libraries and public spheres.

Disagreements on public sphere theory in public library research

Lately, there has been a debate in this journal regarding the role of Jürgen Habermas' (1989[1962]) public sphere theory in research on public libraries (Buschman, 2019; Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2020). John Buschman argues that the work of Michael Widdersheim and Masanori Koizumi are important for library and information science (LIS), but not for advancing a Habermasian public sphere approach for studying public libraries. Rather, for Buschman (2019) these authors contribute to advancing our understanding of the internal and external communication practices of public libraries, and how the libraries engage with civil society. Buschman sets out to demonstrate that the work of Widdersheim and Koizumi is not in line with Habermas' (1989[1962], 1992) public sphere theory, in that they have forgotten that Habermas' theory was about the evolution of democracy in Europe. Widdersheim and Koizumi (2020), on their part, argue that their work is perfectly in line with Habermas' body of work, as they look beyond his initial theory and towards his other influential works on communication, democracy and the public sphere (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1996) when theorizing the relationship between public libraries and public spheres. A further disagreement between the parties relates to their respective positions within the philosophy of science. Where Buschman adheres to a hermeneutic approach, referring to Clifford Geertz (1973) as a key source of inspiration, Widdersheim and Koizumi position themselves in a nomothetic rather than an ideographic tradition, in that they are seeking to develop general models transcending particular cases. Considering the number of papers Widdersheim and Koizumi have produced in journals and proceedings developing and applying models of the public sphere and public libraries' (see Buschman, 2019, Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2020), the models have become theories in their own right, decoupled from Habermas' public sphere theory (a point not made explicit by the authors themselves).

Buschman argues that if one is to talk about the public sphere, one must relate to Habermas' work in a certain way. Widdersheim and Koizumi criticizes Buschman for this view and what they term an originalist approach (Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2020, p. 618) to Habermas (1989[1962]) initial conceptualization of the public sphere. Seen from a distance, the main disagreement between the authors seems to be whether it is possible to use the term public sphere without applying a proper and 'originalist' approach to Habermas' work. Although Widdersheim and Koizumi (2020) argue that they are relating to Habermas' theories (Habermas, 1984, 1987, 1989[1962], 1992, 1996) in their operationalization of the public sphere in public libraries (Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2016), their work is really about developing theories of the democratic function of public libraries in society, and how this is

governed and legitimated through communicative practices and civil society interactions. They find the concept of the public sphere to be helpful in doing this. For Buschman, it is problematic to use the term public sphere in such a manner as it is employed somewhat differently than in Habermas' work, and not sufficiently linked to democracy, hence the title 'the public sphere without democracy' (Buschman, 2019).

I am all for not applying an originalist approach to influential theories, as argued by Widdersheim and Koizumi (2020) against Buschman's (2019) critique. At the same time, I am skeptical towards relying too heavily on one author (Habermas) when developing your own theories, as Widdersheim and Koizumi have been doing. If Widdersheim and Koizumi had not made such a strong connection between their own work and that of Habermas I do not think Buschman would be as critical towards their work. As already mentioned, Widdersheim and Koizumi have through their work developed theories in their own right; their work is more than a Habermasian take on public libraries. If they in their future work rely less on Habermas when discussing the various relations between public libraries and public spheres this might benefit their perspective, and possibly be more appealing to Habermasian scholars like Buschman. Buschman, on the other hand, needs to accept that there are multiple theories of the public sphere, and that one does not have to be a Habermasian in order to discuss, theorize or study public spheres. Although Habermas' theory is by far the most influential in the human sciences, there are other approaches that have had considerable impact. And besides, Habermas is not the first scholar to theorize a public sphere. Although one can find the idea of a public sphere already in Kant (Gripsrud, Moe, Molander, & Murdock, 2010; Kant, 1975 [1784]), modern philosophers like John Dewey (2012[1927]) and Hannah Arendt (1998[1958]) have without doubt written important works on the public sphere (although using different concepts) (Calhoun, 2017; Gripsrud et al., 2010).¹ Furthermore, Habermas' theories have been influential in the development of alternative public sphere theories, in that Habermas' work has led scholars to develop perspectives on the public sphere where they position themselves as alternatives to a habermasian perspective, with the work of Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge (1972) and Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 1993, 2005) as prominent examples.²

¹ In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey states that "'the problem of the public' is how best to improve "the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion" (Gripsrud et. al., 2010: 43), and in *The Human Condition*, Arendt discusses the relationship between the private and the public realm.

² Negt and Kluge argued that Habermas missed out on counter public spheres, especially proletarian ones, in his theory of the bourgeois public sphere. Mouffe, on the other hand, does not consider consensus as a goal; she looks at conflict and emotional involvement as a value in itself, and believes that this serves democracy better than

In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss how public libraries have been theorized as public spheres in LIS, moving beyond the debate between Buchman and Widdersheim and Koizumi, and thus also a Habermasian notion of the public sphere.

Public libraries as public spheres

In recent years, library policies have been developed to emphasize the public sphere function of the public library. This is especially true in the Nordic countries, where several national laws on public libraries have been reformulated to encompass the libraries role as an infrastructure for a public sphere (Audunson et. al., 2020). These developments have been inspired by the work of Habermas, although somewhat implicitly. In Norway, Habermas' work has had a profound impact on the social sciences and humanities, and through that also the law on freedom of speech (Kalleberg, 2015; Ministry of Justice and the Police, 1999), and recent formation of cultural policies (Ministry of Culture, 2018) and library strategies (Ministry of Culture & Ministry of Education and Research, 2019). This is due to a tradition for involving scholars as experts when developing policies (Kalleberg, 2015). Even though policies emphasize public libraries as a public sphere infrastructure (in a Habermasian sense), there is nevertheless a leap to argue that the public library is merely a Habermasian public sphere institution, in that rational discussions of cultural and political matters are but one aspect of the democratic mission of public libraries. In order to capture the totality of the democratic mission of public libraries as related to public spheres, it makes more sense to rely on a set of public sphere theories, than to simply base our understanding on Habermas' notion. Before moving on to alternative theories on the public sphere, I will give a short presentation of Habermas' theories and how they can be related to public libraries.

The public sphere, democracy and public libraries

For Habermas a public sphere consists of "private people come together as a public" (Habermas, 1989[1962]). In his 1962 book he describes how the public sphere in Germany, Great Britain, and France in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries went through a transformation from being a sphere where the rulers were displaying their power (a representative public sphere), to becoming a bourgeois public sphere inhabited by property-owning and literate men discussing central social and cultural issues (it later evolved to also include other social groups). In these public discussions, arguments were to transcend the

an unattainable ideal of consensus and communicative rationality. Mouffe's work has recently been applied to public libraries (Eckerdal, 2017, 2018).

individuals' social status, no topic should be foreign for critical discussion, and the audience should in principle be totally open (Habermas, 1989[1962], p. 27). But Habermas' theory ended on a negative note, echoing the dystopian view on modernity put forward by his Frankfurt teachers (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002[1947]): He believed it to be deeply problematic that the new mass media of the time (such as tabloid newspapers, radio and popular cinema) transformed the public to be consumers of culture, rather than critically discussing citizens. According to Habermas, this led to the dissolving of the bourgeois public sphere; due to these mass media, citizens were no longer capable of performing arguments in public.

Habermas later changed his perception of the role of mass media for democracy: 30 years after the publication of his dissertation, he launched a theoretical model for liberal democracies (Habermas, 1996). According to this model, any political decision must be supported by a majority of the population in order to be considered legitimate. A public sphere that strives to live up to the ideals of the bourgeois public sphere plays a key role in this model, as a majority will be attained through public deliberations. Habermas is no longer a pessimist. He now considers the mass media to play a key role in the communicative structure of the public sphere, where different groups from civil society can communicate their interests to a broader public. Depending on the kind of support they manage to achieve, these interests can be channeled to the political system and potentially end up in political decisions, and at best changes in law. Within such a democratic power circuit (Aakvaag, 2017), public libraries can play a role as an open and inclusive space where citizens can get together and discuss cultural and political matters, in addition to be a free and open space for citizen education.

Public libraries have increasingly emphasized their role as public meeting places and hosts of cultural and political events, especially in the Nordic countries (Audunson et. al., 2020). Scholars of library and information science have also emphasized this aspect of public libraries in recent years, deeming public libraries an important element in the infrastructure of a sustainable public sphere (Audunson et al., 2019). Habermas' theory has proven helpful when conceptualizing this aspect of the mission of public libraries. When we take other dimensions of the mission into account, dimensions that also point to public libraries contributing to a democratic public sphere, simply relying on a Habermasian approach will come short. In order to theorize the complex role of public libraries as public spheres we need a broader set of theories.

The civil sphere, democracy and public libraries

From Habermas, we get a precise definition of what constitutes a public sphere, but “[p]rivate people coming together as a public” (Habermas, 1989[1962]) only serves as a description of certain aspects of the life at a public library. Habermas’ theory is too focused on democratic deliberation to really capture the public libraries contribution to a democratic public sphere. If we turn to Jeffrey Alexander’s (2006) theory of the civil sphere we get to include democratic aspects of public libraries that goes beyond deliberative events taking place within the libraries, as his theory is not built on rational deliberation as the basis for a civil public sphere.

Alexander (2006) adheres to Habermas’ (1989[1962], p. 27) definition of the public sphere as “the sphere of private people coming together as a public”, but criticizes Habermas for assuming that the idealizing principles of deliberation and rational discussion “actually grow out of speaking, deliberating, or being active in the public sphere” (Alexander, 2006, p. 16). Where the public sphere for Habermas is an arena for rational discussions, it is for Alexander an arena for social performances, since “the ideal of rational dialogue and dispassionate deliberation is only one of several performative modes available to cultural actors in the public sphere” (Townsend, 2012, p. 302). Habermas’ (1987) communication theory is based on an idea that there exists a specific form of rationality in the lifeworld that sets it apart from the instrumental rationality of the systems of market and state. Through communicative rationality, Habermas (1984) argues that we meet each other as equals and let the power of the best argument decide the winners of every discussion. For Alexander, on the other hand, solidarity rather than rationality is the guiding principle of the public sphere. Such a civil public sphere “relies on solidarity, on feelings for others whom we do not know but whom we respect out of principle” (Alexander, 2006, p. 4). The civil sphere is “a world of values and institutions that generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time” (Alexander, 2006, p. 4). For Alexander, the discourse of the civil sphere has at its core a set of binary cultural codes separating the civil from the anti-civil. This discourse is in turn sustained by specific communicative institutions (public opinion, mass media, polls, associations) and regulative institutions (voting, parties, office, law). This leaves no room for public libraries as an explicit part of his theory. Nevertheless, as public libraries are tied to the civil side of the binary code of civil sphere discourse, basing its legitimacy on such civil values as inclusion, openness and rationality, public libraries can be viewed as civil organizations. At the same time, it is important to remember that the public library can fail to live up to its ideals. In the US, for example, the public library has throughout its history gradually dissolved its tendencies for exclusion and anti-civil actions (Wiegand, 2015).

Public libraries can most certainly be considered an institution of the civil sphere, as it “generates the capacity for social criticism and democratic integration at the same time” (Alexander, 2006, p. 4). In public libraries patrons can attain knowledge deemed important for participation in public sphere discourse, and potentially also feel as part of a community simply by being present in the library and engaging with its various offerings. The *public* in public libraries relates both to the library as a physical “meeting place” for various activities involving some form of deliberation (be they debates, book club meetings or language cafés) and it being an open and inclusive space (at least in principle, although not true throughout the history of the institution (Wiegand, 2015)).

As public libraries have a strong mandate to serve the whole community through various inclusive practices (Johnston, 2018), Alexander’s civil sphere theory, with its heavy focus on solidarity, can be helpful when theorizing the democratic and inclusive mission of public libraries. Lacking in Alexander’s theory is a focus on the public sphere as a place, as a physical location, an aspect that is captured by Habermas’ theory, as well as other theories of public spheres, particularly those developed by Richard Sennett (Sennett, 1992[1977], 2010).³ Simply relating to one theory of the public sphere will not be sufficient to amply theorize the relationship between public libraries and public spheres. Instead, we need to critically engage with several theories of public spheres and seek to develop them as fitted to public libraries.

Public libraries and public spheres

During the 2000s, scholars have developed many concepts that can capture how public libraries function as part of a public sphere. In LIS, public libraries have been conceptualized as low intensive meeting places (Audunson, 2005), as meeting spaces (Jochumsen, Rasmussen, & Skot-Hansen, 2012), as public spheres (Buschman, 2019; Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2016, 2020), and as third places (Audunson et al., 2020; Oldenburg, 1989). In sociology, public libraries have recently been conceptualized as palaces for the people (Klinenberg, 2018). Library scholars activate sociological theories when developing models and concepts for public libraries, irrespective of whether the original theory emphasizes public libraries as a part of the theory. Oldenburg (1989) hardly mentions libraries in his book, while library and information scholars talk about libraries as third places (Audunson et al., 2020). Similarly, libraries make up a minor part of Habermas’ theory, yet library and information scholars rely heavily on his

³ For Sennett, the public realm (as opposed to the private realm of intimate relations) is a place where strangers meet and become part of a culture of civility. It is a forming space where people are developed as tolerant citizens, and it is usually equated with life in the cities. See Fagerlid (2020) for an application of this perspective on public libraries.

theory when conceptualizing public libraries as public spheres (Audunson et al., 2019; Buschman, 2019; Vårheim, Skare, & Lenstra, 2019; Widdersheim & Koizumi, 2020). Alexander does not mention libraries, yet his theory has been activated when theorizing the role of libraries in society (Larsen, 2018, 2020). Klinenberg is an exception as he is a sociologist writing explicitly about public libraries when developing his argument on the importance of social infrastructures for creating a more just and united society. Combined, these different perspectives provide us with a rich conceptual language for understanding the democratic mission of public libraries. Yet, as pointed out by Widdersheim (2017), scholars of library and information science have relied heavily on Habermas' early work when conceptualizing public libraries as public spheres. In going forward with this theorizing in library and information science, scholars should not only engage with Habermas' more recent work but also alternative theories of public spheres. Only then will we be able to capture the many aspects connecting public libraries to public spheres.

As stated in the introduction, the debate between Buschman and Widdersheim and Koizumi is at core a debate about the status of Habermas' theory when theorizing public libraries as public spheres. As shown throughout this article, there are many influential theories of public spheres, and one need not rely solely on Habermas' work when seeking to understand the role of the public library as part of democratic public spheres. Instead of debating how best to apply Habermas' theory to modern day libraries, a more fruitful debate can be what kind of theories can help us understand the democratic role of public libraries as it relates to public spheres.

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