

# Murdoch Almighty: When the Public Loses Opinion

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

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People imagine that their opinions are their own, not those of corporate moguls who compete to colonise the public sphere. We are not as free in thought as we think.

German philosopher and political scientist [Juergen Habermas](#) is often credited for his immense contribution to sociology and critical theory among other areas of scholarly endeavour. His most memorable achievement, however, is his introduction of the concept of the “public sphere”, a phenomenon, he argued, that rose in Europe in the 18th century and was forced into an untimely hibernation by the same forces that led to its inception.

Habermas’s “public sphere” enjoyed convenient yet reasoned specificity in time and place: 18th century England. The formation of bourgeois culture coupled with an expansion of liberal democracy gave rise to an increasingly educated populace with precise interests, rights and expectations. Using coffee houses and other public places as mediums for dialogue, the English bourgeoisie managed to create their own public sphere, which eventually contributed to the formation of public opinion. Other Western democracies, notwithstanding France with its undeniable history of active citizenry, were soon to be part of the growing movement.

Of course, Habermas’s concept, like any other groundbreaking realisation, generated debate, and an intense one at that. Some argued that there are indeed various “public spheres”, overlapping and simultaneous. Others argued against the existence of such a concept altogether. The debate is, obviously, much more elaborate and unlikely to end any time soon. But Habermas’s ideas and their outreach — first introduced in his book *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* in 1962 — persist in relevance and import.

The rise and endurance of the public sphere of the 18th and 19th centuries was momentous in the sense that it finally defined a relationship between the state and the public on somewhat more equitable grounds than hence. Public opinion finally mattered, or so it seemed. The way that such opinion was communicated required fewer mediums and even less middlemen.

Regardless of where “the public sphere” begins and where it ends — for at times it failed to fairly represent women, minorities, labourers and other historically marginalised groups — it at least succeeded in establishing and defining the boundaries between the “life-world” and the “system”; the first representing the mutual solidarity of those involved in making the public sphere and the latter concerned with the state, its apparatus, and its own concern with power and authority.

As expected, the relationship would have to be that of push and pull, whereby the life-world

would fend for and attempt to expand its social and political significance while the system would incessantly attempt to colonise the public sphere and its life-world. One would rightly expect that a healthy democracy is one that offers a balance of power between the public and the state, enough to keep those in power in check, and to protect society from a state of chaos.

Evidently, well-established democracies were little interested in reverting to past historic experiences with feudalistic and authoritative regimes. The 20th century was proof of that assertion as much as it was of the rapid colonisation of the public sphere by other means aside from brute power and coercion: that of capitalism.

Capitalism saw the uneven distribution of wealth, and thus power. While the bourgeois public sphere of past centuries had long conceded to an ever-expanding life-world, the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, once again, redefined the relationship between the public and authority. The system had finally managed to penetrate the virtual solidarity of the life-world through newfound rapports struck between the state and the new capitalists. Those with the money found it more beneficial to keep public opinion in check to appease the state, in exchange for a share of power and privilege that can only be granted by the state; thus the populace might think that its opinion counts, but in actuality, it matters little.

This may explain why Habermas, among others, spoke of the “rise and fall” of the public sphere at a time when we seem to have more access to media platforms than ever before. In short, what remains of the public sphere is the illusion that there is one.

Habermas’s ideas require no compelling reason to be discussed; they are compelling on their own. However, an article in *The Guardian* on 1 July by Lance Price, former media advisor to the British prime minister, brought the topic back to mind. Price asserted that media tycoon Rupert Murdoch was arguably the most powerful man in the media world today. Murdoch, an Australian-born US citizen, literally owns a significant share in public opinion through his control of the world’s largest media conglomerates.

“I have never met Mr Murdoch, but at times when I worked at Downing Street he seemed like the 24th member of the cabinet. His voice was rarely heard [but, then, the same could have been said of many of the other 23] but his presence was always felt,” Price wrote.

Murdoch “attended many crisis meetings at the Home Office — the influence of the Murdoch press on immigration and asylum policy would make a fascinating PhD thesis,” the author of the best-selling *The Spin Doctor’s Diary* added. “There is no small irony in the fact that Tony Blair flew halfway round the world to address Mr Murdoch and his News International executives in the first year of his leadership of the Labour Party and that he’s doing so again next month [July, 2006] in what may prove to be his last.”

Shocking as they may seem, the revelations of Price, a man once intimately involved in the workings of the British government, appear utterly consistent with the strengthening bond between the mainstream media and governments in Western democracies. Such a bond is equally, but especially visible in the United States.

But the relationship between states and media become even the more dangerous when both team up — and not by accident — on the same ideological turf. Murdoch is a right-wing, pro-Israeli (widely known to be a personal friend of Ariel Sharon), pro-war ideologue. In

2003, every editorial page of his raft of 175 newspapers around the world touted the same pro-war mantras. Some might have innocently deduced that the “world’s media” were all inadvertently converging on a consensus that sees President Bush as someone who is “acting very morally [and] very correctly”, to borrow Murdoch’s own language, and that such convergence is a reflection of the overall international public consensus on the matter. Reality, however, was starkly different.

Of course, Murdoch, who owns numerous newspapers, TV stations and news services throughout the world is not the exception, but the norm. In fact, a greater convergence is constantly taking place in the media world in the United States, which gives a few individual media conglomerates unprecedented ownership of thousands of radio and television stations, newspapers, magazines, etc. While some still laud the “freedom of the press”, little aware of who owns what, democracy is being greatly compromised: the “life-world” is conceding like never before to the ever-encroaching “system”, and a true “public sphere” is almost non-existent, at least in any meaningful form.

While states cannot prevent events or guarantee absolute power for themselves, they’ve understood the inimitable value of the media in its ability to forge a favourable climate of public opinion that seems incidentally consistent with that of the state. In exchange, the commercial and even ideological interests of those who own the media are always guaranteed. As long as such a correlation is not fully recognised and disabled, true democracy will continue to experience a frightening decline, whereby meaningful participatory democracy is replaced by mere democracy rhetoric used to satisfy political, ideological, and ultimately imperialistic ends. Without a crucial awakening that gives the public back what is rightfully theirs — its opinion, its public sphere and its democracy — this downward spiral is likely to continue.

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