New Media and the Public Sphere: An Analysis of the Susan Boyle Phenomenon

Introduction

The public sphere is where people get together to realize and discuss common goals and to influence society’s workings in relations to common goals. Since modern societies are expansive and populated, public sphere functioning depends on media such as writing, radio, and television. Every type of medium has its own form of unique influence on society. Sometimes the influence is harmful to the public sphere and sometimes it is helpful.

In recent decades we have seen the proliferation of new media based on digital technologies and the Internet. Web blogs and user generated content sites such as YouTube and Facebook that are open to the public have developed into public venues that involve millions of users worldwide. Beyond a doubt, these have had a profound impact on society, publicity, and public discussion and participation. The nature and extent of this impact in relation to the public sphere has yet to be comprehended.

In this paper, I want to examine and reflect on the impact of new media on the public sphere. In doing this, I will analyze one recent example of a new media publicity phenomenon—that of the Internet exposure of the British television talent show contestant, Susan Boyle. Part I of the paper develops an analytical framework by discussing two types of assessments of the media’s impact, and by reframing these in relations to Habermas’s theories of the public sphere. Part II analyzes the Susan Boyle phenomenon, considering aspects that indicate both negative and positive effects of the event and the media supporting it, in relation to the public sphere. Part III, the final part of the paper, offers a brief assessment that considers how to weigh the beneficial and detrimental implications of these new media in the public sphere. I argue that the new media supported Susan Boyle event indicates both positive and negative aspects of these media and their societal effects. Whether or not these effects are more harmful or helpful to public sphere discourse is a matter that cannot be easily decided, and depends on additional considerations and further investigations.
Part 1: Analytical framework

*Media manipulation vs. medium as the message*

Theory, analyses, and commentary on the role of the media in the public sphere and society often tends to bounce back and forth between pessimistic and optimistic portrayals. In some accounts, media serve to degrade the public sphere by reducing discourse and representation to advertising or propaganda. In others, the media improve public spheres and discourses by broadening the means and scope of participation.

Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s (1944/1969) essay on “The Culture Industries” is a classic example of the first. Observing America during the 1940’s they saw the growth of television, radio, popular music and cinema as a near total extension of economic and technical processes into culture and individual psychology and experience. They believed that this proliferation of entertainment and the ever widespread consumption of it rendered societal members increasingly uncritical, passive, complacent, and dull-witted. On this account, the media promote dampening of critical spirit and skill which society trades in for consumption bliss.

The second sort of position is exemplified in Marshall McLuhan’s famous essays (1964; 1967) on the media. In contrast to the Frankfurt theorists, McLuhan argued that it was the specific character of a particular medium itself that had the profoundest effects on society, far more so than any types of contents or representations advanced through the medium. To analyze, therefore, the effects of a medium such as television by focusing on the contents of news, shows, and so on is to search up the wrong tree; the real societal effects result from the fact that television images are audiovisual, instantaneous, and projected simultaneously to thousands if not millions of people. Societal members are exposed to so much more information and images and to so many other people in cultures than they had ever been before the advent of television. This has much more of an impact on society than does the content of what is broadcasted. Carrying this line of thinking further, McLuhan saw electronic media -- with their widespread extension of simultaneous and varied communicative representations -- as something that would enhance democracy more than as something that degraded it.

While both the early Frankfurt theorists and McLuhan have been thoroughly criticized over the years, their basic arguments remain relevant. This is not only because their determining pieces continue to guide research and inform discourse, but also, arguably, because the tension
between their respective positions reflects actual ambiguity and tension in the role of media in society and the public sphere.

**Habermas and the public sphere**

Habermas’s theory (1994) of the “structural transformation of the Bourgeois public sphere” improves on Horkheimer and Adorno by developing additional sets of categories such as the “public sphere,” “public opinion,” and “publicity.” These enable a more sophisticated analysis of the medias’ impact, even if ultimately the framework does not entirely rid itself of some of his earlier teachers’ biases and one-sidedness.

The “public sphere” is that modern institutional space in which private civil society actors come together to bring to light, discuss, and debate matters of the common good and public concern, including matters that relate directly to actions of the state. Concretely, a public sphere exists wherever there is an open forum in which debate, dialog, truthfulness, respect, and accountability for what is said is instituted as the primary mode of discourse. Such a sphere can exist in many places: in academia; in public spaces such as coffee houses, where people get together to discuss social, cultural, and political matters; in journalistic news venues and broadcasts; in neighborhood, town hall, or municipal meetings; and so forth.

Habermas traces the modern formation of these spheres out of the interests and experiences of the Bourgeoisie. Crucially for Habermas, the modern public sphere originated from the Bourgeois public starting in the 18th century (hence the “Bourgeois public sphere”). As Habermas notes, this public was a reading public, who through consumption of and critical engagement with arts and letters, became increasingly concerned with its own experiences. This was crucial in the development of abilities to deeply assess one’s own life and values and to critically engage others on similar matters. Only citizens who were capable of breaking past their own private viewpoints as well as tradition and other forms of authority, by deeply examining themselves and scrutinizing the values and actions in front of them, could really participate in the sort of critical debate that establishes “public opinion” which serves to locate, define, and oversee the implementation of collective values and goals.

As a critical theorist Habermas believes the public sphere as an institutional domain is one of the greatest accomplishments of modernity. In contrast to Horkheimer, Adorno, and others who tend to see much of modern society as an arrangement that ensures domination by the
Bourgeoisie, Habermas’s sees the modern Bourgeois public sphere as something that can extend to all of society, such that it even offers the means to curb and transform Bourgeois power itself.

This position offers one way to get passed one of the most common criticisms of the earlier Frankfurt School -- that they overstated the ability of capitalistic economic interests to manipulate societal members through instruments of the media. People are just not always passive and uncritical.

One reason they are not is because of the institutionalization of the public sphere itself. Modern society has designated institutional domains where discourse and representations are controlled and accountable for the truthfulness of claims and assertions. There is an institutional differentiation between public discourse, news, political campaigns, etc., on the one hand, and advertising and entertainment on the other, even if both are often transmitted via the same media. Many people do know the difference and act accordingly by regularly scrutinizing entertainment and advertising representations. Not everyone is as naïve as Horkheimer and Adorno suggested.

Habermas’s theory also provides additional means to be critical beyond that of the earlier Frankfurt theory. Once public spheres are instituted, they can become subject to manipulation. To the extent that people continue to have faith in these domains, such manipulation can be falsely legitimized -- i.e., we believe what we read or hear in the news or in the politician’s campaign trial because we trust that what is transmitted through the public sphere has been subjected to a high-level of critical scrutiny. Or, people gradually lose faith in the public sphere and become cynical, such that the latter’s functioning is severely compromised. No one feels he or she can believe anything so we might as well believe whatever we want to believe.

Habermas’s argument about the recent “structural transformation of the public sphere” and his diagnosis of the role played by the mass media discusses both of these scenarios. Crucially for us, his theory as a whole provides a means to consider the media in a more sophisticated light, thinking of how specific media and their particular operations and effects on discourse and representation can both enhance or degrade the quality and range of public dialog.

Public sphere and new media

Habermas has not been without his own critics. Some point out that the “Bourgeois” public sphere has always advantaged social particularity (Benhabib 1996; Fraser 1996; Shudson 1996), whether that of class, ethnicity and race, or gender. According to this line of thought,
inevitably, the public sphere privileges upper middle class white males and serves to limit admission to the forum on the part of other “voices,” all while legitimating the former’s domination.

In relation to the media itself and reminiscent of McLuhan, some argue (Carpignano 1999; Garnham 1996) that the role of the media must be viewed in a more nuanced way than Habermas seems to allow. The public sphere Habermas praises and laments is one based on the print medium. Using standards of discourse and representation that are closely tied to writing as the measure to gauge the positive and negative effects of newer types of media causes one not to see the differences and potentials of the newer media. Whether or not such criticisms are on the mark, they do suggest that something ought to be modified in Habermas’s perspective. We need further distinctions when considering the impact of the media.

In this way, to the extent we can agree with some of the core of Habermas’s normative concerns, it might be more productive to broaden and clarify some of the notions of the public sphere and its functioning, and to do analyses accordingly. One of the functions of the public sphere is that of “bringing to light” through “consciousness raising,” “inclusion of previously silenced voices,” and exposure to other peoples, cultures, and points of view. What do specific media do in service or disservice to this function? Another function is to promote criticism and dialog. What does a given medium enable/disable in that regard? Finally, the public sphere should serve to help individuals transform their own viewpoints in a way that orients more to the common good. This happens through reflection, through seeing things from other perspectives, and from trying to see things from the perspective of establishing a working compromise and reconciliation of differences. How does a medium promote or degrade such a process? These are all questions that assume aspects of Habermas’s framework but that at the same time allow us to broaden our perspective and analyses.

The public sphere has been changed in many ways from the first examinations of Habermas’s writings. In the late twenty century new media have proliferated in such a way as to outpace our abilities to assess their effects. New media have given citizens new opportunities to participate in debates, discussions, etc. in the public sphere. This media consists of the form of electronic communication that is made possible through the use of computer technology. The term “new” is in contrast to “old” media forms, such as print newspapers and magazines. New media platforms include websites, mobile phone applications, digital television, email, etc.
What is particularly interesting for our purposes is the technology associated with user generated information websites like YouTube. Individuals have the capability to view the video of their choice, and they also have the ability to add videos that they would like to share with the public. This new media technology is quite different from old media technologies like television and newspapers. In the latter, elites chose what content is to be provided. With new media, private individuals choose on the basis of their own preferences in relation to what is out there and what they are able to find. The individual can decide if he wants to absorb a particular media representation or not, rather than having it more or less projected on to him through a standard broadcast or news story. With websites like YouTube the information provided on the site can be provided by anyone and the user has the ability to view or not view the content. This is what makes the Susan Boyle phenomenon so compelling. New media platforms are giving amateurs the ability to be thrust into the limelight of the mainstream media like never before (Danesi 2008).

Part 2: Analysis of a YouTube example

The Susan Boyle phenomenon

In April of 2009, the British television program “Britain’s Got Talent” showcased the singing talent of an unassuming single recluse from a small Scottish village. This woman, Susan Boyle, became an overnight sensation after her performance of "I Dreamed a Dream" from the popular theatre production, Les Miserables.

When Susan (see picture below) first emerged on the stage, the crowd rolled their eyes, laughed at her dress, and booed and hissed as she spoke. The judges were undoubtedly amused at Ms. Boyle’s appearance. As with so many other contestants who obviously just wanted to have their moment on television regardless of whether or not they had any talents, the judges patronizingly appeased Ms. Boyle’s “delusion” that she had the abilities of a professional vocalist. The judges seemed to already confirm that she was a joke, simply based on her matronly and eccentric appearance. Most female contestants on these reality shows are young, thin, and pretty. Ms. Boyle, on the other hand, was an awkward frumpy woman in her late forties with short curly gray hair. She lacked grace and style, and when she spoke she sounded cheeky. She even admitted that she had “never been kissed” by a man and lived with her cat named Pebbles.
All of the ridicule she received was purely based on her appearance. Once the initial introductions were over, she was invited to begin singing. As the music began, the judges and the audience appeared to anticipate that her voice would bellow or croak. Instead, her first note rang across the theatre, immediately making her sound like a classically trained singer. All of the stereotypical conceptions of her seemed to melt away as she hit one note after another. The audience appeared awestruck by what they were witnessing. They were smiling in silence, and seemed to revel with every note that she sang. The judges also appeared mesmerized. Simon Cowell, a judge whose hardedge demeanor often borders on the sadistic, looked dreamy eyed as she sang. The female judge, who moments earlier had been so condescending, began tearing up.

Ms. Boyle’s performance ended with a standing ovation, both from the audience and the judges. Each of the three judges unanimous approved her admittance through to the next round of the competition. The decision made the audience erupt into thunderous applause.

Within hours, Susan Boyle’s segment of “Britain’s Got Talent” became a sensation. Websites like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter posted the 7-minute clip. In the first 72 hours of being posted on YouTube her video garnered nearly 2.5 million views (Khan 2009). Within a week the audition performance had been viewed more than 66 million times, setting an online record (Vargas 2009).

This formerly unfamiliar amateur singer provides a clear illustration of how viral video can generate international stardom within just hours of being uploaded online (Collins 2009). A viral video is a video clip that is posted on the Internet and is then shared through widespread distribution via online sharing. These videos are spread through various online distribution applications including blogs, social networking sites, email, and websites.

Without websites such as Facebook and YouTube, Americans would have probably never heard of Susan Boyle. But, because of the viral nature of the Internet, newspapers, television shows, and radio programs all picked up the story. Once these media obtained the story,
Americans became familiar with the Susan Boyle story. Shows like *Oprah, The Today Show, Good Morning America,* and *Access Hollywood* all became enthralled with her story.

So why did this performance become such an overnight sensation in the United States? What does this tell us about the public sphere and the role of these new media in it?

*Susan Boyle as distraction*

Most Americans would not be captivated by an unknown, homely, Scottish contestant on a British TV show. There are, however, a couple of reasons why Americans became so obsessed with Ms. Boyle’s story. First, the fact that citizens downloaded the segment on YouTube and then began distributing it to the masses, made it so that the airwaves would become saturated with the story’s publicity. Second, after so many people had seen the video, many began to believe that the story perpetuated the classic underdog story. It confirmed the belief in the “American Dream” by showing that an unassuming woman has the chance to follow her life-long dream of singing. A positive public opinion of Susan Boyle emerged because so many Americans could relate to her and her dreams. The segment of Ms. Boyle portrayed an average person with an astonishing talent who was given the chance to live out her dream. Many Americans wish to achieve their aspirations and to live the life they have always hoped for. Susan Boyle’s story gave them the chance to believe that their dreams are possible.

What can this case tell us about the possible functioning of the public sphere? Many would argue that the Susan Boyle phenomenon marks a form of public sphere degradation. If the public sphere and the discourses and representations there are all something that are supposed to help citizens become proactive in their pursuit to achieve a moral and just life as a nation, the reception of Susan Boyle instances more of a distraction. Citizens become obsessed with a stranger, they fail to realize their goals are not always grounded in reality, and they are wasting time by continually replaying representations of a resolution in someone else’s life rather than actively seeking out the same in their own. Let us consider each of these in further detail.

Why do so many Americans become obsessed with strangers’ personal lives? Numerous Americans are fixated on celebrities. These fascinations are perpetuated through public sphere vehicles like magazines, television shows, websites, etc. These media outlets enable engrossed citizens to continue their addiction to knowing “who so and so is dating” and “what famous designer such and such is wearing.”
One could argue that a chief reason for these obsessions stems from individuals’ lack of self-determination and responsibility in living their own lives. Many people would rather live their lives through the lens of a celebrity, rather than focus on their own. Americans’ enthrallment with Susan Boyle has much the same source as their celebrity obsessions. The Susan Boyle phenomenon allows people to fantasize about becoming famous. It provides them with a screen on which they can project their desires, longings and fantasies, rather than a way for them to reflect on the social nature and causes of their longings and desires. It provides, in other words, a seductive way to bypass reflections that can lead to actions, both in individual’s lives, and in public sphere dialog.

In terms of the specific new media, the viral nature of internet media as transmitted through platforms such as YouTube provides these distractions more or less 24/7. Television at least imposed more constraints based on the highly scheduled and standardized nature of broadcasts. The new media provides people the opportunity to constantly have these contents at their fingertips.

Many Americans have unrealistic beliefs that their aspirations can be achieved, and indeed, that they even have humanly and socially uplifting aspirations. The Susan Boyle story serves to give false hope in relation to dreams (fame, sudden wealth) that really only few could possibly achieve, all the while preventing us from asking ourselves why we should want fame and wealth and whether or not these are the best pursuits for most in society.

Moreover, the voyeurs of this episode may not know the entire story behind Ms. Boyle. In a sense “Britain’s Got Talent” is a “reality show,” in that it supposedly depicts real people and real events under certain preset circumstances. Most people likely understand the show that way. While reality shows appear to be a sort of “reality,” in actuality they are thoroughly produced and edited to appear a certain way. For all we know Ms. Boyle could have been groomed to appear the way she did on the show. The judges and producers may have been quite aware of her singing talents but they produced the show in order to create an appealing and compelling story that would boost ratings. This would be all the more the reason to argue that the show and then the video clip watched millions of times over the Internet promotes false and unrealistic beliefs that go unquestioned.

Closely related to the above, the near-obsession with Susan Boyle likely indicates or demonstrates mass diversion of attention from the responsibilities of good citizenship. To put it
quite bluntly, it shows widespread squandering of time that could be spent reflecting on values and responsibilities, on cultivating critical and aesthetic skills, on actively taking part in the community, and in engaging in critical dialog with others.

As with the first issue, this issue and the previous one are all further enabled by the new media format itself. All in all, the example of Susan Boyle is one that in many ways shows how the media format and the content itself likely hinders the functioning of a healthy public sphere and healthy public dialog and debate.

Susan Boyle as demonstration of public sphere potentials

While it is readily conceivable how events like the Susan Boyle phenomenon indicate deterioration of the public sphere, it is also conceivable how these events and the media that enable them might enhance public sphere discourse. In Susan Boyle’s case, a woman who might normally be invisible in society is given a voice. Others are then given a chance to learn about a distant person who is both different and similar. All of this may in turn prompt reflection and dialog. In many ways the media format itself provides citizens with new opportunities to actively seek and take part in such experiences.

All over America and Britain there are people like Ms. Boyle who experience the same sort of invisibility regardless of whether or not they have some celebrated talent. Some experience it as a constant part of their everyday lives; others experience it only on occasion. No doubt that is part of what resonates about Susan Boyle’s story -- many can identify with it.

Her appearance, first on television, and then all over the web, brought her invisibility to light and gave her a voice. It was a voice of considerable beauty; but while her singing helped cast her into stardom, the narrative surrounding her -- of invisibility, domesticity, and of living one’s life in care of others -- played at least an equal part in her story’s appeal.

One could argue that Boyle’s exposure and appeal, played and replayed millions of times over the Internet, has served to render visible the previously invisible. In doing so, it has also brought to light the fact that people are made invisible and that this is a source of undue affliction. It is also a source of societal loss: for unrecognized talents, for appreciation of everyday experience, and for admiration of simple and everyday instances of selfless care and service to others and to society.
While these are all pervasive themes in modern culture, they are not ones that publishers and television executives decide to continually broadcast until there is an expressed public demand that promises a ratings boost. Susan Boyle’s infiltration into the public sphere was made possible by the fact that she was posted on websites like YouTube and then rapidly spread in a viral sort of way. Only then did she begin to appear on television shows and broadcasts. One can recognize the public sphere potential of the media form itself in this case. Moreover, the voluntary nature of Boyle’s internet exposure more or less forced the more hierarchical driven forms in television and newspapers to respond by giving her further exposure.

The display of Susan Boyle also provides citizens with further examples of the phrase to “not judge a book by its cover.” As mentioned earlier in the paper, when Ms. Boyle first emerged on stage, the audience and judges appeared amused by her dress and attitude, and seemed to shrug her off as a funny spectacle. When she began singing, everyone changed. The same attitude was delivered from the media audience. Viewers believed that she was a joke before she sang. Once she began singing, she proved everyone wrong. The astonishment and shock caused by the vast discrepancy between peoples’ expectations and the reality of her voice prompted people to examine the expectations that were proven false.

What were the stereotypes and assumptions behind these expectations? Are only pretty, thin, and young women capable of singing? Are only pretty, thin, and young women worthy of publicity? In publicly shattering common expectations through her deeds, Ms. Boyle also brought to light the fact that many of us harbor such false and unjust expectations. Such expectations are based on cultural stereotypes and on current prevailing values and norms of physical beauty. These are then used to assess individual’s social worth and attention and publicity worthiness. The Boyle phenomenon provides an examination into these stereotypes, assumptions, values, and norms. It also provides an impetus to assess that these in turn are applied most strongly to women.

For Habermas, one of the central public sphere functions is in its providing a forum where citizens get to better know and understand one another and themselves. They do this through serious dialog that causes individuals to stand back from themselves, so to speak, and then look back in from the perspective of someone else and from point of view of the greater society. Seeing someone like Susan Boyle -- a distant other who is different, gives people the opportunity to consider differences. At the same time, seeing the humanness, simplicity, and
complexity of this other person from a small village in Scotland, enables people to see similarity and commonality within differences. People, see, for example, that others have the same feelings and aspirations. With regard to the example of everyday “invisibility,” people who experience the same, recognize it in another, and then see it as a pervasive negative experience whose sources should be called into question and potentially changed.

The public sphere provides a way to complement an appreciation for difference with an understanding of common needs and aspirations. This in turn provides an opportunity to locate, discuss, and work toward common goals. One could argue that Susan Boyle’s case demonstrates an example of the beginnings of such workings. Her story, in becoming a widespread public phenomenon is one that kindles the sort of self and social awareness and empathy that animates public sphere discussion for potentially good and just democratic purposes.

All of this, in turn, is enabled and supported by the new media. These media allow people to voluntarily post and to actively seek out and consider these types of contents. The opportunity to have easy access to these contents can offer individuals the ability to participate in their own active judgment and develop their own opinion. Many times these types of contents provide people the capability to voice their opinions about the video. We can witness this especially in the numerous blogs about Susan Boyle. By having the chance to declare their views, individuals create their own coffee houses, so to speak. This in turn enhances the public sphere’s ability to serve democratic ends.

Discussion and Conclusion

After examining an example of new media in relation to the public sphere from many different angles based on several theoretical prospectives there are several conclusions that can be reached. How do we decide which prospective is the “right” one? I don’t think that can be determined. There are good points and bad points to take into consideration when examining the public sphere with regards to media. Individuals should not simple ignore media. They should absorb it, but they must be proactive and engaging while consuming it. New media enables people the ability to debate and discuss events and creates the capability to form public opinion around events just as Habermas suggested in the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In many ways, the web has enabled citizens the chance to be more proactive in the public sphere. Over the past several decades, individuals could only passively absorb information through
newspapers and television. The web gives people the ability to voice their opinions directly to society through online sharing sites, blogs, social networking sites, etc. In many ways, this has not been done since the Bourgeoisie times of the coffee houses and reading rooms that Habermas recounts. I think the most important take away after doing this paper is to always consider both sides. Individuals must be proactive in the public sphere. They must be mindful of events in their community and throughout society. If citizens adopt this philosophy, the public sphere will continue to function as Habermas intended it to and hopefully will continue to keep the government and civil society in check.
Bibliography


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